

UCD and 1916

BY CHRISTINA HUNT MAHONY

SIGNATORIES IS THE BRAINCHILD of Éilís O'Brien, the Director of Communications at University College Dublin. In her preface, she situates this collaborative work in a recent historical context of similar undertakings, including the appearance of the 2004 volume, *The UCD Aesthetic*, edited by Anthony Roche of the Department of English, Film and Drama, for the occasion of the university's sesquicentennial and the 2007 reading and concert in the National Concert Hall in Earlsfort Terrace which marked UCD's final departure from that address. The work has also appeared in the form of dramatic readings on stage in Kilmainham Gaol and other venues.

Emma Donoghue, Thomas Kilroy, Hugo Hamilton, et al.

SIGNATORIES

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The volume is one of many multi-media and collaborative artistic projects produced in the centenary year of The Easter Rising, and amid the proliferation of 1916 books it is understated and original in concept—a tribute to the seven men who signed the Proclamation, rendered in individual dramatic narratives written by prominent Irish writers. In addition to those listed above, the authors involved in the project include

Frank McGuinness, Rachel Fehily, Marina Carr, Éilís Ní Dhuibhne, and Joseph O'Connor (the latter two are better known for their prose, although both have plays to their credit.) Fehily, the only writer here who is not a household name, is a family law barrister who has written for the stage.

As is well known, the seven signatories, and others, all men, were executed in the aftermath of The Rising. The women who played prominent roles in the fighting were uniformly spared. Those who have devised *Signatories*, with its emphasis on documents—both the Proclamation and the subsequent letter of surrender of the rebels—have chosen to include a tribute to a woman who is more obscure than the flamboyant Constance Markievicz or the doughty Helena Molony. Nurse Elizabeth O'Farrell was a member of Cumann na mBan, and, like many of the women of 1916, carried messages in her voluminous skirts. In her case it was to various outposts of the rebellion informing them of Pearse's intention to surrender, a dangerous assignment which met with confused and problematical reaction. She was also rather famously, and literally, airbrushed out of the photographs of Pearse surrendering to Brigadier General William Lowe.

The book includes much useful apparatus apart from its preface. There is a director's note on the staged version by Patrick Mason (who is described here as an "honorary UCD man") and an introduction, *Imagining 1916: Writing and Memory*, by

Lucy Collins also of UCD's Department of English. Mason explains the limitations of the dramatic monologue that disallows the possibility of onstage interaction. Its countermanding strength is the intensity of focus it can produce in the theatre. Collins emphasizes the rebels' integration into the literary and publishing culture of the time and place, and reminds us that they all were writers who left us essays, memoirs and various creative works.

The eight dramatic narratives, composed by the writers and spoken by or about each of the signatories and Ms. O'Farrell in turn, are succinct—five to ten printed double-spaced pages each. There is, both on the book's jacket, and marking each chapter, a subtle, recurring motif of a pen and a gun—a nibbed fountain pen and a rifle, to be exact. Each chapter is introduced by the same photograph of the interior of Kilmainham Gaol.

Tom Kilroy's dramatization of Pearse's final hours focuses on psychological pressure points and biographical details he has explored in earlier work. These include self-loathing and a troubled sexuality, such as feature in *Double Cross*, his play about Brendan Bracken. Bracken-like as well is the problematizing of Pearse's mixed Irish-English parentage. Kilroy favors a reading of Pearse's heroics as an effort to overcome fear of homosexuality—not the first such interpretation and one in keeping with the era. The figure of Pearse, so different in temperament from Connolly, the other

acknowledged leader of The Rising, is referenced both in Kilroy's narrative and that of Hugo Hamilton's on Connolly that follows. Hamilton's oblique artistic response to commemoration takes the form here of a reminiscence by a woman remembering a domestic crisis during her Birmingham childhood when she and her siblings were rescued by their Irish child minder who was devoted to the memory of Connolly and regularly sang the children a song about him. Thus Connolly doesn't speak in his segment of *Signatories*, nor does Séan Mac Diarmada, at least not directly. The latter patriot's narrative is set at a time not long after The Rising, and spoken by his intended bride Min Ryan, who is now on the eve of marrying his comrade Richard Mulcahy. The reminiscence is not a threnody, but a retelling of the oddly light-hearted final meeting by the pair. Written by Éilís Ní Dhuibhne with a deft awareness of the unreality of these events in the lives of such young people, the writer weaves into her monologue the lyrics of the grisly Cromwellian ballad "Brian Boy Magee," which Mac Diarmada is documented as having sung on his final night before execution.

It is worthwhile to pause here to note that the playwrights involved in this project did not choose their patriot, but were each assigned one of the signatories. Emma Donoghue was asked to write lines to be spoken by O'Farrell, and the method she

chose, a reverie of her past role in the founding of the nation, which gave Mason, the director, a rubric which might serve to unite the divergent perspectives, tones and diction used by the team of writers.

Frank McGuinness' contribution to *Signatories* is the only one that bears a title. "Waged" is a monologue by Éamonn Ceannt, which puns slightly on the word "wage" and its dual meaning as noun and verb, particularly the idiomatic use in English in reference to waging war. His eschatological musings centre on four items that comprise the contents of his pockets—coins, a watch and chain, a rosary and the key to his house. This is one of the most pared and least emotive of the offerings in the collection, but is poignant in its reference to Ceannt's wife and son, as is the

very matter of fact and orderly representation of Thomas MacDonagh's final hour. The academic/poet offers his view that *The Rising* was not the stuff from which poetry could be made, but a much more prosaic affair. MacDonagh's thoughts, as imagined by Marina Carr, are unusual here in his recalling pleasurable moments and savored meals from his past including his time spent in Parisian cafes where he watched fashionable women pass by, and dinners of new lamb cooked by his mother.

Writer Joseph O'Connor's is the final pairing—with Joseph Mary Plunkett. O'Connor has an unlikely affinity with the upper crust Plunkett; and it should be noted that although McGuinness and Kilroy have produced historical drama, O'Connor alone

among the eight authors working here has written historical novels. This credential is transferrable to the task at hand in *Signatories*. O'Connor's Plunkett, hesitant, well dressed and well spoken, is allowed to break the fourth wall, suggesting that members of the audience probably aren't highbrow enough for Ibsen. In his monologue, as in others, it is the small things that niggle or are cause for regret or sorrow. Here Plunkett bemoans that during his ten-minute marriage to Grace Gifford, in his cell the night before the execution and in the presence of ten soldiers, he was not allowed to remove his handcuffs. The volume (and the stage performance) concludes starkly with the sound of a rifle shot and the image of Plunkett falling to the

ground.

Signatories is a worthy, if minor, project, appearing as it does in a welter of related publications. One quibble I would have, regarding a book with so much helpful apparatus, is the omission of the names of the eight actors who played the patriot roles in the stage production. In what was, in the first instance, a dramatic undertaking, such an oversight is more than regrettable. The publication itself will be of interest to those who follow the writing careers of any of the playwrights involved, and also for those who are engaged with the long tradition of the literary representation of figures from Ireland's historical past. •

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