LIKE MANY other Irish patriots, Thomas MacDonagh was of mixed ancestry. His father, Joseph, a Roscommon man whose own father had been a physical force man, had an understandable distrust of patriots. Joseph, given Latin and some education by a priest-uncle went to Marlborough Training College to become a teacher. In 1867, now a teacher in Cloghan, Co. Offaly, he met and married the principal teacher there, Mary Parker, a convert from Unitarianism whose father had come from England to Trinity College, Dublin, as a compositor in Greek at the University Press. She was musical, interested in painting, verse and Victorian music in a rather un-Gaelic way. In time, they came to Cloughjordan, Co. Tipperary, where their fourth child, Thomas, was born in 1878.

Thomas was sent to Rockwell College in 1892, with the hope, if things developed in that way, of eventually joining the Holy Ghost Order. It was the custom for such boys to remain on for four years after completing the secondary school course as prefect teachers before going to France to enter the novitiate. MacDonagh remained five years teaching classics, and while there he began to read widely in English, French and Latin literature. He developed a home-given interest in the organ and began seriously to write verse.

Deciding that his was not a vocation to the religious life, he left Rockwell to come as a secondary teacher to St. Kieran’s College, Kilkenny, in September 1901. He taught English to the junior grades and French to the senior ones. Keats and Wordsworth seemed to be his first interest and his enthusiasm for them was so infectious that traces of it have survived in his pupils for over sixty years. They remember, too, his handling of A Tale of Two Cities, and the romantic blood-bath of the French Revolution.

In St. Kieran’s at this time, Francis Sheehy Skeffington also taught. They lodged together in 19, High Street, at the home of Dr. White, physician to the College, and one of their pupils remembers them in contrast - the one, MacDonagh, small, stocky, neat, almost dapper, interested in rugby; the other bearded and untidy with a passion for long walks legendary among the students.

THE GAELIC LEAGUE

Dr. Douglas Hyde had given an address in Kilkenny towards the end of 1900, and from then can be dated the effective beginnings of the Gaelic League. It attracted the casual interest of a good many people, and the intense interest of a few. By December 1900, there were 103 members including the Bishop, Dr. Brownrigg, Captain Otway Cuffe, who with his sister-in-law Lady Desart was to do much for the city, some priests - the League President was a Professor of St. Kieran’s College - some of the members of the Corporation and a good cross-section of the population. The primary purpose of the League was to revive the Irish language in order to bring about a renewal in Irish life. Some time at the end of 1901 or early 1902, MacDonagh, with a few friends, went for a joke to a meeting of the Gaelic League, and the League made one of its most committed converts. On April 28, 1902, he was co-opted on to the League Committee, and in January, 1903, he was made Honorary Secretary. During the years 1902 and 1903 modest developments were made. Prayers in Irish were introduced in the Capuchin Church in Walkin Street, the Rosary in Irish was introduced by the President of the League, Father Dollard - to this Confraternity in St. Mary’s Cathedral.

But, most important of all - the organisation of the local branch was put on a surer foundation, with changes introduced in the rules governing the election and procedure of the governing committee (June 1902).

MacDonagh resigned as secretary from the Gaelic League Committee in Kilkenny in June 1903. A resolution of confidence was passed at a subsequent committee meeting leaving on record in the Minutes of the branch “our” opinion of his character and worth as a sterling Irishman, devoted heart and soul to the loftiest ideals of the Gaelic League, unselfish in his motive, kind, tactful and gentlemanly in his actions towards all, and absolutely fearless in the discharge of the duties which his position, as Secretary or Committee-man, imposed upon him, and “we assure him that he carries with him the deep respect and hearty good wishes of
every member of the committee”.
He remained teaching his Irish classes and before he left Kilkenny he presented to the League library his two published books of verse, *Through the Ivory Gate* (1903) and *April and May* (1903). He left behind him in Kilkenny, as he did everywhere else, people with extraordinarily vivid memories of him, pupils in St. Kieran’s and in the Gaelic League, many of whom still remember him with the freshness of recent acquaintance, as a pleasant person, charming, enthusiastic, volatile and kind. In September, 1903, MacDonagh began teaching in St. Colman’s College in Fermoy.

**A MODEST FULFILMENT**
The Gaelic League was stronger in Fermoy, and he was near the Munster Gaeltacht, and in his teaching, in his mastery of Irish at the League and at the Munster Training College in the summer, in his growing contacts with the Anglo-Irish writers in Dublin, with Colum, Stephens and Yeats, and in his writing he found, temporarily, a modest fulfilment. In 1906, a book of poems *The Golden Joy* was published. Like his earlier books it did not receive the acclaim his friends thought it deserved, though there were a few favourable notices in English and Scottish papers, and in Ireland only in *Moran’s Leader*.

By the end of 1906 he was writing to his friend, Dominic Hackett from Kilkenny: “I mean to leave Fermoy next summer, if I at all can, and probably Ireland too. I can more easily get work in London, I think, than in Dublin, and there is no other place possible. This place has become a horror to me ... I fear that if I lived another year here I should become impossible as a friend to anyone”.

Of course, he did not go to London. He found a new enthusiasm. The only hope for saving Irish was the bilingual school - and in 1908 he joined Patrick Pearse, with whom he had been in contact since his Kilkenny days, on the teaching staff of St. Enda’s, Rathfarnham. He threw himself with much gusto into what was to be a constantly precarious educational experiment. His success there was undoubted, as was his success as a teacher everywhere. Desmond Ryan, one of his pupils, leaves an unforgettable pen-picture of MacDonagh at St. Enda’s. “Thomas MacDonagh, his hands in easy gesture, talking thirteen to the dozen, and laughing with his quick staccato laugh . . he promises every boy the most certain and amazing progress in every subject on the programme in less than a week, having learned Italian in that time himself with the aid of a dictionary, his Latin and his days in Paris”.

The Abbey Theatre produced in 1908 a play which MacDonagh had written in Fermoy *When the Dawn is Come*, on which he placed high hopes of success. In theme it fore-shadows, curiously, the Easter Rising. It was set in an Ireland of the future where an English army is faced by an Irish one commanded by seven Captains. The play centres around a Leader “a subtle, Hamlet-like character”, MacDonagh calls him - “whose motives are questioned by his comrade Captains, but proves in death his loyalty to the National Cause”. It was not a success, wrote MacDonagh, “being badly performed and misunderstood”.

About 1910, the old pessimism, which had enveloped him in Fermoy, returned. Surely an unhappy love affair must have had something to do with it. There were possible causes too, the lack of instant literary success, the loss of hope in the renewal of National life he had worked for since his Kilkenny days, and the lack of practical sympathy with and the occasional open opposition shown to the Irish Ireland Movement by powerful elements in the Church and in the old Irish Party. One thing is certain, MacDonagh went through a personal crisis hinted at constantly in *Songs of Myself* published in 1910. The verse in *Songs of Myself* is gloomy, preoccupied with staleness, emptiness, loss of youth and death. Some idea of his themes is given in the last poem of the book, *Envoi:*

*I send these creatures to lay a ghost,*

*And not to raise up fame”*  

*For I shrink from the way that they go almost As I shrink from the way that they came.*
But I whose creed is only death,
Do not prize their victory,
I know that my life is but a breath On the glass of eternity.
So I send on their way with this crude rime These creatures of bitter truth,
Not to raise up fame for a future time.
But to lay the ghost of my youth.

It was in this book that one of his best known poems, John John appears. In the summer of 1910 he went to Paris “in search of freedom”, and with a vague intention of becoming a painter. “I shall go my way alone . . . the old things that were mixed up with life in Ireland for me have died, and have left neither desire nor regret. But Paris did not suit him. He found that he had little talent as a painter, and he returned to Dublin where he lived “a kind of semi-detached life at a gate lodge of Mr. David Houston’s House in the Dublin hills”, while still teaching at St. Enda’s. Houston left him on his own, enabling him to become the “quaint recluse who delighted in company”.

A TURNING POINT
It was a house where many writers congregated - Padraig Colum, James Stephens and Seamus O’Sullivan - and soon MacDonagh became a constant visitor to the literary salons in Dublin. It was at A.E.’s salon that he was introduced to three Nationalist daughters of a Dublin Unionist called Gifford with “I want you to fall in love with one of these girls”. “That will be easy”, said MacDonagh, “the only difficulty will be to decide which”. In time MacDonagh made up his mind, and it was Muriel Gifford he married in January 1912. His marriage, a successful one, was one of the turning points of his life. He began studies in the National University, and in 1911 he graduated with an M.A. with a recommendation to expand his thesis “Thomas Campion and the Art of English Verse” for a Doctorate. In 1911 he was appointed lecturer at University College, Dublin, and had begun to show unusual academic promise. At this time, too, he was an associate editor of The Irish Review with Houston, Stephens and Colum, and after a time, Joseph Mary Plunkett whom he had first met in 1909 as a student of Irish. In time with Edward Martin and Plunkett, he founded his Irish Theatre in Hardwicke Street to produce plays not produced by the Abbey. He was still writing prolific verse, some of which he published in 1916. Alienated as MacDonagh seemed to be in 1910 from sympathy with the Irish people and from belief in their religion, he found in the active and hopeful involvement with the Irish Volunteers and the I.R.B. a way of returning, of becoming one again with the people. It brought him back, too, to his Catholic faith. Nationalism was clothed with the Christian garments of baptism, suffering, death and resurrection.

MacDonagh never seems to have been involved directly in any political party. From his days in Kilkenny he was in general agreement with the policies of Sinn Féin, but this never excluded the possibility of his supporting a reorganised and revitalized Irish party. “Many of us”, he wrote to Hackett in May 1909, “who are out of tune with modern parliamentary ways, are attracted by the truth of much put forward by Sinn Féin, but if tomorrow, a strong Home Rule Party existed, with Parnell’s tactics and strategy, Sinn Féin would die, I believe”. He was constantly commenting on the pitiable state of Irish politics.

At the inaugural meeting of the Irish Volunteers, November 1913, MacDonagh was elected a member of the Provisional Committee, and given command of the Second Dublin Battalion. He attended the great volunteer parade that followed O’Donovan Rossa to the cemetery. He had found himself at last. “The Movement is spreading”, he wrote to Hackett in January 1914, “we have with us our whole generation”. He threw himself into the work with great gusto, almost with glee, training his battalion, wearing “a long military cloak, swift-moving, gay and witty”. “I have found a great thing to do in and with life, outside the very real and wonderful interest that a wife and two children
give me”, he wrote to Hackett (May 1915). “I am fifteen years younger than when you saw me last, or rather I was, a little before you saw me last, for half of it is due to my marriage. Ireland is all right. What is left to us is healthy, and full of hope. and self-confidence. When I marched the Irish Volunteers down the road from Clontarf on the heels of the British soldiers, I was sure that things would come our way rapidly. I work hard every day at Volunteer work. I am a member of the General Council of the Central Executive of the Headquarters Staff. I am Commander of the Second Branch of the Dublin Brigade, and Senior Officer of the Brigade Council.

“In addition to the work done in all these capacities, I am Director-General of Training for the whole country, and have to keep a staff working to direct that department. But the work, half like that of a Cabinet Minister, and half like that of a Regular Military Officer, is wonderfully interesting and exhilarating. Our people are nowhere against us. The Redmondites give us arms and ammunition knowing that they do not want them. The young priests are with us. We have given an ideal and enthusiasm to the young boys and girls of Ireland, such as you and I did not get . . . Ireland is all right”.

THE RISING

MacDonagh, already aware of the plan for an early Rising and a member of the I.R.B. since 1915, was coopted as a member of the Military Council of the I.R.B. in April 1916. He became one of the signatories of the Easter Proclamation. He was in command of the garrison in Jacob’s Factory during Easter Week, which because of circumstances did not see much active service. He refused to surrender at first when news of Pearse’s surrender was brought to him believing the end of the European War was at hand, and hoping that a prolonged rising would strengthen the Irish case at a subsequent peace conference. He eventually surrendered, with clear knowledge that his execution would result. On May 3, 1916, with Pearse and Clarke, the first of the martyrs of Easter Week, he was shot in Kilmainham Jail.

What of the personality of Thomas MacDonagh? He was certainly gifted. Frank O’Connor called him “an adventurer in letters, like a seventeenth century Irish gentleman in the French or Spanish army; the outline of a great man, without the intellectual substance”. “In private”, wrote James Stephens, “I have seldom known a man in whom the instinct for friendship was so true; no one who was so prepared to use himself in the service of a friend. It was his death that gave him his claim to greatness”.

“They all died well”, a British witness of the executions of 1916 observed, “but MacDonagh died like a prince”.

Writer, dreamer, poet, teacher, aspiring politician and political martyr, MacDonagh with his “bony thumb” has put his mark on Irish history as did the other men of Easter Week, not the mark that he had hoped to put, nor the mark he foresaw he might put. From what well sprang MacDonagh’s urge to political activity and personal sacrifice? Was it the urge to ultimate power over men which can obsess the gifted academic, or the urge to a vicarious immortality through martyrdom in a great cause, or was it something more noble and difficult - the demands of duty cutting across the grain of personality? Perhaps the answer is found in his best-known poem, first written in Kilkenny on the death of Willie Rooney.

*His song were a little phrase Of eternal song*
*Drowned in the harping of lays More loud and long.*
*His deed was a single word Called out alone*
*In the night when no echo stirred To laughter or moan.*
*But his songs new soul shall thrill The loud harps dumb And his deed the echoes fill When the dawn is come!*