

Hutchinson, (William Patrick Henry) Pearse

by Patrick Maume

Hutchinson, (William Patrick Henry) Pearse (192–2012), poet, was born on 16 February 1927 in Glasgow, the only child of Henry Warren Hutchinson, a printer, and his wife Catherine (or Caitlín) Sarah (née McElhinney), a Scottish-born schoolteacher. Both parents were Sinn Féin activists; Henry lost his job as manager of a Glasgow printworks and was interned (1919–21), while Caitlín ran a safe house for fugitives and a Sinn Féin shop selling prison handicrafts. Their opposition to the Anglo–Irish Treaty (1921) precluded employment in Dublin; Caitlín supported the family by teaching in a catholic primary school in Greenock. She was active in Cumann na mBan and knew Constance Markievicz (qv), Margaret (Brady) Pearse (qv) and Margaret Pearse (qv); her son was called after the brothers William (qv) and Patrick Pearse (qv). Disappointed with his youthful dissipation, she would lament: 'Pearse, you aren't worthy of the name' (*Sunday Independent*, 15 August 1982).

After the election of a Fianna Fáil government in 1932, Caitlín wrote to Éamon de Valera (qv) and secured a job for Henry in the Dublin labour exchange. The Hutchinsons leased a house in Rathgar (called Findrum after the Donegal townland where Caitlín's family originated), and Pearse was educated at Westland Row CBS and Synge Street CBS (1936–45), supplemented by eclectic and often exotic reading in public libraries. He recalled that reading the Scots Gaelic poet Sorley MacLean (Somhairle MacGill-Eain (1911–86)) showed him how passion could be conveyed in Gaelic, and he took abiding interest in the twentieth-century Scottish literary revival driven by the poet Hugh MacDiarmid (Christopher Murray Grieve (1892–1978)). Reacting fiercely against the emotionally intensive catholic piety inculcated in him, which he described as based on fear rather than love, he was outspokenly agnostic as an adult. He was grateful to the Christian Brothers only for teaching him Irish, unintentionally opening earthier aspects of the older tradition. At Synge Street he befriended the painter Patrick Swift (qv) and the critic and poet John Jordan (qv) (1930–88), a lifelong associate.

Hutchinson was first in English in the national leaving certificate examination in 1945, and that year published his first poems in English (in the *Bell*) and in Irish (in the *Capuchin Annual*), and his first prose article (on the Chilean poet Gabriela Mistral (1889–1957), in the *Catholic Standard*). The following year he worked for nine months as an announcer on Radio Éireann (a job obtained with the assistance of Fr Senan Moynihan (qv)). Assisted by the Capuchins, he won a scholarship to UCD, taking Spanish and Italian when he matriculated in 1947. Although recognised as a promising poet, he left UCD in 1949 without taking his degree and recalled the teaching at the college as poor. He became editor of the Capuchins' *Irish Bookman* and crossword-checker on the *Sunday Press*.

At UCD he encountered the budding poet and man of letters Anthony Cronin (1926–2016), who introduced him to literary and drinking circles around McDaid's bar and the informal 'Catacombs' nightspot. Hutchinson took to the latter's gregarious and sometimes violent ambience, but his dislike of the vicious mockery exuded by many of its denizens, from Patrick Kavanagh (qv) down to passing begrudgers, brought him the nickname 'Hutchy Touchy'.

In 1950 Hutchinson took a holiday in Galicia (north-west Spain) and Portugal, and returned to Ireland having fallen in love with the sun and wishing to live there forever. This was intensified by conflict with his strong-willed mother over sex and religion. He left for Spain on 1 April 1951, but was unable to find work and moved to Geneva, where friends found him a position as a translator for the UN's International Labour Office. Hutchinson had mixed feelings about his two and a half years in Geneva; while he experienced emotional and intellectual development and participated in the Salzburg Seminar in American Studies (the novelist Saul Bellow (1915–2005) helped him publish a poem in *Partisan Review*), he found the city of Calvin in some respects more puritanical than mid-twentieth-century Dublin.

After a short stay in Holland, Hutchinson returned to Dublin late in 1953 and worked as a sub-editor for the *Irish Press*. In September 1954 he went to Barcelona with a young, well-to-do woman called Daphne Sheridan to work as English teachers. (Hutchinson's orientation was predominantly homosexual; several relationships with men are celebrated in his later verse.) He fell in love with the city and developed a fascination with the Catalan language, repressed by the centralist dictatorship of Francisco Franco. He learned Catalan, and the poet Salvador Espriu (1913–85) became a major influence on his later verse. In 1955 Hutchinson and the British poet P. J. Kavanagh (1931–2015) organised the first public reading of Catalan poetry in Barcelona since the end of the civil war, accompanied by Hutchinson's English translations. Hutchinson took an interest in other Spanish minority languages and learned Galician. (His translations *Friend songs: mediaeval Galaicoportuguese love poetry* were broadcast on BBC radio's Third Programme in 1960 and published in 1970.) He was also a regular contributor to the Irish-language magazine *Comhar* (1955–90). His experience of Catalonia led him to take a more sympathetic view of Ireland and of Irish republicanism, which he had previously associated with Irish puritanism; he was moved when Catalans spoke to him of Terence MacSwiney (qv).

After travelling in northern Europe, Hutchinson returned to Ireland in 1957 and spent some time in the Gaeltacht. For the next four years he became a regular literary critic on Radio Éireann (famously criticising *Sive* by John B. Keane (qv)). A natural broadcaster, he combined a lightly humorous conversational tone with a gift for rendering visual imagery in sound. He adjudicated amateur drama festivals and contributed book reviews and essays in English and Irish to the *Irish Press*.

In 1961 Hutchinson returned to Barcelona and its bohemian lifestyle with a friend, Ernie Hughes. Although Francoist authorities often turned a blind eye to discreet

transgressions, such toleration was unofficial, uneven and unpredictable; after arrest in 1962 for being drunk and disorderly and mocking Franco, Hutchinson was obliged to leave Spain every three months and re-enter on a tourist visa. This led to stays in the French Catalan city of Perpignan, where he befriended Catalan political exiles. In 1962 he published a collection of thirty translations from poems by the Catalan Josep Carner (1884–1970). Hutchinson's first original poetry collection, *Tongue without hands*, was published by Liam Miller (qv) in his Dolmen Press in 1963.

Hutchinson returned to Dublin in 1967 to care for his mother (d. 1968), enjoying a guarded reconciliation. He lived in Findrum after her death, and held court in Slattery's pub nearby. His verse from this period onwards shows a more relaxed attitude, celebrating friendship and less deeply estranged from Irish society. He supported himself by sporadic journalism and equally sporadic broadcasting work (notably a 1968 stint as RTÉ drama critic and regular appearances on the radio programme *Sunday miscellany*). His first Irish-language collection, *Faoistin bhacach* (1968), received a Butler award for Irish writing from the Irish American Cultural Institute of Eoin McKiernan (qv) in 1969, and was soon followed by another collection, *Expansions* (1969).

In 1971 Hutchinson was rescued from penury by being recruited for three years by Brendan Kennelly (b. 1936) as Gregory fellow in poetry at the University of Leeds, which required him only to arrange visits and readings by poets, give classes on poetry and assess students' efforts, and write his own poetry. He read intensively, developed an interest in African literature, visited Edinburgh regularly, and struck up new friendships (notably with the Cork-born critic and writer Robert Welch (1947–2013)). In 1972 he published another collection, *Watching the morning grow*. In Leeds in 1974, Hutchinson began the major relationship of his later years, with Alan Biddle (1952–94), from Kircubbin, Co. Down, who returned with him to Dublin and worked as his secretary. Hutchinson was the driving force behind the foundation in Dublin in 1975 of the poetry journal *Cyphers*, which became a long-running and prestigious publication with a strong international orientation. He undertook European poetry reading tours, developing a fondness for Bremen in north Germany. In 1975 he was television critic of the *Irish Times*.

Hutchinson wrote and presented a weekly RTÉ radio programme on Irish poetry, folklore and traditional music, *Óró Domhnaigh* (1977–8), regarded as his major broadcasting achievement. (Only two recordings have been preserved, though the scripts are in Hutchinson's papers.) He presented television programmes, including *Look around* (1975–6) and *Around the world* (1978), on the lives of young people in different countries, contributed a weekly Irish-language column, 'Tagairt', to the *RTÉ Guide* (1976–2003), and in the 1980s sporadically published impressionistic and fragmented essays in the literary page of the *Cork Examiner* (run by his friend Robert O'Donoghue (qv)). He was associated with various left-liberal causes, and highlighted the repressive nature of Irish society in his poetry: a poem from this period links Declan Flynn (a gay man beaten to death in Dublin in 1982) and Ann

Lovett (a 15-year-old schoolgirl who died in 1984 giving birth at a Marian grotto in Granard, Co. Longford, after a concealed pregnancy) as victims of Irish repression. Combining republican sympathies with concern at the Northern Ireland troubles, he maintained that, while he could never support violence, he could not condemn Northern Catholics for resisting oppression.

In 1978 Hutchinson received a two-year Arts Council bursary, and in 1981 became a founding member of Aosdána; its support grant (*cnuas*) was vital to his financial survival. Gallery Press published his *Selected poems* (1982) and a collection of new poems, *Climbing the light* (1985). These were followed by *Le cead na gréine* (1988) and *The soul that kissed the body* (1990), new and selected Irish-language poems with his own translations and introduction. *Barnsley main seam* (1995), dedicated to Biddle, was his first collection designed to some extent as a coherent whole, notable for reflections on the working-class cultures of northern England. Gallery published his *Collected poems* in 2002, followed by collected translations, *Done into English* (2003), and a volume of new poems, *At least for a while* (2008). Hutchinson's 80th birthday was marked by a symposium in TCD, which produced the essay collection *Reading Pearse Hutchinson: from Findrum to Fistera* (2011; ed. Philip Coleman and Maria Johnston). From 2009 Hutchinson began intermittent recordings of reminiscences, hoping to write a memoir of his travels.

Hutchinson died of pneumonia in Dublin on 14 January 2012. His extensive archive is in the library of Maynooth University; its opening on 24 May 2015 was accompanied by the inauguration of an annual Pearse Hutchinson seminar and the launch of a collection of unpublished Hutchinson poems, *Listening to Bach*. His poetry has been translated into numerous European languages, including Romanian, Flemish, and Galician. His literary significance is debated. He is widely admired by poets, generally acknowledged as a lover and master of language and as exemplifying a trend away from introverted concern with Irishness towards wider continental horizons. He himself resisted the view that he was best understood as an inhabitant of Ireland: 'I suppose I live in languages. If I belong anywhere, that is where I belong. A poet must live in language or else he's no good at all' (*Sunday Independent*, 15 August 1982). His career reflected a wider tendency away from allusive, hermetic poetry to the pursuit of Beat-like immediacy. Some critics argue that Hutchinson's concern with simplicity and Ireland's place in the comparative history of human oppression too often deteriorates into banality, didacticism, and regurgitation of sentimental revivalist tropes. Even these, however, acknowledge his occasional greatness, while his champions argue that his achievement has not yet been fully recognised and absorbed. There are portraits by Edward McGuire (qv) (1932–86) and Paul Funge (qv), and a drawing by Sean O'Sullivan (qv).

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*Ir. Press*, 13 Nov. 1944; 26 Mar. 1952; 16, 27 June 1953; 7 Aug. 1954; 16, 23 Aug. 1958; 10 Jan., 4 Apr., 6 Aug. 1959; 12 Mar., 2 Apr., 7, 31 May, 3 Sept., 8 Oct. 1960; 18 Mar., 6 May 1961; 15 Sept. 1962; 11 Jan., 22 Feb., 22 Mar., 4 Apr. 1969; 24 Jan., 27, 31 Mar., 13 July, 29 Aug., 15 Sept., 10 Oct., 22 Nov., 2 Dec. 1970; 23 Jan., 10 Mar., 16, 19 Apr., 3 July, 30 Nov. 1971; 28 Apr. 1973; 21 June 1975; 2 Dec. 1976; 8 Jan., 13 Aug. 1977; 25 Sept. 1982; 8 May 1994; *Ir. Independent*, 6 Dec. 1948; 23 Sept. 1961; 4 Jan. 1964; 4 Dec. 1967; 3, 24 Feb., 8 Apr. 1969; 7 Feb., 11 Aug. 1970; 19 July 1975; 27 June 1995; 16 Jan. 2012; *Evening Herald*, 6 Apr. 1960; 21 Jan. 2012; *Ir. Times*, 8 Feb. 1973; 12 May, 2, 16 June, 7, 14, 21, 28 July, 25 Aug., 22 Sept. 1975; 21 Jan. 2012; *Sunday Independent*, 15 Apr. 1973; 15 Aug. 1982; 30 Jan. 1983; 31 Dec. 1989; 24 Feb. 1991; 21 May 2000; 21 Aug. 2007; 22 Jan. 2012; *Cork Examiner*, 24 May 1973; 25 Aug. 1975; 13 Oct. 1981; 19 Jan., 16 Feb., 9, 16 Mar., 6 Apr., 24 Aug. 1982; 9 Feb., 19 Apr., 20 Sept., 18 Oct. 1983; 16 Apr. 1985; 9 Mar. 1991; 17 June 1995; *City Tribune* (Galway), 19 Sept. 1986; *Field Day anthology of Irish literature*, iii (1991), 1,431–32; Hogan; *Ir. Examiner*, 26 Aug. 2000; *Munster Express*, 11 July 2008; Máire Nic Fhinn, 'Rus in urbe: a conversation with Pearse Hutchison', *Poetry Ireland Review*, cvii (Sept. 2012), 111–25 (translation by Clíona Ní Riordáin of Irish-language interview published in *Inntí*, xi (1998))