

## MacGonigal, Maurice Joseph

by Carmel Doyle and Lawrence William White

MacGonigal, Maurice Joseph (1900–79), landscape and figurative painter, was born 22 January 1900 in Ranelagh, Dublin, third eldest child and only son of Francis MacGonigal, Sligo-born painter and decorator, and Caroline MacGonigal (née Lane). After attending Synge St. CBS, in 1915 he became a trainee apprentice in the stained-glass studios (in which his father was a partner) of his uncle Joshua Clarke (1858–1921) at 33 North Frederick St.; working with his cousin Harry Clarke (qv), he learned the graphic skills of drawing and decorative design. Enlisted by Bulmer Hobson (qv) in Na Fianna Éireann (1917), during the war of independence he served as an IRA dispatch rider under Sean Dowling in C Coy, 4th Bn, Dublin Bde. Arrested and interned in Kilmainham jail (8 December 1920), he was moved to Ballykinlar camp, Co. Down, where he was elected prisoners' intelligence officer. On release in 1921, he resigned from republican organisations and concentrated on his artistic ambition. Becoming a partner with Harry Clarke, he completed a number of designs while attending evening classes at the Dublin Metropolitan School of Art. After winning a three-year Taylor scholarship for his painting 'A public meeting', he attended the school as a day student (1923–6), studying under Patrick Tuohy (qv), Seán Keating (qv), and James Sleator (qv). His watercolour 'Prisoners on the roof, Kilmainham' (1923) captured the historic moment in its depiction of protesting republicans. A visit to the Aran islands in 1924 commenced his enduring artistic fascination with the west of Ireland. He showed a stained-glass panel, 'Baal', at the 1925 Arts and Crafts Society of Ireland exhibition, but soon turned to painting as his primary medium. A 1927 visit to Holland, where he studied the works of Mauve and van Gogh, determined his belief that landscape painting could embody a nationalist cultural identity.

Inspired by a tour of the coasts of Antrim and north Down with Hobson, he completed a series of watercolours (1927–30), and held his first one-man show at the St Stephen's Green gallery in 1929. He executed black-and-white illustrations for *The white bolle-trie: a wonder story* (1927) by Kenneth Sarr. Appointed visiting art teacher at the RHA school (1927) and substitute teacher at the Metropolitan School of Art (1934), for over half a century (1924–79) he exhibited annually at the RHA, averaging five works per year. Elected an RHA associate in 1931, he was made RHA in 1933. Primarily a landscapist favouring scenes in Achill, the Aran islands, Connemara, and Co. Dublin, he also painted cityscapes, rural and urban genre scenes, portraits, and subjects of political or historical import. His landscapes of the early 1930s, such as 'The beach at Renvyle', were realist in style. Commissioned by the Irish Hospitals' Trust to create a pageant for their sweepstake draw, he executed twenty-four watercolours depicting Manannán Mac Lir, the ancient Irish sea god of wealth, shown at the Plaza Ballroom, Dublin (1932). Reproductions of his paintings, such as 'Gathering seaweed for kelp', were included in *Saorstát*

*Éireann: Irish Free State official handbook* (1932). From 1933 he was a member of the Academy of Christian Art, a conservative body regarding art as a means toward spiritual knowledge. Twice keeper of the RHA school (1934–9 and 1950–61), during his second tenure he moved with his family into the keeper's residence on Ely Place. For his socialist painting 'Dockers' (1934; Hugh Lane gallery), representing three stevedores awaiting work, he used models provided by trade-union leader James Larkin (qv). A founder (1926) of the Radical Club (where he exhibited work), he had many friendships with writers; in 'A Dublin studio' (c.1935; Limerick City Gallery of Art), he portrayed some fellow Radical Club members, including Harry Kernoff (qv), Frank O'Connor (qv), Seán O'Sullivan (qv), and Keating, the latter seated at an easel. He designed the stage sets for the first Dublin production of 'The silver tassie' by Sean O'Casey (qv) at the Abbey Theatre (1935).

Assistant professor of painting at the newly constituted National College of Art (NCA) (1937–54), he served under Keating, whom he subsequently succeeded as professor (1954–69). While encouraging students' interests in various artistic styles, he perpetuated the college's conservative teaching methodology, with its overweening emphasis on life classes, derived from a synthesis of the classical academic tradition and the working practices of nineteenth-century French realism. He was also professor of painting at the RHA (1947–78), and its president (1962–78). He painted a large mural for the Irish pavilion at the 1939 New York world's fair, representing 'America' and 'Liberty' with thirty prominent Americans of Irish birth or ancestry. He married (6 August 1940) Aida Kelly (his model for 'America'); they had two sons: Muiris Diarmuid Mac Conghail (born 1941) and Ciaran MacGonigal (born 1945). 'The rescue from the prison van at Manchester' (1940–46; Hugh Lane gallery), representing the 'Manchester martyrs' of 1867, exhibits masterful craftsmanship within an anachronistic treatment. It was included in a government-sponsored exhibition of historical painting at the NCA in 1946 marking the anniversary of the Easter rising, in which MacGonigal was also represented by 'An gorta' ('The famine') (1946; National Museum of Ireland), a rare foray into allegory. 'A summer's day' (1948) is a representation of Booterstown Ave., Dublin, emphasising the underlying geometrical structure of forms. A 1952 exhibition of his paintings at the Victor Waddington galleries, Dublin, included 'Nightfall, Connemara' and 'Low tide, Erelough'. Many of MacGonigal's coastal scenes of the 1950s and 1960s, such as 'The artist's wife and family with dog at Errisbeg' – notable for capturing the atmospheric light of the west – were painted at his summer home at Faul, near Clifden in Connemara. During the 1960s his style became more abstract, as in 'Composition' (1961), a painting derivative of Picasso's cubist technique. In 'Early morning, Connemara (Mannin Bay)' (1965; NGI), he demonstrated a fresh, non-academic approach to landscape.

MacGonigal was made an honorary member of both the Royal Academy, London (1963), and the Royal Scottish Academy (1964). In the midst of a 1969 student revolt demanding curricular reform and greater scope for free artistic expression, MacGonigal controversially resigned his NCA professorship, charging an erosion

of teachers' professional authority. He criticised the Irish government's according of tax-free status to creative artists (1969) as likely to attract to Ireland 'the art parasites of Europe'. A governor and guardian of the NGI, he received an honorary LLD from the NUI (1970). He served on the advisory committee of the Project Art Centre, Dublin (1971), and was elected a member of the Water Colour Society of Ireland (1972). During the 1970s he painted numerous Kerry and Connemara landscapes, including the impressionistic 'Stony beach, Feothanach' (1972) and 'Races, Ballyconneely, Co. Galway' (1976), portraying a local event. Throughout his career he lived at various addresses in the Dublin city centre and such south city suburbs as Ranelagh, Booterstown, and Rathgar. He died 31 January 1979 in Baggot St. hospital, Dublin, and was buried in Gorteen graveyard, Roundstone, Co. Galway, a large studio palette once belonging to William Orpen (qv) being placed in the grave. A self-portrait is in Limerick City Gallery of Art. A major retrospective exhibition was held at the Hugh Lane Municipal Gallery of Modern Art in 1991.

---

Mairín Allen, 'Contemporary Irish artists, xviii: Maurice MacGonigal', *Father Mathew Record*, xxxvii (May 1943), 6; Hilary Pyle (comp.), *Irish art, 1900–1950* (1975), 49 (exhibition catalogue); *Ir. Times*, 1 Feb. 1979; *WWW*; Adrian Le Harivel and Michael Wynne, *National Gallery of Ireland: acquisitions, 1982–83* (1984), 28; Ann M. Stewart, *Royal Hibernian Academy of Arts: index of exhibitors and their works 1826–1979*, ii (1986); John Turpin, 'The National College of Art under Keating and MacGonigal', *GPA Irish Arts Review Yearbook* (1988), 201–11; Patricia Boylan, *All cultivated people: a history of the United Arts Club, Dublin* (1988), 194; Kenneth McConkey, *A free spirit: Irish art 1860–1960* (1990), 174–7; Patricia Butler, *Three hundred years of Irish watercolours and drawings* (1990), 186–8; Katherine Crouan, *Maurice MacGonigal, RHA, 1900–1979: an Irish palette* (1991) (exhibition catalogue); Elizabeth Mayes and Paula Murphy (ed.), *Images and insights* (1993) (exhibition catalogue), 112–13; Brian P. Kennedy, *Irish painting* (1993); John Turpin, *A school of art in Dublin since the eighteenth century: a history of the National College of Art and Design* (1995); S. B. Kennedy, *Paul Henry* (2000); Snoddy (2002 ed.); Maurice MacGonigal file, National Irish Visual Arts Library, NCA(D)D Dublin. Information from NGI, Dublin; Dublin City Gallery, The Hugh Lane; Limerick City Gallery of Art