

Hopkins, Gerard Manley

by Patrick Maume

Hopkins, Gerard Manley (1844–89), poet and Jesuit, was born 28 July 1844 at 87 The Grove, Stratford, Essex, eldest of nine children (eight of whom survived to adulthood) of Manley Hopkins (1818–1897), marine insurance adjuster, and his wife, Catherine, or Kate (née Smith; 1821–1920). His parents encouraged their children's artistic interests, inspired by the Ruskinian view that close observation of the natural world was intimately linked to moral perception; Gerard developed a talent for drawing, and two of his brothers became professional artists. His interest in poetry dated from his mid-teens. Hopkins was educated at Highgate School (1854–63), where he was regularly and brutally flogged, and Balliol College, Oxford (1863–7), where he thrived. Here he moved in Anglo-Catholic ritualist circles, whose views went beyond those of his high-church family. He began to practise auricular confession, and his religious faith centred on sacramental belief in the real presence of Jesus in the eucharist. Anglo-Catholic ritualism sometimes had a certain homoerotic element; there is little doubt that Hopkins's orientation was homosexual and that he was troubled by his fascination with the male body. He was a small and slightly built man who suffered from persistent health problems; some acquaintances regarded him as mildly effeminate, but others disputed this.

In the summer of 1866 Hopkins came to believe that the anglican claim to be a part of the one church founded by Christ was untenable; on 21 October 1866 he was received into the Roman catholic church by John Henry Newman (qv). After graduation he taught for two terms at Newman's Oratory school at Birmingham, but then decided to enter the religious life. After making this decision, on 11 May 1867, he burned his manuscript poems, believing them to be a possible obstacle to his religious vocation, but they survive in copies that he had sent to friends. In the ensuing years he continued to keep journals of his observations from nature.

In September 1868 Hopkins entered the novitiate of the English province of the Society of Jesus at Roehampton. In undertaking for the first time the spiritual exercises of St Ignatius Loyola he experienced a spiritual crisis (which he later recalled in his poem 'The wreck of the *Deutschland*'). It appears that the Ignatian method both exercised his powers of observation (the Ignatian meditant is encouraged to visualise precisely the scenes on which he meditates) and heightened his tendency to morbid introspection and depression. After taking his vows on 8 September 1870 he spent 1870–73 in further training at St Mary's Hall, Stonyhurst, Lancashire, and 1873–4 teaching classics and English to junior novices at Roehampton. In August 1874 he was sent to St Beuno's College in Wales to study theology; he developed a special devotion to St Winifred, whose shrine is nearby, studied Welsh – a pursuit that combined an interest in prosody with a desire for the conversion of Wales – and continued his observations of nature. He also discovered

the writings of the medieval scholastic Duns Scotus, who taught that each individual thing has its own distinct essence, by contrast with the Thomist view that matter is in essence undifferentiated; this accorded with his own view of the physical world as a sacramental medium through which God makes his presence known. Hopkins's aesthetic rejected 'Parnassian' regularity and tried to deploy words to bring out afresh the inherent design and energies of the sensual world. His adherence to Scotism, rather than Thomism, which was the officially favoured school, is believed to have hindered his advancement in the Jesuit order. Hopkins made the most of the fact that Scotus – unlike Aquinas – had been a zealous advocate of the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception, which Pius IX had declared binding on all Catholics in 1854. On 28 August 1874 he received the four minor orders of doorkeeper, lector, acolyte, and exorcist.

In December 1875 Hopkins was fascinated by newspaper accounts of the deaths of five German nuns, while escaping to America from Bismarck's Kulturkampf, in a shipwreck off the English coast; in response to a casual remark from his superior about the possibility of writing a poem on the subject, he composed an ode 'The wreck of the *Deutschland*', which combines an account of Hopkins's own submission to God with the story of the nuns' deaths, and hails them as martyrs whose end will hasten the return of England to Catholicism. Hopkins was acutely aware of the conflict between the Catholic Church and temporal powers across Europe; he believed that English civilisation faced imminent disintegration as a long-term effect of the Reformation, and hoped that his poetry might be an instrument of God in the subsequent reconstruction. The ode was completed by June 1875 and submitted to the editors of the Jesuit journal, *The Month*, who found its metrical and stylistic experiments incomprehensible and turned it down. Hopkins regarded their response not merely as an ordinary rejection but as an expression of official disapproval; after *The Month* refused a more conventional ode on a shipwreck, 'The wreck of the *Eurydice*' in 1878, he came to realise that his work would probably not be published in his lifetime. He continued to write – though in less complex forms – and to send copies of his poems to a small circle of friends, the most important of whom were Robert Bridges, an Oxford contemporary who became poet laureate and served as Hopkins's literary executor, and the Anglican canon R. W. Dixon, a poet who had briefly taught Hopkins at Highgate.

After his ordination to the major orders of subdeacon, deacon, and priest (21–3 September 1877) Hopkins began a period of movement from place to place. He found this profoundly disturbing, though he accepted it in accordance with the Jesuit self-image of soldiers removed from inordinate attachment to their surroundings and willing to go where they were sent without hesitation. He taught at Mount St Mary's College, near Sheffield (October 1877 to April 1878), and was curate at the fashionable Jesuit church in Farm Street, London (July to November 1878) and at St Aloysius' church, Oxford (December 1878 to October 1879); this experience of appearing as a revenant in the setting of so many fond memories produced a number of poems on transience and mortality.

In October 1879 Hopkins was assigned as curate to St Joseph's church at Bedford Leigh in Lancashire. This appointment saw the start of a period of service in the slums of the industrial north, which the nature-loving southerner found oppressive, particularly after he moved to St Francis Xavier, Liverpool (January 1880 to August 1881). His ornate style of preaching was ill suited to audiences more responsive to the direct style of Father Tom Burke (qv), in whose honour he composed some Latin verses. Hopkins once reduced a dining-room full of Jesuits to laughter by an extended comparison between the shape of the Sea of Galilee and that of the human ear, and he unintentionally scandalised a Farm Street congregation by comparing the church to a cow with seven teats – the sacraments. On a temporary posting to St Joseph's church, Glasgow (August to October 1881), he found 'the poor Irish' at Glasgow 'very attractive . . . though always very drunken and at present very Fenian, they are warm-hearted and give a far heartier welcome than those at Liverpool'. In October 1881 Hopkins began his tertianship at Roehampton, and on 15 August 1882 he took his final vows, after which he was sent to teach at Stonyhurst.

In December 1883 Hopkins was invited to Ireland by Father William Delany (qv), who wished to raise the standard of teaching at University College, Dublin, the remnant of Newman's Catholic University, newly taken over by the Jesuits, and to recruit Jesuit staff whose salaries could be ploughed back into the college. Delany sought several English Jesuits but was able to get only Hopkins (who was regarded as eccentric and expendable). In February 1884 Hopkins was elected to a Royal University of Ireland classics fellowship, which enabled him to take up the position of professor of Greek at University College. His election produced a dispute between Delany and the future archbishop of Dublin William Walsh (qv), who believed that RUI fellowships should be spread among the catholic secondary schools around Dublin and not reserved for University College; there was also some resentment at the importation of an Englishman.

Hopkins, his expectations shaped by Oxford, was dismayed at the low standard of learning and the utilitarian attitude to education found among his pupils, who treated him with considerable irreverence. His English voice and mannerisms grated on colleagues as well as pupils; his closest friend was a Jesuit lay brother debarred from ordination by epilepsy, and he found occasional solace on visits to upper-class catholic families, notably the Cassidys of Monasterevan, Co. Kildare. Scrupulous attention to vast piles of examination scripts intensified his depression; an unfinished 'Epithalamium' for a brother's marriage, incongruously centred on an image of nude male bathers, was jotted on an answer book while Hopkins invigilated an examination in 1888. The six 'terrible sonnets' of 1885, never sent to friends and found among his papers after his death, are classic expressions of mental desolation and despair. He planned various scholarly projects which were never finished (sometimes hardly begun).

Hopkins was further divided from colleagues and pupils by his political views. The only other English Jesuit in the college, Joseph Darlington (qv), was pro-nationalist.

Hopkins was despised as hysterical and effeminate – ‘a merely beautifully painted seashell. I never found any mollusc inside it of human substance’. Although Hopkins believed Britain had done injustice to Ireland in the past, he regarded the methods used by Irish agitators as immoral; he thought home rule was inevitable and should be accepted on the basis of getting the worst over as soon as possible, but he felt a visceral hatred for Gladstone for destroying the empire. Even after the exposure of the Pigott forgeries he continued to believe that Charles Stewart Parnell (qv) had been complicit in the Phoenix Park murders, adding that even if the accusations against Parnell were false they were less libellous than the claim made by William O’Brien (qv) that Arthur James Balfour (qv) deliberately caused the deaths of prisoners. Hopkins contrasted the sincere faith of Irish congregations with what he regarded as their immoral political activities, referring to ‘the unflinching devotion of the Irish, whose religion hangs suspended over their politics as the blue sky over the earth, both in one landscape but immeasurably remote’. Some of Hopkins's most assertively English poems date from his residence in Ireland. A number were encouraged by watching military displays in Phoenix Park – Hopkins was always fascinated by soldiers.

In the middle of 1889 Hopkins contracted typhoid, probably transmitted by the defective drainage system of University College (which was renovated shortly afterwards). This developed into peritonitis, from which he died 8 June 1889 at 86 St Stephen's Green; he was buried on 11 June in the communal Jesuit plot at Glasnevin cemetery, Dublin. In subsequent decades Bridges, his literary executor, tried to prepare the ground for the acceptance of Hopkins's work by submitting examples of his poetry to anthologies. In December 1918 Bridges published *Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, on which Hopkins's fame is based. His attention to language as a medium led him to be hailed as a forerunner of literary modernism. More recent critics emphasise his Victorianism.

Some accounts of Hopkins see his religious vocation as having provided structure and meaning to his life and enabled his poetic achievement; in this interpretation the dark years in Ireland are seen as a sacrifice offered to God. Other readings see him as fleeing from self-knowledge into an externally imposed discipline, which crippled and ultimately destroyed him; in this view the darkness of his later years reflects a painfully resisted awareness of frustration and futility. To a great extent this dispute reflects disagreement about the truth or falsehood of the faith to which Hopkins devoted his life, and the question of whether suffering is utterly futile or capable of redemption; neither side can deny the centrality of faith to Hopkins' self-image, nor the intensity of his pain, and both can wonder what greater achievement might have been his had his superiors been receptive to his literary gifts.

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Paddy Kitchen, *Gerard Manley Hopkins* (1978); Robert Bernard, *Martin Gerard Manley Hopkins: a very private life* (1991); Norman White, *Hopkins: a literary biography* (1992); Norman White, *Hopkins in Ireland* (2002)

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