

MacManus, Patrick Francis ('Frank')

by Maureen Murphy

MacManus, Patrick Francis ('Frank') (1909–65), writer and broadcaster, was born 8 March 1909 in 'a little house on a narrow street', 23 (20) Michael's Lane, Kilkenny, eldest child of Bernard MacManus, commercial traveller, and Julia MacManus (née Murphy). His father died when MacManus was nine; his mother took over his father's business to educate her four sons and her daughter. MacManus was educated at the CBS, James St., Kilkenny, where he took first place in Ireland in science and was offered a county council scholarship to the NUI; however, family finances precluded his accepting the award. Instead he enrolled at St Patrick's College, Drumcondra (1927–9), where he qualified as a national school teacher. On his first day at St Patrick's he met Roibeárd Ó Faracháin (qv); they became lifelong friends. He finally earned his BA degree from the NUI in 1931, attending evening classes at UCD.

MacManus was the fourth generation of his family to become a schoolmaster, and was appointed in September 1929 to the CBS in Synge St., Dublin. His mother died in March 1930, leaving him responsible for his younger siblings. MacManus was always a keen writer and started writing poetry at sixteen. According to his son, his first published piece was an article about hedge schoolmasters, written for the *Irish Press* shortly after it began publication in September 1931. Continuing to write for the *Irish Press* for the rest of his life, he estimated that he contributed thousands of items to the paper. His last two reviews for the *Irish Press* appeared in the issue that carried the news of his own death.

Cornelius Ryan (qv), a pupil at Synge St. when MacManus was a teacher there, remembered him as a kind and encouraging master. When his students needed a play, he wrote 'Thunder over Limerick'; it was translated into Irish by Ó Faracháin and published as *Toirneach Luimnighe: drama staireamhail i dtrí radharcanna* (1935). Teaching helped MacManus to appreciate the way that an eye-witness account could enliven history for his students, and his series of stories based on eye-witness historical sources were collected in *After the flight* (1938). MacManus taught until 1947, when he was the successful applicant in an open competition for the post of general features officer at Radio Éireann. (He followed Ó Faracháin, who was promoted to deputy director of Radio Éireann in 1947.) He later became director of talks and features, a position he held until his death in 1965.

MacManus was part of the group of writers, including Ó Faracháin, Gabriel Fallon (qv), John Sheridan (qv), and Tim Gahan (David Barry) and the painter Seán O'Sullivan (qv), who regularly met at the office of the *Capuchin Annual*. Sheridan later described the lively, intense MacManus of those years with the words MacManus himself used to describe Donnchadh Rua Mac Conmara (qv),

the eighteenth-century poet hero of his first novel: 'The eyes were bright, and their glance was like a sword-thrust'. A conservative nationalist, MacManus wrote for a number of catholic periodicals and newspapers in the 1930s: the social weekly *Outlook*, *Capuchin Annual* (1934–65), the *Father Mathew Record*, and the *Catholic Standard*. In 1938 he started a weekly column under his pen name 'Manus O'Neill' for the *Standard*, which ran until 1955. He also contributed to the *New Irish Magazine* and *The Bell* (October 1943–51).

He wrote prolifically while he taught and worked at Radio Éireann: thirteen novels, short stories, biographies, poetry, drama, and essays. *Stand and give challenge* (1934) was the first of a trilogy of eighteenth-century historical novels about Donnchadh Rua Mac Conmara (qv), who was born in Cratloe, Co. Clare, but spent most of his life in Waterford, where he was associated with the Sliabh gCua poets. MacManus would have read the fragments of Mac Conmara's life in *The hidden Ireland* (1925) by Daniel Corkery (qv) (1878–1964), a book he called 'a key book if there ever was one' when he wrote later about Corkery in his article 'Three first meetings' (*Capuchin Annual*, 1959). For MacManus, Corkery was a 'father image in which were combined something of the guiding patriarch and the inspiring prophet'. The novel's theme – the major theme of Mac Conmara's life and poetry – is loss: political exile, abandoned or rejected love, laments for the dead, and nostalgia for a lost way of life. The sequel *Candle for the proud* (1936) won the Irish Academy of Letters' Harmsworth award. *Men withering* (1939) describes the poet's old age, his own tragic stand in relief against yet another defeat for the Irish: the failure of the 1798 rebellion and the reprisals that followed. His consolation was that his poetry and the stories about him would live after him.

Before he finished the Mac Conmara trilogy, MacManus finished *This house is mine* (1937), the first novel of a second trilogy, set in Kilkenny in the later Ireland of peasant proprietorship and portraying its human costs, including the price paid by the dispossessed emigrants. The second and final instalments were *Flow on lovely river* (1941) and *Watergate* (1942). The first two books of the series were translated into German in the 1960s.

MacManus found the background for what is regarded by many as his finest novel, *The greatest of these* (1943), in the civil litigation that arose from a dispute between Robert O'Keeffe (qv), parish priest of Callan, Co. Kilkenny, and the vicar general of the diocese of Ossory, over O'Keeffe's failure to gain his bishop's permission before inviting an order of nuns to the parish. O'Keeffe took the matter to court, where he charged the vicar general with slander and libel; the court found in favour of the diocese. MacManus's novel explores the conflict between the priest's fierce charity and his bishop's authority, and the redemptive compassion of a later bishop, his old pupil, for the bitter, exiled priest. Thomas Kilroy's novel *The big chapel* (1971) was inspired by the same events. MacManus's attempt at light fiction, *Statue for a square* (1945), received mixed reviews, but his novel *Fire in the dust* (1950), was praised for

its portrait of the spinster who represented all that was repressive in Ireland through the 1960s.

His *Pedlar's pack: stories, sketches, essays, verse* (1944) includes his long essay 'The death of Dermot O'Hurley', which may have been a study for a novel of the life of Dermot O'Hurley (qv), archbishop of Cashel, tortured and hanged in Dublin in 1584 for 'bearing treasonable papers against the queen'. The bells in 'Sacristan to St Michael's' certainly anticipated a leitmotif in *The greatest of these*, and the blond woman on the train in 'My bonnie lies over the ocean' may have been a trial piece for the character of Alice Lennon in *Watergate*.

In addition to fiction MacManus wrote two biographies, *Boccaccio* (1947) and *St Columban* (1962), and a series of travel articles, which were collected for *Seal ag Ródaíocht* ('A spell as a rambler') (1955). When he abandoned his creative writing, he edited three collections of essays: *Yeats as we knew him* (1965), a centenary tribute to the poet, and two collections that considered major issues and trends in twentieth-century Ireland: *The Irish struggle* (1966) and *The years of the great test, 1926–39* (1967). These collaborative works arose from what proved to be one of his most enduring legacies to Irish intellectual life.

As director of talks and features, MacManus introduced a number of innovative literary and cultural programmes – readings, dramatisation of fiction, original radio drama, poetry, and music – that provided venues for a new generation of Irish writers. His most successful series was the Thomas Davis (qv) Lectures, which started on 27 September 1953 and have continued for more than fifty years. The lectures, on an historical or cultural theme and usually followed by publication in book form, demonstrated the impact that radio could have on Irish cultural life. The successive Thomas Davis series stimulated the creation of texts for Irish cultural and historical studies for the serious listening public.

MacManus, a member of the Irish Academy of Letters, died of a heart attack early on the morning of 27 November 1965 at his home, 101 The Rise, Mount Merrion, Co. Dublin. He was survived by his second wife, his three sons (Michael, John, and Patrick), his brothers, and his sister.

He married first (October 1939) Mary Lalor (d. 1950) and secondly (1952) Joan McCarthy. In his memory RTÉ sponsors the annual Francis MacManus Short Story Prize. He is commemorated in Kilkenny by Francis MacManus Square. There is an unpublished biographical sketch of MacManus by Denis Coller in the archives of the Proscenium Press at the University of Delaware (F407), and an unpublished NUI (UCD) Ph.D. dissertation by Arthur Fedel, 'Francis MacManus: the heritage of history. A biographical and critical study' (1977), which includes four appendices: a short autobiography by MacManus; recollections by his eldest son Michael and his second wife, Joan; and MacManus's application for the position of controller of television programmes for RTÉ.

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