

McGuire, Edward Augustine

by Carmel Doyle and Lawrence William White

McGuire, Edward Augustine (1932–86), painter, was born 10 April 1932 in Dublin, third eldest of two sons and two daughters of Edward Augustine McGuire (1901–92) (qv), businessman, sportsman, and later senator, and Bridget McGuire (née Neary), of Newry, Co. Down. His father was an accomplished, though not professional, painter, and a discriminating art collector. In young Edward's childhood the family moved from Foxrock to a large house and grounds at Newtown Park, Blackrock, Co. Dublin. Afflicted with a heart murmur, he was taught by a private tutor until age 12, then went to St Conleth's school, Clyde Rd, Dublin, before attending Downside, a Benedictine public school in Somerset, England (1946–50), where he was cricket captain; he later played for the Leprechauns, and was a member of Dublin's Phoenix cricket club. He worked for a short time in the family business, the Brown Thomas department store, on Grafton St., Dublin, as a floorwalker and trainee manager, but was unsuited to the calling. His formal artistic training was limited. While roaming throughout Italy in his battered baby Austin tourer (1951–3), he viewed the Renaissance masters, intermittently attended Rome's Accademia di Belle Arti, and studied with fashionable portraitist Pietro Annigoni. He briefly attended the Slade School of Art, London (1954), where his teachers included Lucian Freud, and met Irish artist Patrick Swift (qv), who exerted the most significant influence on his emerging style. With a studio over the coach house at Newtown Park, he painted for a time under the name 'Edward Augustine' to distinguish his work from his father's. While living alone at Kilmurvey on the Aran islands (1955–6), he tirelessly sketched and painted the skulls and bones of sheep, developing an abiding interest in *nature morte*. After moving to a studio-flat at 42 Upper Leeson St., Dublin (1959–66), he exhibited little but concentrated on compiling his 'colour dictionary' (1958–68), now in the Irish Museum of Modern Art, Kilmainham, Dublin; a meticulous, scientific compendium of tonal transitions, it was utilised as an essential tool in his compositional technique. A 1961 watercolour of poet Patrick Kavanagh (qv) was the first of the many perceptive portraits of literary figures for which he would become especially noted. One of his few landscapes, 'Rossenarra' (1967), despite its painstakingly detailed depiction of a country house and grounds, achieves an effect less realistic than dreamily visionary. McGuire achieved artistic maturity with his 1968 portrait of Garech Browne, patron of Irish traditional music and founder of Claddagh records; highly acclaimed on its exhibition at the RHA (1970), it established McGuire's reputation as a major talent.

From 1966 until his death McGuire lived and worked in a house bought by his father at 26 Sandycove Ave. West, Dún Laoghaire, Co. Dublin. He married (1974) Sara ('Sally') Browne (née Wright), divorced sister-in-law of Garech Browne, with whom he had been living since 1971; she had an adopted Indian-born daughter, Tresa, whose portrait in Halloween costume he painted (1980) – one of the few

child portraits in his *oeuvre*. Adjudged by some critics to be the finest Irish portraitist since John Butler Yeats (qv), he executed commissioned portraits of politicians, academics, and socialites. His best work, however, was done in his portraits of writers, and his disconcertingly strange still-life studies of stuffed birds and other dead animals. Commissioned by the Ulster Museum, his portrait of Seamus Heaney (1974) depicts the poet seated at a table before a window in his Wicklow cottage; perhaps McGuire's most familiar painting, it was widely exhibited. Other notable literary portraits include those of Pearse Hutchinson (1970), Michael Hartnett (qv) (1971), Francis Stuart (qv) (1974), Sean O'Faolain (qv) (1977), Anthony Cronin (1977), Paul Durcan (1981), and Michael Longley (1983). Characteristically depicting the sitter in frontal pose with a fixed, quasi-hypnotic gaze, McGuire's portraits often incorporate surreal backdrop elements, such as leaves, flowers, and birds, both as formal devices and as expressions of disparate aspects of personality.

His interest in painting dead creatures began at age 20 when he bought a stuffed plover, owl, and duck from a taxidermist at the Natural History Museum; over the years, he repeatedly utilised these and similar objects in his paintings, as props or as subjects in their own right, either singly or skilfully juxtaposed in groups. He once remarked: 'The reason I paint dead birds is because they stay still' (*Ir. Times* (1973)). Important works in this genre include: 'Four snipe' (1969), shown in a unique one-painting exhibition at the Dawson gallery, remarkable for subtle distortions of space and perspective, suggesting a sinister tension among the objects; 'Lobster – still life' (1971), depicting items collected near his seaside summer home at Termon, Maghery, Co. Donegal (where he worked 1971–80); and 'The window' (1974), an arrangement of five stuffed birds against a six-paned sash window. His numerous studies of owls constitute the most accomplished work of his last several years.

Though early in his career McGuire exhibited at the Irish Exhibition of Living Art, his dominant interest in portraiture was out of favour with the institution's modernist bias; after 1962 he exhibited more frequently at the RHA, becoming an associate in 1973, and full member in 1976. His work was shown abroad in America and France, and won several prizes, including the Douglas Hyde gold medal at the 1976 Oireachtas for his portrait of President Cearbhall Ó Dálaigh (qv) (now in the European court of justice, Luxembourg). A painstaking, meticulous craftsman, with working methods reminiscent of the Florentine quattrocento, he produced at a slow rate; it was said that he progressed from taking four years to paint a picture, to painting four pictures a year. Favouring a flat-surfaced, low-toned style, he asserted that his choice of subject was 'terribly important', but only as 'the starting point for the exploration of complementary colours or tonal values' (quoted in Fallon, 75). A complex, paradoxical, highly wrought personality, he alternated bouts of bohemian conviviality with long periods of monkish solitude; handsomely patrician, courteous, and impeccably mannered, he could turn rude and bitterly sardonic when so moved. Two weeks after suffering a heart attack, he died in hospital in Dublin on 26 November 1986. While most of his paintings remain in private collections,

samples of his work may be viewed in the NGI; Dublin City Gallery The Hugh Lane; and the Ulster Museum (Belfast). A biography (1991) by Brian Fallon includes poems and reminiscences by some of his literary sitters, and a comprehensive catalogue of his paintings and drawings, compiled by Sally McGuire.

The Irish imagination 1959–1971: catalogue of an exhibition at the Municipal Gallery of Modern Art, Dublin ... in association with Rosc '71 (1971), 86; *Ir. Times*, 17 Apr. 1973; Hayden Murphy, 'Edward McGuire: a profile', *The Arts in Ireland*, ii, no. 4 (1974), 38–48; Cyril Barret, 'Edward McGuire: sitters' in Roderic Knowles (ed.), *Contemporary Irish art* (1982), 32–3; Edward McGuire, 'Patrick Collins and Peter Pearson', *Martello Magazine* (winter, 1982), 1–4; id., 'The art of portraiture', *ibid.* (summer, 1983), 31; *Ir. Times*, 2 Dec. 1983, 27 Nov. 1986; Ann M. Stewart, *Royal Hibernian Academy of Arts: index of exhibitors and their works 1826–1979*, ii (1986); Dorothy Walker, 'Sailing to Byzantium: the portraits of Edward McGuire', *Irish Arts Review*, iv (winter, 1987), 21–9; *Martello Magazine* (summer, 1988); Sebastian Ryan, 'Edward', *ibid.* (summer, 1989), 8–11; *Edward McGuire RHA 1932–1986: retrospective exhibition* (1991); Brian Fallon, *Edward McGuire, RHA* (1991); Brian P. Kennedy (ed.), *Art is my life: a tribute to James White* (1991), 201; Elizabeth Mayes and Paula Murphy (ed.), *Images and insights* (1993), 154–5; *Aosdána* (1996), 196, 208; Snoddy