

O'Connor, Patricia

by Patrick Maume

O'Connor, Patricia (1905–83), writer and teacher, was born Henrietta Norah O'Connor (known within her family as Norah) at Sheephaven coastguard station, Dunfanaghy, Co. Donegal on 4 December 1905, third of four children (three daughters and a son) of Patrick O'Connor, coastguard and sailor, and his wife Annie May (née Fallon). Her elder sister Theresa Margaret O'Connor was a historian and vice-principal of Portadown High School. The family were members of the Church of Ireland.

O'Connor recalled that although she left 'Gweedore' at the age of ten she was permanently impressed by the area's poverty and its exploitation by the landed class; she considered the subsequent revolution inevitable, though an uncle of hers was shot in its course. When she revisited the area in 1935 she was impressed by its new prosperity, which she attributed to the economic policies of Éamon de Valera (qv). A passage in her 1938 novel *Mary Doherty*, however, suggests ambivalence. In it, a minor character visits the ruined coastguard station in Dunfanaghy and attributes the depopulation of the local protestant school to protestants being intimidated out after partition, while the (catholic) heroine argues that they were not directly targeted but suffered collateral damage in a revolt against the imperial 'machine'. In 1912 her father was transferred to Howth, Co. Dublin. O'Connor became a boarder at Celbridge Collegiate School, Co. Kildare, where she remained after the family were reassigned to Donegal in 1913 and to Peterhead in Scotland in November 1918; she associated their departure with the Irish political situation.

After taking the Irish intermediate certificate aged fourteen, O'Connor followed her family to Scotland, where she enrolled in Dunfermline High School. She later complained that she, and all the other girls in her class, were directed towards teaching as a career when they were too young to understand it or to reflect on (as distinct from regurgitating) their lessons. 'Like most other teachers I did not choose teaching as a career. I was conscripted.' (*Lagan*, 1944, 92). O'Connor trained at Dalry House teacher training college, Edinburgh, from 1924–6 and received her teaching diploma in 1928.

After brief employment by Fife Teaching Authority, O'Connor moved to Northern Ireland, where her family settled after her father's retirement in January 1927. In September 1930 she succeeded her sister Theresa as principal of Viscount Bangor School, Killough, holding this position until she contracted tuberculosis in 1945. She was repeatedly rated 'highly efficient' by inspectors, although some parents disliked her progressive educational views, feeling she devoted too much time to nature study and not enough to lessons. The limitations of the educational system in light of its ability to shape pupils' destinies was a major literary preoccupation.

O'Connor married William Reginald Ingram, civil servant (later manager of Killough Brick Works), on 25 February 1933. She adopted the pen name Patricia O'Connor (after her father) for literary matters (including letters to newspapers), and in 1937 stated that outside Killough, Co. Down, she was known as 'Miss O'Connor' (to avoid confusion with her mother). Her correspondence with General Hugh Montgomery (qv) is variously signed 'Patricia O'Connor', 'Patricia O'Connor Ingram', 'Patricia Ingram' and 'P. Norah Ingram'.

O'Connor rapidly developed literary ambitions. In 1937 she unsuccessfully submitted a play to the Abbey Theatre which she believed would antagonise conservative friends, in which she tried to perfect the witty, cynical style then already visible in her letters, a style which would dominate her mature work. In 1938 Radio Éireann broadcast two half-hour plays of hers: 'Georgina and the dragon: play of the future' (18 July) and 'Silk stockings' (22 November). Nothing else is known of them. She also reviewed books in southern newspapers, gaining a reputation for acerbity.

In 1938 O'Connor published two novels, *The mill in the north in January* (intended to appear in 1937 but delayed because the Dublin publishers tried to censor unionist sympathies expressed by one character) and *Mary Doherty* in December. *The mill in the north*, located in the Downpatrick area, depicts generational struggle within a mill-owning family during the interwar depression. *Mary Doherty*, a much more ambitious and less integrated work (published in London), explores Northern Ireland's divisions through the relationship between the heroine, a catholic foundling turned lady's companion, and a protestant gentleman farmer. Some aspects of its treatment of sexuality and sectarian division are startling. Mary Doherty's protestant suitor, escorting her home from a party where he has taken alcohol, rapes her. He offers to marry her, but she refuses – a surprising act of self-assertion by contemporary standards – because he will not have their children brought up as catholics (since the family farm would pass into catholic hands). Everyone, including the perpetrator, regards the rape as shameful and disgraceful to him, but it is never seen as a crime which should be prosecuted, and despite her refusal to marry, Mary insists that she still loves him. The dilemma is resolved when an abdominal operation leaves Mary infertile, allowing them to marry. (Some secondary sources describe this as an abortion; while a subliminal hint at miscarriage cannot be ruled out). Extracts from *Mary Doherty* appear in the *Field Day anthology of Irish women's writing* (vol. 4, 962–970). The novel has a subplot, reminiscent of her later work, in which the attempts of a presbyterian minister to control an interdenominational estate school leads to its closure and the religious segregation of the pupils.

In 1937–40 O'Connor corresponded with General Hugh Montgomery, whose conciliatory Irish Association she joined. O'Connor also supported him in newspaper controversies (including one with her sister Theresa over the historical reliability of W. E. H. Lecky (qv)) though she thought the editor of the *Belfast Newsletter* censored her replies. O'Connor believed that while any attempt to reunify the island at that time would lead to civil war, reunification within the British Commonwealth

was inevitable in the long run since it represented the best interests of all concerned, while the combination of Ulster unionist voters with southern Commonwealth supporters would preclude a republic. She thought de Valera unduly praised and demonised, believing his faults no worse than those of Northern Ireland's first prime minister, Lord Craigavon (qv), whom she severely criticised in private. (In 1953 she expressed a slightly higher opinion of Northern Ireland's third prime minister Lord Brookeborough (qv) – that he was not a bigot but pretended to be one for political advantage).

In October 1940 O'Connor addressed the Dublin-based Women's Social and Progressive League on rural depopulation (something referenced in *Mary Doherty*, which suggests Ulster is becoming a city state confined to Belfast and its environs). She claimed young people's migration from the countryside to the city was largely based on misunderstanding; memories of former poverty made rural people live austere even after circumstances improved, while the demands of respectability caused urban people to present themselves as more prosperous than they were. The journalist covering the lecture stated that O'Connor had almost completed a book on the subject entitled *Voice out of Rama* (in reference to Jeremiah 31:15 and Matthew 2:18). Her play of this title was staged by the Ulster Group Theatre (UGT) in 1944. A fragmentary script survives in the Linenhall Library, Belfast, but must have been rewritten after 1940 as it culminates in the flight of civilians to the countryside during the Belfast Blitz of April–May 1941.

O'Connor's commitment to drama as her principal mode of expression reflects a connection established with the UGT soon after its founding in 1940. Between 1942 and 1959 she wrote eight plays for the UGT which staged at least five, making her the most-produced Irish woman dramatist between the literary revival and the 1990s. Several of these plays (*Highly efficient* (1942), *Select vestry* (1944), *Canvassing disqualifies* (1948), *Master Adams* (1949) and *The farmer wants a wife* (1955)) were published by the Belfast-based Quota Press or by HR Carter Publications for sale to local drama groups. O'Connor deliberately retains the *mise-en-scène* of kitchen comedy as a setting for social critique. Her aims are indicated in a brief paper on 'The future of Ulster drama' in a 1942/3 anthology of essays by members of the Belfast PEN Club, which argues that the UGT offers the prospect of a local drama with 'meaningful farce and sentimental nothings' replaced by critical examinations of the province's institutions: 'There is also drama in the growing fury against ineffectiveness and the worship of the sublimely unimportant, at present manifesting itself in bitter or flippant cynicism.' O'Connor was a long-serving committee member of Belfast PEN (serving as chairwoman in 1951) but resigned in 1953 over alleged autocratic and hypocritical behaviour by Richard Hayward (qv) whom she accused of unfairly criticising Dublin PEN as not doing enough for freedom of expression while using his position as Belfast chairman to silence criticism.

O'Connor's most successful play was *Highly efficient* (1942), a biting critique of the educational system as experienced by a probationer teacher in the town of

'Ballydim' who is trying to persuade a pupil to sit a civil service examination rather than becoming a maidservant while awaiting marriage. The pedantic, trivial and arbitrary assessments of school inspectors make her position almost impossible. The school board prefer to keep down the education rate rather than improve children's prospects; the (presbyterian) clerical manager uses the school building for church fundraising events while grudging the smallest expenditure on school maintenance. The teachers' likely fates are represented by a cynical older teacher, a wife-seeking local farmer who courts every new woman teacher without interest in them as individuals, and references to a previous teacher who died of overwork and despair. The play ran for five weeks and was extremely popular with teachers. It was revived for a three-week run in 1944 in response to new education legislation, and broadcast on BBC Radio Ulster in 1945. The published version has a preface by O'Connor defending her criticisms, which are expanded in an article on teaching as a profession in the 1944 edition of the literary miscellany *Lagan* (no. 2).

*Select vestry* (1944) explores the dilemma of a Church of Ireland rector who secures funding for a boys' home by assisting a wealthy and irreligious aspiring politician to become churchwarden; as well as being well-received in Belfast, it had a brief run in a small London theatre. (O'Connor continued to seek wider audiences; in September 1949 she had an acrimonious correspondence with Jack Loudan of the Northern Ireland Council for the Encouragement of Music and the Arts over the rejection of her plays for production by Tyrone Guthrie (qv)).

*Canvassing disqualifies* (1948), a one-act play (published in a 1948 Quota selection of four one-act plays edited by O'Connor and seen as reflecting her promotion of new dramatists) depicts the frantic manoeuvres of a school board to justify rejecting a highly qualified candidate for principal in favour of an inexperienced local. *Master Adams* (1949) is a sympathetic portrayal of an elderly village teacher who wonders if his life has been wasted until his daughter is cured by an ex-pupil whom he inspired to take up medicine. *The farmer wants a wife* (1955), combining a hard edge and a happy ending, criticises the tradition of elderly farmers retaining the land until death, with their ageing heirs postponing marriage until inheritance (if then); it was popular and was staged in Cork during a UGT tour. *Who saw her die?* (1957) has been lost. In 1958 the Ingrams moved from Killough to Belfast.

O'Connor's last produced play, *The sparrows fall* (1959, never published) shows she had lost none of her critical edge. It incorporates elements of the 1957 Fethard-on-Sea boycott (involving Seán Cloney (qv) and Sheila Cloney (qv)), though O'Connor stated that she had conceived the play before the boycott took place. The play depicts an embittered elderly catholic woman teacher who victimises a pupil because her mother was originally a protestant; when the girl's parents transfer her to the protestant school, the teacher orchestrates a boycott of the parents' shop. An investigation by the bishop establishes the teacher's wrongdoing (which includes deliberately marking down pupils born out of wedlock) and she is forced to retire. This ending is less evasive than it might seem; the teacher's misdeeds

reflect sexual frustration and jealousy, the bishop only intervened because he was related to the girl's father, and the mother comments bitterly that, in contrast to the gospel passage, 'sparrows' (pupils) are routinely brought down by incompetent teachers, and all churches cite Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son Isaac (also referenced in *Voice out of Rama*) to justify pressurising children into substandard denominational schools.

O'Connor's career as a dramatist was ended by the 1960 implosion of the UGT over Sam Thompson's (qv) play *Over the bridge*, and by her return to teaching in November 1961 after being pronounced clear of TB. She taught the eleven-plus preparatory class in Porter's Memorial School in the working-class Donegall Pass district of South Belfast. She continued to write for BBC Radio Ulster; her short story 'First love' was broadcast in February 1961 and 'The parable in reverse' won a BBC short story competition. She was interviewed for radio documentaries about the UGT (1965) and her own life and work (1975). In 1969 she retired and moved with her husband to Killyleagh, Co. Down, where she died on 2 February 1983. The couple had no children.

O'Connor has a distinctively bitter and uncompromising wit, but as a problem playwright has been obscured by changes in the conditions she exposed. The early twenty-first century saw a revival of interest in her as part of a wider recovery of neglected Irish women dramatists.

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O'Connor's letters to Montgomery, PRONI, D2661/C/1/I/1/3-11; Jack Loudan letter to O'Connor (1949), Tyrone Guthrie papers, PRONI, D3585/F/1/6; Two letters concerning O'Connor's 1953 resignation from PEN, John Hewitt papers, PRONI, D3838/7/30/44 and D3838/7/30/47; *Belfast Newsletter*, 25, 27 May, 7 June 1937; 5 Mar., 16, 18 June, 18 July, 4 Aug., 22, 29 Nov., 17 Dec. 1938; 18 Aug. 1939; 23 Feb. 1940; 1, 22 Sept., 6, 20 Oct. 1942; 8 Jan., 22 Oct. 1943; 12 Sept. 1945; 7 Oct. 1946; 5, 30 Apr., 13 May, 21 June, 6 Oct. 1947; 13 July, 4 Oct. 1948; 3, 19 Oct. 1949; *Ir. Independent*, 7 June 1938; *Ir. Times*, 18 Oct. 1940; 21 Sept. 1946; 20 Apr. 1951; 1 Apr., 6 May 1955; Patricia O'Connor, 'Choosing teaching as a career', *Lagan: A Miscellany of Ulster Writing*, no.2 (1944), 92–96; Patricia O'Connor, 'The future of Ulster drama', *PEN in Ulster* (Belfast, n.d. [1942 or 1943]); *Belfast Telegraph*, 25 Jan. 1958; *Ir. News*, 26 Feb. 1959; Mark Phelan 'Beyond the Pale: neglected northern playwrights, Alice Milligan, Helen Waddell and Patricia O'Connor', in Melissa Sihra (ed.) *Women in Irish drama: a century of authorship and representation* (2007), 117–125; Cover letter from Valerie Ingram (O'Connor's niece) dated 30 Jan. 2012, accompanying donation of O'Connor plays, a novel and a biographical note to the Linenhall Library Drama Archive, Belfast; William Stranney and Valerie Ingram, 'Patricia O'Connor: Killough playwright', *Lecale Review*, 13

(2015), 42–50; Fiona Coleman Claffey, *Political acts: women in Northern Irish theatre, 1921–2012* (2016), 58–70

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