

'Wishes For My Son, Born On St Cecilia's Day, 1912'

By Thomas MacDonagh

*NOW, my son, is life for you,
And I wish you joy of it,—
Joy of power in all you do,
Deeper passion, better wit
Than I had who had enough,
Quicker life and length thereof,
More of every gift but love.*

*Love I have beyond all men,
Love that now you share with me—
What have I to wish you then
But that you be good and free,
And that God to you may give
Grace in stronger days to live?*

*For I wish you more than I
Ever knew of glorious deed,
Though no rapture passed me by
That an eager heart could heed,
Though I followed heights and sought
Things the sequel never brought.*

*Wild and perilous holy things
Flaming with a martyr's blood,
And the joy that laughs and sings
Where a foe must be withstood,
Joy of headlong happy chance
Leading on the battle dance.*

*But I found no enemy,
No man in a world of wrong,
That Christ's word of charity
Did not render clean and strong—
Who was I to judge my kind,
Blindest groping of the blind?*

*God to you may give the sight
And the clear, undoubting strength
Wars to knit for single right,
Freedom's war to knit at length,
And to win through wrath and strife,
To the sequel of my life.*

*But for you, so small and young,
Born on Saint Cecilia's Day,
I in more harmonious song
Now for nearer joys should pray—
Simpler joys: the natural growth
Of your childhood and your youth,
Courage, innocence, and truth:*

*These for you, so small and young,
In your hand and heart and tongue.*

AN ASSESSMENT DR LUCY COLLINS

TO the rebels of 1916, the future of Ireland was closely linked to the next generation of Irish men and women, who would keep revolutionary ideals alive. In this poem, Thomas MacDonagh commemorates the birth of his son by meditating on his own hopes for the future. This vision is dominated by love, which both binds father and child together and shapes how human meaning is created here.

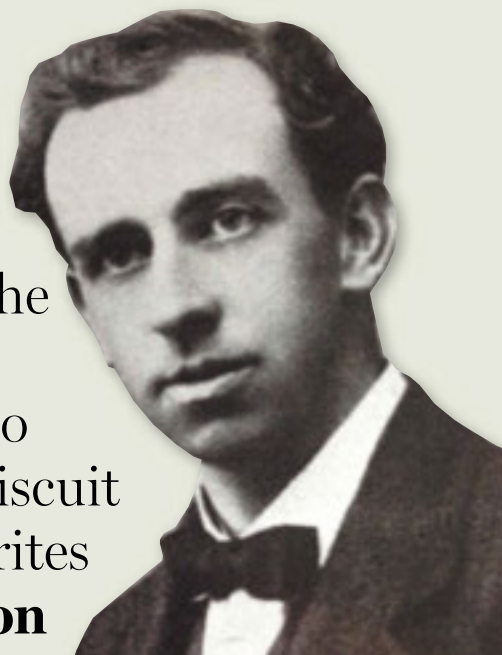
MacDonagh wishes that his son be 'good and free', linking morality with personal liberty. Here, as elsewhere in his work, he reveals the tension between individual and collective viewpoints — a tension which fundamentally shapes how freedom itself can be understood. Idealism lies at the heart of this poem, but it is a different kind of idealism to that contemplated by Pearse or Plunkett.

Though MacDonagh invokes the 'martyr's blood', he recognises that violent enmity is at odds with religious feeling. He chooses instead to highlight the role of redemption; the long and patient quest for lasting freedom. The poem moves from larger, abstract aims, to the simplest of wishes for the child: that he will grow naturally in 'courage, innocence and truth'.

THOMAS MacDONAGH

Charm offensive

Thomas MacDonagh's intense political nationalism was the backdrop to him leading 150 men to seize the Jacob's biscuit factory in 1916, writes Catherine Wilsdon



"I know this is a lousy job, but you're doing your duty — I do not hold this against you."

THESE are the words of the poet-patriot Thomas MacDonagh standing before the nervous firing squad tasked with his execution. During that tense moment, the 12 young Sherwood Foresters may well have reminded him of his own students at St Enda's or UCD. In a final display of characteristic generosity, the revolutionary leader offered them his cigarettes. These last moments lay testament not only to the strength of character recalled by those who knew him, but also to his great ability to connect with people as a friend, leader, teacher, poet or playwright. But how had this gentle, personable scholar ended up handcuffed and blindfolded in the stonebreakers' yard at Kilmainham Gaol?

Born in Cloughjordan, Co Tipperary, MacDonagh was educated at Rockwell College where he briefly entertained the idea of becoming a missionary priest before deciding upon a career in education. A teaching position at St Kieran's College brought him to Kilkenny where he joined the Gaelic League and his passion for the Irish language and culture was kindled.

While teaching English, French, and History at the college, he published two volumes of poetry and became increasingly active in the League's social and cultural activities. It was during this time that MacDonagh became fluent in the Irish language and grew dissatisfied with the absence of the subject on the St Kieran's curriculum. This prompted him to take up a position at St Colman's College, Fermoy, where he taught for five years before joining Patrick Pearse at his experimental Irish-language school in Dublin, St Enda's.

MacDonagh held the position of assistant headmaster at Pearse's school

during which time he studied for a BA in French, English, and Irish at University College Dublin. Following the completion of an MA in English Literature he began lecturing at the university. In 1912 he married Muriel Gifford with whom he had two children. He continued to write poetry, plays and literary criticism during this time and, with his friends Mary and Padraic Colum, Joseph Mary Plunkett, James Stephens, and David Houston, he edited the *Irish Review* — a magazine of literature, art and science. A supporter of rights for women and workers, he was a member of the Irish Women's Franchise League, the Industrial Peace Committee, and a founding member of the teachers' union, ASTI.

Primarily engaged in nationalist endeavours of a cultural kind, the events of the Dublin Lockout contributed to the intensification of MacDonagh's political nationalism and in December 1913 he joined the Irish Volunteers. Elected to company captain in July of the following year, his talkative and charming personality was put to use as he travelled the country with the aim of recruiting volunteers. At the same time the editorial of the *Irish Review* indicated a transition from ideals into action as the magazine published more outwardly political pieces such as the "Manifesto of the Irish Volunteers".

In July 1914, alongside Bulmer Hobson

SNAPSHOT

THOMAS MacDONAGH

Born: 1 February 1878, Cloughjordan, Co Tipperary

Educated: Rockwell College

Affiliation: Irish Volunteers, IRB

Career: Teacher, St Enda's; lecturer, UCD

Died: 3 May 1916, Kilmainham Jail

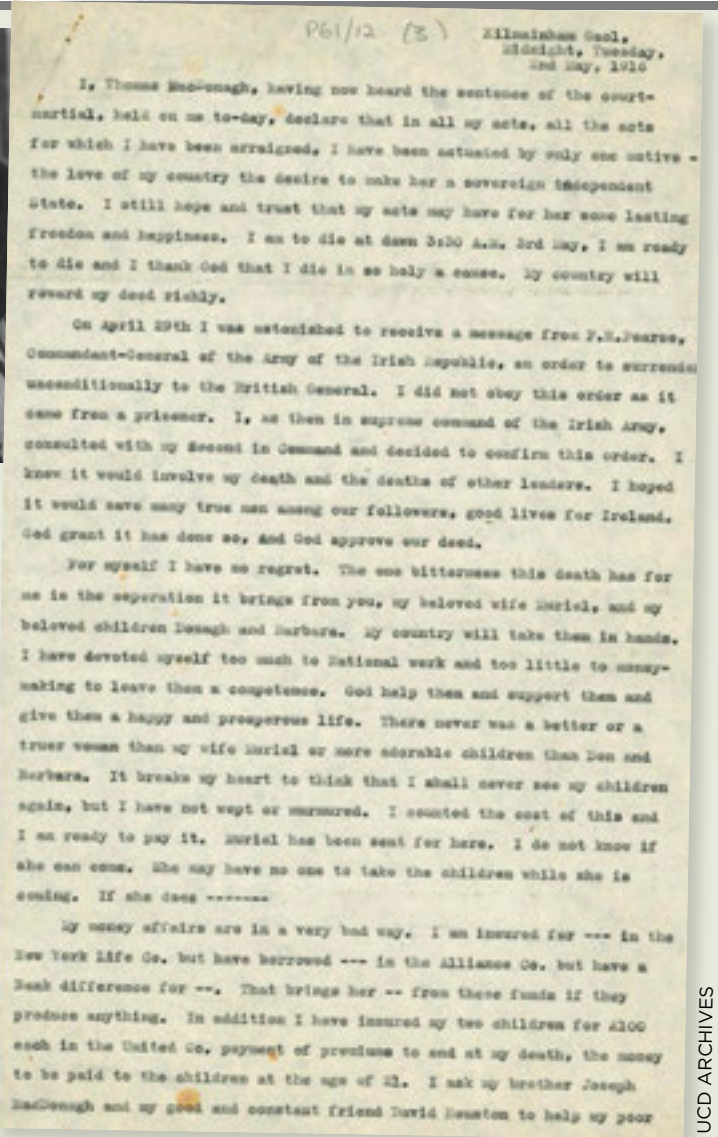
and Darrell Figgis, MacDonagh played an important role in the Howth gun-running during which rifles and ammunition were smuggled in from Germany. Making their way back from Howth, the Volunteers were apprehended at Fairview by the British Army and the Dublin Metropolitan Police. Though a brief scuffle broke out, the leaders managed to prevent the standoff from escalating. While Figgis and the ever-talkative MacDonagh engaged the assistant commissioner of the DMP — William Vesey Harrell — in a prolonged argument, Hobson dispersed the volunteers.

March 1915 saw MacDonagh sworn into the Irish Republican Brotherhood and appointed Commandant of the 2nd Battalion, Dublin Brigade. However, it wasn't until April 1916 that he became the seventh member of the Military Council, which had been established the previous year and included Pearse, Plunkett, Éamonn Ceannt, Seán MacDiarmada, Thomas Clarke and James Connolly. MacDonagh was Director of Equipment but was not informed about the plans for the rising until just before Easter week.

In the week leading up to the Rising, MacDonagh played an important role as intermediary between the Council and his colleague at UCD, Eoin MacNeill, who was opposed to the Volunteers engaging in offensive force. Once MacNeill was made aware of the plans for a rising, MacDonagh was tasked with persuading him to pledge his support. Believing that a British attack was imminent and that a German ship would soon deliver arms in Kerry, MacNeill briefly backed the insurrection. However, the interception of the ship by the British Navy prompted him to issue a countermanding order on the eve of Easter Sunday. That same day the leaders convened and planned a Monday rising instead. In an effort to divert attention from the revised plan, MacDonagh visited MacNeill at home to deliver Pearse's



Clockwise from left: Catherine Wilsdon; Thomas MacDonagh with his wife Muriel and their firstborn Donagh; a transcript of MacDonagh's last letter to Muriel; the covers of McDonagh's 'When the Dawn is Come' which played at the Abbey Theatre in 1908, and 'Poems By Thomas MacDonagh', as chosen by his sister. Inset below: MacDonagh, by Dublin artist Brian O'Neill.



COLIN O'RIORDAN

UCD ARCHIVES

ABBAY THEATRE ARCHIVES

UCD ARCHIVES

confirmation of the countermand. That would be the last time MacNeill would see his friend.

At noon on Easter Monday the 2nd Battalion of the Dublin Brigade convened at St Stephen's Green Park where they were joined by members of Cumann na mBan and Na Fianna Éireann. The last minute arrival of Major John MacBride meant that Michael O'Hanrahan was replaced as second-in-command owing to MacBride's superior military experience.

MacDonagh found that he had 150 men at his disposal, fewer than half of what he could have expected had the Rising taken place the previous day as planned. This meant that he would have to forgo plans to take Trinity College and concentrate efforts on seizing Jacob's Factory and establishing outposts in the area. The strategic importance of the factory lay in its proximity to Dublin Castle and to Richmond and Portobello Barracks. The position allowed the volunteers to hinder British access to the city from the South.

Relative to the fighting that took place at the GPO and the Four Courts, however, they saw little action. Heavily fortified, with snipers positioned in the towers relentlessly harassing the British forces, and surrounded by a warren of small streets, Jacob's Factory was a difficult target for an all-out attack. The disruption



In the week leading up to the Rising, MacDonagh played an important role as intermediary between the Council and his colleague at UCD, Eoin MacNeill, who was opposed to the Volunteers engaging in physical force



tried and executed, the British officer-in-command remarked: "They all died nobly, but MacDonagh died like a prince".

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brought angry civilian mobs to the gates of the garrison prompting MacDonagh to order rebels to fire blanks to disperse the crowd. As a leader he was reported to have been indecisive and confusing in his orders and therefore MacBride assumed a leading role. Nevertheless, his sense of humour and good nature helped to reassure the volunteers as they waited in anticipation of British attack. During the week the brigade ambushed 30 British soldiers, a plain-clothes DMP officer reporting on activities at the factory was shot, and six others captured. At Davy's pub an opportunity to attack a troop of British soldiers was lost, precipitating the fall of the outpost.

Initially, MacDonagh opposed Pearse's order to surrender until he confirmed the legitimacy of the order with Ceannt. On April 30 he accepted surrender and ordered his brigade to stand down. The first of the leaders to be



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