

Classic Poetry Series

Thomas MacGreevy
- poems -

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Thomas MacGreevy(1893 - 1967)

Thomas MacGreevy, poet, art and literary critic, Director of the National Gallery of Ireland (1950-63), was a man of letters in the old sense of the word. He has been hailed as Ireland's first modernist poet, yet is one of its most neglected. Although many consider his poetic output slight (one volume of poetry published during his lifetime, *Poems*), his strikingly original poetry paved the way for younger poets such as Samuel Beckett, Brian Coffey and Denis Devlin to see a way around that proverbial shadow cast by W.B. Yeats.

Although MacGreevy's poetic output might not have been prodigious, he was far from silent. During his lifetime he wrote hundreds of articles in art, literary and social journals, short stories, a novel, plays (many in the 1940s in collaboration with Geraldine Cummins), monographs on contemporary writers and artists, catalogues of the National Gallery of Ireland's collections, and thousands upon thousands of letters, many of which are still preserved in archival collections.

Thomas MacGreevy was born on 26 October 1893 in Tarbert, Co. Kerry, the seventh of eight children (and only surviving son). He sat the Boy Clerk examination for the British Civil Service in 1909, moving to Dublin in February 1910 to take up a post with the Irish Land Commission. Dublin was a world of contradictions: in July 1911 MacGreevy watched as King George and Queen Mary drove by in an open car; three months later he was there when John Redmond unveiled the Parnell monument on Sackville Street.

MacGreevy served in the Great War as a Second Lieutenant in the Royal Field Artillery. His training lasted nearly twenty months: by Christmas 1917 he was on line in the Somme. In *Poems* the two first poems are specifically about MacGreevy's experiences in the war. But the war had a profound effect on him, and coming to terms with the experience filled his poetry and critical writing for the next decade and a half.

After the war MacGreevy was afforded an opportunity he could only dream about in pre-war times: a scholarship to Trinity College Dublin. He read History and Political Science and began to participate in Dublin's intellectual, social and cultural life.

In March 1925 MacGreevy moved to London. It was from London that he began writing poetry, drawing upon his life in Tarbert, Dublin and the Great War as inspiration. Most of his poetry concerned events he witnessed or trips he made. He also wrote art and literature reviews for *The Times Literary Supplement* and

The Nation and Athenaeum. He began his career as an art critic while assistant editor for The Connoisseur.

In London he met T.S. Eliot, editor of The Criterion, who took him on as a reviewer. It was possibly Eliot's poetry that had the most profound effect on MacGreevy's own style. Certainly MacGreevy's long 'cab' poem (as it is commonly referred to) 'Crón Tráth na nDéithe' is greatly indebted to 'The Waste Land'. MacGreevy was an extraordinarily visual poet: he painted words on the page, sometimes like an impressionist, but more often like a cubist, juxtaposing the real and surreal in disturbing and unfamiliar ways.

In January 1927 an opportunity came to work in Paris as lecteur in English Literature at the Ecole Normale Supérieure. He jumped at the opportunity. Within a matter of weeks MacGreevy was part of Joyce's circle, assisting the master with Work in Progress, and helping to defend him from his literary detractors in articles justifying and explicating Joyce's method.

In November 1928 MacGreevy's replacement at the Ecole arrived: Samuel Beckett. The two men hit it off immediately and MacGreevy introduced Beckett to his wide circle of friends, including Joyce. The rest is history. In Paris MacGreevy met another writer who was to change the course of his life: Richard Aldington. Although only a year older, Aldington became MacGreevy's mentor. Aldington was instrumental in MacGreevy's finding a publisher for his translation of Valéry's Introduction to the Method of Leonardo da Vinci, and in having two of his monographs on contemporary writers published: T.S. Eliot, and Richard Aldington: An Englishman.

Although MacGreevy's life in Paris was rich in art, literature and friendship, he found it difficult to make ends meet. In 1933 he returned to London. There he joined the staff of The Studio, becoming their chief art critic. He also began lecturing for the National Gallery. By this time he had, by and large, stopped writing poetry. It was in London, however, that Poems was finally published by Heinemann, and reprinted by The Viking Press in New York. Reviews were mixed and, not surprisingly, the most critical reviews came from Irish reviewers writing in Dublin and London. Ireland was not yet ready for modernist poetry.

In 1950 MacGreevy was appointed Director of the National Gallery of Ireland, and he came into his own. Although to many he seemed a surprising choice, his latent talents as an administrator were brought to the fore. He was instrumental in bringing to the Gallery ideas such as a lecture series and in-house restoration, which were commonplace abroad. Unfortunately, the demands of the position (MacGreevy was 57 when he was appointed) took its toll: MacGreevy's two heart

attacks finally forced him to retire in 1963.

During his last years, MacGreevy began writing poetry again. He also began his Memoirs, which he never completed. He was admitted to the Portobello Nursing Home for what should have been a minor operation in March 1967, but died from heart failure afterwards, on St Patrick's eve.

Homage To Hieronymus Bosch

A woman with no face walked into the light;
A boy, in a brown-tree norfolk suit,
Holding on
Without hands
To her seeming skirt.

She stopped,
And he stopped,
And I, in terror, stopped, staring.

Then I saw a group of shadowy figures behind her.

It was a wild wet morning
But the little world was spinning on.

Liplessly, somehow, she addressed it:
<i>The book must be opened
And the park too.</i>

I might have tittered
But my teeth chattered
And I saw that the words, as they fell,
Lay, wriggling, on the ground.

There was a stir of wet wind
And the shadowy figures began to stir
When one I had thought dead
Filmed slowly out of his great effigy on a tomb near by
And they all shuddered
He bent as if to speak to the woman
But the nursery governor flew up out of the well of Saint Patrick,
Confiscated by his mistress,

And, his head bent,
Staring out over his spectacles,
And scratching the gravel furiously, Hissed -
 The words went pingg! like bullets,
 Upwards, past his spectacles
<i>Say nothing, I say, say nothing, say nothing!</i>

And he who had seemed to be coming to life
Gasped,
Began hysterically, to laugh and cry,
And, with a gesture of impotent and half-petulant despair,
Filmed back into his effigy again.

High above the Bank of Ireland
Unearthly music sounded,
Passing westwards.

Then, from the drains,
Small sewage rats slid out.
They numbered hundreds of hundreds, tens, thousands.
Each bowed obsequiously to the shadowy figures
Then turned and joined in a stomach dance with his brothers and sisters.
Being a multitude, they danced irregularly.
There was rat laughter, Deeper here and there,
And occasionally she-rats grew hysterical.
The shadowy figures looked on, agonized.
The woman with no face gave a cry and collapsed.
The rats danced on her
And on the wriggling words
Smirking.
The nursery governor flew back into the well
With the little figure without hands in the brown-tree clothes.

Thomas MacGreevy