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# **INTRODUCTION**

# **W.R. RODGERS PAPERS**

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# W.R. Rodgers Papers (D2833)

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## Summary

W.R. "Bertie" Rodgers occupies an important place in a generation of Ulster writers which included John Hewitt, Louis MacNeice, Roy McFadden, Sam Hanna Bell and Michael MacLaverty. Although Rodgers was first and probably best known as a poet, he was also a literary figure in the widest sense, being a prose essayist, a book reviewer, a radio broadcaster and script writer, a lecturer and, latterly, a teacher.



## **Biographical background**

Rodgers's career spans an amazing series of professional and cultural transformations. He was born in Belfast in 1909 and grew up in Mountpottinger in the east of the city. He showed a talent for writing at school and went on to read English at Queen's University where he won a number of prizes for his literary essays. On completion of his degree, he entered Theological College and was ordained as a Presbyterian minister in 1935. His first "call" was to Cloveneden church, Loughgall, County Armagh where he was minister for 12 years. In 1936 he married Marie Harden Waddell, a medical doctor who set up practice in the village. His wife became ill (later diagnosed as schizophrenia) and the couple left Loughgall temporarily in 1943, she to seek treatment under the pioneering Jungian analyst Dr John Layard, he to write in Oxford. Rodgers returned to Loughgall after a year but resigned from his ministry in 1946 to take up post at the BBC in London as a script writer for the newly established "Third" programme. {D. O'Brien W.R. Rodgers (Cranbury, New Jersey, 1970)} He stayed at the BBC as a full-time producer and script writer till 1953 when he went free-lance. {PRONI D2833/E/9, Rodgers to Mansfield, 4 August 1968.} Rodgers's wife died in 1953, following a period of illness after she herself had been studying psychoanalysis in Edinburgh. In the same year he married Marianne Gilliam (née Helweg) the ex-wife of his immediate boss in the BBC, Lawrence Gilliam. They resided in England till 1966 when Rodgers secured a post as writer in residence at Pitzer College, Claremont, California and later a lecturing post at California State Polytechnic. He died in 1969 in Los Angeles and was buried at Loughgall.

W.R. Rodgers published two volumes of poetry: 'Awake! and Other Poems' (London, 1941) and 'Europa and the Bull' (London, 1952) and two volumes of prose: 'Ireland in Colour' (London, 1957) and 'Essex Roundabout' (Colchester, 1963). His standing as a literary figure was based on his poetry, particularly on 'Awake!' which was given glowing reviews in Britain and America and on his highly innovative series of radio broadcasts on Irish literary figures: Irish literary portraits. Rodgers held a number of important public positions in the arts world. He was elected a life member of the Irish Academy of Letters in 1951 to fill the vacancy caused by the death of George Bernard Shaw and was a member of the Literature and Poetry Panel of the Arts Council of Great Britain and a board member of the Arts Council of Northern Ireland. {ibid.} In 1968 he was awarded a life annuity of £100 by the Dublin Arts Council 'as an acknowledgement of your distinction in letters and of the honour which your literary work has reflected on this country'.{O'Brien, op. cit. p.7.}

There was a major hiatus in Rodgers's output as a poet after the publication of 'Europa' in 1952. His period in California seems to have spurred him to write poetry again and he intended to publish a third volume of verse. Although his output of other written work such as prose essays, radio scripts and radio talks and lectures was prolific, there were a number of major unfinished literary projects, particularly "The Character of Ireland" (a compilation of essays on all aspects of Irish life and culture which he was to co-edit with Louis MacNeice), and a project to publish edited versions of his broadcast "portraits" as an oral history of the Irish literary movement, c.1890-c.1940. He received a grant from the Chapelbrook Foundation of Boston, Mass, USA, for the oral history project, but when he died only the preface was

completed. This work was finished by his widow Marianne and published by the BBC as Irish Literary Portraits (London, 1972). However the published work is not a complete collection of all the portraits omitting, for example, the portrait of Dr Richard Best, Gaelic scholar, linguist and librarian at the National Library mentioned by name in Joyce's Ulysses. The importance of the W.R. Rodgers papers lies in the fact that they fill in such gaps. Moreover the broadcast and published versions of the scripts only represent a small and very well edited tip of an extremely large iceberg. Rodgers himself said 'the broadcast scripts are only a part; for instance, the one hour broadcast on The Easter Rising represents fourteen hours of recorded talk'. {PRONI D2833/D/9, op. cit.}

The career of W.R. Rodgers vigorously resists confinement in any narrow context. Rather, his achievements interact across a variety of contexts in different spheres of life and letters. He is perhaps most significant in the context of Ulster writing. Rodgers was one of a series of writers from a protestant background, such as Sir Samuel Ferguson, William Lynd, John Hewitt and Louis MacNeice, who dissented or radically differed from expected norms. Conor Cruise O'Brien said of him: 'Bertie Rodgers was an Ulster Presbyterian who sought and enjoyed the company of Southern Catholics. The case is not unique: it remains unusual. .... He was, among so much else, a good Dubliner and Dublin loved him. '{Introduction to Irish Literary Portraits pp. ix-x.} His prose essay Black north (D2833/D/10/1) and his poem Home thoughts from abroad (D2833/B/1/UC/1) are very good examples of Rodgers commenting critically on events in Northern Ireland from his position as an "exile".

Good Dubliner or not, Rodgers also involved himself in the Regionalist movement among Ulster writers in the 1940s and 50s given most vivid expression in the poetry and prose of his life-long friend, John Hewitt. Indeed it was the "phenomenal" international success of 'Awake!' stimulating a widespread interest in Ulster writing, which encouraged local writers to consider forming a distinctive literary movement. {T. Clyde "A stirring in the dry bones: John Hewitt's regionalism" in The Poet's Place (eds G. Dawe and J. W. Foster, Belfast, 1991).} Rodgers corresponded frequently with Hewitt on the subject of Ulster writing and contributed to various journals which were used as a vehicle for the regionalist movement such as Lagan, The Bell and Rann. Although probably less "sold" on the regionalist concept than Hewitt, in much of his writing Rodgers exhibits an interest in the people and landscape of Ulster and Ireland generally which goes beyond the realms of theory and ideas to examine the customs of the people with the sensitivity of the anthropologist or folklorist. This provides a second context for his work: that of a writer describing Ireland on the eve of the changes engendered by mass ownership of motor cars and televisions. This is evident in his own work, where there are frequent examples of his ability to pick up the minutiae of nuances of speech and behaviour and set them in the overall context of their place, time and history. This is as true for his broadcasts about his own childhood in Mountpottinger as it is for his recording trips to the west of Ireland. His correspondence with leading figures in the Irish Folklore Commission and his interest in the translation of Gaelic stories emphasize his importance as a social chronicler at a time when great changes were on the horizon.

At another level, Rodgers's career can be seen as one of great innovations. His work at the BBC should be seen in the context of the history of radio broadcasting as well as the more obvious interest to be derived from the subject matter. Because of his

growing literary reputation, Rodgers was approached by Louis MacNeice and offered a post at the newly established "Third" programme in 1946. In his preface to *Irish Literary Portraits*, Rodgers said of this period: 'Sound radio was expanding, experiment was in the air, and with the inception of the BBC "Third" Programme a sort of Indian Summer of the imagination evolved. Under Laurence Gilliam a group of writers and producers and skilled engineers were encouraged to explore the possibilities of sound in all its aspects in the air'. {*Irish Literary Portraits* Preface p.xi.} Rodgers's main contribution in this area was in the development of a system of editing transcriptions of tape recorded interviews (known as telediphones) and juxtaposing the edited sections together to make a "portrait" comprised of a symposium of memories held together by Rodgers's own narration. This system was widely imitated and became known as the "Rodgers technique" in radio circles. {O'Brien, op. cit. p.61.} Rodgers considered the subject matter of the literary portraits to be his major achievement: 'My most intensive and significant work over the past twenty years has been in recording material about the Irish Literary Movement, the oral reminiscences of men and women who knew Yeats, Joyce, Gogarty, Synge, AE, Moore, the Abbey Theatre, etc. or who were involved in the Easter Rising of 1916'. {PRONI D2833/E/9, op. cit.} It is perhaps in this aspect of his work that his importance as an oral historian, particularly of literary Dublin, is best illustrated.



## **The Papers**

### ***Arrangement of the Archive***

W.R. Rodgers believed in the indivisibility of life and letters. His papers reflected this and presented some problems of categorisation because of their extent and miscellaneous nature. A compromise arrangement between a biographical, chronological approach and one which focused on the various literary genres was eventually adopted. The correspondence within the archive has been sorted into specific categories where it clearly relates to a specific subject. Where this is not so, it has been given a general, chronological arrangement. Researchers who are interested in specific literary figures should note that where a letter related to a particular subject and where Rodgers kept the letter in one of his subject folders, this arrangement has been maintained. For example, although there are many letters from John Hewitt in the Irish literary correspondence section, the researcher interested in Hewitt should scan the list as other letters are located elsewhere. Moreover, researchers interested in Rodgers's work on specific subjects should also be aware that he would sometimes use the same subject/material to produce different types of work, for example he wrote radio scripts using and commenting on his own poetry. Therefore anyone interested in the poetry section would be well advised to check in the scripts section as well. In the sections containing creative material the following convention was adopted: papers relating to a particular poem or subject were arranged so that the fairest copy and most complete version came first, to be followed by drafts, corrected and amended copies, notes and working papers.



### ***Presbyterianism and Poetry***

The Presbyterian ministry section (D2833/A) contains material which, in addition to illustrating the concerns and interests of a rural minister, is of interest when considering Rodgers's subsequent career. For example there are notes for a sermon preached to local Orange men on the eve of the Second World War (D2833/A/3/1). The poetry section (D2833/B) is arranged, as far as possible, according to the sequence of publication in 'Awake!' and 'Europa'. This section also contains mss of poems which were not in either of the above volumes or in the 'Collected Poems' (ed D. Davin, Oxford, 1971). Some of these poems were published in magazines but others are probably unpublished. This section also contains a printer's copy of Rodgers's collected poems with MS comments and glosses by the Irish poet James Stephens.



## **Correspondence**

Rodgers's standing in Irish literature is reflected in the range of correspondents in the Irish literary correspondence section (D2833/C/1).

Austin Clarke and John Hewitt are especially well represented. It should be noted that the Hewitt letters dovetail chronologically with a deposit of Rodgers's letters to Hewitt in the John Hewitt papers (PRONI ref. D3838/3/17). As noted above, other Hewitt material pops up under different subjects. Of particular interest is a long letter in the miscellaneous section where Hewitt criticizes Darcy O'Brien's biography to Rodgers's widow and illustrates his points with personal recollections. The general correspondence section (D2833/G/37) illustrates Rodgers's involvement in the wider world of English literature. Of particular interest are a run of wartime in-letters from Cyril Connolly and Stephen Spender, co-editors of the influential London literary magazine *Horizon*. The material in the Irish literary portraits section (D2833/D/1) is kept in Rodgers's original arrangement and reflects the rich accumulation of source material he used to fashion the programmes from - correspondence, fully transcribed interviews and notes of conversation and anecdote - much more fully than the published version of the scripts. The material for the Easter Rising broadcast "Old Ireland Free" is probably of the most interest as it contains many transcriptions of interviews with eye-witnesses and participants and includes descriptions of events in Ulster.



## **Radio, television and the stage**

John Hewitt told a story of Rodgers, when pressed for cash, writing impromptu a short radio talk to pay the bill. The "Talks" sections (D2833/D/6-8) represent different forms of this genre ranging from the informal, comic and chatty talks for the BBC's "Today" programme to more serious talks on Irish subjects, some of which are of great biographical interest such as "A Dublin Visit" and "First visit to Dublin" (D2833/D/7/2). There is a close association between Rodgers's radio talks and his prose essays, indeed some of the talks, such as "Speak and Span" (D2833/D/7/1) were also published as prose essays (D2833/D/10/7). The section on plays (D2833/D/11) contains a surprising variety of types of play, ranging from Rodgers's own highly acclaimed version of the verse drama (a new form pioneered by MacNeice) to his autobiographical "Return Room", about his childhood in Mountpottinger. Moreover, this section also contains material which shows Rodgers made tentative ventures into writing for the stage and television.

The "Character of Ireland" section is one of the richest in the archive. At the death of MacNeice in 1963, all of the contributions and some of the correspondence appears to have devolved to Rodgers. In many cases edited versions of the various essays are also available. The correspondence is of particular interest as it is often of a dual nature: contributors to Rodgers then

Rodgers to general editor. This allows some strong personal opinions to be expressed. Moreover, some of the contributors' correspondence relates to issues felt to be contentious or sensitive, particularly regarding the chapter on the church in Ireland.



### ***Rodgers in America***

A selection of Rodgers's American material has been included. It supplements some of the Irish literary material, as Rodgers used his oral history tapes, his personal knowledge and his experience as a working poet as a teaching resource. Additionally it provides a further biographical dimension as the landing of Rodgers, an ex-Presbyterian minister from Co. Armagh and senior Irish literary figure into California in 1966 on the eve of the "Summer of Love" and at the height of the anti-Vietnam war campaign is extraordinary to say the least. Rodgers's arrival in California is also interesting because it triggered off a new period of poetic activity. Rodgers's method of composition had ramifications for the way parts of the archive have been arranged. 'The poems don't come like the bird from the bough' he told an Essex journalist. 'The lines of the poems are like bricks - if you have a sense of architecture, you can put them together... . It is not uncommon for a whole notebook to be filled with abortive but determined attempts at creation for only four lines of poetry to be born.'{PRONI D2833/G/26} Rodgers did not exaggerate. The archive contains many such notebooks and loose papers containing lines of poetry, ideas for poems or scripts, fragments of conversations or anecdotes. To try to keep the architecture clear of the bricks, most of this material is located in the notes and notebooks section (D2833/F) on the basis that, although much of the material cannot immediately be related to particular poems, essays or scripts, a keen literary scholar may well be able quarry some salient detail about the poetry or the poet.



### ***Collector of manuscripts***

As well as being a collector of anecdote and conversation, Rodgers was a collector of manuscripts. The miscellaneous section (D2833/G) contains a surprising variety of literary and non-literary material including mss. by the Young Irelander, John Mitchell and his sister Henrietta and poetry and prose mss. (in Greek) by the Irish poet Thomas Moore - of "Moore's Melodies" fame. However, perhaps of most interest for anyone studying Rodgers's poetry, are copies of the "dream books" considered by his biographer as giving insight into the mind of the poet. {O'Brien op. cit. p.45} It should be noted that D2833 does not represent the complete papers of W.R. Rodgers. The University of Texas holds a collection deposited by his widow in 1969, a catalogue of which is available under D2833/E/14. There is some degree of overlap with published and broadcast material but, because much of D2833 is manuscript or typescript with manuscript emendations, the two collections should be seen as

complementing rather than duplicating one another regarding Rodgers's creative work. However, for biographical and related interest material, D2833 is unique.

