

MacGreevy, Thomas

by Susan Schreibman

MacGreevy, Thomas (1893–1967), poet, art and literary critic, and director of the National Gallery of Ireland, was born 26 October 1893 in Tarbert, Co. Kerry, sixth among eight children of Thomas McGreevy (1858–1930) of Crossmolina, Co. Mayo, a former member of the RIC (1879–82) and later farmer and fisherman, and his wife Margaret (née Enright) (1855–1936) of Tarmons, Co. Kerry, schoolteacher, and later headmistress of Tarmons national school. MacGreevy attended local national schools until 1910. Although he was a precocious child, the family had not the resources to send him for further schooling. He took a correspondence course to prepare for the entry-level grade of the civil service, and in September 1910 he travelled to Dublin to sit the boy clerks examination. Out of 146 candidates MacGreevy placed in the top fifteen, and was offered a position in Dublin. In February 1910 he began work with the Land Commission. Two years later he sat the assistant clerkship examination, and was offered a place with the Charity Commission for England and Wales in London. On the British declaration of war on Germany (4 August 1914), he was promoted to second-division clerk and transferred to the department of intelligence at the admiralty. On 2 March 1916, the 'appointed date' under the military service act enabling conscription, MacGreevy was deemed to have enlisted in the Royal Field Artillery. The arrest and subsequent trial in London of Roger Casement (qv) provided the impetus for MacGreevy's first short story: a dialogue between the gaoled Casement and Sir Arthur Nicolson.

As MacGreevy's work with the admiralty was considered essential to the war effort, he was not called up until 17 March 1917. He trained as an officer cadet in England before being awarded his commission as second lieutenant, RFA, on 4 November. By Christmas MacGreevy was serving in the Somme sector with the 30th Division artillery. He served with the 148th Brigade until 2 October 1918, when he was wounded near Messines. His wound was severe enough to have him sent back to England to recover. He had also been wounded on 25 April 1918 during violent gas and high-velocity shelling at Kemmel Hill. The war was a recurring theme in MacGreevy's writings throughout the 1920s and early 1930s. The first two poems of his collection *Poems* are specifically about the war, and in the early 1930s he began several novels that centre on the war or feature Irish soldiers who return to Dublin after the war.

In January 1919 MacGreevy was demobilised. There seemed to be no question as to his returning to London and a civil-service career. As he wrote many years later in his memoirs, 'Something had happened in Ireland which had perhaps made a different Ireland from the Ireland I grew up in. I wanted to find out about that'. In February 1919, on a scholarship for ex-officers, he began reading history and political science at TCD. It was during this time that MacGreevy made many

friends, the vast majority of them lifelong, including Harry Clarke (qv), E. R. Dodds (qv), Pádraig de Brún (qv), Mainie Jellett (qv), Stephen MacKenna (qv), Lennox Robinson (qv), Hester Travers Smith (qv) (see under Dowden), Dolly Travers Smith (qv) (later Dolly Robinson), George (qv) and W. B. Yeats (qv), and Jack B. Yeats (qv). In Dublin he was involved with the Dublin Drama League, and wrote articles (mainly about art) for the *Irish Statesman*, the *Irish Times*, and *Old Ireland*. In December 1920, the month he graduated from Trinity College, he began work as county organiser and assistant secretary of the Carnegie United Kingdom Trust (CUKT) with Lennox Robinson, who was the Irish secretary. It was also during this time that MacGreevy began writing prose fiction. Very few of these stories were published. From December 1920, and throughout the difficult period of the civil war in which library buildings were a favourite target of attack, MacGreevy very successfully continued his work with the CUKT. In May 1925 he moved to London after a scandal – centring on a story published by Lennox Robinson in *Tomorrow* – caused Robinson's dismissal, the suspension of the Trust's Irish advisory committee, and MacGreevy's resignation in solidarity.

In London, with an introduction from W. B. Yeats, MacGreevy called on T. S. Eliot, and became a regular contributor to *Criterion*. In November he was appointed assistant editor for the *Connoisseur*. It was during this period that he began writing poetry seriously. Many of his most famous poems, 'Aodh Ruadh Ó Domhnaill', 'Seventh gift of the Holy Ghost', 'De civitate hominum', and 'Cron tráth na nDéithe', date from this time. In February 1927 MacGreevy moved to Paris to take up a temporary post of *lecteur* at the École Normale Supérieure due to William Stewart's early departure. The director of the École was so pleased with his work that he was invited to stay through the 1927–8 academic year. Although his work with the École ended in November 1928, MacGreevy continued to reside in Paris until the summer of 1932. Shortly after his arrival in Paris he renewed his acquaintance with James Joyce (qv), whom he had briefly met in 1924, and began assisting with 'Work in progress'. In November 1928 he met Samuel Beckett (qv), his replacement at the École. The two men formed a friendship that only ended with MacGreevy's death. Throughout the 1920s and early 1930s MacGreevy contributed creative work and criticism to many little magazines, such as *Dial*, the *New Review*, *Revue Anglo-Américaine*, and *Transition*. In 1931 Chatto & Windus published two of MacGreevy's monographs, *T. S. Eliot: a study* and *Richard Aldington: an Englishman*. In 1934 *Poems* was brought out, first by Heinemann (London) and later in the year by the Viking Press (New York).

Late in 1933, after a short sojourn in Tarbert, MacGreevy returned to London. Although his life in Paris was rich in art, literature, and friendship, he found it difficult to make ends meet. In London he lectured for the National Gallery, and in 1938 joined the staff of the *Studio*, becoming their chief art critic. The blitz put a halt to MacGreevy's reviewing and lecturing. He returned to Dublin despite the scarcity of work. By 1941, however, he was art critic for the *Irish Times*, and a regular contributor to the *Father Mathew Record* and the *Capuchin Annual*. In the last

twenty years of his life he renewed his earlier commitment to the promotion of the visual arts in Ireland. He supported the fledging Irish Living Arts exhibitions through his reviews in the *Irish Times*. He was also one of the earliest champions of Jack B. Yeats's work. His 1945 monograph *Jack B. Yeats: an appreciation and an interpretation* (Victor Waddington Publications), was the first full-length, and for many years the only, study of the painter's work. Also in 1945 *Pictures in the Irish National Gallery* was brought out by the Mercier Press, and in 1960 the Dolmen Press published *Nicolas Poussin*, which was a labour of love for an artist who had cast his spell on MacGreevy some fifty years previously.

In 1950 MacGreevy was appointed director of the NGL. Although to many he seemed a surprising choice, his latent talents as an administrator were brought to the fore. He was instrumental in bringing to the gallery such ideas as a lecture series and in-house restoration, which were commonplace abroad. It was through his persistent requests to the government (beginning the year he was appointed) that an extension to the gallery (later known as the '1968 wing') was approved. Unfortunately, the demands of the position (MacGreevy was 57 when he was appointed) took its toll: he had two heart attacks in 1956 and 1957 and ill health forced him to retire in 1963.

During his last years MacGreevy began writing poetry again. He also began his memoirs, which he never completed. He was admitted to the Portobello Nursing Home for what should have been a minor operation in March 1967. He died from heart failure on St Patrick's eve, 16 March 1967.

TCD, Thomas MacGreevy papers; Susan Schreibman (ed.), *Collected poems of Thomas MacGreevy: an annotated edition* (1991); Susan Schreibman, 'The Thomas MacGreevy chronology: a documentary life, 1855–1944' (Ph.D. thesis, NUI (UCD), 1997); Susan Schreibman (ed.), 'The Thomas MacGreevy archive', <http://jefferson.village.virginia.edu/macgreevy> (Apr. 2008)