

Shearman, Hugh

by Patrick Maume

Shearman, Hugh (1915–99), man of letters, Ulster unionist and theosophist, was born in Belfast, the only child of John Nicholson Shearman, teacher at Belfast Royal Academy (BRA), and his wife Margaret (née Morrison). His uncle T. E. C. Shearman was also employed at BRA (as registrar and bursar), and his two paternal aunts were headmistresses of Ashleigh House School, Belfast. Shearman called the north Belfast suburb of Cliftonville, physically dominated by BRA's tower, 'my native village', and lived there for most of his life. In 1935 he published a short history of BRA to mark its 150th anniversary, and he wrote for the academy yearbook, the *Owl*. He came from a long-established Ulster Church of Ireland clerical and professional family, and claimed the defender of Derry, David Cairnes (qv), and an original Apprentice Boy of Derry among his collateral ancestors.

Educated at BRA, he studied history at QUB, winning a number of scholarships. He was active in the QUB historical society, where he befriended Theo Moody (qv) and was president (1937–8), and he contributed to the student magazine the *New Northman*. During 1940 newspaper controversies, Shearman stated that he had worked with refugee victims of Nazism, and had lost his intended career (probably secondary-school teaching) by the outbreak of war. He subsequently became a history student in TCD, and in 1943 received a Ph.D. for a dissertation on the economic results of the disestablishment of the Church of Ireland. (In 1970 he published a pamphlet, *How the Church of Ireland was disestablished*, to mark the centenary of disestablishment. His original dissertation was published by the Lurgan-based Ulster Society as *Privatising a church* (1995).) He subscribed to the early volumes of *Irish Historical Studies*, in which he published an article on post-disestablishment tenant purchase of former church lands, and a note on the citation of official state papers. His career was, however, directed towards journalism by religious and political commitments.

At some point in the late 1930s or early 1940s, Shearman became a member of the Belfast lodge of the Theosophical Society, based at Adyar (near Madras in India) and dominated by the thought of Charles Webster Leadbeater (1854–1934). Later ordained a priest of the theosophist-affiliated Liberal Catholic Church, he became a prominent LCC apologist and in 1980 published a short life of Leadbeater. Shearman maintained that theosophy reflected the fundamental protestant principle of revolt against authority and dogma, and rested on belief in an universe governed by mind, driven by a process in which individual minds overcame their own limitations – mainly involving compartmentalised perceptions of reality – to achieve wholeness and assimilation into the world-soul. This entailed literal belief in clairvoyancy, telepathy, reincarnation, and the existence of non-human spirits (the devas, daemons and fairies of mythology) and highly evolved consciousnesses

(the 'ascended masters' with whom the occultist and theosophist Helena Blavatsky (1831–91) claimed to communicate).

For decades Shearman was Northern Ireland chairman of the Theosophical Society, also serving on the council of the worldwide society. From the 1950s to the early 1990s he contributed regularly to the society journal, the *Theosophist*, and wrote numerous books and pamphlets elucidating theosophist history and philosophy, including *The purpose of tragedy* (1954), *Modern theosophy* (1954), *Purpose beyond reason* (1955), *An approach to the occult* (1959), *The passionate necessity* (1962) and *The round of experience* (1962). A guide to work in the Theosophical Society, a revised edition of his 1959 tract *To form a nucleus*, was published by the society in 2007.

Shearman came to attention as a defender of Ulster unionism with *Not an inch: a study of Northern Ireland and Lord Craigavon* (1942). He saw himself as representative of a new generation of unionists seeking to come to terms with the old guard. Craigavon (qv) is the single-minded human embodiment of the Ulster cause, whose decisive moral decision to use force if necessary contrasts with the emotional, self-deceiving John Redmond (qv) and Éamon de Valera (qv). The events of 1940, when Ulster unionists stood with Britain while the southern state remained neutral, are Craigavon's vindication.

Seeing himself as a left liberal, Shearman claimed that Ulster unionism was essentially progressive. *Not an inch* laid the framework of the unionist apologetic he maintained for the rest of his career. He argued that Stormont had coped relatively well with the post-war economic crisis caused by the decline of traditional industries and the displacement of labour from agriculture by modernisation, while the southern state crippled its own exports in pursuit of delusional self-sufficiency. From the late 1940s he pointed to the enactment by Stormont of British welfare legislation, the development of large-scale housing programmes, and the pursuit of outside investment. Denying there was any significant anti-catholic discrimination in Northern Ireland, he described a rather idealised state, for which he was criticised in the 1940s by John Hewitt (qv) and Robert Mitchell Henry (qv). In the 1960s he supported the modernising project of Terence O'Neill (qv).

Shearman followed *Not an inch* with two satirical novels set in Belfast: *The bishop's confession* (1943) parodies the autobiography of Archbishop Charles Frederick D'Arcy (qv); *A bomb and a girl* (1944) satirises the academics and students of QUB. A theosophical subtext is discernable in both novels' concern with the attaining of an undivided self.

During the international anti-partition campaign by the governments of de Valera and John A. Costello (qv) after 1945, Shearman emerged (with St John Ervine (qv)) as intellectual spokesman for the unionist cause. He wrote for the UUP-sponsored monthly the *Voice of Ulster*, and addressed the Young Ulster Society (a gathering of

unionist intellectuals) and a Young Unionist summer school organised by O'Neill. He was commissioned to write an official booklet, *Northern Ireland: its history, people and resources* (1946), for His Majesty's Stationery Office. A first edition of 50,000 was swiftly exhausted (much of it distributed among overseas opinion-formers); by October 1947, 60,000 had been given away with 25,000 retained for sale to the public. This led to commissions for another pamphlet, *How Northern Ireland is governed* (1951) and an officially sponsored school textbook, *Modern Ireland* (1953), replacing an earlier text by David Alfred Chart (qv). Shearman also engaged in publicity and research work for the Ulster Tourism Development Association, and broadcast regularly from 1946 on BBC Radio Ulster on cultural and historical topics. In 1948 he produced a history of Anglo–Irish relations (published by Faber and Faber of London), which takes a notably more acerbic view of Irish nationalism and the southern state, and was denounced as 'a scandalous libel on the Irish people' by M. J. MacManus (qv) (*Ir. Press*, 29 January 1948).

In 1949 Shearman published *Ulster* in the Robert Hale county books series. This greatly underestimated personal account of the nine-county province, incorporating material from radio talks, newspaper articles, and even his novels, and drawing on the regional studies of E. Estyn Evans (qv) and T. W. Moody, was his *magnum opus*. His theosophist belief in enduring archetypes underlies his assertion that folk tradition should not be seen as a vanishing heritage and that social and economic modernisation is to be welcomed.

From the early 1950s Shearman's literary career revolved around theosophy and journalism in the Belfast papers, initially in the *Belfast Telegraph*, then from the 1960s to 1980s almost exclusively in the *Belfast Newsletter* and its stable-mate the *Sunday News*. He wrote for the *Encyclopaedia Britannica's* yearbook, and in 1961 played a leading role in a group of UUP intellectuals advising on the updating of policies and propaganda. He was also Northern Ireland president of the Cat Protection League.

Shearman regarded the abandonment of economic nationalism by the Irish republic in the 1960s as a confession of nationalist bankruptcy. He saw the Northern Ireland civil rights movement of the late 1960s and the outbreak of the troubles from 1969 onwards as reviving the anti-partition propaganda of 1945–51 and the paramilitary subversion of 1956–62, sponsored jointly by the Irish government and the IRA. (Republican commentators often quoted Shearman's defence in *Not an inch of Craigavon's* appeal to force as evidence of the fundamental illegitimacy of a state created on such a basis, and the plausibility of republican belief that determined violence might bring them similar success.) His last publication to be commissioned by Stormont, the pamphlet *Northern Ireland, 1921–1971* (1971), lavishly illustrated with photographs and commemorating the province's fiftieth anniversary, repeats his standard narrative about the achievements of unionist rule, and predicts rapid resumption of modernisation after the defeat of terrorism.

In his regular *Newsletter* column, Shearman denounced the suspension of Stormont in 1972 as a British betrayal, and opposed integrationism. His short commissioned history, *News Letter, 250 years, 1737–1987: a history of the oldest British daily newspaper* (1987), blames the deindustrialisation of Northern Ireland on the incompetence and indifference of direct-rule administration. Believing that no devolved government could function if obliged to contain members committed to its destruction (i.e., nationalists), he opposed the Sunningdale agreement (1973) and in April 1974 lectured United Ulster Unionist Council delegates on the use of propaganda techniques. Over the following decade and a half, he defended Stormont's record and the unionist cause in his journalism, in articles for the American journal *World Affairs*, and in talks and pamphlets for the UUP and groups such as Friends of the Union. (The substance of these late polemics may be found in *The Ulster cover-up* (1993), a selection from the column that he published in the *Sunday News* for eighteen years under the pen name John Morrison (private information).)

Shearman's late-life isolation reflected a wider erosion of the provincial protestant elites, as the middle classes assimilated to metropolitan standards and avoided political involvement. The outbreak of the Northern Ireland troubles reflected a political failure that his technocratic pretensions failed to address. It is paradoxical that Shearman, whose philosophy emphasised the breaking down of compartmentalisation, could believe a large minority would accept exclusion indefinitely, while his obliviousness to the violent and emotive aspects of popular unionism reflected the tendency of idealist and pantheist modes of thought to overlook inconvenient realities.

Until his last decade, Shearman lived mostly in a house on the Cliftonville Road. After some years of ill health following a stroke, he died on 26 January 1999 in Belfast. He was married with a son and a daughter.

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*Belfast Newsletter*, 16 Oct., 1 Nov. 1935; 30 Nov. 1936; 11 Nov. 1937; 5 Mar., 14 Nov. 1938; 29 May, 3 July 1944; 23 July 1945; 18 Feb., 29 June 1946; 8 Feb., 31 Oct. 1947; 8, 10 Jan., 12 Apr. 1948; 25 Oct. 1949; 19 June 1950; 19 Dec. 1954; 30 July, 14 Nov. 1956; 5, 11 Apr., 22 May 1972; *Northern Whig*, 7 Feb. 1938; 17 May, 4 Sept. 1940; 29 Dec. 1944; 5, 10 Jan. 1945; 2 Oct. 1946; 11 Dec. 1947; 18 Aug. 1949; 17 July 1950; 10 Nov. 1951; 9 Dec. 1954; 18 Dec. 1957; *Belfast Telegraph*, 25 Feb. 1942; 24 Nov. 1945; 6 Aug. 1953; *Ir. Independent*, 8 June 1942; 10 Mar. 1943; 24 Apr. 1948; 27 May 1950; *Ir. Times*, 13 Mar. 1943; 7 Oct. 1944; 27 May 1948; 29 Apr. 1950; 1 Sept. 1952; 6 June 1953; 16 May 1970; 8 Apr. 1971; 31 Mar. 1973; 27 Apr. 1974; *Ir. Press*, 31 Mar., 22 Apr. 1943; 31 Oct. 1947; 29 Jan. 1948; 10, 24 Apr., 8, 16, 23 May 1950; 29 May 1961; *Londonderry Sentinel*, 11 Oct. 1947; *Mid-Ulster Mail*, 18 Oct. 1947; *Ballymena Weekly Telegraph*, 8 Oct. 1948; *Ballymena*

*Observer*, 5 Sept. 1952; Gregory Tillett, *The elder brother: a biography of Charles Webster Leadbeater* (1982); Edward McCamley, *Belfast Royal Academy: the second century, 1885–1985* (1986); John Whyte, *Interpreting Northern Ireland* (1990); Gillian McIntosh, *The force of culture: unionist identities in twentieth-century Ireland* (1999); *The Owl* (1999) (death notice, and appreciation by Douglas Gageby); 'Hugh Shearman', [www.katinkahesselink.net](http://www.katinkahesselink.net); 'Hugh Shearman', [www.ricorso.net](http://www.ricorso.net); internet material accessed Oct.–Nov. 2017

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