

Shaw, Francis

by Patrick Maume

Shaw, Francis (1907–70), Jesuit priest, Celtic scholar and historical polemicist, was born 26 March 1907 in Mullingar, Co. Westmeath, the fourth child among four sons and two daughters of Patrick Walter Shaw (1872–1940), merchant, and his wife Mary 'Minnie' (née Galligan). The Shaws were a leading Mullingar business dynasty; Patrick Walter Shaw owned several premises in the town (and a number of racehorses) and sat on a number of public bodies, including Mullingar town commissioners and Westmeath county council; he chaired Westmeath county board of health. In local politics, the Shaw family formed a distinctive faction independent of both the local Redmondite organisation and the radical dissident group led by Laurence Ginnell (qv). P. W. Shaw, however, endorsed the support expressed by John Redmond (qv) for the allies in the first world war and addressed several recruiting meetings. He was a Cumann na nGaedheal TD for Longford–Westmeath (1923–33).

From an early age Francis Shaw took a strong interest in the Irish language, and was awarded fifteen prizes and medals at local and national feiseanna. He was educated at Mullingar Christian Brothers' School and Terenure College, Dublin. The latter school was chosen because its Carmelite proprietors were willing to make allowances for his frail health by letting him sleep in a single room rather than a dormitory. Shaw's health problems were chronic; late in life he stated he had hardly ever had a pain-free day.

On 1 September 1924 Shaw entered the Jesuit novitiate at Tullabeg, Rahan, Co. Offaly, and after his first profession (21 November 1926) undertook his juniorate studies at the Jesuit residence in Rathfarnham Castle, Dublin, where Fr Lambert McKenna (qv) encouraged him to pursue a career in Celtic studies. In 1929 Shaw graduated from UCD with first-class honours in Celtic studies, winning a postgraduate scholarship and a Mansion House Fund scholarship in Irish language and literature; at UCD he wrote for the college magazine, the *National Student*. In 1930 he won a travelling scholarship in Celtic studies, and in 1931 graduated MA with first-class honours (his principal areas of study being Irish history and the Welsh language). He studied philosophy at the Ignatius Kolleg (the German Jesuit house of studies) at Valkenburg (near Limburg) in the Netherlands (1930–32). His scholarly mentors included Osborn Bergin (qv); Eoin MacNeill (qv), whose lectures Shaw recalled as 'unorthodox and unpredictable # they taught in action the way of research' (Martin and Byrne (1973), 303); Rudolf Thurneysen (qv), under whom he also studied at the University of Bonn (1932–3; he returned to Ireland prematurely because of ill health); and T. F. O'Rahilly (qv).

Shaw's presence in Germany during the Nazi seizure of power contributed to his abiding distaste for that movement. In 1935 he sparked public controversy by suggesting at a meeting in UCD that advocates of Irish-medium education for English-speaking children displayed a narrow nationalism comparable to Nazism; in April 1936 he published an article in the *National Student* denouncing Nazi persecution of catholicism, the regime's general lawlessness, and the writings of Nazi ideologue Alfred Rosenberg (1893–1946): 'this farrago of impiety, stupidity and ludicrous ignorance of history # a religion of race and racial hatreds, founded on pseudo-scientific theories which are discredited by all serious historians and ethnologists'.

Shaw undertook further study at UCD (1933–6); in 1934 he produced a highly praised edition of the Old Irish text *Aisling Oengusso*. During his studies at UCD he regularly presented papers to the Irish-language student society Cumann Liteardha na Gaeilge and taught at the Irish-language summer college in Ballingearry, Co. Cork. He studied theology at the Jesuit faculty in Milltown Park, Dublin (1936–40), where he was ordained priest on 31 July 1939. He was allowed to substitute a long retreat for tertianship studies because of his ill health, and became a professed Jesuit on 24 December 1945. From autumn 1940 until his death Shaw lived in the Jesuit community at 35 Lower Leeson Street, Dublin, of which he was superior (1945–51); he annually constructed the Christmas crib in its chapel. He was also a consultor of the Irish Jesuit province (1947–53).

Shaw initially expected to spend some years on research after ordination. In March 1941, however, he was appointed professor of early and mediaeval Irish at UCD in succession to Bergin through the influence of D. A. Binchy (qv), and held this post for the remainder of his life. Later in 1941 he was appointed to the board of the Institute for Advanced Studies, and in 1942 was elected MRIA. Shaw was a painstaking teacher, and assisted foreign students with evening tuition, often in their own languages. His sense of humour and combative argumentation brightened his lectures and survives in such published remarks as his dismissal of the wilder theories of the archaeologist R. A. S. Macalister (qv) regarding cross-cultural parallels: 'The swastika in Dublin is associated with laundrying [a reference to the well-known Swastika Laundry]. Therefore the Nazi movement is the cult of hygiene and Hitler is a soap-and-water god!' (*Studies* (June 1935), 320).

Shaw's devotion to teaching, combined with his poor health, meant that his research interests (mediaeval Irish medical tracts, whose significance in pioneering a simplified Irish free from the inflated rhetoric of the bardic schools he held to be greatly undervalued; ancient Irish clothing, houses and social life generally; the history of Celtic scholarship) found expression only in occasional publications, including articles and book reviews, in the Jesuit journal *Studies* and similar outlets. Shaw remarked that whenever he set about reducing his collection of typewritten transcripts of medieval medical texts to coherence he had to go to hospital.

Shaw was an outspoken opponent of T. F. O'Rahilly's thesis on the existence of two St Patricks, both on scholarly and devotional grounds: he held that mediaeval miracle tales and scholarly positivism alike hindered recognition of the deep interior spirituality found in the 'Confession' and 'Letter to Coroticus'. He was scathing about scholars who (unlike his hero MacNeill) relied on printed editions (often outdated) rather than reading manuscripts. A recurring theme is that vague and ignorant romanticisation hinders the Irish nation from recognising authentic heroes such as George Petrie (qv), Eugene O'Curry (qv) and Johann Kaspar Zeuss (qv).

Shaw held the view, common among social historians, that history paid too much attention to the powerful and articulate and should explore the experience of the common people. He was encouraged in this by love of country sports and the fields and rivers of his native lake country; he praised his fellow Westmeath man Fr Paul Walsh (qv) for supporting his topographical studies by walking the land, and claimed that MacNeill, as an Antrim 'countryman', understood Ireland better than did the urban Patrick Pearse (qv) and James Connolly (qv). As he grew older, he felt his own lifetime had witnessed the end of an immemorial rural Irish way of life, whose traces, he hoped, would at least be preserved in the records of the Folklore Commission. He thought that popular commercial culture, particularly from America, was debasing public taste, and lamented that the authentic romance and heroism found in lives of saints and missionaries were being eclipsed by the synthetic Hollywood varieties. In 1942 he published a pamphlet criticising the novel and film *Gone with the Wind* for excessive 'realism' in their depictions of sexuality and childbirth and for superficiality in their depictions of catholicism. This rousing defence of literary censorship against 'long-haired intellectuals' appealed to readers to keep the faith even if the European war subjected Ireland to the same devastation as that suffered by the defeated states of the American south.

Shaw attributed the totalitarian movements of the twentieth century to the efforts of ideologues to force common humanity into utopian projects. His scepticism of state power was influenced by contemporary catholic social thought, and he saw Irish identity as essentially catholic; but, though this forms a subtext in his 1963 article on the essentially Roman nature of early Irish spirituality and his analysis of the 'Celtic twilight' of W. B. Yeats (qv) as owing more to Macpherson's Ossian (mediated through Arnold and Renan), the rhetorical inflation of Standish James O'Grady (qv), and 'the charlatan Blavatsky and Brahman philosophers' than to the authentic past as revealed by Celtic scholarship, Shaw was not a bigot. Throughout his career he lauded protestant scholars such as Edmund Curtis (qv), Edward John Gwynn (qv), and Douglas Hyde (qv); he admired Pope John XXIII and welcomed his attempt to open the catholic church to the world.

Shaw took a strong interest in radio for religious purposes and popular education; he gave several 'retreats for the sick' on Radio Éireann, encouraging listeners to mentally re-enact, in Ignatian style, the life of Jesus, and he contributed to the Thomas Davis lecture series on early Ireland. He also wrote on spiritual and other

matters for the Jesuit devotional magazine, the *Sacred Heart Messenger*, and was active in An Rioghacht (the League of the Kingship of Christ) and the Sodality of the Sacred Heart. His illness gave him a particular interest in ministry to the sick; he was a frequent hospital visitor, and directed the sodality of the nursing staff at St Vincent's Hospital (1944–59). He was popular as a confessor and spiritual adviser, and frequently mediated family disputes in local households.

Dean of the faculty of Celtic studies in UCD (1964–70), he served in the NUI senate (1963–70), and was spoken of as a possible successor to Michael Tierney (qv) as president of UCD; he served as interim president after Tierney's resignation in 1964, but did not seek the post. During the 'gentle revolution' protests of the late 1960s, Shaw supported the 'establishment' group around President J. J. Hogan (qv), and his defeat in UCD governing body elections in December 1969 strengthened advocates of greater student participation in university governance. After a year's illness, Shaw died in a Dublin nursing home on 23 December 1970, and was buried in the Jesuit plot in Glasnevin cemetery.

Shaw's posthumous fame rests on an article published two years after his death. He had been invited to contribute an essay to the spring 1966 issue of *Studies* (commemorating the 1916 rising), but his 10,000-word article, 'Cast a cold eye # prelude to a commemoration of 1916', was turned down by the journal's editor (Fr Burke Savage) and the Jesuit provincial as over-long and inopportune. Shaw acquiesced, but prepared a 20,000-word version which circulated in typescript. In 1971 a copy was acquired by the New Ulster Movement (precursor of the Alliance Party), which saw the piece as directly relevant to the developing Northern Ireland troubles, and gave it further informal circulation. Under these circumstances, Fr Troddyn (editor of *Studies*) and the provincial decided that official publication would reassert their copyright and assist understanding of Irish current affairs; the article appeared in the summer 1972 issue of *Studies* (vol. lxi, no. 242, pp 113–53) under the title (chosen by Troddyn) 'The canon of Irish history: a challenge'.

In 'The canon of Irish history', Shaw attacks the four last pamphlets produced by Patrick Pearse in 1915–16 to justify the forthcoming Easter rising. The pamphlets, Shaw contends, equate the Gaelic tradition with physical-force separatism as the 'gospel of Irish nationality', with Wolfe Tone (qv), Thomas Davis (qv), James Fintan Lalor (qv), and John Mitchel (qv) as its 'four evangelists'; claim that John Redmond and his political allies committed national apostasy in accepting home rule rather than full independence as a final settlement; and equate the rebels, precipitating war and their own deaths to redeem a corrupted Ireland, with Jesus crucified to redeem sinful humanity. Shaw argues that Pearse projected Standish James O'Grady's essentially pagan concept of heroism and a modern republican ideology essentially alien to Irish society onto the Gaelic past; that Pearse and his allies denied and betrayed the concrete achievements and genuine patriotism of others, particularly Redmond and MacNeill; that Pearse, and by extension the whole physical-force republican tradition, engaged in blasphemous self-deification to justify imposing

their will on the majority in a manner reminiscent of twentieth-century fascism and communism; and that the independent Irish state owes more to an older and broader popular sense of Irish nationality, which Redmond and MacNeill represented, than the irreligious and destructive mindset of Tone and Pearse.

'The canon' sums up the concerns of Shaw's lifetime. Its critique of Pearse resembles his 1930s critique of Yeats; its invocation of the horrors of twentieth-century European history reflects his longstanding sensitivity to those horrors; its vaguely defined but essentially catholic and rural-populist version of Irish identity reflects Shaw's lifelong self-presentation as spokesman and servant of the plain people of Ireland; and Redmond and MacNeill are cast, like Zeuss and Petrie, as heroes unjustly forgotten by those enjoying the fruits of their labours.

In 1966 Shaw had concluded his essay by hoping that recent moves towards north-south reconciliation indicated that both parts of Ireland, north and south, as well as Ireland and Britain, might recognise their commonalities and join in preserving the best in their cultures from American commercial cosmopolitanism. The essay's publication six years later, at the height of the Northern Ireland troubles, coincided with intensive debate (associated with such figures as Conor Cruise O'Brien (1917–2008)) about whether traditional Irish nationalist self-images had contributed to the conflict in Northern Ireland and threatened to unleash similar conflict in the Republic; this context gave the essay an explosive impact. An *Irish Times* editorial (11 September 1972) noted that Shaw's view of Pearse as a destructive ideologue comparable to Rosenberg raised awkward questions about numerous eulogies of Pearse as a model Christian patriot: 'Has every other cleric been wrong and only Father Shaw been right?' The Jesuits were accused by Cruise O'Brien of opportunism in suppressing Shaw's piece until it became convenient to distance the catholic church from militant nationalism (*New York Review of Books*, 25 January 1973), and by an *Irish Press* editorialist (1 September 1972) of re-enacting previous clericalist betrayals of Irish nationalism: 'The name of Pearse will easily survive this modern Shavian broadside.'

Shaw's essay has been subjected to extensive critique (Lyons, Lee, Ó Snodaigh) over its failures to place Pearse in context and to address the place of Irish protestants and unionists in Irish nationality; its dismissive attitude to republicanism and socialism; and its over-simplistic view that pre-1916 Ireland was a democracy. (Shaw also unduly minimises the political differences between Redmond and MacNeill.) It is still, however, regularly cited in debates about the relationship between nationalism and Irish historiography; when *Studies* marked its centenary by publishing a selection of essays from past issues, Shaw's essay was singled out by former Taoiseach John Bruton as 'the most startling essay in the volume'. Some who praised Shaw's critique of Pearse's sacrificial politics were advocates of a secularist liberalism which would have horrified Shaw, and the essay survived, when the man behind it was virtually forgotten, into an Ireland whose social and political attitudes he would have found unrecognisable.

Shaw's papers are held at the Irish Jesuit Archives, 35 Lower Leeson Street (reference J451), which also has files concerning the 1972 publication of 'The canon of Irish history' (CM/LEES/359, 383). A miniature plaster side-portrait by the sculptor Gary Trimble is held in the same building.

Westmeath Examiner, 24 Oct., 8 Nov. 1931; 28 July 1934; 16 Mar., 21 Sept. 1940; 15 Mar. 1941; *Ir. Times*, 10 Sept., 2 Oct. 1964; 11 Dec. 1969; 11 Sept. 1972 (includes F. S. L. Lyons, 'The shadow of the past', p. 12, on Shaw's 'The canon'); Marian Keaney, *Westmeath authors: a bibliographical and biographical study* (1969), 174–6; *Ir. Independent*, 25–8 Dec. 1970; obituary, by Fr Francis Finnegan, *Irish Province News* (1971), 76–8; M. Proinséas Ní Catháin, 'The academic and other writings of Rev. Professor Francis Shaw, SJ', *Studies*, lx, no. 238 (summer 1971), 203–07 [list is incomplete]; *Studia Celtica*, vii (1972), 177; Francis Shaw, 'MacNeill the person' in F. X. Martin and F. J. Byrne (ed.), *The scholar revolutionary: Eoin MacNeill, 1867–1945, and the making of the new Ireland* (1973), 299–311 (includes note on contributor, p. 300); *Lochlann*, vi (1974) [supplement to *Norsk Tidsskrift for Sprogvidenskap*, xi], 180–81; Pádraig Ó Snodaigh, *Two godfathers of revisionism: 1916 in the revisionist canon* (1991); Diarmuid Breathnach and Máire Ní Mhurchú, *1882–1982: Beathaisnéis*, iii (1992), 152–3; J. J. Lee, '#The canon of Irish history: a challenge# reconsidered' in Toner Quinn (ed.) *Desmond Fennell: his life and work* (2001), 57–82; Philip O'Leary, *Gaelic prose in the Irish Free State 1922–1939* (2004), 52; Michael Wheatley, *Nationalism and the Irish party: provincial Ireland 1910–1916* (2005); Bryan Fanning (ed.), *An Irish century: Studies 1912–2012* (2012); John Bruton, remarks at launch of Bryan Fanning (ed.), *An Irish century*, 21 Mar. 2012, www.johnbruton.com/2012/03/irish-century-studies-1912-2012.html (accessed 27 June 2012)