

Title	Pádraic Ó Conaire
Authors	Ní Ghearbhuigh, Ailbhe
Publication date	2020-06-19
Original Citation	Ní Ghearbhuigh, A. (2020) 'Pádraic Ó Conaire', in Cunningham, J. and McDonough, C. (eds.) Galway, Hardiman and Beyond, Arts and Culture in Galway, 1820-2020. Arden, pp. 132-134.
Type of publication	Book chapter
Rights	© 2020, the Author. Published by Arden. All rights reserved.
Download date	2024-05-13 09:26:49
Item downloaded from	https://hdl.handle.net/10468/13508

Pádraic Ó Conaire

Ailbhe Ní Ghearbhuigh

The significance of the writer Pádraic Ó Conaire (1882–1928) to the city of Galway is demonstrated by the location of his statue in Eyre Square, an important public space through which travellers to Galway by bus or train must pass. The statue itself, carved out of limestone by Albert Power, was unveiled by Éamon de Valera in 1935. After an eleven-year absence due to vandalism and concern about the deterioration of the limestone, a bronze replica was placed in Eyre Square in 2018. (The original may be seen in the Galway City Museum.) In sentencing the vandals who decapitated the statue, the judge remarked that their act was ‘the equivalent of the Mona Lisa being taken from the Louvre in Paris’.¹

Pádraic Ó Conaire was born in a public house on the docks in Galway on 28 February 1882. His father, Tomás Ó Conaire, was a publican and originally from Ros Muc; his mother, Cáit Nic Dhonnchadha, was of merchant stock. Tomás drank heavily and, after the demise of his business, he set sail for America around 1887, leaving his wife and children behind.² He was never heard from again. Pádraic and his two brothers were sent to Ros Muc to live with relatives after their mother’s death in 1894. Although his extended family spoke English among themselves, Ó Conaire would have heard a lot of Irish growing up from the patrons in his father’s premises and, later, at school in Ros Muc. He attended Rockwell College from the age of fourteen but transferred to Blackrock College not long afterwards.³ Interestingly, both Éamon de Valera and

T.F. O’Rahilly were among his classmates in Blackrock. Before sitting his Intermediate Certificate examinations there, he moved to London in 1899, working as a clerk in the Board of Education. It was through his involvement with the Gaelic League in London that he encountered figures such as W.P. Ryan, Michael Collins and P.S. Ó hÉigearthaigh.⁴ It was also in this period that he began to write in earnest, submitting essays, short fiction and plays to the Oireachtas literary competitions – with considerable success. He became involved with a woman named Mary Agnes (Molly) Mc Manus and between 1905 and 1911 they had four children together. Their marriage certificate was recently uncovered: they were married on 30 January 1926 in the registry office in Lambeth.⁵ From 1914, however, Ó Conaire was primarily living in Ireland, often in Galway, returning occasionally to London to visit his family. His main (though meagre) source of income between 1914 and his death in 1928 was writing in Irish and occasional teaching. It was a wayward period in Ó Conaire’s life, marked by heavy drinking, though he did stand as an Independent candidate in urban council elections in Galway in June 1928.⁶ When he died on 6 October 1928 in Richmond Hospital in Dublin, all he left behind were his writings, which were later valued at £100.⁷

If Patrick Pearse instructed writers to look towards Europe for literary models, it was Ó Conaire who put that advice into practice.⁸ Many commentators have noted the influence of major international writers on Ó Conaire’s work – among them Dostoevsky and Gogol, Ibsen, Anatole France, Daudet, Maeterlinck, Poe and Hardy.⁹ The modernist sensibility in his work is perhaps best demonstrated in his only novel, *Deoraíocht* (1910), which examines the sense of dislocation felt by an Irish-speaking immigrant in London. This feeling of alienation is compounded by his physical disfigurement following an accident. Desperation leads the protagonist, Micheál, to work in a travelling freak-show as a ‘wild man’. While touring in Ireland, he is beset by anguish upon returning to his home town of Galway: ‘Tagann cumha agus uaigneas orm mé a bheith i

mo bhaile dúchais agus gan duine ná deoraí do m'aithneachtáil'.¹⁰ ('I feel nostalgic and lonely to be here where nobody recognises me.')¹¹ Dressed in chains, wearing a hairpiece and unrecognisable to people he once knew, he is further humiliated by the prospect of 'marriage' to the obese woman in the circus, as arranged by the ringmaster. Unable to withstand this indignity in his home town, Micheál candidly addresses the crowd, pointing to the pretence of the show, and a small riot ensues. Máirín Nic Eoin posits that this important episode demonstrates the lack of understanding of the home community about the reality of emigrant life, and suggests the reluctance of the home community to recognise the bleaker aspects of that life.¹² Micheál is not redeemed by this proclamation of truth, however; he continues to be imprisoned in his maimed body and alienated from society upon his return to London. Perhaps Ó Conaire's greatest achievement as a writer was that, unlike his contemporaries, he was willing to put his characters in challenging situations, thus allowing him to interrogate the darker aspects of the human psyche.

- 34 Kees van Hoek, *Country of my Choice: An Irish Panorama*, Tralee: The Kerryman Ltd, 1945, pp. 148–9.
- 35 Ibid, p. 149.
- 36 W.M. Thackeray, *The Irish Sketchbook*, reprint, Gloucester: Alan Sutton Publishing Ltd, 1990, p. 181.
- 37 Samuel Reynolds Hole, *A Little Tour in Ireland*, London: Bradbury & Evans, 1859, p. 57.

10 Pádraic Ó Conaire

- 1 *Connacht Sentinel*, 12 October 1999.
- 2 Aindrias Ó Cathasaigh, *Réabhlóid Phádraic Uí Chonaire*, Baile Átha Cliath: Coscéim, 2007, l. 1.
- 3 Áine Ní Chnáimhín, *Pádraic Ó Conaire*, Baile Átha Cliath: Oifig an tSoláthair, 1947, l. 20.
- 4 Gearóid Denvir, ‘Pádraic Ó Conaire agus Éire a Linne’, in *Litríocht agus Pobal: Cnuasach Aistí*, Indreabhán: Cló Iar-Chonnachta, 1997, l. 61.
- 5 Aindrias Ó Cathasaigh, ‘Pádraic agus Mrs Ó Conaire’, *Bliainiris* 11, lgh 25–47 (l. 38).
- 6 Ó Cathasaigh, *Réabhlóid Phádraic Uí Chonaire*, l. 236.
- 7 Ibid., l. 243.
- 8 Aisling Ní Dhonnchadha, *An Gearrscéal sa Ghaeilge*, Baile Átha Cliath: An Clócomhar, 1981, l. 80.
- 9 Máirtín Ó Cadhain, ‘An Gearrscéal sa Ghaeilge’, *Scríobh*, 5 (1981), l. 103; Pádraigín Riggs, *Pádraig Ó Conaire: Deoraí*, Baile Átha Cliath: An Clócomhar, 1994, l. 70.
- 10 Pádraic Ó Conaire, *Deoraíocht*, Baile Átha Cliath: An Comhlacht Oideachais, 1994 [1903–4], l. 29.
- 11 Pádraic Ó Conaire, *Exile*, translated by Gearailt Mac Eoin, Indreabhán: Cló Iar-Chonnachta, 1994, p. 38.
- 12 Máirín Nic Eoin, *Trén bhFearann Breac*, Baile Átha Cliath: Cois Life, 2005, l. 127.

11 Lady Gregory’s Galway

- 1 Lady Gregory, Holograph Memoirs, notebook 2; Berg Collection, New York Public Library (hereafter: Berg).
- 2 Ibid. The manuscript clearly reads ‘meet friends there & a rope’, but this appears to be a slip of the pen.
- 3 Galway City Library, James Hardiman, Volume of Engravings, 1812–1830 (GS01/2).
- 4 Lady Gregory, Holograph Diary, entries for 19 May – 3 June 1888, Berg.
- 5 Letter to Wilfrid Blunt, 5 June 1888, Berg.