

Pearse, William ('Willie')

by William Murphy

Pearse, William ('Willie') (1881–1916), revolutionary and sculptor, was born 15 November 1881 at 27 Great Brunswick St. (Pearse St.), Dublin, second son among two sons and two daughters of James Pearse, a monumental sculptor originally from London, and his second wife, Margaret Pearse (qv) (née Brady), a shop assistant from Dublin. From childhood Willie was devoted to his older brother, Patrick (qv). In 1891 the Pearse brothers entered CBS, Westland Row. Willie possessed limited academic ability and was frequently physically chastised in school, contributing to his brother's distaste for corporal punishment. He was considered artistically talented, however, and natural heir to the family business. From 1897 he attended the Metropolitan School of Art, where he studied sculpture under Oliver Sheppard (qv). He followed Patrick into the New Ireland Literary Society and the Gaelic League, providing Irish classes for his fellow art students. He was a member of the executive of the Wolfe Tone and United Irishmen Memorial Committee (1898), often wore a kilt, and played Gaelic sports, being a mediocre hurler but a good handball player.

On his father's death in 1900, Willie did not take immediate control of the family business. He left Patrick in charge and continued his studies in South Kensington and Paris, acquiring a more cosmopolitan awareness. On returning to Ireland he showcased work in RHA and Oireachtas exhibitions between 1906 and 1913. In 1907 he exhibited, with other members of the Irish Art Companions, at the Irish International Exhibition. He maintained a frequent correspondence with, and fondness for, Mabel Gorman, a young girl who was his favourite model – she posed for such pieces as 'Memories' and 'Éire Óg' – although the relationship became strained before her death in 1914. Pearse & Sons continued to carry out commissioned work on churches (St Mary's cathedral, Limerick) and for nationalist bodies (Father Murphy memorial, Wexford); Willie's favourite piece was the 'Mater Dolorosa' in St Andrew's church, Westland Row, Dublin. The business declined, however, and closed in 1910.

By then Willie was teaching art and English at his brother's school, St Enda's, and at its companion school for girls, St Ita's. He was effectively assistant headmaster at St Enda's, giving Patrick more time for political activity. He shared with Patrick a fondness for dressing up, and nurtured acting ambitions. With Thomas MacDonagh (qv), he ensured that drama was given a prominent position on the school's curriculum. With mixed success he played Pilate in Patrick's 'Passion play' at the Abbey (1911) and Ciaran in Patrick's 'The master' when it was staged at the Irish Theatre, Hardwicke St. (1915). He rejected an offer to join Sir Frank Benson's professional touring company, but did establish the Leinster Stage Society with his sister, Mary Brigid (qv). In 1912 the Society staged a season at Cork Opera House which was a critical and financial disaster.

His brother's closest confidant, he too joined the Irish Volunteers in November 1913, but was not intimately involved in the planning stages of the 1916 rising. During the rebellion (24–9 April) he was a captain on the headquarters staff and occasionally (if Patrick was indisposed) acting chief of staff. In reality he had no authority and ‘on no plausible definition could he have been called a ringleader’ (Townshend, 282). On surrender he was court-martialled and, contrary to expectations, executed in Kilmainham jail a day after his brother (4 May 1916). Many suspected that he was executed simply because of his relationship to Patrick, although he was among the first to be tried and the only prisoner to plead guilty, and these factors may have contributed. In unsuccessfully pleading for the return of his body to his family, John Dillon (qv) described him as ‘a most inoffensive creature’ (Dudley Edwards, 329). The shooting of such an innocuous figure, who had played a minor part in the rising, did much to discredit the executions in the eyes of many moderate nationalists.

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Desmond Ryan, *The man called Pearse* (1923), 50, 60–76; Mary Brigid Pearse, *The home life of Patrick Pearse* (1934), 17, 28; Louis N. Le Roux, *Patrick H. Pearse* (1932); Milo McGarry, ‘Memories of Sgoil Eanna’, *Capuchin Annual 1930*; Margaret M. Pearse, ‘St Enda’s’ and Desmond Ryan, ‘Margaret Pearse’, *Capuchin Annual 1942*, 227–30, 312–18; Margaret M. Pearse, ‘Patrick and Willie Pearse’, *Capuchin Annual 1943*, 86–8; *Cuimhní na bPiarasach*, i, ii, iii (n.d.); *Studies*, iv (1966); Ruth Dudley Edwards, *Patrick Pearse: the triumph of failure* (1977); Séamas Ó Buachalla (ed.), *The letters of P. H. Pearse* (1980); *Ir. Times*, 17 Jan. 1984; Boylan; Snoddy; Turlough Breathnach, ‘Willie Pearse & his world’, *Ireland of the Welcomes*, xlviii, no. 4 (1999); Elaine Sisson, *Pearse’s patriots: St Enda’s and the cult of boyhood* (2004); Charles Townshend, *Easter 1916: the Irish rebellion* (2005)