

# Wonderful beauty of Ireland's rebel poems

The insurrection inspired a vibrant body of work, writes **Lucy Collins**

**T**HE poetry of 1916 engages in fundamental ways with the ideals of independence and with the feelings and experiences that helped to shape the modern nation. Perceived as a 'poets' revolution', the Easter Rising is often linked to the Irish Revival that flourished at the turn of the century, suggesting a close relationship between artistic expression and political activism.

The Revivalist movement, which was well under way by the 1890s, sought to forge a distinctive Irish literature through the use of native materials and writing styles. These aims, expressed in journals such as the *Irish Review*, had a performance counterpart on the stage of the Abbey Theatre. However, though the artistic achievements of this time, both in performance and print, signalled an intense engagement with ideas of national identity, the political and cultural wings of the nationalist movement remained distinct.

So the poems of 1916 are drawn from a wide range of sources — some are written by the rebel leaders themselves and some by major Irish poets; others are widely circulated texts that catch the popular feeling of the years following the Rising.

Patrick Pearse joined the Gaelic League in 1896 and was, for a time, the editor of its newspaper *An Claidheamh Soluis*. Convinced of the significance of the Irish language, and keen both to modernise it and to expand its use, he wrote poetry in both Irish and English. Ideas of suffering and sacrifice lay at the heart of the work, which was strongly influenced by Christian imagery and idealism. 'Fornocht Do Chonac Thú (Naked I Saw Thee)' is perhaps the best known of his Irish language poems; its single-minded perspective underpins much of Pearse's verse in English too, reinforcing the visionary character of many poems of the Rising. In 'The Mother', Pearse chooses a female voice to bring the combined pride and suffering of the bereaved to life. Grief is assuaged here by an awareness of the heroism of the men's actions.

Yet in spite of Pearse's reputation as a fervent nationalist, his writings as a whole reveal the range of his political thought, and his capacity for reflection and change.

Christian iconography was an important feature of much of the work by rebel poets. Joseph Mary Plunkett shared Pearse's commitment to this symbolism but his work is the more mystical of the two. His poems grapple with the challenges of human imperfection: 'I See His Blood Upon the Rose' reads the presence of the divine in nature as a way of transcending this limitation.

Though they learned much from the Irish emphasis of Revivalist writing, these poets were also influenced by the English tradition, both in form and tone. Thomas MacDonagh, who taught with Pearse at St Enda's, and later lectured at University College Dublin, was a literary scholar and both his poetry and criticism reflect his familiarity with cultural histories beyond Ireland. The title of his first volume of poetry, *Songs of Myself*, testifies to the importance of self-reflection and personal relationships in his work, however. It is through direct experience that MacDonagh understands his aspirations as an Irishman.

Arguably, the most famous representation of the Easter Rising was not by a rebel poet but by WB Yeats. 'Easter, 1916' remains one of the 20th century's iconic poems but its popular reception in the decades that followed the



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Read the commentary by Dr Collins and choose your favourite from these:

- \* 'The Mother', by Patrick Pearse
- \* 'I See His Blood Upon the Rose', by Joseph Plunkett
- \* 'The Foggy Dew', by Canon Charles O'Neill
- \* 'The Wayfarer', by Patrick Pearse
- \* 'Easter 1916', by WB Yeats
- \* 'Connolly', by Liam Mac Gabhann
- \* 'Wishes for my Son', by Thomas MacDonagh
- \* 'Comrades', by Eva Gore-Booth
- \* 'Sixteen Dead Men', by WB Yeats
- \* 'Imperial Measure', by Vona Groarke



Top: WB Yeats, whose 'Easter 1916' remains one of the 20th century's most iconic poems. Above: Joseph Plunkett ('I See His Blood Upon The Rose'); Canon Charles O'Neill ('The Foggy Dew'); Eva Gore-Booth ('Comrades') with her sister Costance Markievicz; and Vona Groarke ('Imperial Measure').

Rising somewhat obscures the complexity of the feelings it expresses. The changing perspective on the rebels here, from casual dismissal to formal memorialisation, suggests both the poet's ambivalence towards the events and his growing sense of their significance. In another poem, 'Sixteen Dead Men', Yeats reflects on how the execution of the rebel leaders has altered the sympathies of the Irish people.

Already an established poet by the time of the Rising, Yeats's involvement in the Irish Revival, and his close relationship with Maud Gonne, brought him into

the revolutionaries' orbit, though he never espoused the use of violence for political ends. Yeats was once a friend of rebel leader Constance Markievicz and of her sister — the poet, Eva Gore-Booth.

Both women gave up lives of privilege for political and social activism and, though ideologically at odds with one another, they retained a strong emotional bond as Gore-Booth's poem 'Comrades' indicates. As a pacifist, Gore-Booth opposed all forms of violence, and was sensitive to the involvement of Irish soldiers in the First World War, as well as in revolution at home.

The tension between these positions can be traced in the poetry of the time: Tom Kettle and Francis Ledwidge both enlisted in the British Army but Ledwidge's most famous poem would be an elegy for his executed friend Thomas MacDonagh. Poems about the revolutionaries, whether they were reflective lyrics or popular ballads, became an important part of the memorialisation of 1916. 'The Foggy Dew', by Canon Charles O'Neill, uses the Irish song tradition to appeal to popular consciousness, while Liam MacGabhann's 'Connolly' —

one of a number of poems on the labour leader — emphasises the recognition of this figure within his own lifetime.

Irish poets continue to engage imaginatively with the Easter Rising, often in ways that offer new or challenging perspectives on previous views. Vona Groarke's 'Imperial Measure' offers a perspective on the role of women in the GPO, which subtly addresses the neglect of female participants in the received narratives of the period.

Other poets such as Paul Durcan and Paula Meehan use witty and provocative observations to challenge the act of commemoration itself. The enduring importance of the 1916 Rising as an inspiration for poetry reveals its power to address our shared understanding of the past, as well as our individual responses to this moment in history.

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