

## Ó Tuairisc, Eoghan

by Colbert Kearney

Ó Tuairisc, Eoghan (1919–82), writer, was born Eugene Rutherford Watters in Ballinasloe, Co. Galway, on 3 April 1919, eldest of two sons and two daughters of Thomas Watters, shoemaker, who had been wounded in 1916 while fighting with the Connaught Rangers at the Somme, and Maud Watters (née Sproule), seamstress and clairvoyante. Having attended the local national school (1925–32), he won a scholarship to St Joseph's College, Garbally Park, Ballinasloe, where, between 1932 and 1937, he excelled in English, Irish, Greek, and Latin literatures, acquiring in the process a European perspective and an antipathy to provincial narrow-mindedness. His family circumstances prevented him from taking up a university scholarship; instead, he enrolled at St Patrick's Training College in Drumcondra, Dublin, where the official language was Irish and where he qualified as a primary teacher in 1939. (While at St Patrick's he was commissioned as a second lieutenant in the army and served in the Waterford area during the summer of 1940.) In 1940 he took up his first appointment in Rathfarnham Boys' National School and in 1944 transferred to Finglas where he taught until his resignation in January 1961. He attended UCD as an evening student, graduating BA (1943) and MA (1947).

Ó Tuairisc's literary career is remarkable in that he was a genuinely bilingual full-time professional writer, producing poems, plays, novels, and criticism in both Irish and English. The relative lack of regard for his work in English is a source of amazement to those whose attention has been recently directed to it by critics of Irish poetic modernism. The only extensive criticism has been in Irish: Martin Nugent's 1984 study of the plays and Máirín Nic Eoin's 1988 literary biography. While his reputation as a writer in Irish was guaranteed by his success in Oireachtas competitions and the popularity of his plays, there were always those who questioned the merit of work that flaunted its modernism and made no effort to mimic a Gaeltacht facility in theme or treatment. Although he was a successful teacher and greatly in demand as a writer of pantomimes and an adjudicator at drama competitions, Ó Tuairisc's best work, both in Irish and English, resists casual reading and has never been subjected to the kind of critical acclaim and annotation that, for example, introduced Joyce's fiction and Eliot's poetry – both major influences on his writing – to a wider public. He was instinctively ill-disposed to literary groups and coteries and consequently, throughout his life, found it difficult to get published and, when published, was sometimes reviewed with the casual cruelty reserved for unknowns.

His first novel, *Murder in three moves*, a detective story set in Connemara and based on a chess problem, was published in Dublin in 1960 and generally well received. Shortly afterwards he resigned from teaching to concentrate on writing, and the decision seemed vindicated when, over the following four years, his best work was published. *L'attaque* (1962) deals with the French invasion of Ireland in 1798 as

seen through the mind of Máirtín, a poor Mayo farmer, whose pre-enlightenment mentality struggles to understand the abstract ideas that excite his formally educated leaders. The narrative produces a modern epic quality by relating the action to key elements in European history from the idea of fate in Greek tragedy to the Gaelic concept of the *aisling*. Readers of *L'attaque* would not have been unsettled by the author's *The week-end of Dermot and Grace* (1964) but, inevitably, there were few who bought both.

Ó Tuairisc had been working on this poem throughout the 1950s and had made many unsuccessful efforts to find a publisher. It is likely that it would have had more of an impact had it appeared, say, in 1955, when the memory of its central event, the atomic bombing of Hiroshima, was fresher in the public mind. The poem is an autobiographical drama of many voices speaking within the mind of Dermot, a young man who renounces a life of bourgeois escapism for the martyrdom of poetry. More remarkable than the material is the characteristic layering which relates Dermot's dilemma to a wide range of European civilisation from Euripides' 'Alkestis' to the Irish 'Tóraíocht Dhiarmada agus Ghráinne', from Plato's cave to Einstein's theory of relativity, from the mass to 'Madame Butterfly'; the weight of the references is never burdensome because the reader is borne along by the music – rich, fluent, various, and superbly orchestrated. Though the influence of Eliot is detectable, the poem is never derivative. Many of the same themes and techniques recur in *Aifreann na Marbh*, a requiem for those killed at Hiroshima, which is the centrepiece of Ó Tuairisc's Irish collection of the same year, *Lux aeterna*.

This productive period came to an end with the sudden death of his wife in 1965. After his second marriage he managed to resume his literary career. The most interesting of his later works is *An Lomnochtán* (1977), an impressionist reconstruction of a midland childhood, written in a non-native Irish which, among others things, suggests the linguistic psycho-drama of the bilingual writer. He died of a heart attack 24 August 1982. In 1945 he married Una McDonnell, then a librarian, later to become a successful painter and designer, and lived in Cappagh, west of Finglas, until her death in 1965. In 1972 he married the writer Rita Kelly and went to live in Maganey, Co. Kildare.

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Máirín Nic Eoin, *Eoghan Ó Tuairisc: beatha agus saothar* (1988); Martin Nugent, *Drámaí Eoghan Uí Thuairisc* (1984); John Goodby, *Irish poetry since 1950* (2000); personal knowledge