

Connor, Jerome

by Giollamuire Ó Murchú

Connor, Jerome (1874–1943), sculptor, craftworker, and graphic artist, was born 23 February 1874 in Coumduff, Anascaul, Co. Kerry, youngest among six surviving children (four sons, two daughters) of Patrick Connor, farmer and housebuilder, and his second wife, Margaret Connor (née Currane), both of Anascaul. Educated locally, in 1888 he emigrated with his family to Holyoke, Massachusetts, where his eldest brother Timothy had settled c.1878. Trained in the Springfield, Mass., area as stonecarver, machinist, and signpainter, he moved to New York c.1896, financed by prizefighting winnings (as 'Patrick J. O'Connor'). He learned bronzecasting and assisted with Perry's 'Fountain of Neptune' (Washington, DC, 1898). When working on the collaborative Dewey victory arch project (New York, 1899), fellow sculptors noted his ability.

About January 1899, staying with a patron, Bill Spear, at Quincy, Mass., he was recommended to arts-and-crafts promoter Elbert Hubbard and joined his Roycroft community at East Aurora, New York. There he helped with several crafts, produced competent book illustrations, and fired his first sculptures (signed 'Saint Gerome') in terracotta. Despite his later claims to be self-taught, this work, visibly influenced by Augustus Saint-Gaudens (qv), indicates a formal training. He exhibited, initially as 'Jerome (Stanley) Conner' (Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, 1900, 1902–4, 1906, 1908, 1915–16, 1919–21; Art Institute of Chicago, 1916). In 1902 Connor left Roycroft 'to direct the Fine Arts' at Gustav Stickley's United Crafts, Syracuse, New York, a major arts-and-crafts centre. The movement's ideals were embodied in a Whitman memorial proposal, incorporating 'The labourers', a celebration of the dignity of craftsmanship, which won Connor immediate critical approval. An early commission, the Kirkpatrick memorial fountains (Syracuse, 1904) – life-studies of Onondaga Iroquois braves – led the Onondaga to honour him, and he participated for some years in their ceremonies.

After 1903, with his wife Anne, a fellow Roycrofter, he made an extended study visit to Italy, perhaps funded by sculptor and art patron Gertrude Vanderbilt. The Connors then moved from Syracuse, New York, to Washington, DC, c.1910. Major commissions followed for memorials to Irish-American general James Shields (qv) (Carrollton, Missouri, 1910); to university founder Archbishop John Carroll (qv) (1735–1815) (Washington, 1912); to Robert Emmet (qv) (Washington, 1917; also San Francisco; Emmetsburg, Iowa; Dublin); and for war memorials: 'The supreme sacrifice' (Washington, marble, 1921), 'The angels of the battlefield' (US civil war nursing nuns, Washington, 1924), and 'Victory memorial' (the Bronx, New York city, 1925). His 1920 portrait of Éamon de Valera (qv) is a unique historical record.

American victims of the 1915 *Lusitania* sinking included Elbert Hubbard of Roycroft, and Gertrude Vanderbilt's multi-millionaire brother Alfred. Their families, with politicians including Franklin Roosevelt, formed the Lusitania Peace Memorial Committee to honour the dead at Queenstown (Cobh), Co. Cork, appointing Connor sculptor. In 1925 he moved with his family to Dublin. In 1929 they returned to America, but travelled regularly between the US and Ireland until the outbreak of war in 1939.

In Dublin, Connor's reliefs of government ministers William Cosgrave (qv), Kevin O'Higgins (qv), Desmond FitzGerald (qv), Ernest Blythe (qv), and John Marcus O'Sullivan (qv) and bust of George Russell (qv) (all 1926), Irish coinage submissions (1927), and 'The patriot', a 1916 memorial proposal (1929), won recognition. He exhibited (RA, 1929–32; British Empire Academy, 1930); his 2 North Circular Road studio became a recognised meeting-place for artists and writers, but he received no state commissions.

After completing a companion Hubbard memorial (East Aurora, 1930), he addressed the *Lusitania* project, now delayed by briefing changes. Reflecting committee-member Gertrude Vanderbilt's shifting tastes, an initial allegorical angel was replaced (c.1930) by mourning fishermen. In 1934 a design incorporating both concepts was approved. He had personally cast the 'Fishermen' (the first large *cire-perdue* bronze attempted in Ireland) and completed the plaster 'Angel of peace' and the stonework when work stalled owing to lack of further funds (September 1936).

Before the depression Connor had hoped to erect memorials in his native Kerry. Alternative 'Liberty' (c.1930) and 'Pikeman' (1931) proposals for Tralee remained unrealised, but a Killarney 'Kerry poets memorial' ('Éire in mourning', evoking Whitman's poem 'Old Ireland') seemed viable, with his businessman brother Timothy covering part of the fee. Then local payments stopped (March 1932) amid claims that the design was 'pagan'. After a standoff, Connor was judged in breach of contract, and obliged to return all advances (July 1936).

Although many questioned this judgement, it precipitated Connor's bankruptcy (December 1938), eviction from his Dublin studio (February 1939), and subsequent poverty. However, he continued exhibiting (RHA 1937–8, 1941–3), now developing a late style, marked by an increasingly free use of clay – evident when contrasting the 1931 Tralee 'Pikeman' maquette with the near-expressionist 'Pikeman' study commissioned c.1941 by John Reihill. Another supporter, James Digby, provided him with a studio apartment (15 Crampton Court, his last address). However, by mid 1943, without a wartime fuel ration, he was unable to cast further bronzes. Admitted to the Adelaide Hospital suffering from malnutrition, he died of heart failure, 21 August 1943. In 1945 sculptor Domhnall Ó Murchadha (later RHA; d. 1991) helped save the main studio plasters. He completed the *Lusitania* memorial (1968) and 'Éire' (Dublin, 1976), designed Connor's Dublin gravestone and a memorial for Anascaul, and (with local help and the support of the Connor estate) set up

the Jerome Connor Trust collection of Connor sculptures, intended for display at Anascaul once a gallery is built there for the purpose. Connor's fourth 'Emmet' bronze, recovered in the US, was erected in St Stephen's Green, Dublin, in 1968.

Connor is represented in the following collections: Dublin: Áras an Uachtaráin, Hugh Lane Municipal Gallery of Modern Art, NGI, NMI; East Aurora, New York: ScheideMantel House; Frankfort, Kentucky: Old Capitol Building; Limerick: City Art Gallery; New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art; Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson House; and Waterford: Municipal Art Collection.

Contemporaries admired Connor's work for its unflinching realism and sensitivity to individual character. His monuments gave historic events immediacy, his models embodying ideals of heroism, spirituality, and sorrow. Catholic, nationalist Irish-America found him an eloquent advocate, communicating their values to a wider society by his sophisticated use of contemporary secular imagery. In Ireland, such imagery was unappreciated, and Connor was reduced to penury, his achievement preserved for the nation only by the timely action of a dedicated few.

Connor married (1901) fellow Roycroft craftworker Anne Bowen Donohue, daughter of Dr Thaddeus Donohue of Memphis, Tennessee (born Tralee, Co. Kerry; surgeon, 110th Regiment US Colored Infantry, 1864–6), and Anna Elizabeth Donohue (née Chase), of a southern planter family. The Connors had one child, Marjorie ('Peggy') Connor.

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