

Pearse, James

by Patrick Maume

Pearse, James (1839–1900), sculptor, was born on 8 December 1839 at 24 Plumtree Street, Bloomsbury, London, the second of three sons of James Pearse, frame-maker, and his first wife Mary Ann (née Thompson). The family was impoverished and moved to Birmingham (c.1847), where James attended local primary schools. He was sent to work in a chain factory (c.1852); he hated this and subsequent employment as an apprentice printer. Determined to become a sculptor, he attended night classes in art school and began a lifelong project of self-education through reading. His parents were unitarians, but he became an atheist after being expelled from Sunday school for asking awkward questions. Remaining strongly attached to his family, he exchanged visits with them throughout his life and recalled his childhood as poor but deeply loving and tried to recreate it in his own married life. After a brief period in which he moved in bohemian circles and tried to establish himself as a professional sculptor, he became a stonemason and carver working on the restoration and construction of public buildings. Much of this involved churches, including some work on Lincoln cathedral. He visited Dublin as a foreman on the construction of the Kildare Street Club (c.1860).

After becoming an employee of Hardman and Co. of Birmingham, a major church-fittings supplier closely connected with Augustus Pugin (qv), Pearse moved to Ireland (c.1862/3) as Hardman's opened a Dublin branch off Camden Street to meet a boom in Irish church-building. He was employed as chief sculptor, and lived in the Camden Street/Portobello area. On 28 April 1863 in Birmingham he married Susan Emily Fox. They had one son and three daughters; two of the girls died in early childhood. It is alleged that James believed that one died from neglect by Emily; their deaths within a month suggest infectious disease. The family were nominal anglicans, but were received as Roman catholics at the Passionist church in Mount Argus, Dublin (c.1869). Some years later, after trade rivals cast doubt on his religious allegiance, Pearse obtained a letter from Fr Pius Devine, CP, who had instructed him, testifying to his sincerity and understanding of catholic doctrine. Although his son Patrick (qv) liked to believe that his father's conversion had been sincere, there is evidence that it was undertaken for commercial reasons and that James remained at heart an atheist. As a hobby he studied comparative religion, which may account for the intellectual curiosity about catholic doctrine noted by Devine.

Pearse was recognised as a particularly talented workman, and in 1867 Hardman's, commissioned to decorate the newly constructed House of Lords, brought him to London to work on the carved princesses that decorate the Lords' robing room. In 1873 he entered a partnership with P. J. O'Neill specialising in monumental works, and moved to Great Brunswick Street (latterly, Pearse Street), Dublin. Emily Pearse

died in Dublin on 26 July 1876 from meningitis. Fifteen months later, on 24 October 1877, Pearse married Margaret Brady (qv), whom he met around the time of Emily's death; she was an assistant in the shop where he bought his daily newspaper. They had two sons and two daughters: Margaret Mary (qv), Patrick, William (qv) and Mary Brigid (qv). Despite at least one serious dispute, and some concern about their eighteen-year age difference and the speed of their acquaintance after Emily's death, the marriage appears to have given James the happy home life for which he longed. This contrasted with the gruff and belligerent personality he presented to the outside world (extending to occasional fisticuffs with troublesome workmen). Although James Vincent Pearse, the son of the first marriage, worked for his father and shared in the occasional drinking bouts in which Pearse indulged after completing major commissions, he was not admitted to partnership (possibly because of Margaret's influence) and died in a workhouse in 1912.

After his partnership with O'Neill dissolved in 1878, Pearse established his own business as an architectural sculptor at 28 Brunswick Street. In his obituary in the *Irish Builder* he was described as a pioneer of neo-Gothic church art in Ireland. Before 1850 catholic church-builders favoured neoclassicism because of the Roman experience of many senior clergy, and newly fashionable Gothic was associated with the Church of Ireland; Hardman's Irish involvement coincided with, and advanced, popularisation of Puginesque Gothic among catholic patrons.

A political admirer and personal acquaintance of the radical politician and atheist propagandist Charles Bradlaugh (1833–91), Pearse wrote after Bradlaugh's death that he had loved him more than any man except his own father. He is believed to have published several pamphlets for Bradlaugh's Freethought Publishing Company under the pseudonym 'Humanitas'. These included *Is God the first cause?* (1883) and *The follies of the Lord's prayer* (1883), which are explicitly atheist, at least two pamphlets attacking socialism (which Bradlaugh opposed), and *Charles Bradlaugh and the Irish nation* (1885), defending Bradlaugh's advocacy of Irish home rule. In 1889 Pearse took out a £50 debenture in the Freethought Publishing Company, which suggests religious rather than merely political sympathy with Bradlaugh. Joost Augusteijn cites contemporaries of his sons claiming that James Pearse's erratic religious observance, habitual working on Sundays, and provocative remarks on religious matters were notorious, and that friends warned him that they might damage his business.

Pearse was a strong supporter of home rule in the late 1880s, possibly influenced by Bradlaugh and his own strongly nationalist second wife. In 1886 he published under his own name a pamphlet, *'England's duty to Ireland' as it appears to an Englishman*, replying to an anti-home rule pamphlet by the Trinity College professor Thomas Maguire (qv); it is noteworthy for its insistence that the author is a self-educated workingman refuting an effete elitist by sheer logic. (Pearse strongly admired Michael Davitt (qv) as a self-made workingman.) He withdrew from nationalist activism and literary activity after 1890, possibly due to work pressure, the

deaths of Bradlaugh and Charles Stewart Parnell (qv) in 1891, and the recession of home rule after the Parnell split. He was not a separatist; family parties ended with choruses of 'God save the queen'.

Between 1880 and 1891 Pearse worked in partnership with his former foreman Edward Sharp (also from Birmingham); they were awarded a gold medal at the 1882 national exhibition of Irish arts and manufactures for a Gothic high altar with statuary executed by Pearse. The partnership broke up after a quarrel over the construction of a high altar (now destroyed) for SS Michael and John's church, Dublin (executed by Pearse but designed by the architect John Loftus Robinson (qv)). Thereafter Pearse ran his own business. In 1900 Pearse and Sons was the largest stonemason yard in Ireland, employing forty workmen and leasing as business premises three properties on Townsend Street adjacent to the family residence on Great Brunswick Street.

Pearse's artistic achievement is difficult to assess because much of his work was anonymous, attributed to firms which employed him rather than individually, or executed to others' designs; some of his works were destroyed in army raids on St Enda's school after the Easter rising, and some known works in catholic churches were destroyed after liturgical changes following the second Vatican council. His most widely praised projects include the sculpture 'Erin go breagh' on the roof of the headquarters of the National Bank of Ireland in College Green (1889), decorative work for Enniscorthy cathedral and St Michael's church, Tipperary town, and the pulpit of the four masters in St Eunan's cathedral, Letterkenny, Co. Donegal (completed by his sons after his death). In an autobiographical fragment, Patrick Pearse compared his father to the anonymous craftsmen who created mediaeval cathedrals and described his pursuit of 'the hopeless task of trying to make Irish church-builders recognise what was beautiful and religious in sculpture ... If ever in an Irish church you find, amid a wilderness of bad statuary, something good or true or lovingly finished, you may be sure that it was carved by my father or one of his pupils' (quoted in Edwards, 5).

James Pearse was noticeably careful with money (perhaps because of his early poverty and awareness that he was not skilful with estimates and accounts; contemporaries believed he might have been more financially successful had he paid more attention to the administrative side of his business). He invested in stocks and debentures, including Birmingham municipal stock. In the early 1890s he considered transferring his business and family to Birmingham, but was deterred by Margaret's opposition. He was a bibliophile who spent freely on collecting and binding books, and his collection became the core of the library at St Enda's.

After suffering a brain haemorrhage while visiting relatives, James Pearse died on 5 September 1900 in Birmingham. Patrick believed he had undergone a spiritual awakening in his last years. This claim should not be dismissed; Patrick's honesty about his father's earlier atheism embarrassed Mary Brigid, who censored the

published text. Pearse's Birmingham relatives believed he accepted catholic last rites only to please his wife and children, and this seems more plausible. He left the substantial estate of £1,470 17s 6d, mostly tied up in the business. James Pearse was proud of his self-made respectability, and his worldview was summed up in the firm's motto, *Labor Omnia Vincit* (Work Conquers All).

The extent to which James Pearse's Englishness influenced (by reaction or otherwise) his children's political and religious attitudes has provoked much speculation. Some commentators (notably Ruth Dudley Edwards) present Patrick Pearse as emotionally distant from his father and clinging to his mother. Others point out that James's children recalled him as reserved but affectionate (he carved a wooden rocking-horse for his elder children), that his correspondence with Margaret when away from home displays detailed knowledge of and concern for the children, and that the family's living at his workplace meant that he was physically present to a greater extent than many Victorian fathers. This may explain why Patrick's accent was heavily influenced by his father's English intonation, so that in his childhood and youth casual acquaintances often assumed he himself was English. As late as 1901 a journalist briefing his IPP employer on the Gaelic League leadership said of Patrick: 'He is English by training and I don't know if there is a tint of Irish blood in his veins – certainly he is no Nationalist ... A friend ... remarked ... that it was surprising how an Englishman had cottoned to the language' (McCarthy to O'Brien, O'Brien papers). James sent Patrick and William to the predominantly working-class school run by the Christian Brothers on Westland Row, where their English accents and mannerisms were painfully conspicuous. The school appears to have been chosen for proximity and cheapness. James appears to have been particularly proud of Patrick and Margaret Mary, and boasted of their intellectual abilities.

After James's death, Patrick undertook genealogical research in the futile hope of proving the Pearses were of Irish descent. His writings suggest he attributed problematic personality traits, such as shyness and melancholia, to his English blood, but he also spoke of his father's ancestral puritan love of freedom and aesthetic sense (several of James's sculptures were displayed at St Enda's). The recurring theme in Patrick's writings of an honest but sceptical outsider-mentor redeemed by the Christ-like faith of an innocent child-pupil is often presented as an allegory of national redemption, but can also be seen as reflecting his hopes for his father. Desmond Ryan (qv) recalled Patrick's remark shortly before the 1916 rising: 'If ever you are free, it is the son of an Englishman who will have freed you' (Augusteijn, 34–5).

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Pearse papers, Pearse Museum, Rathfarnham, Dublin; Tim McCarthy to William O'Brien, 1901 (UCC, William O'Brien papers, AL113); Ruth Dudley Edwards, *Patrick Pearse: the triumph of failure* (1977); Brian Crowley, "I am the son of a good father":

James and Patrick Pearse' in Roisín Higgins and Regina Uí Chollatáin (ed.), *The life and after-life of P. H. Pearse* (2009), 19–32; Joost Augusteijn, *Patrick Pearse: the making of a revolutionary* (2010); Paul Gorry, *Seven signatories: tracing the family histories of the men who signed the proclamation* (2016); Teresa O'Donnell and Mary Louise O'Donnell, *Sisters of the revolutionaries: the story of Margaret and Mary Brigid Pearse* (2017)

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