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aroon: *Depictions
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The soggarth aroon: *Depictions of the priest in some twentieth-century Irish Fiction*

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Quite understandably, the Catholic priest has been a central figure in Irish literature. This was because of the significant role played by the Catholic Church in the day-to-day lives of Irish people. In rural Ireland, the local church was a fulcrum, the place where people gathered for Mass on Sunday as well as for baptisms, weddings and death – not forgetting the sacraments of First Communion and Confirmation, of course. The priest was held in high esteem and wielded huge influence. He was usually one of the few educated members of the community and so to his spiritual standing was added the extra layer of intellectual superiority.

This article will consider some literary depictions of priests, from the turn of the twentieth century up until 1969. The three novelists chosen are George Moore (1852-1933), Canon Sheehan (1852-1913), and Francis McManus (1909-1965). As will be clear, all were male and one was a priest. The choice is arbitrary and there are several others – particularly Liam O’Flaherty – writing in the same period, who could have been added to the list had time and space permitted. The portrayals of the clerical protagonists are positive in general, but this does not mean that the writers were oblivious to the foibles of their subjects: indeed, Sheehan in particular was not afraid to foreground the shortcomings of his priest characters, especially pride, and the other writers too were alive to the human frailties of theirs.

GEORGE MOORE

We will begin our discussion with one of the major fin-de-siècle Irish writers, George Moore. He was the son of a Catholic landlord in Mayo, who was also a member of Parliament, a privileged background which allowed George to indulge his burgeoning

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interest in art by spending a few years in Paris. His relationship with Catholicism was strained to say the least. On one occasion, he went so far as to write to *The Irish Times* declaring that he had abandoned Catholicism to become a member of the Church of Ireland. His pious brother Maurice was quite shocked by this move, but George was determined to follow through on his decision because of an intense dislike for priests:

‘Nothing will annoy them more, and in writing this I shall not be writing a lie. Magicians I have called them, and with good reason. Their magical powers are as great in politics as in religion, for haven’t they persuaded Ireland to accept them as patriots?’¹

In many of Moore’s books, particularly the short story collection *The Untilled Field*, priests are often portrayed in a negative light. The main criticism he levels at them is how they leverage money out of the impoverished peasants in order to build churches that will be monuments to their enduring glory. Moore’s most accomplished novel, *The Lake*, relates the trajectory of Father Oliver Gogarty who works in a remote parish in Mayo beside Lough Carra. When one of his parishioners, the national school teacher Nora Glynn, becomes pregnant outside of wedlock and refuses to reveal the identity of the father, Gogarty denounces her from the pulpit. She departs from the parish and heads to the continent to work as secretary for a well-known and somewhat notorious writer. Over time, Father Gogarty comes to see that jealousy was the reason why he reacted so violently to Nora’s predicament. In the rather long and revealing correspondence that takes place between the two, Gogarty shares his doubts about his vocation. He admits that the training he received in Maynooth taught him ‘to despise women.’ He sees that this was ultimately unhealthy: ‘God gave us our human nature: we may misuse and degrade our nature, but we must never forget that it came originally from God.’² How different the tone is here from the confession he made to another priest that he could never understand how unrequited passion for another human being, as related to him in the confessional, could lead to insanity. He had never been subjected to such temptation himself, that is, before he came in contact with Nora Glynn:

‘It seemed impossible that life would close on him without his seeing her face or hearing her voice again, and he began to think

1 George Moore, *Hail and Farewell*, vol. 2, *Salve* (London: William Heinemann, 1920), 377.

2 George Moore, *The Lake* (Gerards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1980), 128. Originally published in 1905.

how it would be if they were to meet on the other side. For he believed in heaven, and that was a good thing. Without such belief there would be nothing for him to do but to go down to the lake and make an end of himself'.³

Oliver Gogarty is a sophisticated man, someone with a keen appreciation of literature, theology and the arts. But when it comes to affairs of the heart, he is a complete novice. The lake is a constant presence in the novel, at once a source of menace and consolation. If he did not still believe in heaven, Gogarty admits that he would choose drowning in the waters of Lough Carra as his preferred method of suicide. He is sensitive to nature in the way a poet would be. Indeed, the opening lines of the novel underline this attraction:

'It was one of those enticing days at the beginning of May when the white clouds are drawn about the earth like curtains. The lake lay like a mirror that somebody had breathed upon, the brown islands showing through the mist faintly, with gray shadows falling into the water, blurred at the edges'.⁴

The lake will be a collaborator in his decision at the end of the novel to leave his parish and seek fulfilment elsewhere. He devises a scheme whereby people will suspect he has died in a drowning accident by shedding his clothes on the shore and swimming to the far side of the lake, where he had previously hidden a fresh pair. It is unlikely that he will meet up with Nora Glynn again on his travels. Indeed, he does not necessarily leave the priesthood because of her, but out of a recognition that he could no longer be true to the vocation that he chose: 'To say Mass, believing the Mass to be but a mummary, was detestable. To remain in his parish meant a constant degradation of himself. When a parishioner sent to ask him to attend a sick call, he could barely bring himself to anoint the dying man.'⁵ As would have been the norm at the start of the last century, Gogarty's family was very religious and it would have been a great source of pain to them to know that he was leaving the priesthood. As distinct from a traditional loss of faith, where one comes to doubt even the very existence of God, Moore's character seeks the divine in a different way. He acknowledges this in the last letter he writes to Nora Glynn when he says that belief in books rather than in Nature is one of humanity's most curious characteristics. He concludes: 'I am glad to think that it was your sunny face that raised up my crushed instincts, that brought me

3 *Ibid.*, 121.

4 *Ibid.*, 1.

5 *Ibid.*, 138.

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back to life, and ever since you have been associated in my mind with the sun and the spring tide.’⁶

There is a strong sense in which Oliver Gogarty is the mouthpiece of certain views that were dear to George Moore. At times, there is a disconnect between Gogarty’s background and training and the way he comes to look on the world. It would take more than a few letters from Nora Glynn to bring about the epiphany – and I restore its religious connotation to that noun – that grips the heart of a priest from rural Mayo with no experience of life outside of his home parish apart from the few years spent in Maynooth and what he read in books. Writing in this magazine in 1958, the revered former Professor of English, Peter Connolly, remarked how George Moore, like Joyce: ‘rejected the dogmatic and moral system of the Church in the name of the artist’s search for freedom, but to a surprising extent they were obsessed with the priest as a personification of it all.’⁷ It is certainly the case that priests hold a fascination for writers, because of how they stand out from the crowd and cause people to contemplate the transcendent. Moore does have a certain feel for the clerical mind-set, but he is no Bernanos because the hugely important, and dramatic, inner life of his fictional priests rarely attains the intensity or authenticity of what the French Catholic writer achieved.

CANON SHEEHAN

In the case of Canon Sheehan, there was no need to imagine the priestly role: he lived out that function throughout his adult life. He managed to combine his pastoral role with a literary vocation which achieved substantial success during his lifetime. Virtually all of Canon Sheehan’s books were translated into other languages and he enjoyed the type of sales that would have been the envy of any writer of his time. And yet his name does not appear in any of the various encyclopedias of Catholic literature that I have consulted. In a contribution to a book of essays published in 2014 to mark the centenary of the death of Doneraile’s best-known writer, James O’Brien questions why Sheehan is such a neglected literary figure today and defines the object of his literary endeavour ‘as the creation of a Christian culture that eschewed the materialism of modernity, the narrow realism of its aesthetic, and the positivism of its philosophy.’⁸

6 *Ibid.*, 144.

7 Peter Connolly, ‘The Priest in Modern Irish Fiction’, *The Furrow*, December 1958 (9) (12), 786.

8 James O’Brien, ‘Canon Sheehan of Doneraile: A Literary Life’, in Gabriel Doherty (ed.), *Revisiting Canon Sheehan of Doneraile 1852-1913: Author, Activist, Priest* (Wells, Somerset: Smenos, 2014), 4-31, 28.

What marks out Sheehan from other Catholic writers of the period during which he wrote is the fact that he was not living in a country where Catholicism was under siege from the forces of secularism. Indeed, one could argue that the very opposite was the case. Writing as an insider about the role and function of the clerical life, and borrowing on many of the incidents and experiences that shaped his own thinking, Sheehan captures several of the realities of Ireland at the end of the nineteenth century. It is interesting that Father Dan Hanrahan, the beloved parish priest in *My New Curate*, summarises the concerns of modern literature thus: 'Exactly those questions of philosophy, ethics, and morality which form the staple material of theological studies and discussion in our own colleges and academies. Novels, poetry, essays, lectures, treatises on the natural sciences – all deal with the great central questions of man's being, his origin, and his conduct.'⁹ Interestingly, such texts were forbidden in Maynooth at the time Sheehan studied there and for a long time afterwards: they were clearly considered a danger to the seminarians.

For the purposes of this article, I have decided to concentrate on the semi-autobiographical novel, *Luke Delmege* (1901). Strange though it might seem, this novel, and others by Sheehan, provoked the ire of a number of clerical readers in Ireland. Perhaps the portrayals of priests were considered too critical – although most of them are far from unsympathetic – or that they revealed some of the human weaknesses of priests that others might like to remain hidden. In the 'Introductory' to the novel, Sheehan ruminates once more on the advantages associated with literature: "'Truth is stranger than fiction.'" No! my dear friend, for all fiction is truth – truth torn up by the roots and bleeding human hearts, and carefully bound with fillets of words to be placed there in its vases of green and gold on your reading-desk, on your breakfast-table.'¹⁰ It would appear from these lines as though Sheehan felt the need to justify his literary endeavours which were so displeasing to many of his confreres. Otherwise, I am not sure what would have prompted him to include such an apologia at the very start of his novel, which follows the career of its eponymous character who emerges fresh from Maynooth after having achieved 'First of First', the highest academic award. His natural expectation might have been to be asked to work in Bishop's House, but instead it is decided that he should start his career in England, where his youthful romantic aspirations are not satisfied:

9 Canon P. A. Sheehan, *My New Curate* (Cork: The Mercier Press, 1989), 12. The novel originally appeared as a serial in the *American Ecclesiastical Review* at the start of the twentieth century.

10 Canon Sheehan, *Luke Delmege* (London/New York/Toronto: Longmans, Green and Co., 1932), 4.

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‘How his soul burned to emulate the heroism of saints – to go abroad and be forgotten by the world, and to be remembered only by Christ – to live and die among the lepers and the insane....’¹¹

What transpires was a far cry from what he had envisaged. Initially, he is greatly impressed with the ‘calm independence’¹² with which the English people express their opinions. The Anglican community strike him as being particularly sophisticated and he becomes obsessed with dazzling them with his brilliance. What he seeks above all else are ‘men’s praises’. A friend, Father Sheldon, remarks to him on one occasion:

‘Did you ever feel an impulse to go down on your knees and kiss the hem of the garment of some poor, half-witted illiterate old duffer, who knew just enough of Latin to spell through his breviary, but who was doing, with sublime unconsciousness, the work of his Master?’¹³

The criticism hits home, but the young man is not yet sufficiently self-aware to see the error of his ways. When he returns on vacation to Ireland, his family and friends see a great change in him. During the time away, his way of speaking, his dress, his manners had all become very English. Indeed, Delmege feels as though he is a stranger in his own land: ‘... the aspect of the landscape seemed intolerably melancholy and dull. The gray fields, that had not yet sprung into green, the thatched cottages, the ruined walls, the broken hedges, the ragged bushes, all seemed to Luke, fresh from the prim civilization of Aylesburgh, unspeakably old and wretched. Ruin and dilapidation were everywhere.’¹⁴ The source of Luke’s disillusionment is a feeling of superiority with regard to his fellow countrymen. Even though he will eventually become disenchanted with England towards the end of his sojourn, life in the rural southwestern outpost of Ireland where he is sent by his Bishop leaves him feeling bereft. He fails to inspire the love of the people, who dislike his manner and lack of understanding of their customs and traditions. The following sums up their reaction: “‘He’s a fine man, God bless him”, said the women as they resumed their seats. But he’s mighty proud!’” It is that despicable trait of pride that establishes an impenetrable wall between Father Delmege and those he was ordained to serve.

11 *Ibid*, 29.

12 *Ibid*, 100.

13 *Ibid*, 170.

14 *Ibid*, 225.

The suffering associated with the death of his mother and the eviction of his family from their farm, the softening of his negative view of the superstition and relative ignorance of the people, along with a growing appreciation of the beauty of the landscape, help the priest to better carry out his ministry. When his former parishioners travel a great distance to attend his mother's funeral, Father Delmege sees that they are prepared to forget previous differences when tragedy visits one of their own. Equally, when Barbara Wilson, the daughter of a well-to-do family, decides to join a religious order to atone for what she considers the licentious life of her brother, without letting anyone know her background, the priest is provided with the solution to his woes: 'Lose all to find all.' At the end of his life, he reaches an accommodation with himself and God through the development of an unconditional love for the most humble of society:

'Alas! It took many years to teach him how hollow was it all – that there was no God in Humanity, except the God who embraced Humanity to raise it almost to the Godhead; nor were the sublime doctrines of renunciation and sacrifice practiced except by the lovely followers of the one Divine Man'.¹⁵

There is a somewhat 'preachy' tone to these lines which detracts from their impact. The reader can easily detect the change in the priest, now arrived in middle age and far humbler than the young man who achieved the 'First of First' in Maynooth, so there is no real need to point out so plainly the revelation that it is the meek and the humble who know God's love most intimately. Luke Delmege is used in this instance to express the opinions of his creator, a fatal flaw in the novelist. That said, Canon Sheehan's prowess as a writer should not be underestimated. He was far better at describing priests than any other category of society, but that is in the natural order of things, given his background and training. In spite of a tendency to 'lead' his readers and perhaps assuage the doubts and criticisms of his brother priests, Sheehan does succeed in getting inside the head of his priest characters in a way that allows us to share their struggle to find a worthwhile and fulfilling way to live out their vocation.

FRANCIS MCMANUS

With Francis McManus, we have a good example of a lay writer with a keen interest in Catholicism. Having taught for 18 years in Synge Street Christian Brothers School in Dublin, he took

15 *Luke Delmege*, 560-1.

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up the role of director of features in Radio Éireann in 1947. His best-known text for those of us of a certain age is *The Greatest of These* (1943), which was on the English Leaving Certificate syllabus for many years. It relates how a parish priest in rural Ireland, Father James Phelan, disobeys a direct instruction from his Bishop not to proceed with setting up a school for the poor in his parish of Bannow. Phelan is a good example of someone who, once embarked on a project, feels obliged to follow it through to its natural conclusion. But such obstinacy sets him on a collision course with Bishop Coyne, who, exasperated at the failure of his priest to see reason, is forced to take matters into his own hands:

‘Some must rule. Some must serve. I will maintain that discipline though it hurt me severely and bring grief to me, and though it hurt men whom I have always admired, esteemed, and even held in high affection.’¹⁶

The tragic flaw of the parish priest is a failure to take on board advice given to him in good faith by his curates and the Bishop. He decides to take his case to the civil courts until the divisions created by the controversy lead some of his supporters to resort to violence, at which point Phelan decides to withdraw from the parish and active ministry. The novel opens on a new year’s eve some time later with the ringing of bells outside the episcopal palace of the current Bishop of Dunmore, Edward Langton, who had been taught Latin by Phelan, then a curate in the boy’s parish. Earlier that day, a newly ordained priest related to Langton an encounter he had with a priest living in a very simple abode on the outer extremities of the diocese. From the inscription on Latin books in the house, it is clear the elderly priest in question is James Phelan. Langton has endured some health problems in recent times, which he suspects may be serious, and is anxious to bring some healing to the situation. Reading through Phelan’s file reveals the extent to which things got out of control all those years ago:

‘This was the man then: gesticulating, strutting, pounding the table, bullying, being left deserted, so that presently when he discovered himself alone, anguish would dash in upon his heart like smothering blood. No disciplinary punishment would equal that final dereliction’.¹⁷

Reading through this passage, I am reminded of the Irish priests who in recent times have fallen foul of the Church authorities and in some cases are no longer allowed to say Mass publicly or

16 Francis McManus, *The Greatest of These* (Cork: Mercier Press, 1973), 77.

17 *Ibid*, 84.

publish anything without first submitting it for approval. These are men who have devoted their lives to serving the Church and they are deprived even of an opportunity to answer the accusations (submitted anonymously) that have led to the sanctions meted out to them. 'Dereliction' is an excellent noun to describe how they must feel. James Phelan is fortunate to have a Bishop who is anxious to build bridges and to forge a path that might eventually lead to reconciliation. He decides to visit Phelan in his home and to allow his former mentor give vent to his feelings. The old man does not hold back:

'What cunning brought you here? What pride of place made you come to torment me? I was never a match for the like of you, my lord, who always lust after office and place. If I had yielded at the beginning of my troubles and practiced all the strategies and held my tongue, I should now be greater than the greatest of these.'¹⁸

The title of the novel is hinted at towards the end of the quote above. Rather than taking umbrage at this outburst, Langton can detect the pain that lies at its core, a pain that has been reawakened by this reminder of his past. He listens patiently to what Phelan has to say and invites him to come to visit him after Easter. While there, Phelan is introduced to two of Langton's closest friends, Canon Keeffe and Archdeacon Crane, and rediscovers the pleasures of clerical company and discussion of things philosophical and theological. The Bishop retires early and leaves the three men to their own devices. He is aware of how perilous the path to reconciliation will be for Phelan: 'He must be scrupulous with every word for fear a casual syllable might be mistaken by this man and so delay his peace. That peace would reside in obedience, and the man could rest then.'¹⁹ The following day, he invites Phelan to assist him in the celebration of the Eucharist, which is a sign that the period of exile is all but over. There was no demand that he disavow his past actions, no public humiliation, no request that he sign a document guaranteeing good behaviour in the future (impositions that have been foisted on Irish priests who have fallen foul of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in Rome). No, what is acknowledged in this instance, is that a priest is always a priest (*sacerdos in aeternum*) and that obedience to a higher order need not involve a complete renunciation of past actions. Sometimes it is sufficient that one be prepared to re-engage with a system that should have at its core charity and understanding. Those latter

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 126.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, 146.

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qualities often seem to be lacking in some of the Church's dealings with what they view as 'rebel priests' in today's system. McManus' sensitive treatment of a Bishop's relationship with a priest who balked against the status quo is infinitely more meaningful to me now than it was when I studied his novel all those decades ago and its relevance to the current situation is quite remarkable in some ways.

CONCLUSION

In a review of J. F. Powers's *The Presence of Grace*, Frank O'Connor wrote:

'The attraction of the religious life for the story teller is overpowering. It is the attraction of a sort of life lived, or seeking to be lived, by standards other than those of this world, one which, in fact, resembles that of the artist. The good priest, like the good artist, needs human rewards, but no human reward can ever satisfy him.'²⁰

These lines supply an excellent summary of what this article has sought to illustrate, namely that the figure of the priest forms an attractive subject for the creative artist in that his preoccupations are at one and the same time human and transcendent, just like those of the artist. The four novelists dealt with highlight the fascinating raw material that the inner life of a priest afforded them and how it led to narratives that were of this world while aspiring towards another, more intangible universe.

20 Harriet O'Donovan Sheehy, 'Introduction' to *Frank O'Connor, The Collar: Stories of Irish Priests* (Belfast: The Blackstaff Press, 1993), v.