

Robinson, Lennox

by Christopher Murray

Robinson, Lennox (1886–1958), playwright and director, was born Esmé Stuart Lennox Robinson on 4 October 1886 near Douglas, Co. Cork, youngest of seven children (of whom twins died in infancy) of Andrew Craig Robinson, stockbroker, and Emily Anna Robinson (née Jones). When Lennox was six years old his father took orders in the Church of Ireland and in 1895 moved his family to Kinsale, and thence in 1902 to the rectory in Ballymoney, west Cork. Owing to ill health, Lennox had little formal education, being tutored at home except for a couple of years spent at Bandon Grammar School up to 1904. At home he read widely, dabbled in music, and edited a family magazine, *Contributions*. On a visit to the Cork opera house (August 1907) Robinson was greatly influenced by the Abbey Theatre company, then on tour with 'Cathleen Ni Houlihan' by W. B. Yeats (qv) and 'The rising of the moon' by Lady Gregory (qv). Some months later Robinson wrote his first play for the Abbey, where he made his career.

'The Clancy name', staged 8 October 1908, was a one-act peasant play in a new realistic style. In order to preserve the family name Mrs Clancy suppresses her son's dying confession to a murder. Like the plays that followed to 1916, it was bleak and pessimistic. As the Abbey was suffering from the loss of manager Willie Fay (qv), Yeats offered the inexperienced Robinson the post in 1909. He was soon embroiled in controversy when he kept the theatre open at the time of King Edward VII's death on 7 May 1910. The Abbey's patron, Annie Horniman (qv), withdrew her subsidy of the theatre when Yeats backed Robinson and no public apology was made. The Abbey company then undertook a series of tours to the US, managed by Robinson. The last of these before the 1914–18 war lost money, and Robinson resigned as manager.

In 1915 he took a position as organising librarian for the Carnegie (UK) Trust, then establishing a network of public libraries throughout Ireland. He remained with the trust until his dismissal in 1924 amid controversy over a short story he published in *Tomorrow*. In the meantime he continued to write plays, and won much success with 'The whiteheaded boy' (1916) and 'The lost leader' (1918). Like his play about Robert Emmet (qv), 'The dreamers' (1915), the latter was a political drama, in which Robinson imagines Charles Stewart Parnell (qv) alive and well and living in the west of Ireland in 1918. 'The whiteheaded boy' was Robinson's first comedy and turned out to be his greatest success, being frequently revived on the Abbey stage.

In 1917 Robinson published his only novel, *A young man from the south*, which is autobiographical and emphasises the strong nationalist feeling also evident in some short pieces entitled *Dark days* (1918). But his genius lay mainly in the theatre and he returned to the Abbey in April 1919 as manager and producer/director, where he

remained till his death in 1958. Robinson is usually credited with reviving the Abbey after 1919, encouraging the new talents of George Shiels (qv) and Sean O'Casey (qv) and building up perhaps the most talented acting company in the Abbey's history.

Robinson was made a member of the board of directors in 1923, filling the place left vacant since the death of J. M. Synge (qv) in 1909. Pursuing his interest in contemporary European drama, Robinson helped found the influential Dublin Drama League in 1919, which performed modern experimental plays at the Abbey on Sunday and Monday evenings.

In the 1920s Robinson tried to move beyond the conventional Abbey 'peasant' play into more middle-class, urban material. In 'The big house' (1926) he dealt with the theme of the Anglo-Irish caught up in the wars that ravaged his native Co. Cork from 1919 to 1923, and returned to the plight of unionists in southern Ireland in 'Killycreggs in twilight' (1937). Regrettably, neither of these plays was as popular as the lighter comedies such as 'The whiteheaded boy', 'The far-off hills' (1918), and 'Drama at Inish' (1933).

In spite of a growing drink problem, Robinson's work rate remained impressive, not only in the writing of plays but in organising the Abbey Theatre Festival in 1938, editing a collection of the lectures he had then given, *The Irish theatre* (1939), and editing Lady Gregory's *Journals* (1946). Robinson also edited anthologies of Irish poetry and wrote biographies of an Irish artist, Dermot O'Brien (qv), *Palette and plough* (1948), and the Anglo-Irish TD Bryan Cooper (qv) (1931). In recognition of his diverse achievements TCD awarded him an honorary D.Litt. (1948). In 1951 Robinson published the official history of the Abbey Theatre, just as fire destroyed the original building and the company moved to the Queen's Theatre.

Robinson's place as an Irish playwright is in the second rather than the first rank, and not many of his plays are revived nowadays, among them 'The whiteheaded boy' and 'Drama at Inish'. Yet his craftsmanship undoubtedly influenced the development of Irish drama, although he probably wrote too much (twenty-two plays for the Abbey alone). It may be that his personality was always too dominated by Yeats, whom he revered, and that he never fully realised his potential. But Robinson continued to give a great deal to Irish theatre even when he was well past his best, for example becoming involved in the vibrant Amateur Drama Council, of which he was created honorary patron in 1953.

Robinson died 14 October 1958 in Glensilva Nursing Home, Monkstown, Co. Dublin, of complications arising from heart failure, and was buried in St Patrick's cathedral, Dublin, on 17 October. He married (1931) an artist and screen designer at the Abbey, Dorothy Travers-Smith, granddaughter of the famous Edward Dowden (qv), professor of English at TCD, and daughter of a Dublin doctor. They had no children. His papers are mainly in the Southern Illinois University at Carbondale and in the

NLI. The Abbey Theatre holds a portrait by James Sleator (qv) and a bronze bust by Garry Trimble.

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Lennox Robinson, Tom Robinson, and Nora Dorman, *Three homes* (1938); Lennox Robinson, *Curtain up: an autobiography* (1942); id., *Towards an appreciation of theatre* (1945); Michael J. O'Neill, *Lennox Robinson* (1964); Robert Hogan (ed.), *Journal of Irish Literature: a Lennox Robinson number*, ix, no. 1 (Jan. 1980); Christopher Murray (ed.), *The selected plays of Lennox Robinson* (1982) (bibliog. by Frances-Jane French); Michael Ó hAodha, *Pictures at the Abbey: the collection of the Irish National Theatre, with a conversation piece by Lennox Robinson* (1983); Christopher Murray, 'Lennox Robinson: the Abbey's anti-hero', Masaru Sekine (ed.), *Irish writers and the theatre* (1987), 114–34; Christopher Murray, 'Lennox Robinson, *The big house, Killycreggs in twilight* and "the vestigia of generations"', Otto Rauchbauer (ed.), *Ancestral voices: the big house in Anglo-Irish literature* (1992), 109–19; Hartmut Vormann, *The art of Lennox Robinson: theoretical premises and theatrical practice* (2001)