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**A REVIEW OF THOMAS MACGREEVY
AND THE RISE OF THE IRISH AVANT-GARDE,
BY FRANCIS HUTTON-WILLIAMS**

Francis Hutton-Williams, *Thomas MacGreevy and the Rise of the Irish Avant-Garde* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2019), hardback, pp. 160, ISBN 978-1-78205-356-9.

Reviewed by Benjamin Keatinge

This new study of the important Irish poet, art historian, and museum curator Thomas MacGreevy (1893–1967) seeks to recalibrate our understanding of post-Independence Irish culture by arguing that MacGreevy’s multifarious contributions amounted to a campaign for “a new edifice of the mind” (15) and that his poetry and cultural criticism enable us to “rewrite the map” (25) of a period traditionally seen as one of “censorship, national conservatism and cultural homogeneity,” as the back cover of this elegant volume argues. MacGreevy’s close friend, Samuel Beckett, memorably summed up the cultural situation of 1930s Ireland in his novel *Murphy* (1938), where the pundit Ramaswami Krishnaswami Narayanaswami Suk, reader of Murphy’s horoscope, is described as “*Famous throughout the Civilised World and Irish Free State*”.¹ The incivilities of Irish society in the post-Revolutionary period are widely attested to, notably by John Banville, who characterizes post-Independence Ireland as being governed by “monolithic, impregnable, eternal” forces “before which the individual must bend, or break”.² No less trenchantly, Seán Ó Faoláin alludes to the overbearing dominance of “a completely obscurantist, repressive, regressive and uncultivated Church” in his contribution to the well-known documentary film, *Rocky Road to Dublin*, directed by Peter Lennon (1967). A devout Catholic, MacGreevy found an accommodation with the new order and Hutton-Williams’s study carefully delineates the many ways in which MacGreevy’s brand of Catholic nationalism challenged the monolith described by Banville. Indeed, the book’s central contention is that the evolution of MacGreevy’s interests, from private poet to public intellectual (he was Director of the National Gallery of Ireland from 1950–1963) enabled “contemporary art [. . .] to re-enter the Irish mainstream” and to be “within the reach of all” (104).

In this evolution, MacGreevy’s disagreement with his close friend Samuel Beckett about the status of Jack B. Yeats as “national painter” (76) takes on

particular importance and is the focus of Chapter 4 of Hutton-Williams's study. Reviewing MacGreevy's monograph, *Jack B. Yeats: An Appreciation and an Interpretation* (1945) in the *Irish Times*, Beckett publicly challenged MacGreevy's advocacy of Yeats as "The first genuine artist [. . .] who so identified himself with the people of Ireland as to be able to give true and good and beautiful artistic expression to the life they lived, and to that sense of themselves as the Irish nation".³ Beckett argues instead for an existential Yeats who looks inward rather than outward and thus illuminates, according to Beckett, "the issueless predicament of existence".⁴ Leading Beckett scholar Seán Kennedy notes in his essay "MacGreevy, Beckett and the Catholic Irish Nation" that "Beckett's writings of the period place him at profound odds with the entire thrust of MacGreevy's decolonizing project,"⁵ and the intimacy they had maintained during the 1930s foundered upon MacGreevy's valorization of Yeats's national imaginary.

The spectrum of interests that MacGreevy's career embodies makes him a potentially unwieldy subject for a monograph study. Hutton-Williams has done much in just over one hundred pages to encompass MacGreevy as poet, art historian, and curator, but even so, this is a different and more interdisciplinary kind of book as compared, for example, with the tightly-argued study of Denis Devlin by Alex Davis, which offers detailed readings of individual poems at every step.⁶ Nevertheless, MacGreevy's poetry, chiefly from *Poems* (1934),⁷ receives ample coverage in Chapters 1–3 in readings inspired by Beckett's famous review of "Recent Irish Poetry".⁸ By placing Beckett and MacGreevy together alongside Devlin in Chapter 1 ("Becoming a Poet: MacGreevy and the Aftermath of the Irish Revolution"), Hutton-Williams may slightly misrepresent Beckett's view of MacGreevy as an "independent" whose acknowledgement of "the breakdown of the object" is not necessarily a given.⁹ The tension between Hutton-Williams's sense of this "small group of Irish poets" (21)—Beckett, MacGreevy, and Devlin—as an "avant-garde network" (20) working together and his countervailing sense of their separateness with "no uniformity of poetic approach" (21) leaves the precise synergies between these poets largely unresolved. As regards poetic approaches, there may have been only a superficial harmony between Beckett and MacGreevy and also between Beckett, Devlin, and Coffey (the "Irish modernists" or "Thirties modernists" epithet seems to have served more as a badge of convenience) and, although their interwar relations have been the focus of intense scholarly scrutiny, there remains much to discuss.¹⁰ Seán Kennedy has revised the critical consensus about Beckett's reviews of MacGreevy's poetry and he sees Beckett as only offering "tactful equivocation" or "veiled critique" of MacGreevy's *Poems*.¹¹ But Kennedy's views are not mentioned by Hutton-Williams, nor is there any detailed consideration of the confessional differences which, Kennedy

argues, underpin Beckett's hesitancy. Arguably, the differences revealed by Beckett's public reservations on MacGreevy's study of Jack B. Yeats can be found in less conspicuous form in "Recent Irish Poetry" and "Humanistic Quietism," the two reviews of 1934 in which Beckett discusses MacGreevy's poetry.¹²

Where Hutton-Williams does mention the confessional disparities between the Protestant, God-haunted Beckett and the Catholic MacGreevy and their consequences for their mutual appreciation of each other's work, it is a somewhat truncated discussion that neglects a good deal of potential theological complexity. Hutton-Williams suggests that MacGreevy's poetry overcomes the "no-man's land, Hellespont or vacuum" between subject and object hypothesized by Beckett in "Recent Irish Poetry"¹³ and adopts a "'Thomistic' imperative to face the world head on" (38), thereby attaining "a fundamental and necessary relationship with civic life" (38). This reading comes up against Beckett's ambivalent sense of his friend's work as exhibiting "humility" of a quietistic kind more inclined to "prayer" than to direct engagement with the world,¹⁴ and it elides potential non-Thomistic readings such as the one advanced by James Matthew Wilson in his persuasive essay "The Augustinian Imagination of Thomas MacGreevy." Wilson's Augustinian reading provides a theological account of the same engagement sensed by Hutton-Williams but from a different perspective, which reads MacGreevy's poetry as an expression of how "art and nation alike are but means to a still higher end, that of showing forth the City of God."¹⁵ This Augustinian nuance justifies the "Yet" which concludes MacGreevy's powerful war poem "De Civitate Hominum" and signals, one feels, a broader theological "hope"¹⁶ above and beyond the "civic life" (38) alluded to by Hutton-Williams. In this context, the brief invocation of Thomism in Chapter 1 of the present study would benefit from further development.¹⁷

Brian Coffey (1905–1995) was a professional philosopher who completed his doctoral studies on Thomas Aquinas at the Institut Catholique, Paris in 1947. A correspondent of Thomist philosopher Jacques Maritain, it was Coffey whose philosophical training, Catholic convictions, and loyalty to Ireland are perhaps most closely aligned with MacGreevy's interests. Indeed, it was Coffey who plangently wrote to MacGreevy after the early death of their mutual friend Denis Devlin (1908–1959) to lament over "the accidents that scattered us" when "we could have been more 'useful' at home."¹⁸ This Thomistic sense of *praxis* would have bolstered Hutton-Williams's arguments by demonstrating Coffey's sympathy with MacGreevy's endeavors "at home"—sympathies not necessarily shared by Beckett or Devlin. This letter and others from Coffey are arguably more relevant to MacGreevy's sense of civic and national commitment than the very brief excerpt from Coffey's "Missouri Sequence" cited in Chapter 1 (30).

The happenstance of Beckett/MacGreevy/Devlin as a trio in the book's consideration of the poetry they published in the 1930s is most readily apparent in its truncated account of crucial exchanges between Beckett/Devlin and Beckett/Coffey around the time of the publication of Beckett's novel *Murphy* in March 1938. Echoing Ruby Cohn's suggestion in *Disjecta*,¹⁹ Hutton-Williams argues that Beckett's 1938 unpublished French article "Les Deux Besoins" ("The Two Needs") was written as part of "his defence of Devlin" (23), whose *Intercessions* (1937) Beckett had reviewed in *transition*.²⁰ An alternative viewpoint is advanced by J. C. C. Mays in his exposition of Coffey's review of Beckett's *Murphy*, "completed in Paris in March 1938" but unpublished at that time.²¹ Mays argues that "Les Deux Besoins" makes "equal if not more sense as a response to the ideas contained" in Coffey's unpublished review, noting that Beckett and Coffey were in close correspondence at this time and insisting that it was Coffey who best understood the philosophical issues at stake in *Murphy* and who served as "a sounding board for [Beckett's] essay, *Les Deux besoins*."²²

Hutton-Williams agrees with Mays in as far as he maintains that "Beckett was still working out" his aesthetics during this period (23). The language of Beckett's review of Devlin, which invokes "one kind of need, and art" and "another kind,"²³ in the contrapuntal manner of "Recent Irish Poetry," allows Hutton-Williams to draw a line of continuity between the 1934 and 1938 reviews. The "profounder self-awareness" (22–23) Beckett saw in the poetry of *Intercessions* in 1938 compares unfavorably with the "flight from self-awareness" of the "leading twilighters" who Beckett had excoriated in his 1934 polemic.²⁴ The circumstantial evidence linking "The Two Needs" essay to the *Intercessions* review seems convincing and, at the rhetorical level, irresistible given Beckett's repetition of phrases of need ("terms of need, not of opinion," "an escape from need"²⁵) in his appraisal of *Intercessions*. But the dichotomies and needs of *Murphy* and of its eponymous hero are also compelling and lend credence to Mays's argument as to Coffey's influence on Beckett's thinking at this time. The hero loves and loathes his partner, Celia. He recognizes himself in Mr Endon, who doesn't seem to recognize him. He is alive in the mind but fettered to the body. Mays's suggestion that the conflictual needs within *Murphy* emerge from his dialogue with Coffey (and also prompted "Les Deux Besoins") merits fuller consideration in Hutton-Williams's study. Indeed, Hutton-Williams's astute sense of the divergences between Beckett's *Echo's Bones* (1935), Devlin's *Intercessions* (1937), and MacGreevy's *Poems* (1934) in terms of how the poems articulate "a sense of division from society" and adopt variegated stances towards "the social world" (38) evokes the same philosophical and social tug-of-war that *Murphy* grapples with, and so the relatively cursory mention of Beckett's early masterpiece in the present study (23), and the occlusion of Brian Coffey's input, leaves at least some stones unturned.

Hutton-Williams succeeds in bringing poetry and painting into well-calibrated alignment in Chapter 3 where Beckett's insights prove their worth in a lucid discussion of "MacGreevy and Postimpressionism." Here Beckett's "breakdown of the object," and his ludic declaration that "At the centre there is no theme,"²⁶ provide a firm basis by which to elucidate MacGreevy's defense of Mainie Jellett's "geometrical" (63) and Cubist paintings. Hutton-Williams reminds us that Jellett's work provides "new infusions of traditional Irish material" (66). MacGreevy's expertise in Celtic and Byzantine art enabled him to discern, in Beckett's words, "the old thing that has happened again"²⁷ and, just as importantly, to defend it before the Irish public. The painterly dimensions of MacGreevy's poetry are then explored in further readings of the "postimpressionist aesthetics" of *Poems* (67). Chapter 3 might be said to contain *in nuce* and in fluid equilibrium the three main strands of the book: MacGreevy's poetry, his art criticism, and his public/professional roles. Indeed, Hutton-Williams is largely successful in achieving a synthesis of these broad areas in MacGreevy's life, thus overcoming in close analysis the disjunctures of MacGreevy's career.

Indeed, whereas Susan Schreibman's path-breaking essay collection *The Life and Work of Thomas MacGreevy: A Critical Reappraisal* (2013) is divided into discrete sections to treat different aspects of MacGreevy's career—"MacGreevy as Poet," "MacGreevy as Critic," "Cities of MacGreevy," "MacGreevy and Friends," "MacGreevy Remembered"—Hutton-Williams's book is a critical synthesis of all of these, with additional consideration of MacGreevy's influence on the public domain of Irish cultural life. If Beckett confessed to finding himself "wishing" MacGreevy "were writing more" for himself and "less for Ireland,"²⁸ Hutton-Williams convincingly demonstrates that, for MacGreevy, these two activities were not mutually exclusive. A further strength of the book is its inclusion of splendid color plates which greatly enhance the discussion in Chapter 5 of MacGreevy's study of Jack B. Yeats.²⁹

Citing Daniel Corkery's *Synge and Anglo-Irish Literature* (1931) in his epigraph to Chapter 4 "Reconstructing the National Painter," Hutton-Williams presents MacGreevy as "one of the wild geese of the pen" (75), MacGreevy who is also ambitious for "cultural reform" in his own country (61). The bringing together of home and abroad, Dublin via Paris, in a probing discussion of Irish modernist painting is where Hutton-Williams's study comes into its own. By reading MacGreevy's expatriate identity alongside the "Irish selves" (66) of painters whose work he supported (among them Mainie Jellett, Norah McGuinness, and Nano Reid), Hutton-Williams reorientates our sense of Ireland's insularity at a particular cultural moment. Chapters 3–5 affirm in sophisticated terms the essential Irishness that MacGreevy claimed for himself and for the experimental painters he most admired. Paris and London were but

a “step on the way home,” as he wrote to George Russell (*AE*) in March 1927 (41) in a quote Hutton-Williams uses an epigraph for Chapter 2 “MacGreevy as Parisian *Littérateur*, 1927-33.” On his return to Ireland in 1941, MacGreevy would add a Gaelic “a” to his baptismal surname “McGreevy” and devote his career to Ireland’s cultural life. His later work as Director of the National Gallery of Ireland is given full credit in the book’s final chapter “The National Gallery Revisited, 1950–63,” and the plural “value” (1) of MacGreevy’s contributions to Irish culture are thus validated by this timely consideration of his underappreciated public service.

For W. B. Yeats the poet, revisiting the Municipal Gallery “Where my friends’ portraits hang” was akin to entering a sacred or “hallowed place” (*CW1*, 328). MacGreevy’s efforts at “revitalising the public’s relationship with art” (99) were less portentous but more grounded, as Hutton-Williams deftly argues. By increasing annual visitor numbers at the National Gallery of Ireland “from 37,547 in 1958 to 53,452 in 1961” (99), MacGreevy proved that (at least some of) “the People wanted Pictures” without any need to invoke Renaissance patterns of patronage as W. B. Yeats had done in his 1912 poem “To a wealthy Man who promised a second Subscription to the Dublin Municipal Gallery if it were proved the People wanted Pictures” (*CW1*, 106). Of course, both W. B. Yeats and MacGreevy made themselves “‘useful’ at home” (to quote again from Coffey’s letter of 1959) through their tireless advocacy of “museum culture in Dublin” (98). However, W. B. Yeats’s exasperation at his fellow countrymen and women perhaps bears closer comparison with Beckett’s savage indignation at what he saw as the unredeemed philistinism of the Irish Free State.

Hutton-Williams’s study invokes W. B. Yeats in many areas but without the extensive treatment accorded to his artist brother in Chapter 4, “Reconstructing the National Painter.” Importantly, Hutton-Williams demonstrates how MacGreevy casts Ireland’s “romantic national heritage” (32) in a different light from W. B. Yeats while echoing major Yeats poems in places. He notes that “Crón Tráth na nDéithe,” with its heavily Eliotic structure, mood, and syntax, is at some level also “a response to Yeats’s ‘Easter, 1916’” (32) and he compares, briefly, W. B. Yeats’s “An Irish Airman Foresees His Death” with MacGreevy’s aerial war poem “De Civitate Hominum,” noting the different perspectives in the two poems as they convey the airman’s fatal descent.

Dealing as it does with the aftermath of the Irish revolution, Hutton-Williams’s study elucidates “the split between Ireland’s earlier revolutionary aspirations and its conservative artistic direction” (94) and how MacGreevy’s “discursive interventions” served to “shape” the evolution of the state’s cultural life in “affirmative” and progressive ways (95). The more senior poet, of course, belonged to the previous revolutionary generation and the elegiac tone of W.

B. Yeats's "The Municipal Gallery Revisited" knowingly articulates the poet's awareness of being one of "the old regime," (98) not the avant-garde.

NOTES

- 1 Samuel Beckett, *Murphy* (London: Faber and Faber, 2009), 22; italics in original.
- 2 John Banville, "Memory and Forgetting: The Ireland of de Valera and O'Faolain," *The Irish Review* 17/18 (Winter 1995), 147.
- 3 Quoted in Samuel Beckett, "MacGreevy on Yeats," in *Disjecta*, ed. Ruby Cohn (London: John Calder, 1983), 96.
- 4 Beckett, "MacGreevy on Yeats," 97.
- 5 Seán Kennedy, "'Too Absolute and Ireland Haunted': MacGreevy, Beckett and the Catholic Irish Nation," in *The Life and Work of Thomas MacGreevy: A Critical Reappraisal*, ed. Susan Schreibman (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 199.
- 6 See Alex Davis, *A Broken Line: Denis Devlin and Irish Poetic Modernism* (Dublin: University College Dublin Press, 2000).
- 7 Thomas MacGreevy, *Poems* (London: William Heinemann, 1934).
- 8 Samuel Beckett, "Recent Irish Poetry," in *Disjecta*, ed. Ruby Cohn (London: John Calder, 1983), 70.
- 9 Beckett, "Recent Irish Poetry," 70.
- 10 See, for example three significant critical interventions by Seán Kennedy: "Beckett Reviewing MacGreevy: A Reconsideration," *Irish University Review* 35, no. 2 (Autumn/Winter 2005): 273-287; "'The Artist Who Stakes His Being is from Nowhere': Beckett and Thomas MacGreevy on the Art of Jack B. Yeats." *Samuel Beckett Today/Aujourd'hui*, 14 (2004): 61-74, and "'Too Absolute and Ireland Haunted,'" 189-202. Patricia Coughlan, "The poetry is another pair of sleeves: Beckett, Ireland and Modernist Lyric Poetry," in *Modernism and Ireland: The Poetry of the 1930s*, ed. Patricia Coughlan and Alex Davis (Cork: Cork University Press, 1995), 173-208; Benjamin Keatinge and Aengus Woods, "Introduction," in *Other Edens: The Life and Work of Brian Coffey*, ed. Keatinge and Woods (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2010), 1-11; Michael Smith, "Michael Smith Asks Mervyn Wall Some Questions about the Thirties" [interview with Mervyn Wall], *The Lace Curtain* 4 (1971), 79-80.
- 11 Seán Kennedy, "Beckett Reviewing MacGreevy: A Reconsideration," *Irish University Review* 35, no. 2 (Autumn/Winter 2005): 273, 278.
- 12 Beckett, "Recent Irish Poetry," 70 and Samuel Beckett, "Humanistic Quietism," in *Disjecta*, ed. Ruby Cohn (London: John Calder, 1983), 68.
- 13 Beckett, "Recent Irish Poetry," 70.
- 14 Beckett, "Humanistic Quietism," 68.
- 15 James Matthew Wilson, "The Augustinian Imagination of Thomas MacGreevy," in *The Life and Work of Thomas MacGreevy: A Critical Reappraisal*, ed. Susan Schreibman (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 81.
- 16 Beckett, "Humanistic Quietism," 68.
- 17 It is worth noting that Thomism and neo-Thomism, deriving from the philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas (c. 1225-74), have more Aristotelean and worldly aspects than Augustinian ideas deriving from St. Augustine of Hippo (354-430). *The Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy* describes Thomistic philosophy as follows: "Throughout his writings Aquinas's major concern is to defend a 'naturalistic' or Aristotelian Christianity, in opposition not only to sceptics but also to the surrounding tendency to read Christianity in Neoplatonic terms, derived largely from Augustine, and also channelled to the 13th century through

such writers as Avicenna. Aquinas takes issue with the occasionalism of the Neoplatonists, which reduces mankind to spectators of the world order in which all causality is ultimately an expression of God's will; like Aristotle he is concerned to protect the notion of a genuine human agent who is the responsible author of his or her own actions." Simon Blackburn, *The Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008). Accessed January 26, 2021, <https://www-oxfordreference-com.elib.tcd.ie/view/10.1093/acref/9780199541430.001.0001/acref-9780199541430-e-229>.

- 18 Brian Coffey to Thomas MacGreevy, September 10, 1959. Quoted in Benjamin Keatinge, "'Missouri Sequence' and the Search for a Habitat," in *Other Edens: The Life and Work of Brian Coffey*, ed. Keatinge and Woods (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2010), 107.
- 19 Ruby Cohn, "Notes," in *Disjecta*, ed. Ruby Cohn (London: John Calder, 1983), 174.
- 20 Samuel Beckett, "Intercessions by Denis Devlin," in *Disjecta*, ed. Ruby Cohn (London: John Calder, 1983), 91–94. Original review published in *transition* 27 (April–May 1938), 289–94.
- 21 J. C. C. Mays, "Brian Coffey's Review of Beckett's *Murphy*: 'Take warning while you praise,'" in *Other Edens: The Life and Work of Brian Coffey*, ed. Keatinge and Woods (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2010), 85.
- 22 Mays, "Brian Coffey's Review of Beckett's *Murphy*," 95.
- 23 Beckett, "Intercessions by Denis Devlin," 91.
- 24 Beckett, "Recent Irish Poetry," 71.
- 25 Beckett, "Intercessions by Denis Devlin," 91.
- 26 Beckett, "Recent Irish Poetry," 70–71.
- 27 Beckett, "Recent Irish Poetry," 70.
- 28 Samuel Beckett to Thomas MacGreevy, March 18, 1948. Quoted in Kennedy, "'Too Absolute and Ireland Haunted,'" 190.
- 29 Thomas MacGreevy, *Jack B. Yeats: An Appreciation and an Interpretation* (Dublin: Victor Waddington, 1945).