

O'Grady, Standish James

by Patrick Maume

O'Grady, Standish James (1846–1928), writer and journalist, was born 18 September 1846 in Castletownbere, Co. Cork, one of eleven children of Thomas O'Grady, Church of Ireland rector of Castletown Berehaven and his wife, Susanna Dowe. The O'Gradys were an old Waterford family. Two of O'Grady's great-uncles, General Standish O'Grady and Admiral Hayes O'Grady, distinguished themselves in the Napoleonic wars; the Admiral was the father of the Celtic scholar Standish Hayes O'Grady (qv). The Doves arrived during the Munster plantation and intermarried with the McCarthys. O'Grady's parents were affectionately portrayed in his boys' stories, *The chain of gold* and *Lost on Du Carrig*, whose heroes were modelled on his elder brothers while he appears as the youngest son, Charlie. His mother was the model for the heroine of his historical novel *Ulrick the ready*, whose theme of blending planter and Gael through intermarriage reflects O'Grady's pride in his ancestry. O'Grady rejected his parents' evangelical faith, but retained their sense of supernatural forces underlying the everyday world; his social criticisms echo Old Testament prophets.

When his mother inherited a small estate at Three Castle Head, west Cork, O'Grady played with the local children, went to the village school, and visited every cottage on the estate. This gave him a sense of brotherhood with the common people and an idealised vision of aristocratic paternalism.

He was educated at Tipperary grammar school from 1856 and found separation from home traumatic but distinguished himself as a scholar and an athlete. He won an exhibitionership and a classical scholarship to TCD in 1864 and was a successful athlete and debater, winning medals for debating, ethics and philosophy. He was a leading member of the 'hockey' (i.e. hurling) team and always athletic, and in later life was a proficient golfer and tennis player. He studied divinity, but gave it up after two years, abandoning orthodox Christianity for pantheism influenced by Shelley, Whitman, Ruskin and Carlyle. He was called to the bar in 1872.

O'Grady married a childhood friend, Margaret Fisher, daughter of the rector of Kenmare and they had three sons. She claimed to have psychic powers and practised palmistry and O'Grady himself was obsessed with telepathy, which he believed transcended time and space and allowed the artist to make the past live again. He developed an interest in ancient Irish literature after discovering *History of Ireland* by Sylvester O'Halloran (qv) in a country house library. He produced two volumes of a history of Ireland (1878 and 1880), centred on a politically and sexually bowdlerised retelling of the Ulster cycle. These were not commercially successful, but they popularised Cú Chulainn (qv). They had a profound influence on W. B. Yeats (qv) and George Russell (qv); Yeats called O'Grady 'father of the Irish literary

revival'. At intervals throughout his career, O'Grady produced revised editions of the same material.

O'Grady's legal practice was slack, though the Unionist party employed him on electoral matters. He supplemented his income by leader writing for the pro-landlord Dublin *Daily Express*. In the 1890s he also wrote a column in the Dublin *Warder and Weekly Mail*. He preached an idealist neo-feudalism, influenced by Carlyle and Ruskin. Though he preferred aristocratic leadership to a 'shabby and sordid Irish republic, ruled by corrupt politicians and ignoble rich', his fierce denunciations of the aristocracy as insufficiently feudal led Lady Gregory (qv) to call him a 'Fenian Unionist'. His *Toryism and the tory democracy* (1886), hailed Lord Randolph Churchill and told Irish aristocrats to redeem themselves by founding industries establishing the same mutual loyalty with their workforce which their ancestors maintained with tenants and soldiers.

In the 1890s O'Grady studied the Elizabethan wars in Ireland, an interest dating from childhood encounters with traditions of the siege of Dunboy and O'Sullivan Beare (qv). His researches are displayed in his 1896 edition of *Pacata Hibernia*, his story collection *The bog of stars*, historical novels about Red Hugh O'Donnell (qv), and *Ulrick the ready*. O'Grady's heroic advocacy coexisted with self-mockery. His researches mocked Anglo-Saxon supremacists, while emphasising the treachery of crown officials and ridiculing the claim by J. A. Froude (qv) that the English displayed moral and racial superiority, and attributed the crown's victory to the 'Celtic valour' of native troops. He also ridiculed nationalists, pointing out that most chieftains, except Red Hugh, a second Cú Chulainn, temporised with the crown, and he argued that common people thought the crown less oppressive than the chieftains.

O'Grady saw the anti-overtaxation agitation of 1896–7 as a last chance for the aristocracy to reclaim leadership of the Irish nation, demanding a new Volunteer movement. The campaign was allegorically represented in *The tale of a town*, a play by Edward Martyn (qv), rewritten by George Moore (qv) and W. B. Yeats as *The bending of the bough* (1900). The uncharismatic visionary, Ralph Kirwan, who temporarily rouses the eloquent but weak aristocrat Jasper Dean to the leadership that Kirwan cannot wield, is based on O'Grady.

He left the declining *Express* in 1898 and moved to Kilkenny at the invitation of Otway Cuffe (qv) and Ellen, dowager countess of Desart (qv), who had been encouraged by O'Grady's writings to start craft industries. They dominated the local Gaelic League and engaged in psychic research with Margaret O'Grady. He edited the *Kilkenny Monitor* between 1898 and 1900, but left festooned with libel writs after accusing the marquess of Ormonde, the bishop of Ossory, and other local notables of moral corruption for siding with an individual whom the Desarts accused of theft. The Desarts bailed him out financially and he concentrated on the *All-Ireland Review*, which he founded in 1900.

O'Grady was hailed by the literary revival as a father figure and is portrayed respectfully, selectively and sometimes drunkenly by such memoirists as Yeats and Moore. O'Grady was ambivalent about the new movement and criticised theatrical dramatisations of the heroic tales as demeaning. His appeal extended to physical-force nationalists. Arthur Griffith (qv) praised him as an honest Unionist (a handy stick with which to beat other Unionists). Eoin MacNeill (qv) blamed O'Grady for infecting P. H. Pearse (qv) with an unhistorical and pagan imagery of self-regarding Celtic heroism. O'Grady's *Coming of Fionn* was performed at St Enda's College in March 1909, after which O'Grady addressed the pupils. His views on history as art influenced *The hidden Ireland* by Daniel Corkery (qv) (1878–1964) and the satirical novel *King Goshawk and the birds* by Eimar O'Duffy (qv) introduces O'Grady's Cú Chulainn to 1920s Dublin for the purpose of social criticism based on O'Grady's anti-capitalism.

After the closure of the *All-Ireland Review* in 1907, O'Grady suffered a physical and psychological breakdown from overwork; his financial position was eased by a civil list pension. He now saw the aristocracy, and modern civilisation in general, as hopelessly corrupt, turning to the labour movement as a possible vehicle for his ideas. In 1908 he wrote for the *Irish Peasant*, published by W. P. Ryan (qv), telling urban workers to return to the land in Spartan-style communal colonies and he attempted to recruit Dublin clerks for such a scheme. O'Grady wrote *Letters to the leaders of the Irish workers* (1911–12) in the *Irish Worker* published by James Larkin (qv); these were modelled on Ruskin's *Fors clavigera*. He also advocated guild socialism for A. R. Orage's *New Age*. During the Ulster crisis, he argued that Catholics and Protestants should have equal representation under home rule, and sympathised with the All-for-Ireland League promoted by William O'Brien (qv).

O'Grady and his wife left Ireland in 1918 for health reasons. After living in the north of France and Northamptonshire, they moved to the Isle of Wight. He was working on a final exposition of his ideas when he died suddenly, 18 May 1928.

O'Grady's world view, reflecting the late nineteenth-century European reaction against positivism and liberalism, was frequently eccentric and sometimes sinister. Like his masters, Ruskin and Carlyle, he can be claimed by both left and right. His hostility to commercialism was linked to his preoccupation with the Aryan origins of the Irish and his belief that settlement colonies might become reservoirs of agrarian virtue redeeming a corrupt imperial metropolis. His son and biographer remarks that his heroes are all boys and he is pervaded by nostalgia for his wild, free boyhood on the cliffs of Berehaven. Nonetheless, the integrity with which he pursued his vision opened territories for greater writers to develop and makes him a significant critic of late Victorian Irish society.

Ir. Times, obit., 21 May 1928; Hugh Art O'Grady, *Standish James O'Grady: the man and the writer* (1929); earl of Desart and Lady Sybil Lubbock, *A page from the past* (1936); Philip L. Marcus, *Standish O'Grady* (1970); Dominic Daly, *The young Douglas Hyde* (1974); Ruth Dudley Edwards, *The triumph of failure* (1977); F. X. Martin (ed.), Michael Tierney, *Eoin MacNeill, scholar and man of action, 1867–1945* (1980); Hubert Butler, 'Anglo-Irish twilight', *Escape from the anthill* (1985); Edward A. Hagan, 'High nonsensical words', *A study of the works of Standish James O'Grady* (1986); R. F. Foster, *Paddy and Mr Punch: connections in Irish and English history* (1993); Edward A. Hagan, 'A nineteenth-century Anglo-Irish will to power', Timothy Foley and Tadhg Ryder (eds), *Ideology and Ireland in the nineteenth century* (1998); R. F. Foster, *The Irish story: telling tales and making it up in Ireland* (2001); Edward A. Hagan (ed.), *Standish O'Grady, To the leaders of our working people* (2002), Michael McAteer, *Standish O'Grady, AE and Yeats: history, politics, culture* (2002)