

O'Donoghue, Gregory

by Patrick Maume

O'Donoghue, Gregory (1951–2005), poet, was born in Ballinlough, Cork city, the eldest of five sons of Robert O'Donoghue, journalist and writer, and his wife Anne. His father, Robert O'Donoghue (1924–2008), was born in Cork city in July 1924, one of five brothers. In 1944 he became a journalist with the *Cork Examiner*, remaining with that paper (and its stablemate the *Evening Echo*) until retirement in 1987. His role on the paper helped to place him at the centre of Cork's literary world for almost half a century. In 1986 he co-edited (with Professor John Barry of UCC) a series of *Examiner* articles on the history of Cork which were later published in book form. At different times O'Donoghue was a columnist and literary editor (of a page that provided a platform for many writers, including Paul Durcan, Pearse Hutchinson, and Sean Dunne (qv); the latter recalled him as someone who 'always seemed to have a cigarette, a theory, and, if I needed it, a fiver' (*Ir. Times*, 6 December 2008)). A particularly close associate throughout his life was Patrick Galvin (1927–2011); it was O'Donoghue who persuaded Galvin to begin writing the reminiscences that formed the basis for his celebrated *Raggy boy* trilogy of memoirs. As drama critic for the *Evening Echo* in the 1960s and 1970s, O'Donoghue was renowned for his uncompromising insistence on literary standards, his willingness to praise, to contextualise (with reference to wider European literature), and, where necessary, to condemn.

His high standards reflected his own literary/theatrical experiences and aspirations; the writer and critic Theo Dorgan (who recalled the enormous weight attached to O'Donoghue's Saturday night theatre column in the *Echo* by members of UCC's student dramatic society in the 1970s) recounted how when he came to socialise with Robert in his regular haunt in Cork's literary Long Valley bar, he was impressed that the critic judged his own work by the same high measure that he applied to others.

O'Donoghue began publishing poetry in the early 1950s in the journal *Irish Writing* (then Cork-based), edited by David Marcus (1924–2011), but attracted more attention with his plays of the 1960s and early 1970s. In 1958 he wrote the text for 'In praise of Cork', with music supplied by Sean Ó Riada (qv), which was later broadcast by Radio Éireann. He was the author of six plays, including 'Hate was the spur' (1969) and 'Hannah' (1970). In 1970 he produced two experimental verse plays, 'The long night' and 'Not with trumpets', respectively dealing with Terence MacSwiney (qv) and Tomás MacCurtain (qv); 'The long night' was later adapted for radio and broadcast by Radio Éireann. In 1972 he co-wrote with Ronnie Walsh a one-man play on Patrick Kavanagh (qv). O'Donoghue directed stage productions of his own and other plays, and in 1968 won an award from the annual all-Ireland

amateur drama festival in Athlone at a time when the amateur drama movement was much more prominent in Irish cultural life than was subsequently the case.

From 1975, when O'Donoghue became a regular contributor to the newly founded poetry magazine *Cyphers*, his literary endeavours were primarily in poetry. His poetic output was small, and his experience as a playwright was reflected in his preference for the dramatic verse monologue (often voiced by isolated and marginalised characters) over direct self-expression. In 1990 Raven Arts of Dublin published his only collection of original poetry, *The witness*, which contained poems covering his whole production from the 1950s onwards. In retirement he remained active in the Cork literary scene, working with the Munster Literature Centre and giving readings at the annual Éigse na Cúige literary gatherings. Robert O'Donoghue died at his home in Ballinlough, Cork city, on 29 November 2008.

Robert's brother John O'Donoghue (1932–95) – for whom Gregory O'Donoghue wrote an elegy, 'A legacy', in *Making tracks* (2001) – was a painter in oils and watercolours, and a musician, recalled by the poet John Montague as 'artist and lover, a trombonist trying to save his breath for his jazz gift' (*Southword*, ix, 22).

Robert's son **Gregory O'Donoghue** was educated at CBC Cork, before studying English literature at UCC, where his evident brilliance and striking appearance (including long hair and a general hippy style) made a strong impact. Gregory was a leading member of the generation of poets (including Dunne, Thomas McCarthy, Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill, Michael Davitt (qv), and Theo Dorgan) that emerged from UCC in the late 1960s and 1970s under the influence of the poet and critic Sean Lucy (1931–2001), who was professor of modern English in the college, and the poet John Montague, whom Lucy recruited as a lecturer. (Seán Ó Tuama (1926–2006) and Seán Ó Ríordáin (qv) in the Irish department, were also significant presences.) This scene flourished as much, if not more, in the cafeterias and the Long Valley bar than in the classroom. McCarthy, who had Gregory O'Donoghue as a postgraduate tutor, recalled 'a kind and colourful rock star, wandering the groves of academe' (*Evening Echo*, 17 September 2005). Then as later, O'Donoghue combined wide reading and appreciation of poetry with distrust of the academic mindset. His poetic models were Ezra Pound's imagism and the confessional verse of John Berryman, to which he added the lyrics of Bob Dylan and Leonard Cohen, and Robert Graves's mythopoeia. (O'Donoghue always described himself as a 'pagan', combining stalwart dissent from Christianity with a fascination for the preternatural – including a sense of the intrinsic power of words – and a 'strong sense of fatality', a belief that he was a poète maudit.) His attachment to 'street life' as part of a quest for authentic experience manifested itself very early, and with 'hippy hobo' friends he roamed the Cork coast from Youghal to Schull (its scenes recur in his poetic oeuvre).

O'Donoghue was the youngest contributor to the *Faber book of Irish verse* (1974), edited by Montague, who recalled his choice of 'The web' (which O'Donoghue later

thought immature and never collected) as 'declaring my belief in his future # also so as not to leave the last word to Paul Muldoon's gloomy #Hedgehog#' (*Southword*, ix, 21–2). O'Donoghue's first poetry collection, *Kicking*, containing twenty-one poems (some of which had appeared in British and American journals, and some read on Radio Éireann), was published by Gallery Press (Dublin) in 1975; it manifests the achievement of his mature poetic style, of brief haiku-like stanzas combining imagist detail with emotional depth.

After taking his MA degree at UCC with a dissertation on Berryman (assisted by Montague, who had known the American poet), O'Donoghue moved with his first wife, Fiona Walton, to the Queen's University at Kingston, in Ontario, Canada, where he taught classes, studied for a Ph.D., contributed poems to the Toronto literary magazine *Exile*, explored the local downmarket pubs, and roamed New England on Greyhound buses. Ultimately he found academia uncongenial, and in 1980 moved to Grantham, Lincolnshire, with his second wife, Gail Savoy, whom he had met in Canada. He became a railway guard, and 'worked freight trains between South Derbyshire and King's Cross, Nottingham and Skegness' (*Ghost dance*, jacket notes). At the same time he continued to meet and discuss poetry with old literary friends (some of whom were mystified when the discussions extended to passionate disquisitions on technical aspects of railway safety). He continued to publish occasional poems, and in 1985 both he and his father were represented in Sean Dunne's influential anthology *Poets of Munster*.

In the early 1990s O'Donoghue returned to Cork, which was now developing its artistic infrastructure, and renewed contact with such old friends as Galvin and Gerry Murphy. (Galvin had returned to the city about the same time as O'Donoghue.) He became a leading figure in the Munster Literature Centre, co-moderating its Thursday creative writing classes and acting as poetry editor for its literary journal, *Southword*. As teacher he combined stringent criticism and attention to detail with personal generosity. Like his father, he saw poetry in terms of craftsmanship; though sociable, he retained a certain reticence with an element of ethereal remoteness not found in the elder writer. He became a major presence on the Cork literary scene: elegantly gaunt, whitebearded, prophetic and mildly lecherous, a frequenter of literary pubs, and significant influence upon and enabler of younger poets.

Living for the first time in his life as a full-time writer, O'Donoghue experienced a personal poetic revival; his later work is marked both by elegiac imagery derived from his time on the railway (deserted stations, empty sidings, night trains, lonely railway staff), and a sense of evanescent time and ageing eroticism. In 1995 he published an 'interim' poetry collection, *The permanent way* (Three Spires Press), which in 2001 was incorporated into a fuller collection, *Making tracks* (Dedalus Press, Dublin). The latter combined earlier work with new poems that had first appeared in a variety of Irish, British, and American venues, and once more his poetry was read on RTÉ Radio. In July 2004 Cork city council awarded him a bursary under its individual artists' awards scheme.

After a short illness, Gregory O'Donoghue died on 27 August 2005 in the South Infirmary, Cork city. His death produced both a sense of profound loss over a poet at the height of his powers and apparently on the verge of more substantial achievement, and a sense of inevitability given his frailty and otherworldliness. Just before his death, Southword Editions of Cork had published *A visit to the clockmaker* (2005), his translations of poems by the Bulgarian poet Kristin Dimitrova (this intense creative exchange is also commemorated in the love poem-sequence 'A Sofia notebook' in *Ghost dance*), undertaken as part of a scheme whereby thirteen Cork poets marked Cork's status as official European City of Culture in 2005 by each translating a selection of verse (or rendering into poetical form the work of a translator) by a living poet from one of thirteen countries of the 'new Europe' (i.e., in the east and south-east of the continent, outside the western core of the European Union), who had not previously had a volume of poetry translated into English. (Robert O'Donoghue also participated in this project, working in collaboration with Patrick Galvin and a translator on verse by the Turkish poet Yilmaz Odaba#i; the volume, *Everything but you*, was withdrawn from sale after the Turkish authorities realised that in one poem Odaba#i referred to his native city of Diyarbakir as 'spiritual capital of Kurdistan'.) Gregory O'Donoghue's last collection, *Ghost dance* (Dedalus Press, 2006), which combines late work with poems published during his Canadian stay, appeared posthumously, and thus completed a slender but powerful oeuvre, perhaps the most enduring product of the long engagement of both Robert and Gregory O'Donoghue with the changing life of Cork.

Cork Examiner, 16 Oct. 1978; Sean Dunne (ed.), *Poets of Munster* (1985), preface; *Southword*, i (2001); ii (June 2002); iii (Oct. 2002); iv (Mar. 2003); vi (June 2004); vii (Dec. 2004); ix (Jan. 2006; memorial issue); xii (June 2007); *Evening Echo*, 16 July 2004; 1, 27 December 2008; *Ir. Examiner*, 29 Aug., 17 Sept. 2005; Maurice Riordan, foreword to Gregory O'Donoghue, *Ghost dance* (2006); *Ir. Times*, 6 Dec. 2008; 31 July 2009