McGee, Thomas D'Arcy

by Francis M. Carroll

McGee, Thomas D'Arcy (1825–68), poet, journalist, revolutionary, and politician, was born 3 April 1825 in Carlingford, Co. Louth, son of James McGee of the Coast Guard service and his wife Dorcas Catherine Morgan. His mother’s father had been a Dublin bookseller who was imprisoned for his involvement with the United Irishmen. His father in 1833 was given an appointment in the custom house in Wexford. McGee showed promise at school, and was inspired by Fr Theobald Mathew (qv), Daniel O'Connell (qv), and Celtic literature. After his mother died his father remarried, prompting McGee to emigrate to the United States in 1842 to live with his mother’s sister in Providence, Rhode Island. As a result of a passionate Fourth of July speech in Boston, the 17-year-old McGee was offered a job with the Boston Pilot, the leading catholic newspaper in New England. Within two years he was an editor, writing articles on Irish literature, Irish nationalism, and puritanism and nativism in the United States. McGee published his first two books: Eva MacDonald, a tale of the United Irishmen (1844) and Historical sketches of O'Connell and his friends (1845).

On the strength of his writing McGee was invited to join the staff of the Freeman's Journal in Dublin and he returned to Ireland in June 1845. He served as the parliamentary correspondent in London, although he became increasingly interested in literary history, publishing the Gallery of Irish writers (1846) and A memoir of the life and conquests of Art MacMurrogh (1847). McGee was asked to leave the Freeman's Journal as a result of articles he wrote anonymously for the Young Ireland weekly, The Nation, and in April 1847 he joined The Nation. In Dublin McGee became secretary of the Irish Confederation, a group of Young Irelanders who had split from Daniel O'Connell's Repeal Association. By early 1848 divisions formed within this group also, with militants such as John Mitchel (qv), and James Fintan Lalor (qv), advocating a national insurrection, but McGee stood by the conservative leadership of William Smith O'Brien (qv) and Charles Gavan Duffy (qv). In the charged climate of 1848 McGee was arrested for sedition in July, but released. The Irish Confederation moved steadily toward insurrection, and in late July McGee was sent to Scotland, and later Sligo, to rouse sympathisers. The rebellion itself was quickly crushed at Ballingarry, Co. Tipperary, on 29 July. McGee was protected by Dr Edward Maginn (qv), the catholic bishop of Derry, and fled to the United States disguised as a priest.

McGee landed in Philadelphia on 10 October 1848 but left shortly for New York, where he founded his own newspaper called The Nation. His criticism of the catholic church for opposition to the rebellion and republicanism in Ireland led him into a direct clash with the catholic bishop of New York, John Hughes (qv), and an episcopal ban on the paper, resulting in its failure in early 1850. McGee moved back
to Boston and founded another newspaper, *The American Celt and Adopted Citizen*. He moderated criticism of the church, being anxious to avoid contributing to anti-catholic nativism in the United States, and he worked to improve the circumstances of Irish immigrants by promoting adult education, migration to rural areas, and the Irish Immigrant Aid Convention in Buffalo in 1856. As a result, he was reproached for abandoning Irish republicanism. McGee moved the newspaper to Buffalo, New York, in the summer of 1852, and then to New York City in 1853. He also published *A history of Irish settlers in North America* (1851), the first book on the Irish in America; *A history of the attempts to establish the protestant reformation in Ireland* (1853); *The catholic history of North America* (1855), mending his relations with the church; and *A life of the Rt Rev. Edward Maginn* (1857), his patron in Derry in 1848.

McGee was invited to Montreal in early 1857 by the Irish community. Visits to Canada in 1852 and 1856 had modified his earlier critical views. In 1855, during a visit to Ireland, he had urged Irishmen to emigrate to Canada rather than the United States. In Montreal he started a newspaper called the *New Era*, and by late 1857 was elected to the legislative assembly from Montreal and to membership in the St Patrick’s Society. Through both his newspaper and speeches McGee supported economic development, railway construction, immigration, tariffs, the acquisition of western lands owned by the Hudson's Bay Company, and a federation of Canada with several maritime colonies. McGee proposed the ‘new nationality’, a political association of British North America embodying many of the ideas of the more conservative Young Irelanders, which envisioned a political state presided over by one of Queen Victoria’s sons. He concluded that a constitutional monarchy created a more balanced political system and increased liberty.

McGee moved steadily from the ‘reformers’ to the ‘conservatives’ in Canadian politics. In 1863 he became a member of the ‘Great Coalition’, led by John A. Macdonald and George-Étienne Cartier, which through the conferences in Charlottetown and Quebec in 1864 created the dominion of Canada. McGee became one of the ‘Fathers of Confederation.’ As the Fenian movement gathered strength during the 1860s, McGee became more outspoken in his criticism of republicanism, particularly for Ireland, and he urged, in a speech at Wexford during a visit in 1865, that Ireland follow the emerging Canadian formula of self-government within the British empire rather than the Fenian goal of an independent republic. These views cost him political support in Montreal, where he was expelled from the St Patrick's Society. McGee was elected to the Canadian house of commons from Montreal West in 1867, but he was promised a civil service appointment by Macdonald so that he could retire and devote himself to writing. In 1861 he had written a play, ‘Sebastian, or the Roman martyr’, and in 1863 *A popular history of Ireland*, which earned him election to the RIA. However, after a late-night session of parliament on 7 April 1868, McGee was assassinated in front of his house. It was widely held that his murder was a Fenian plot, although that was never proven. Patrick James Whelan (b. c.1840 in Galway), an Irish immigrant, was convicted of
the crime and hanged on 11 February 1869. D'Arcy McGee was given a state funeral in Ottawa.

He married (13 July 1847) Mary Theresa Caffrey; they had five daughters and one son. On McGee's death his widow and two surviving daughters were granted a pension from the Canadian government. *The poems of Thomas D'Arcy McGee* (ed. Mrs James Sadlier) was published in New York in 1869.

-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------