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Title	'My pen is just a weapon': politics, history and the fiction of Peadar O'Donnell
Authors	Ó Drisceoil, Donal
Publication date	2003
Original Citation	Ó Drisceoil, D. (2003) ''My pen is just a weapon': politics, history and the fiction of Peadar O'Donnell', Irish Review, 30, pp. 62-70.
Type of publication	Article (peer-reviewed)
Link to publisher's version	https://theirishreview.com/ - 10.2307/29736104
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Download date	2024-10-12 08:16:26
Item downloaded from	https://hdl.handle.net/10468/3085

UCC
University College Cork, Ireland
Coláiste na hOllscoile Corcaigh

'My Pen is just a Weapon': Politics, History and the Fiction of Peadar O'Donnell

DONAL Ó DRISCEOIL

A critical appreciation of the fiction of Peadar O'Donnell (1893–1986) requires an understanding of the historical and political circumstances (specific and general) in which he emerged and developed as a writer, and of the socio-political purpose that fuelled his creative output.[1] For O'Donnell, 'the greatest agitator of his generation',[2] literature and politics, art and life were inseparable. 'I like to think that people don't really look on me as a writer', he remarked late in life, 'but as a man who took part in the struggle of ordinary people against sharply frustrating limitations on their powers to live fully.'[3] His ideas about his own role, and the part that creative writing could play in the socialist republican struggle that he came to personify, developed in prison during the Civil War and post-War period. In March 1923 the republican military resistance was on its last legs and O'Donnell was in solitary confinement. He spent his days reflecting on the nature and form of the next mobilization. Linking his developing belief about the need for a mass, class-based struggle against the Treaty settlement with his own small-farm background and creative abilities, he made a decision:

> I know that I know the insides of the minds of the mass of the folk in rural Ireland: my thoughts are distilled out of their lives. Therefore, it is not my task to say anything new but to put words on what is in confused ferment in their minds. How would I say it? Write? I could try and I did. . . . I could say their lives out loud to these remnants of the Irish of history until they would nod their heads and say 'this is us!'[4]

Prison life, with its enforced communal intimacy, reminded him of the time he had spent as a teacher on the islands of Donegal, and all his fictional

writings were set either there or in the glens of his native county.

His first novel, *Storm* (1925), published by the Talbot Press and penned while on the run following his escape from the Curragh prison camp in March 1924, bode ill for the prospects of his politico-artistic agenda. This apprentice work is a crude propagandist glorification of the independence struggle, told through the story of Eamon Gallagher, like his creator an island schoolteacher who becomes an IRA commander in the War of Independence; unlike O'Donnell, however, our hero dies melodramatically in the end, to the mawkish strains of his sweetheart's laments. The author came to share the universal low opinion in which the book is held, and inserted a clause into his will forbidding its reissue. It is of interest mainly for the insights it gives into the development of O'Donnell's own feelings during the 'troubles', particularly the moral duty he felt to join the armed struggle. It was with *Islanders* (1927) that he arrived as a serious novelist. The book had written itself in his mind during his time in solitary confinement, and much of the actual writing also took place at the state's pleasure. From 1926 to 1929 O'Donnell was editor of the IRA paper *An Phoblacht*, and used it to promote the agitation against the payment of land annuities that he initiated and spearheaded.[5] He was the subject of constant harassment and frequent arrest, and while on remand in Mountjoy in early 1927 worked on the manuscript of *Islanders* and sent it out for typing. Liam O'Flaherty passed it on to his mentor, Edward Garnett, a reader at Jonathan Cape, who praised the book highly and secured a contract for O'Donnell. Following publication, O'Flaherty wrote to a friend that 'it would be a very good thing if the government locked [O'Donnell] up for a few years and made him write instead of playing tin soldiers to the danger of the community, and no reasonable good for the spreading of civilisation'. W. B. Yeats expressed similar sentiments in 1932, wishing that 'Mr O'Donnell would devote his interest entirely to his novels and leave politics for a pastime in old age'.[6] The point, of course, is that his novels were an integral part of his politics, and vice versa.

Islanders is set in Inniscara, a fictional island partly based on Inniskeeragh, County Donegal. The central concern, as the title (echoing Joyce) suggests, is the people, represented by the Doogan family. We are introduced here to the neighbourliness, or communal solidarity and mutual self-reliance, that is the dominant motif in his fiction and reminiscences of his youth in the Rosses. His contemporary and fellow Rosses writer, Seamus Ó Grianna ('Máire') portrayed a similar pattern of neighbourliness in his work; for him, however, it is no more than a reflection of an experienced social pattern, and not, as it is for O'Donnell, the key to survival; rural socialism *in embryo* and, if harnessed and directed, a force for social transformation.[7]

Islanders portrays episodically the struggle for survival against the harsh environment, physical and socio-economic: the greater the privations the islanders face, the greater the communal response. The characterization is brilliantly authentic, achieving O'Donnell's aim of holding a mirror up to the society he is depicting. However, not everyone was happy with the portrayal of poverty and hardship, and some Donegal emigrants in the US reacted negatively to the warts-and-all picture of the the life they had left behind. Years later O'Donnell gave his answer to these critics by referring to meeting a Polish author whose village was incensed at his portrayal of them: 'They came to a meeting with him on stilts and wearing masks. "Really we are not like this," they said. The writer put on one of the masks and took it off: "Really you are like that. Did you think that reared in poverty and grime, as we were, we could have realized our gifts to the full?" He was listened to.'[8] The reviewer in *An Phoblacht* remarked that, despite the lack of reference to 'politics', *Islanders* was 'powerful propaganda'. He also perceptively contrasts O'Donnell's evident intimacy with the people to the distance that comes through in O'Flaherty's work, and notes that while the latter 'wrote from his individual soul . . . O'Donnell expresses the mass soul of the people'. Michael D. Higgins has argued in a similar vein that, while O'Flaherty and O'Donnell use similar materials of island and rural life, the resolution of political and economic contradictions is sought by O'Flaherty in terms of individual salvation, while for O'Donnell, 'an individual's fate fades into insignificance in comparison with the community's comprehension of what changes are taking place'.[9]

O'Donnell's third novel, *Adrigoole*, followed quickly in the summer of 1929. It is the gloomiest and most pessimistic of his books, which is understandable given its inspiration – the deaths from starvation of a couple, the O'Sullivans, and two of their chidren in Adrigole, County Cork, two years previously. In the book, he transposes the story to his native Donegal. His anger at the time of writing is palpable in the depiction of the destruction of the central characters, Hughie and Brigid Dalach and their children. Its heavy naturalism and the universality of its tragic dimension have dominated literary critiques, and have led most commentators to underestimate the importance of the context in which it was written, and to misread or miss O'Donnell's subtle political purpose. At the time he wrote the book he was frustrated at the slow progress of the land annuities agitation, and wanted to portray the precarious position of small farmers and the fragility of their economy. They could only survive in a context of neighbourliness, and it was the breakdown in this solidarity, created by the Civil War, that led to the death of the Dalachs. At the outset of the annuities agitation in Donegal in 1926, a key concern of his was to overcome

'the *griosach* of bitterness' that smouldered from the Civil War and to re-establish 'the pattern of neighbourliness' that had been undermined.[10]

In *Adrigoole*, we follow the declining fortunes of the Dalachs through the War of Independence, Civil War and immediate post-War years. The sheltering of IRA men during the War of Independence puts an increasing strain on the flimsy economy of the household, reflecting the author's own sense of guilt on this issue. (He recalled elsewhere that, while on the run in the mountain townlands of Donegal in 1924, 'the sense of gloom and doom in . . . *Adrigoole* entered my mind. It disturbed me to recall how often I had billeted a considerable number of men on these homes in the Tan days. I was more aware now of the weakness of this economy.'[11]) With the coming of the Treaty split divisions emerge in the close-knit community. Blight adds to the general problems caused by the poor mountainy bog land of their farm. Demands for rent arrears lead Hughie to Scotland to work, where he contracts typhoid fever, further adding to the family's isolation. In the increasingly naturalistic descent to doom, one of the children dies from eating hemlock. Hughie then joins a poteen run and is jailed for a year, but is released after seven months when Brigid and two more of their children are found dead from starvation. In the final scene neighbours gather nervously, keeping their distance afraid that it was fever that had killed them. Once the doctor announces that it was hunger, O'Donnell writes, with a bitter irony unique in his work, 'with one impulse neighbourliness flooded warm towards [the house]', as Hughie is taken away to the asylum (as was Daniel O'Sullivan before dying there).[12]

Hanna Sheehy Skeffington was angered by 'the dumb resignation' of the central couple and their 'criminal . . . passivity': from Hughie and Brigid one would have expected something more upstanding – and from their creator, also, a better moral, for his philosophy is not framed on the lie-down-and-die school of ethics.' O'Donnell later intimated that the novel's internal logic suggested a different ending, given the vitality and vigour of the couple, and had he not had to 'stay true to the headlines' that inspired the story, which he regarded as crucial, he would have had them emigrate.[13] He has been criticized also for the excessive naturalism in the novel, the mountain, bog and heather existing as hostile, living forces;[14] but those who regard 'Nature versus Man' as the book's central theme miss the point, i.e., it was the breakdown in neighbourliness that allowed the hostile environment to prevail, and that it is only through co-operation that poor people like the Dalachs can survive and ultimately triumph.[15]

O'Donnell's next novel, *The Knife*, appeared in late 1930. 'Crushed But Unconquered! – Gripping Novel by Peadar O'Donnell', trumpeted *An Phoblacht*, which began instalments under the heading 'Written of the IRA

– For the IRA'.[16] The book is set in 'a compact planter district' in the Lagan valley of east Donegal between 1913 and 1923, and examines the crosscurrents of religion, class and nationality in the area against the background of these turbulent years. There is consternation when the Catholic Godfrey Dhus buy into this Protestant enclave with inherited money. Their uppity behaviour unleashes sectarian tensions and upsets the careful balance developed between the local Orange establishment and the Catholic bourgeoisie. With the coming of the War of Independence and Sinn Féin counter-government, O'Donnell presents the marginalization of the land struggle and the conservative role of the leadership of the independence movement. His interpretation of events comes through in clumsy history lessons, presented as links to move the action on, and is also voiced by his characters, like the 'fiery' Nuala Godfrey Dhu. As in *Adrigoole*, the Treaty split sees neighbourliness torn apart, but an extra dimension is added here with the portrayal of the strength of the neighbourly (class) bond between the local republican and Orange small-farmers, which is contrasted with the wilful and traitorous behaviour of the Free Staters. The book ends with local Orangemen dramatically rescuing the republican hero, 'The Knife', from the clutches of a Free State firing squad. Here, the political message is clear and crude, representing an idealized political scenario based on the necessity of overcoming religious division through shared class concerns, which lay at the core of O'Donnell's socialist republican approach to the North.

The most controversial aspect of the book was its treatment of the Catholic Church: characters raise objections to the political use of the pulpit to support the Treaty, and bishops are referred to as 'anti-Christs'. It was attacked from the pulpit and in the conservative press; the controversial passages were offered as evidence of O'Donnell's subversive attitudes in a secret Department of Justice memo for the government in 1931, and the following year formed part of the defence case in a libel action O'Donnell brought against the *Irish Rosary* for accusing him of being a Soviet agent. Some of O'Donnell's fellow prisoners claimed that such phrases as used in *The Knife* were never uttered; the author likened such reactions to the 'Englishman's horror of Irish war books touching the Tan days'.[17] The furore was partially fuelled by a sense of denial, but was also very much part of the 'red scare' that was beginning to develop in Ireland at this time, the aim being to establish O'Donnell's anti-clerical credentials as part of a general demonization of the republican–communist nexus, in which he was a linchpin.

The red scare peaked following the establishment of Saor Éire, a short-lived socialistic platform (the brainchild of O'Donnell) adopted by the IRA in 1931. From the late 1920s, the international communist movement

(Comintern) had been forging ever closer links with Irish republicans, primarily through a range of front organizations, such as the League Against Imperialism and the Irish Working Farmers' Committee. Saor Éire was regarded by the state as the last straw, and, with the support of the hierarchy, the Cumann na nGaedheal government introduced new coercion legislation in October 1931, leading to the banning of twelve organizations, the majority of which boasted O'Donnell as a member. He went on the run, and during this clandestine period busied himself with writing. As well as an account of his Civil War prison experiences, *The Gates Flew Open* (1932), he completed his first and only play, *Wrack* (1933). This story of poor, island fisher folk (reminiscent in setting and general theme of Synge's *Riders to the Sea*) was written, he told his publishers, 'in a rage' at a time when the bishops were 'playing havoc with the rural minds which would naturally, if left free to themselves, sympathize with those they are being incited to destroy'. He wrote the play as a 'reply' to the 1931 bishops' joint pastoral condemning Saor Éire (which had put the plight of western fishing communities at the centre of its agenda): 'They said Russian Gold was the cause of the unrest. I said such things as the slapping of wet skirts against people's legs. Therefore *Wrack*.' He managed to get the script to W. B. Yeats, and it was staged, to good notices, in the Abbey in November 1932, and published by Cape the following year. He refused the publishers' request to write a 'literary' introduction, saying he did not 'care a damn in what form anyone presents anything. My pen is just a weapon and I use it now and then to gather into words scenes that surround certain conflicts.'[18]

The state repression ended temporarily with the accession of Fianna Fáil to power in 1932, and an exhausted O'Donnell and his wife moved to Achill, where they based themselves for the next two years. Though his sojourn on the Mayo island did not quite provide the 'dream workshop' for writing that he had hoped for, he nevertheless managed to complete a fifth novel there, *On the Edge of the Stream* (1934), his most light-hearted work of fiction. The book is informed by O'Donnell's memories of the community conflict surrounding the establishment of the Templecrone Co-operative Society by Paddy 'The Cope' Gallagher, in the Rosses in 1907, and is coloured by the red scare mania that he experienced in the early 1930s, especially the burlesque, hymn-singing campaign against him in Achill. The narrative follows the efforts of a small rural community to establish a co-op in the face of opposition from the local gombeens, clergy and fascistic schoolteacher. They are ultimately successful, thanks in part to the efforts of the schoolteacher's wife, Nelly McFadden. There is a strong feminist subtext in the account of Nelly's oppression by, and gradual liberation from her

abusive husband, which parallels the community's exploitation by the gombeens and its emancipation through embracing the co-op. O'Donnell's fiction always portrayed strong women, and they are often the central characters, but here he appears to be taking a further step. This novel is also his most explicit celebration of the triumph of neighbourliness through activism and struggle; it represents a more general and universal (though equally optimistic) outcome than *The Knife*, while counterbalancing, in tone and resolution, the gloom and pessimism of *Adrigoole*.

Over two decades were to pass before the publication of his next novel. In the interim, he had left the IRA to help form the Irish Republican Congress (1934–6), a short-lived Left–republican experiment, and continued in the remaining years of the 1930s at doomed efforts, along with his Communist allies, to create a united front of labour and republican forces in opposition to 'fascism' and 'imperialism'. By the time of the Second World War, O'Donnell had moved away from revolutionary politics and into a prolonged period of 'peaceful co-existence' with the state.[19] He established the *Bell* in 1940, and succeeded Sean O'Faolain as editor (1946–54). He had published a number of extracts from a 'work in progress' in the *Bell* that eventually emerged as *The Big Windows* in 1955. This is generally regarded as his finest literary achievement; it is also his least explicitly 'political' work, though the argument that the relationship between these two facts is axiomatic is simplistic, if not mischievous.[20] The book, highly stylized and richly textured, depicts the arcane world of a cloistered Donegal glen at the beginning of the twentieth century. The portrayal of this strange society, and particularly its women, is the core of the book, but it does have 'a message', without which it would not be an O'Donnell novel. The big windows of the title, at odds with the traditional norm, are installed by islandwoman Brigid Dugan who marries into the glen. They, and she, symbolize freedom and progress through nonconformity, rebellion and openness to outside influences.

The Big Windows concludes with Brigid returning to the island. O'Donnell believed this was a necessary reflection of reality, as he knew the glen he described was 'doomed', in contrast to the optimism about the future at the end of *Islanders*.[21] Unfortunately, that optimism was misplaced. Inniskeeragh, on which *Islanders* is based, was finally abandoned in 1955, the year that *The Big Windows* was published. O'Donnell devoted much of his political energy in the post-war years to efforts to save the western islands and small-farm countryside, by campaigning for state investment and community self-development through co-operatives. Despite some local successes, what became the Save the West campaign was swimming against too strong a tide. James Plunkett visited 'eerie and forsaken'

Inniskeeragh with O'Donnell in 1967. They stood outside the ruined schoolhouse where O'Donnell had served as a school monitor sixty-six years previously, and 'at that moment [Peadar] stepped through another memory and into another book'.[22] Two years later O'Donnell told an audience: 'I go back to the islands now and I find there is nobody left there, so my story [*Islanders*] – which had a happy ending – it and life were not moving in the same direction.'[23] *Proud Island*, his final novel, was published in 1975. This story of the slow death of a representative Donegal island in the context of the 'cash-nexus' economy reflects the reality, but rejects the inevitability, of island and rural depopulation in the new, EEC Ireland. Foreign trawlers form a ring around the island, putting the herring out of reach of the islanders' small boats. Instead of larger and better-equipped boats, the government offers the dole. Outsiders buy up land, 'No Trespassing' signs symbolize the beginning of the end of the community, and emigration, abandonment and 'dead houses' become the inevitable conclusion, despite the proud resistance of some. With the line 'There were no voices on the paths', Peadar O'Donnell, novelist, concludes.

His own voice remained a part of Irish political life for another decade, and he enjoyed his role as 'grand old man' of the Irish Left and patron saint of progressive causes. *The Knife*, *The Big Windows* and *Proud Island* were reissued in the 1980s and there has been a quiet reawakening of interest in O'Donnell's fiction. American literary critic Alexander Gonzalez published *Peadar O'Donnell: A Readers' Guide* in 1997, the first detailed treatment of O'Donnell as a creative artist rather than, as he puts it, 'a flamboyant historical figure'.[24] Gonzalez makes a strong case for a literary reputation undeservedly obscured by O'Donnell's political profile and the achievements of his illustrious contemporaries. While his analysis of the texts is useful and interesting, his knowledge of the context is poor and sketchy, thus limiting the scope of his critique. It highlights the fact that a rounded assessment of O'Donnell's fiction and politics requires not only that neither be seen in isolation, but that the inter-relationship is explored in an informed historical and biographical context.

'Anyone who wants to know what freedom is about', Sean O'Faolain once suggested, 'should read Peadar O'Donnell.'[25] He could not have wished for a finer tribute, or a clearer affirmation of his primary literary purpose.

Notes and References

1 O'Donnell published seven novels and one play in a fifty-year creative writing career. He also wrote three autobiographical accounts, several political pamphlets and many

thousands of words of campaigning and cultural journalism. He was an organizer with the ITGWU (1918–20); IRA commander (1920–21); member of the anti-Treaty IRA executive (1922–3); elected republican TD (1923); IRA executive and army council member (1924–34); editor of *An Phoblacht* (1926–9) and *The Bell* (1946–54).

2 J. Bowyer Bell, *The Secret Army: The IRA* (Dublin: Poolbeg, 1997 edn), p. 85.

3 Quoted in M. D. Higgins, 'Liam O'Flaherty and Peadar O'Donnell – Images of Rural Community', *The Crane Bag*, vol. 9, no. 1, 1985, p. 44.

4 P. O'Donnell, *The Gates Flew Open* (Cork: Mercier Press, 1966 edn), pp. 74–5.

5 See D. Ó Drisceoil, *Peadar O'Donnell* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2001), pp. 44–50.

6 O'Flaherty to Jonathan Cape, 21 June 1927 and to May O'Callaghan, 29 January 1928, in A. A. Kelly (ed.), *The Letters of Liam O'Flaherty* (Dublin: Wolfhound Press, 1996), pp. 188 and 211; *Irish Times*, 15 June 1932.

7 See P. O'Leary, 'The Donegal of Seamus Ó Grianna and Peadar O'Donnell', *Éire-Ireland*, vol. 23, no. 2, 1988.

8 Preface to B. MacNamara, *The Valley of the Squinting Windows* (Tralee: Anvil Books, 1964 edn), p. 9.

9 *An Phoblacht*, 28 January 1928; Higgins, op. cit., p. 41.

10 P. O'Donnell, *There will be Another Day* (Dublin: Dolmen Press, 1963), pp. 24–5.

11 ibid., p. 22.

12 P. O'Donnell, *Adrigoole* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1929), p. 314; *Irish Independent*, 30 March and 1 April 1927.

13 *An Phoblacht*, 3 August 1929; O'Donnell interview (1983), RTÉ television, 13 May 1986.

14 See, for example, A. Gonzalez, *Peadar O'Donnell: A Readers' Guide* (Chester Springs, Pa.: Dufour, 1997), pp. 23–8, and M. Carden, 'The Literary Achievement of Peadar O'Donnell' (MA, UCD, 1973), p. 204.

15 In *The Irish* (1947), Sean O'Faolain paid *Adrigoole* the compliment of including it among only the dozen or so 'feet-on-the-ground realistic novels' by Irish writers, along with the likes of *Ulysses*, *The Last September*, *Castle Rackrent* and *The Informer* (*The Irish* (London: Penguin, 1969 edn), p. 130).

16 *An Phoblacht*, 22 November and 6 December 1930.

17 ibid., 13 December, 1930; 'Alliance between Irish Republican Army and Communists', Department of An Taoiseach, S 5864(A), National Archives, Dublin; *Irish Times*, 15 June 1932; *The Gates Flew Open*, op. cit., p. 24.

18 O'Donnell to Jonathan Cape, 23 and 24 February 1933, and to Ruth Atkinson at Cape, 21 June 1933, Jonathan Cape Archives, University of Reading.

19 See Ó Drisceoil, op. cit., pp. 70–106.

20 The point is made by Richard English in 'A kind of republican', *Fortnight*, December 1990, p. 11.

21 O'Donnell, *Nusight*, September 1969, p. 78.

22 J. Plunkett, review of *Proud Island*, from the O'Brien Press, courtesy of Peter Hegarty, n.d.

23 O'Donnell, *Nusight*, op. cit., p. 78.

24 A. Gonzalez, op. cit., p. 7.

25 *This Week in Ireland*, vol. 1, no. 20, 27 February 1970.