

Keating, Seán

by Diarmaid Ferriter

Keating, Seán (1889–1977), painter, was born in Limerick city 28 September 1889, one of three sons and three daughters of Joseph Keating, an accounts manager with a bakery firm and Anne Keating (née Hannan). He was educated initially at St Munchin's College, where he was a poor attendee, and subsequently the Municipal School of Art in Limerick. In 1911, despite his father's misgivings, he won a scholarship to the Dublin Metropolitan School of Art, where he came under the influence of William Orpen (qv), and was also introduced by his friend Harry Clarke (qv) to the Aran islands, an area which was to have a huge influence on his future painting as well as encouraging him to master the Aran dialect of Irish. In 1914 he was awarded the Taylor art scholarship for his painting 'Appeal for mercy', and the following year exhibited three works at the RHA, beginning an association that would last for life. The pictures exhibited included 'Annushka' and 'Pipes and porter', described by a contemporary as demonstrating 'a clear vision and brilliant incisiveness of touch' (Snoddy, 227). In 1914 Orpen asked Keating to assist him in his studio and he left for London. Keating idolised Orpen and had frequently accompanied him on tours around Ireland, learning from him the importance of draughtsmanship. Although the two had little in common – Keating was a devout Irish-speaking catholic, Orpen a middle-class anglicised protestant who painted nudes which Keating found disconcerting – Keating continually tried to get him to return to Ireland.

Keating stayed in London until March 1916 when he returned to Dublin to avoid conscription. Based in Gardiner Street, Dublin, before moving to a house in the Dublin mountains, he frequently travelled to the Aran islands, and resumed exhibiting at the RHA. In 1917 he exhibited 'Men of the west', probably his best known painting, a typical example of his portraits based on the west, with flat tones, backgrounds of barren landscapes, and agile handsome men. The following year, he was appointed as an assistant teacher at the Dublin Metropolitan School of Art, and in 1921 held his first one-person exhibition at Leinster Street, Dublin, exhibiting 'An IRA column', and the following year 'Men of the south', a heroic depiction of IRA volunteers. In 1924 at an exhibition held in connection with Aonach Tailteann, he won the gold medal for his large oil painting, 'Homage to Hugh Lane'.

In many ways Keating became the 'official' artist of the Irish Free State, and it could be argued that he helped to create in visual terms a corporate identity for independent Ireland, painting in an Orpenesque style. Given the often large, overstated rhetorical canvases of such subjects as freedom fighters, fishermen, and hurlers, Keating perhaps embodied the nationalist political aspirations of the day, mirroring in the eyes of some critics British official war art. This was reflected in such paintings as 'Allegory', making clear the conflicts of loyalty which followed the civil

war period, though the durability of the art was questioned by some who doubted this art was 'realism', given the stilted posing and flowery costumes, untainted by the reality of a harsh living environment. Some went as far as to suggest that the paintings were heavy-handed artifice masked as folk realism, or 'costumed regionalism substituted for genuine national character and racial vitality' (Fallon, *Irish art*, 168), and that his work was cold, calculated, deliberate and lacked spontaneity. However, in immortalising the 'faces of the west', Keating succeeded Orpen as the major Irish draughtsman of the twentieth century, and was a man who, as well as arrogantly believing he was interpreting the minds of the Irish people, had rigid and independent views on painting methods. He had an exceptional talent for incisiveness and his work was widely regarded as having a particular purity and strength, with a haunting quality, influenced by the art of the renaissance and its descendants in Spain.

If his painting had an honesty and directness, it was also the case that this was reflected in his teaching and the articulation of his views – he continually pressed for reform of the Dublin Metropolitan School of Art, and in 1925 prepared a memorandum for the Department of Education in which he called for reform 'to revitalise the obsolete, non-national, non-Gaelic and non-productive' school (quoted in Kennedy, 20). In 1926 he was commissioned by the government to paint a series of pictures of the Shannon hydroelectric scheme, which resulted in 26 drawings and paintings; during this period he also exhibited 'The mountainy man' at an exhibition of art in Brussels, and in 1932 'The overman', in Ottawa, Canada. Two years later he was appointed professor of painting at the Metropolitan School of Art, where he was regarded as an honest and affable teacher. In 1937 he exhibited 28 drawings at the Victor Waddington galleries in Dublin, which were described as 'almost aggressively independent' (Snoddy, 228). A frequent visitor to America, in 1939 he painted a huge mural of 54 panels for Ireland's pavilion at the New York World Fair.

Elected president of the RHA in 1949, a position he held for twelve years, he was also actively involved in church commissions. As well as painting the stations of the cross in Clongowes Wood College, Co. Kildare, and St. Eunan's Cathedral in Letterkenny, in 1955 he painted the mural of St Therese for a shrine in the side-chapel of the new parish church, Mount Merrion in Dublin, and in 1961 was commissioned to execute a mural for the main hall of the International Labour Office in Geneva. In 1966 he was represented by six portraits at the National Gallery's golden jubilee exhibition commemorating the 1916 rising, and in his later career, collaborated with younger painters and sculptors in a variety of exhibitions. Disciplined and frugal, painting up to ten hours a day, he continued to be fearless in speaking his mind, and despised modernism, believing surrealists and impressionists were 'bedevilled by all the pseudo-philosophy and the pseudo-cultural criticisms' (*Ir. Times*, 22 Dec. 1977). Even at the very end of his career he still bemoaned the absence of any strong or easily identifiable Irish visual tradition. He also courted controversy in Limerick, where he had received the freedom of the

city in 1948, referring to the city as 'a medieval dung-heap' (*Ir. Times*, 22 Dec. 1977). He died 21 December 1977 in Dublin.

In 1919 he married Mary Walsh of Eadestown, Co. Kildare, with whom he had two sons, including Justin (b. 1930), who became a leading Labour party politician and was minister for industry and commerce (1973–7).

Boylan; McRedmond; *WWW*; Seán Keating, 'William Orpen: a tribute', *Ireland Today*, ii (1937); L. C. Martin, *Dublin in decay* (1976); *Ir. Times*, 22 Dec. 1977; Bruce Arnold, *A concise history of Irish art* (1977); idem, *Orpen: mirror to an age* (1981); Brian Kennedy, *Dreams and responsibilities: the state and the arts in independent Ireland* (1990); Adele M. Dalsimer, *Visualising Ireland: national identity and the pictorial tradition* (1993); Brian Fallon, *Irish art 1830–1990* (1994); Snoddy; Brian Fallon, *An age of innocence: Irish culture 1930–1960* (1998)