

Mac Eoin, Gary (Gearóid)

by Patrick Maume

Mac Eoin, Gary (Gearóid) (1909–2003), journalist and catholic activist, was born Garrett Anthony Johnson on 12 June 1909 in Curry, Co. Sligo, where his father, William Johnson, was clerk of the local petty sessions court. Mac Eoin was sixth of nine children and third son. According to family tradition, Mac Eoin's paternal great-grandfather was a protestant of Cromwellian descent who married a catholic wife; Mac Eoin's mother Bridget (née Burke) was of Norman descent, while both his grandmothers were of Gaelic stock. His parents were supporters of the co-operative movement founded by Horace Plunkett (qv) and George Russell (qv) who occasionally visited the area. Mac Eoin described his life as having been shaped by his mother's insistence on personal independence.

Mac Eoin was educated at a local primary school (as a small boy he took part in IRA reconnaissance activities, though he recalled that he was regarded with some suspicion because of his class background). From 1921 to 1927 he attended a Redemptorist minor seminary (secondary school for boys wishing to enter the order) in Limerick City. In 1927 he spent a year at the Redemptorist novitiate in Co. Meath, followed by six years at the house of studies in east Galway, preparing for ordination to the priesthood.

He always showed an interest in systematisation and took a keen interest in the philosophical questions raised during these studies. While other novices regarded these as mere formal routine, he acquired a long-lasting admiration for the neo-scholastic argument that modern philosophical scepticism led inexorably to nihilism, whereas Thomism founded itself on the very nature of being. Mac Eoin also had a natural flair for languages (at the end of his life he spoke nine). During his studies he increased his knowledge of Greek, Latin, French and Irish. As a large proportion of Irish Redemptorists were sent to the Philippines, Mac Eoin decided to learn Spanish – a decision with major implications for his future.

Shortly before he was due for ordination to the priesthood, having already received minor orders and been ordained deacon, Mac Eoin was informed by the Redemptorist provincial that he would not be allowed to proceed to ordination and should obtain dispensation from his vows and leave the order. He protested, but despite support from senior members of the Irish province, his appeals were stymied because the superiors based themselves on a clause of the Redemptorist rule allowing candidates to be dismissed at discretion, and refused to state any grounds for their decision (which might then have been disputed). He eventually negotiated a compromise with his superior by which he received a small sum as start-up capital. Mac Eoin experienced his dismissal as a profound betrayal; Redemptorist training (reflecting the founder's belief that ministry to the poor was so onerous that only the

fiercest commitment could sustain it) had emphasised the duty of perseverance in vocation, the superiority of the religious state of life, the sinfulness and treachery of the outside world, and the bonds of brotherhood supposedly linking the new members to the order.

Determined not to sink into the anomie afflicting other 'spoiled priests' of his acquaintance, Mac Eoin moved to Dublin where he lived with his brother and sister while trying to find work as a freelance journalist. In order to avoid the attention of anyone who knew of him as a Redemptorist novice he used the Irish form of his name while submitting contributions to newspapers, and thus came to adopt it as his usual style. For a time Mac Eoin combined freelance work with a job as collector for the Irish Folklore Commission; he eventually secured a reporting position on the *Irish Independent*, rising to become an editorial writer. In 1941 he obtained a BA in modern languages from the University of London (by correspondence), subsequently taking an MA from UCD (1942) and a Ph.D. in 1951. In 1940 he enrolled at King's Inns, where he was awarded the exhibition prize, and was called to the Irish bar in 1943.

Married to Josephine Delaney (d. 1986), he had one son, and a daughter who died in infancy. In 1944 the Mac Eoins moved to Trinidad when he took up the editorship of the *Port of Spain Gazette*. He was horrified by the depth of poverty he encountered behind the colonial façade, and at the gradual awareness that he himself was part of this exploitative elite.

In 1949 the Mac Eoins moved to New York city as they did not wish their son to acquire the laziness and racism of the white Trinidadian elite. Mac Eoin edited two Spanish#language newspapers, *La Hacienda* and *La Prensa*, whose circulation he improved by developing a systematic marketing operation. He spent two years as director of the Caribbean Commission (supposed to plan the economic development of the West Indies) and worked as public relations officer for the Colombian coffee industry, further increasing his awareness of Latin America. Between 1954 and 1963 he was United Nations representative of the International Catholic Press Union. At the same time he wrote for the *Catholic Encyclopaedia* and magazines such as *Sign*, *Ave Maria* and *Catholic World*.

Mac Eoin's first book was *Cervantes* (1950). His third book, *Nothing is quite enough* (1954 – the title refers to the religious vow of poverty), which described his novitiate and subsequent readjustment to life in the world, achieved widespread acclaim: Mac Eoin always regarded it as his best. He also undertook such commissions as the life of Fr Basil Moreau (1962), founder of the Holy Cross order. In all, he wrote some 25 books; if translations and edited works are included, 52.

In the early 1960s Mac Eoin's religious and political position might be described as 'Cold War liberal'. Although he would have defined himself as a theological 'liberal' in terms of the period, this largely consisted of the view that bishops were

excessively heavyhanded and suspicious of new ideas; he continued to see the solution to this in fuller recovery of the neoscholastic vision. At the same time, he saw the technocratic liberalism of the Kennedy administration and the policies of European Christian Democratic parties as corresponding (albeit with shortcomings) to the vision of catholic social teaching, and immeasurably superior to the atheistic tyrannies of the eastern bloc. He believed the terrible poverty of Latin America and the West Indies only existed because the American public were unaware of its extent, and expected it to be remedied by developmental programmes such as the Alliance for Progress launched by President Kennedy in 1961. These views are expressed in his *Latin America: the eleventh hour* (1962).

In 1963 Mac Eoin returned to freelancing and with his wife undertook a world tour culminating in a stay in Rome in 1965 to cover the last session of the second Vatican council. He wrote regularly for the *Washington Post*, the *New York Times*, the *Los Angeles Times* and *The Times* (London). He also contributed to *Time* and *Life* magazines, Reuters and other news agencies. His experiences on this tour transformed his outlook. He realised for the first time how far the African and Asian missionary enterprise, which was the source of so much pride to the Latin church, was intertwined with colonialism and shared its patronising and Eurocentric attitude to native cultures and peoples; by contrast with the eastern churches, which he now discovered, western missionary Christianity appeared an exotic phenomenon bound up with exploitative and deservedly doomed colonising and collaborator elites.

In Rome Mac Eoin encountered in depth new streams of theology whose significance he had not fully realised but whose representatives were newly emboldened by conferring in Rome and the sense that the Vatican council meant everything was up for grabs. Residence in Italy also brought home to him the extent to which the elaborate structures of canon law represented aspiration rather than reality, both because superiors tended to treat them as binding subordinates but dispensable when it suited their own convenience, and because Italian life showed that wholesale disregard for official rules was tolerated in practice so long as the rules were not rejected in principle. Mac Eoin thus came to regard the hierarchy and *magisterium* of the catholic church not as heirs of apostolic teaching authority, as he had previously believed, but as the legacy of a Roman empire which in outwardly converting to Christianity remade it in its own image; he saw the Vatican council as having vindicated Martin Luther, and decided that the catholic–protestant division was essentially irrelevant. Like other representatives of the radical tendency within the *nouvelle theologie* of the period, Mac Eoin decided that neoscholastic essentialism imposed the cyclical stasis of ancient Greek thought onto the linear progress of creation implicit in Hebrew prophecy, and clung to a deductive approach (i.e. reasoning from general principles) as part of a general nostalgia for premodernity, whereas progress and freedom lay in adoption of the inductive method of scientific reasoning (i.e. reasoning from observation of particulars to wider conclusions which are not known in advance). He also came to believe that traditional catholic theology downgraded humanity by presenting this world as a

testing ground for individual salvation, with fulfilment only being attainable in a future life. Instead, he adopted the version of process theology associated with Teilhard de Chardin, in which history is seen as tending towards the development of a planetary consciousness and the evolution of God's purpose as man takes command of his own destiny. Mac Eoin's views on Vatican II are expressed in *The council and its implications for the modern world* (1966).

Mac Eoin became an active member of the Information and Documentation Service (IDS), a media service which sought to promote the activities and views of the more radical/liberal theologians and bishops at the council. After the council concluded, the IDS remained in existence to maintain pressure on the commissions set up to oversee the implementation of the council's reforms. The 1962 establishment of the weekly *National Catholic Reporter (NCR)* (seen as the voice of the most radical wing of American catholicism) should be seen in this context; Mac Eoin was heavily associated with this publication for the remainder of his career and on his death was described by its editor as its 'grandfather'. In 1966 Mac Eoin was approached by an acquaintance who had obtained the confidential report of the papal commission on birth control which recommended a relaxation of catholic teaching on the subject. Rather than simply publishing the text, which would have had limited impact, Mac Eoin wrote a commentary highlighting its significance and arranged its simultaneous publication in *Le Monde* and *NCR* with the aim of putting pressure on Paul VI. He refused payment for this, the greatest scoop of his career.

Meanwhile, Mac Eoin was further radicalised by developments in Latin America in the late 1960s; the top-down development model favoured by the Alliance for Progress had not produced the benefits predicted by its advocates. Mac Eoin came to believe that it further entrenched existing elites and multinational corporations – which were best placed to exploit new technology – and exacerbated social problems by throwing labourers out of work through technological advance; instead he advocated the autarkic state-directed development model favoured by dependency theorists. At the same time, he saw the wave of military coups which from the late 1960s brought most of Latin America under right-wing dictatorships, and whose massive atrocities Mac Eoin witnessed first-hand as a courageous investigative reporter, as the direct product of US policy favouring a comprador elite (whom Mac Eoin called 'Herodians'). Hailing liberation theology as the first genuine theological advance for centuries, Mac Eoin came to see even the 1968 Medellin statement by the Latin American bishops as too respectful towards private property. Writings such as *Revolution next door: Latin America in the 1970s* (1971) described the Marxist guerrilla movements – whose 'barefoot guerrillas' reminded him of the IRA of his childhood – as the authentic representatives of the continent's people and he saw the establishment of regimes on the model of Castro's Cuba (which he frequently visited) as the only hope.

Mac Eoin's *Northern Ireland: prisoner of history* (1974) shares some of these terms of reference, with its emphasis on the use of political assassination and torture

techniques by counterinsurgency forces, and its view that the Republic of Ireland should abandon its 'neo#colonial' policy of reliance on multinational investment. (Mac Eoin favoured the insertion of a UN peacekeeping force into Northern Ireland, and a policy of gradual reunification which would involve the Republic abandoning its 'cryptotheocracy'; he noted that in his experience Ulster protestants were distinguishable from catholics chiefly by greater distrust of the English.) His 1986 memoir *Memoirs and memories* expressly states that he had adopted the Marxist model of history; he considered socialism to be the next stage in human evolution, described the wage system as intrinsically immoral, believed that the darker aspects of the Soviet Union derived from tsarism rather than Marxism and predicted that the eastern bloc states would develop their own forms of socialism rather than reverting to capitalism. (Cf. also *Unlikely allies: the Christian–socialist dialogue* (1990)).

From 1969 until the mid#1980s Mac Eoin lived in Tucson, Arizona (he subsequently moved to San Antonio, Texas, where he spent the remainder of his life and wrote for the *San Antonio Current* paper). Here he became active in the sanctuary movement, whereby religious groups assisted Central American refugees (considered ineligible for political asylum by the US government) in evading deportation. Mac Eoin composed the standard guide for sanctuary activists. This was part of his wider opposition to contemporary US Central American policy, involving much on#the# ground reporting despite his advanced age and the physical risks involved. He continued these visits into the 1990s; his last book, *The people's choice: Bishop Samuel Ruiz of Mexico and why he matters* (1996), a laudatory biography of a prominent episcopal practitioner of liberation theology, involved arduous visits to the diocese of Chiapas in southern Mexico.

Mac Eoin was an early and enthusiastic adopter of the internet, which he used to compile *The papacy and the people of God* (1998), a collection of essays by ten like#minded theologians outlining the qualities they required in Pope John Paul II's successor. During his career Mac Eoin was an adjunct professor at Columbia and Fordham universities, and lectured at more than fifty universities and colleges in the USA and Canada. He was a visiting fellow and writer#in#residence at St Edmund's College, Cambridge. He continued to visit Ireland regularly, his last stay being in May 2003. He died in a rehabilitation centre at Leesburg, Virginia, on 9 July 2003, where he was recovering after a fall sustained while visiting his son.

Mac Eoin's intellectual evolution mirrored that of large sections of catholicism in the twentieth century, just as his geographical drift from the fringes of Europe towards the American sunbelt and the Pacific mirrored the changing centre of gravity of world history. Even those who dissented from his favoured solutions could recognise his pre#eminent gifts as analyst, populariser, organiser and systematiser, and his ceaseless concern for the poor.

Gary Mac Eoin, *Nothing is quite enough* (1954); id., *Memoirs and memories* (1986); *New York Times*, 20 July 2003; *Ir. Times*, 26 July 2003; Kenneth Ferguson (ed.), *King's Inns barristers 1868–2004* (2005), 213 (under Johnson, Garret Anthony); http://www.nationalcatholicreporter.org/update/maceoin_trib.htm (tribute site; accessed 24 Feb. 2009)

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