

Dublin Made Me by Donagh MacDonagh

Dublin made me and no little town
With the country closing in on its streets
The cattle walking proudly on its pavements
The jobbers, the gombeenmen and the cheats

Devouring the fair-day between them
A public-house to half a hundred men
And the teacher, the solicitor and the bank-clerk
In the hotel bar drinking for ten.

Dublin made me, not the secret poteen still
The raw and hungry hills of the West
The lean road flung over profitless bog
Where only a snipe could nest

Where the sea takes its tithe of every boat.
Bawneen and currach have no allegiance of mine,
Nor the cute self-deceiving talkers of the South
Who look to the East for a sign.

The soft and dreary midlands with their tame canals
Wallow between sea and sea, remote from adventure
And Northward a far and fortified province
Crouches under the lash of arid censure.

I disclaim all fertile meadows, all tilled land
The evil that grows from it and the good,
But the Dublin of old statutes, this arrogant city
Stirs proudly and secretly in my blood.

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MacDonagh, Donagh

by Bridget Hourican

MacDonagh, Donagh (1912–68), writer and judge, was born 22 November 1912 in Temple Villas, Rathmines, Dublin, elder of the two children of Thomas MacDonagh (qv), one of the executed leaders of the 1916 rising, and his wife Muriel Gifford (qv), daughter of Frederick Gifford, a Dublin solicitor, and sister of the artist and republican Grace Gifford (qv). Muriel drowned a year after her husband's funeral, on 9 July 1917, off the coast of Skerries, Co. Dublin; her well attended funeral was an indication of her husband's growing reputation, but Donagh was unable to attend as he was in hospital, probably with tuberculosis. He spent a large part of his childhood in hospitals, was hunchbacked, and had poor health throughout his life; this did not affect his work rate but he died relatively young. His education, which he described as late and haphazard, was the subject of dispute between the protestant Giffords and the catholic MacDonaghs; he was sent to the national school in Broadford, Co. Clare, and to various 'Dame' schools in Dublin, before finally attending Belvedere College. However, he read outside the curriculum and inherited his father's feeling for literature – while still at school he ghosted a number of stories for his aunt, a nun, which were published in the Australian Messenger of the Sacred Heart. When he proceeded to University College Dublin (UCD) he was noted for his erudition and advanced opinions, which he honed in Paris, where he spent his second undergraduate year attending the Sorbonne. Part of a dynamic student

circle including Denis Devlin (qv), Charles Donnelly (qv), and Brian O'Nolan (qv) ('Flann O'Brien'), he appears as 'Donaghy' and is satirised for his erudite brand of nationalism in *At Swim-two-birds*:

The small man had an off-hand way with him and talked in jerks . . . We talked together in a polished manner, utilising with frequency words from the French language, discussing the primacy of America and Ireland in contemporary letters and commenting on the inferior work produced by writers of the English nationality. The Holy Name was often taken, I do not recollect with what advertence.

MacDonagh was secretary of UCD's English Lit. Society, which his father had founded, and, as director of the Dramatic Society, arranged for the first Irish production of T. S. Eliot's 'Murder in the cathedral' which the author came to see and praised highly, despite being pressed into service as a stagehand. MacDonagh wrote his UCD MA thesis on Eliot. A brilliant student career was crowned by the publication (1934) of *Twenty poems*, a joint volume with Niall Sheridan (qv) which was extensively and generously reviewed in the *Manchester Guardian* and *TLS* as well as the Irish papers, all reviewers agreeing that the poems were polished, graceful, and restrained. In 1936 he was called to the bar, after attending the King's Inns, and began practising on the western circuit; however, the following years were difficult. He had few cases and later described himself as a 'briefless barrister'. He married while young (1934) Maura Smyth, the beautiful daughter of a civil servant in Dublin Castle, and soon had two children to support. In 1939 Maura, a sufferer from epilepsy, drowned in her bath. This brought back the tragedies of his childhood and cast him into depression. His children found him exacting and harsh. The situation improved when he married (11 August 1943) Maura's sister, Nuala Smyth. An occasional actress, she was lively and vivacious, and provided him with two more children and a warm, loving home in Strand Road, Sandymount, which was known for its parties. MacDonagh was gregarious and relished good conversation.

His professional life also improved. In 1941 he was appointed a district justice in Wexford, providing him with a steady income until his death. He was a meticulous judge, known for his integrity. On his first day in Wexford, the local sergeant and parish priest came to his chambers to discuss cases before the court was in session – he quickly put an end to this practice. His friendship with Brian O'Nolan ended when he refused to hear a case against O'Nolan in his court on the grounds that they were friends. O'Nolan never talked to him again. Though scrupulous in discharging legal duties, MacDonagh reserved his

passion for literature. In 1941 his second book of poems, *Veterans and other poems*, was published by the Cuala Press. Again it was widely reviewed, but received only qualified praise. Stephen Spender in the *New Statesman* (12 July 1941) enjoyed the idiom, but found the verse a little turgid, uncertain, and employing 'the conventional line of a contemporary manner'. The *Irish Press* and the *Observer* thought the poems subdued and lacking exuberance. Austin Clarke (qv) in the *Irish Times* (19 April 1941) complained of clichés and platitudes, but allowed MacDonagh directness, wit, and occasional sharp definition. He shrewdly observed that having a book 'published in the expensive and exclusive Yeats press [is] both an honour and a handicap in the case of a new and unknown writer'. MacDonagh himself often spoke of the privilege and burden of his father's legacy. He had two more books published, *The hungry grass* (1947) and the posthumous *A warning to conquerors* (1968), and wrote at least one memorable poem, the often anthologised 'Dublin made me' which is quoted on the front page of the autobiography of C. S. Andrews (qv), but his overall poetic output was thin and did not break out of the standards of his time. He had more success as broadcaster and playwright.

In 1939 he was taken on by Radio Éireann, and within a few years found himself hosting 'Ireland is singing', a programme of folk songs and ballads, which resulted in the collection of a major body of songs not commonly available elsewhere. MacDonagh encouraged listeners to send in lyrics which would be set to tunes – for the most part there was no indication of the original tune – and sung on the programme. The lyrics, mostly handwritten, are in the Irish folklore archives in UCD. This popular programme inspired the later important archival recordings of Seán Mac Réamoinn (1921–2007) and Ciarán Mac Mathúna.

Enthusiasm for folk tradition is apparent in MacDonagh's plays, which are all written in verse but are robust, bawdy, funny, and colloquial. His first and most successful play, 'Happy as Larry' was published in 1946 before it was performed. A pugnacious review by Valentin Iremonger (qv) in the *Irish Times* praised the play as a lusty, full-blooded bacchanalia of Dublin but taunted Irish theatres with lacking the guts to produce it. This helped bring about a staging by the Lyric Theatre playing at the Abbey in May 1947. The excellent reviews and enthusiastic audiences continued when the play transferred to the Mercury theatre in London in September. The *Observer* (21 Sept. 1947) called it 'a melodrama in ballade that rips along like a jaunting car in a moonstruck (or eire-faery) midnight'. A West End run in the Criterion theatre in 1948 was equally successful, but the 1950 New

York production was conceived as a musical by Burgess Meredith and was an expensive flop. The play was reprinted in 1967, and the original manuscript bought by Harvard University. None of MacDonagh's subsequent plays achieved comparable success. 'Fading mansion' (performed at the Duchess Theatre, London, September 1949) was an adaptation of Jean Anouilh's 'Romeo and Juliet' and was commissioned by Laurence Olivier, but not even the electrifying appearance of the young Siobhán McKenna (qv) could save it from bad reviews. Critics complained that the Irish setting jarred with the French sentiment. 'God's gentry', a ballad opera about Travellers (first performed by the Belfast Arts Theatre, August 1951), was better received and transferred to the Gate, where it was effectively staged and played for a record-breaking nine weeks. The Irish Times (27 Dec. 1951) termed it a 'tinkers' opera' and first-class light entertainment. 'Step-in-the-hollow' (Gate Theatre, March 1957), was a comic courtroom drama; and his final play, 'Lady Spider' (Gas Company Theatre, Dún Laoghaire, September 1959), a dramatisation of the Deirdre (qv) story, was a departure since it was a tragedy, though still satirical and funny. Deirdre is portrayed as a spider who consumes her men. None of his plays has been revived. In 1958 he edited with Lennox Robinson (qv) the Oxford book of Irish verse.

MacDonagh died 1 January 1968 of respiratory failure in a Dublin nursing home and was survived by his second wife and all four children. He is buried in Deansgrange cemetery, Co. Dublin. His papers, mostly consisting of press clippings, are in the possession of his daughter Iseult McGuinness, as is a bust by Oisín Kelly (qv).