

PAUL HENRY: AN IRISH PORTRAIT

Paul Henry (1876–1958) was one of the most influential artists to work in Ireland during the first decades of this century. Along with Walter Osborne, Jack B. Yeats and Sean Keating in the South and John Lavery and William Conor in the North, his is one of the few 'household' names among the list of Irish painters. To a considerable extent he founded single-handedly what one might call the Irish school of landscape painting. Certainly, he largely fostered the popular view of the Irish landscape, a view which fitted well with the social aspirations of the times. Moreover, as with the work of many influential artists—Constable in Suffolk, Cézanne in Provence, for example—once one has seen a 'Paul Henry' it is difficult to visit the west of Ireland and not to see it through his eyes. But, paradoxically, perhaps in part due to his early popularity and because his is a type of painting until recently out of fashion, it is only now that we have begun seriously to consider the importance and nature of his influence on Irish art.

Henry's principal contribution to Irish art was twofold: first, and most important, by the example of his early work he encouraged an interest in *avant-garde* painting, in Modernism, at a time when it was frowned upon. Second, through the Society of Dublin Painters, which he helped to found in 1920, he created, for the first time in Ireland, a forum where the more experimental artists, who were usually ignored by the Royal Hibernian Academy and other exhibiting bodies, could show their work. Reflecting on attitudes in Ireland towards *avant-garde* painting at that time, Henry later commented: "The French Impressionist movement," and, we might add, its aftermath, "which had left such a mark upon the whole of European Painting, had passed without leaving a ripple . . . upon the complacent self satisfaction of this country".¹ The expressions 'Modernism' and 'Modern Movement' are omnibus terms used to embrace those *avant-garde* tendencies, prevalent in the visual arts in the first half of this century, to which most of those artists subscribed. Generally speaking, the terms are regarded as representing the main stream of development in Western art from the time of Manet and include Impressionism, Post-Impressionism, Symbolism, Expressionism, Cubism, Surrealism and their der-

While it is sixteen years since a retrospective exhibition was held in Ireland of the paintings of Paul Henry, the prices of his pictures have increased dramatically and his work is widely known. Here, **Dr. Brian Kennedy**, who is preparing a biography of Henry, describes the artist's career and the influences upon him, and evaluates his contribution to Irish art.

ivatives. Essentially, Modernism marked an abrupt break with tradition and those artists who embraced it eschewed established forms of representational painting and concerned themselves with a more ideological and reflexive approach, in particular emphasizing qualities of the medium, of process and technique. Modernism represented the main thrust of development in the arts until about the late 1960s. It is therefore only now that we are able to view it as a historical phenomenon.

Ireland is usually regarded as having been late in encountering the Modern Movement; but this in fact was not so and for a time, at the end of the last century and the beginning of this one, a number of Irish men and women were in the vanguard of the new art. George Moore, for example, who was in Paris during the 1870s, knew several of the leading painters of the time and was one of their first champions;² Edward Martyn brought works by Degas and Monet³ to Ireland in the 1880s, and Sarah Purser, who had studied at the Académie Julian in the late 1870s numbered Degas and Forain amongst her acquaintances. Also, *avant-garde* paintings were widely exhibited in Dublin earlier than in many larger centres, including either London or New York. Indeed, so much was the case that we might note here the main exhibitions of such works in Ireland during what were Paul Henry's formative years. In 1884, the year of the first *Salon des Indépendants* in Paris, James McNeill Whistler exhibited twenty-six works, including several of his then notorious 'Nocturnes', at the annual exhibition of the Dublin Sketching Club,⁴ and in 1899 George Russell (AE), in the hope of stimulating the development of a genuinely Irish school of painting—significantly, Irish art was little affected by either

the rise of Irish nationalism in the nineteenth century or the Literary Revival at the turn of this century—organized an exhibition of modern paintings in Dublin which included works by Daumier, Degas, Manet, Monet, Whistler and others.⁵ Russell hoped to do for the visual arts what the writers of the Revival had done for the literary arts. He felt that to achieve his purpose, rather than encourage the exhibition of works by only the foremost Irish artists, which would have been chauvinistic, one should exhibit the best of contemporary painting from outside Ireland, particularly from France, so as to provide a yardstick by which the native artists could measure themselves. Alas, his objective, at least as he envisaged it, was never reached and the whole business of the 'Irishness of Irish Art' has been an issue of debate amongst artists and historians ever since. In 1904 Hugh Lane, also in an attempt to stimulate a genuinely Irish school of painting, brought to the Royal Hibernian Academy many pictures from the celebrated collection of James Staats Forbes (1823–1904), an English railway manager and connoisseur, and thus set in motion the well-known events which led to the foundation in 1908 of the Dublin Municipal Gallery of Modern Art. Forbes's collection was particularly rich in paintings of the French Barbizon School and included numerous Corots. Lane obtained favourable terms for the purchase of many of the works exhibited provided that they went to a public gallery.⁶ In 1906 Lane brought French Impressionist pictures, including several of his disputed Continental pictures, to Belfast's Municipal Art Gallery,⁷ while in 1911 Ellen Duncan organized a show of works by contemporary French painters at the United Arts Club in Dublin,⁸ and the following year she brought to the same venue the first Cubist pictures to be seen in Ireland. Unfortunately neither the catalogue nor reviews of the exhibition enable us to identify the works shown on this occasion;⁹ all we know is that they included works by Picasso, Gris, Marchand and Herbin. The first two names especially, however, suggest that they included some of the latest innovations. By comparison, London had to wait until Roger Fry's exhibitions, 'Manet and the Post-Impressionists', held in 1910–11 and 'Second Post-Impressionist Exhibition',

PAUL HENRY: AN IRISH PORTRAIT

held in 1912, before it saw such works in large numbers; and the so-called 'Armory' show held in New York in 1913 was the first occasion on which modern art was seen there in quantity. Yet for all this activity on the part of a few individuals there was almost complete apathy in the Irish public for modern art and the Royal Hibernian Academy, despite Lane's efforts to help it in a number of ways, steadfastly refused to have anything to do with Modernism. Such, indeed, was to be its stance even until our own times.

For his part Paul Henry adopted an almost Post-Impressionist manner and he was the first Irish artist to do so. The main influences on him were the nineteenth century French painter of peasant life, Jean François Millet, Van Gogh and the American-born painter, James McNeill Whistler, whom he met in Paris. He first became acquainted with Millet as a boy in Belfast through Alfred Sensier's biography¹⁰ and later saw his pictures for himself in Paris, where he also saw those of Van Gogh whose bold brush-work and strength of colour impressed him. But Whistler, through his emphasis on closely modulated tones and the more abstract qualities of the composition, had the greatest and the most lasting influence on him. Whistler's influence first dominated his early work, which comprised mainly illustrations for books and journals and occasional charcoal drawings of landscape (none of his early oils appears to have survived), done in the first decade of this century when he was living and working in London; but when he first went to Achill Island, in 1910, the life of the peasant community there recalled Millet who was his inspiration for the next ten years. Thereafter, until the late twenties, traces of Whistler predominate. These influences represent the two poles of his mature art, namely, from 1910–19, *genre* scenes of peasant life; and, from about 1920–21, landscape, increasingly devoid of figures. For the art historian the main problem in unravelling Paul Henry's career is to elucidate the development of these two aspects of his art and to chart his later treatment of landscape.

The main events in Henry's life are well-known, principally from his two published autobiographies, *An Irish Portrait* and *Further Reminiscences*.¹¹ Henry was born at 61 University Road, Belfast, in 1876, the third of four sons of the Rev.

Robert Mitchell Henry (d. 1891) and his wife Ann Berry (d. 1928). His eldest brother, R.M. Henry (1873–1950), was also well-known, having been a professor of Latin at Queen's University, Belfast, from 1907–38, a prominent advocate of Home Rule for Ireland and the author of *The Evolution of Sinn Fein* (Dublin, Talbot Press, n.d.). Life in the Henry household was rather severe and the Rev. Henry's strictly observed Protestant fundamentalism ensured a rigorous code of discipline which was maintained even after his death. Writing towards the end of his life in *Further Reminiscences*, Paul recalled that as children he and his brothers were 'held together' by a kind of parental despotism. They were not allowed to mix with or even to speak to other children. 'We "were not as other children" . . . we were like four "infant Samuels";' he said. In no other way could he explain the efforts that were made by his parents to keep them 'unspotted' from the world.¹² It is not surprising, therefore, that he later rebelled against this background and, once having left Belfast 'with only a scanty handful of regrets',¹³ as he puts it, never again lived there. But he admired other aspects of his father's character and in later life was grateful to him for the discipline of the 'compulsory' walks which he took with his children in the country, especially by the river Lagan, for these gave him a lasting preference for country over city life.

While still at school Paul Henry studied art for a time under Thomas Bond Walker (1861–1933), a well-known portrait painter in Belfast. He then spent a year or so at the local college of art before going to Paris about 1898, the latter visit being made possible by the generosity of his cousin (Sir) John Henry MacFarland (1851–1935), a prominent educationalist and sometime chancellor of Melbourne University, who paid his way. In Paris he studied art for two or three years, first at the Académie Julian, where sound academic draughtsmanship was emphasized in the teaching and, secondly, at Whistler's Académie Carmen, where he learned to modulate tones in the manner characteristic of his later work. Henry clearly impressed Whistler who, in September 1899, suggested that, of the students, he should be given the job of looking after the routine financial affairs of the academy.¹⁴

Whether he was in fact offered this job is unknown and it would, perhaps, have been contrary to his inclinations to accept it. Moreover, from about that time, with his funds running short, he became conscious of the need to earn his living and so about 1900–01 he moved to London and for a number of years did black and white illustrations for publication in books, magazines and newspapers. While in Paris he had met the Scottish painter, Grace Mitchell (1868–1953), and they were married in September 1903. Together the Henrys shared lodgings in London with Robert Lynd,¹⁵ whom Paul had known at school in Belfast, until the latter's marriage to the writer, Sylvia Dryhurst (1888–1952), in 1909. Lynd and his bride spent their honeymoon on Achill Island and, on hearing their enthusiasm for the island when they returned, Paul and Grace Henry decided to go and see the place for themselves. Thus they first visited Achill probably in the summer of 1910 and they stayed there for almost a year. In 1912 they settled on Achill and, apart from painting forays and visits to Belfast and other parts of the country, it was their home until late in 1919 when they moved to Dublin. However during the mid-twenties their marriage went sour, Grace had a brief flirtation with another man and in 1924 Paul met Mabel Young who had recently come from England to work in the Shelbourne Hotel. In 1930, after protracted legal negotiations, they separated—they were never divorced—and Paul and Mabel Young settled in Enniskerry, Co. Wicklow, where they lived until the 1950s. Grace, sadly, spent the rest of the '30s wandering alone; she painted from time to time in France and Italy but on the outbreak of war in 1939 returned to Ireland to live in an assortment of hotels, guesthouses and, occasionally, with her friends. She died in August 1953 and Paul then married Mabel Young. Paul Henry died on 24 August 1958 and Mabel, his second wife, died in 1974.

While the main events in Paul Henry's life are, as we have said, well known, the difficulty for the biographer arises in trying to extend the known facts, for Henry had scant regard either for the details of his personal life or for the chronology of his paintings, which he nearly always signed but rarely dated. The task, therefore, is twofold: firstly, one must construct an accurate and detailed chrono-

PAUL HENRY: AN IRISH PORTRAIT

logy of his life and career; and, secondly, one must try to match the body of his work with that chronology. Henry was egocentric and occasionally used artistic licence with historical facts in the same way as he might have done in a painted composition. Only a small handful of dates are mentioned in his two autobiographies, and these must be treated with caution, and neither Grace Mitchell nor Mabel Young is mentioned in either book, although *An Irish Portrait* is dedicated to the latter. Moreover both books deal with his career only until about 1920 or so. Next to his years in Paris, the biggest event in Paul Henry's life undoubtedly was his first visit to Achill. In an early draft of *An Irish Portrait* he tells us that this took place in 1913, but the book itself states 1912.¹⁶ However, in an advance notice of the exhibition 'Paintings of Irish Life: Mr. & Mrs. Paul Henry', held at Pollock's Gallery, Belfast, in March 1911, the *Northern Whig* noted that both Paul and Grace Henry had recently been on Achill "for close on a year . . . living amongst the people and getting to know them."¹⁷ Henry, in fact, went to Achill for a fortnight's holiday which he hoped to finance with a sort of roving commission from the *Graphic* and the magazine *Black and White* to prepare drawings for illustrations of the country and its people. But, with artistic licence, he later wrote in *An Irish Portrait* that once on Achill he wanted to stay there. "I had never planned anything," he said. "I always felt the urge of life should not be impeded and frustrated, and so far I had just drifted on the currents of life . . . I made another of my quick decisions, which I never regretted and taking my return ticket to London out of my pocket tore it into small pieces and scattered the fragments into the sea."¹⁸ The truth of this story seems dubious, even though he first told it to an *Irish Times* reporter as early as 1925 and repeated it in a BBC broadcast in 1938,¹⁹ and in any case he retained an address in London until the autumn of 1912;²⁰ but no doubt it appealed to his romantic spirit! But as far as his painting is concerned, from 1912 at the latest he painted exclusively Irish subjects.

About the summer of 1908 Paul and Grace Henry and Robert Lynd went to live at Knapp Hill, near Guildford, in Surrey. There Paul was inspired by the landscape, particularly with one area of

bog land which he drew and painted time and time again.²¹ 'Water Meadows', c.1907–10, a charcoal drawing now in the Ulster Museum, was almost certainly done at that place and time and even for such an early work his compositional technique of dividing the picture plane into two distinct parts, the upper dominated by cloud formations, the lower given to the landscape which is rendered with little detail, the two parts being linked by the upward thrust of a tree or some other compositional device, shows features which remained characteristic of his work through his career. The mood evoked by his handling of this scene is similar to that in many of his early Achill works so that it is not surprising that he felt his arrival on the island to be a sort of homecoming.²² Also, earlier in 1910, as the result of a meeting which he had with Hugh Lane and Dermot O'Brien, he had exhibited for the first time at the Royal Hibernian Academy and so had already renewed his ties with Ireland. When he first arrived in Achill Henry was thirty-four years old and although he had carved a niche for himself as an illustrator he was clearly drifting away from such work. Moreover, in the light of his other activities and the growing number of his early exhibitions—he had contributed regularly to group shows at the Goupil Gallery, London, from 1904, held a joint exhibition with Grace at the Ulster Arts Club, Belfast, in 1907, showed at the Belfast Art Society in 1908 and 1909, and exhibited at the Royal Academy, London, in 1910—it is clear that he was moving towards a career as a painter. The Achill visit therefore was timely for him; the island provided the subject-matter he subconsciously sought and the peasantry reawakened his early interest in Millet.

These points are well illustrated in 'Potato Diggers', c.1910–11, one of his first Achill pictures and one of his best ever works. Here the composition is succinct—the two-part division of the picture plane which we have already noted, the upward thrust of the figures linking these two parts—and the ruggedly dressed figures bent in toil express concisely the wordly lot of such people. The influence of Millet is clear, the pose of the figures owes much to 'The Spaders', which he knew from the illustration in Sensier's *Life*, and to the two figures who work in unison in 'The Gleaners', which

he had seen in the Louvre. As in Millet, too, Henry's landscape has a certain monumentality and inspires a sense of timelessness—the latter quality also is a general characteristic of his work—attributes which suggest the religious and moral beauty which is often associated with labour. Henry exhibited this and similar pictures for the first time in the exhibition with his wife in Belfast during March 1911. Reviewing that show, the *Northern Whig* admired their departure from the conventional way of interpreting the landscape. They "have flung away the accepted formulas as boldly as Synge did when he began to do in drama what they have set themselves to do in colour" it commented, and admired Paul Henry's 'Prayer for the Departed', 1910–11 (present whereabouts unknown), "which has the dignity of the closing scene in *Riders to the Sea*," and 'Old People Watching a Dance', 1910–11 (private collection), a reminder that "dignity does not depend on the subject but on the manner in which it is treated."²³ The *Belfast News Letter* concurred with these views and singled out for praise the 'Potato Diggers', which it noted had been influenced by Millet, as being particularly successful.²⁴ Henry's first Dublin showing of his Achill paintings was in a joint exhibition with Grace Henry, Count Casimir Dunin-Markievicz, Mrs. Frances Baker²⁵ and George Russell (AE) at the Leinster Hall in October 1911. Of his subsequently better-known works on that occasion he showed 'Launching the Curragh', 1910–11 (National Gallery of Ireland [NGI]), and 'Clare Island', 1910–11 (whereabouts unknown), the latter epitomizing that feeling of timelessness to which we have alluded. But the *Irish Times*, however, did not care for his work, finding the "purple and green of his crudely composed 'Bog' [this picture cannot now be identified] . . . peculiarly distasteful."²⁶

His technique developed slowly in these years and in March 1913 when he showed at Pollock's Gallery in Belfast he included another version of the 'Potato Diggers', painted in 1912 (NGI), in which the figure bending to the left with one arm outstretched is obviously a quotation from Millet's 'Gleaners', and the 'Turf Carrier', c.1912–13 (private collection), where the pose of the figure can be traced to illustrations in Sensier's book. The red skirts and petticoats depicted in these

PAUL HENRY: AN IRISH PORTRAIT

works were, he tells us in *An Irish Portrait*, almost universally worn by the women of Achill at that time. Of his purely landscape paintings of these years we have already mentioned 'Clare Island' but 'Connemara Landscape', 1913 (private collection), one of his very few dated works and thus useful as a guide to his handling of the medium (oils) at the time, is also a good example and again demonstrates the sense of stillness characteristic of his landscapes. As with his figure compositions the range of colours is limited in these works. Some measure of his growing prominence at this time was the inclusion of three of his pictures—'A Load of Turf', 'Field-Workers in Achill' and 'A Prayer for the Departed'—in the exhibition of Irish art at the Whitechapel Art Gallery, London, in summer 1913. This was the first time his work had been included in such an exhibition.²⁷

It is difficult to plot the development of his work between 1913 and 1920. He

seems to have sold relatively few pictures at his various exhibitions in these years and the same works—or perhaps others with similar titles—turn up again and again as do his charcoal drawings such as 'The Mountainy Man' or 'A Man of the West', both 1910–19 (NGI). But several press reports do mention the continued freshness, breadth and simplicity of his work. In 1917 the *Irish Times* thought he was developing a decorative treatment of the landscape whereby his imagery was not realistic but was symbolically Irish and it singled out the 'Fairy Thorn' "where," it said, "the artist seems to have learned something from Japan without giving a foreign character to the landscape, which could only be Irish."²⁸ Indeed, as here, the tendency to flatten the picture plane and to emphasize the abstract nature of the various forms, influences from Whistler and Japanese prints, we shall see extended in his pictures of the early '20s.

In those works done on Achill, Paul Henry developed a style perfectly in harmony with his surroundings. In his treatment of figures, as well as his landscapes, he produced archetypes of the west of Ireland, much as Millet had done with the peasants in France. Yet, unlike Millet and the other French Realist painters, Henry's work has no social conscience, there is nothing didactic in it; it is the work only of an observer. In this respect he might be compared with Jack B. Yeats, his associate from 1920 in the Dublin Painters' Society and who had visited the West with Synge in 1905, who also was strictly an observer. But whereas Yeats worked from what he called 'a pool of memories' distilled through his sketch-books, Henry merely recorded, never interpreted. Thomas MacGreevy, an important critic, however, did not admire what he called Henry's habit of 'over-dramatising' the Irish peasants. "He sees them through the eyes of a Post-Impres-



Potato Diggers, c. 1910–11, oil on canvas, 71 × 81 cms. Private collection, Co. Cork.

PAUL HENRY: AN IRISH PORTRAIT

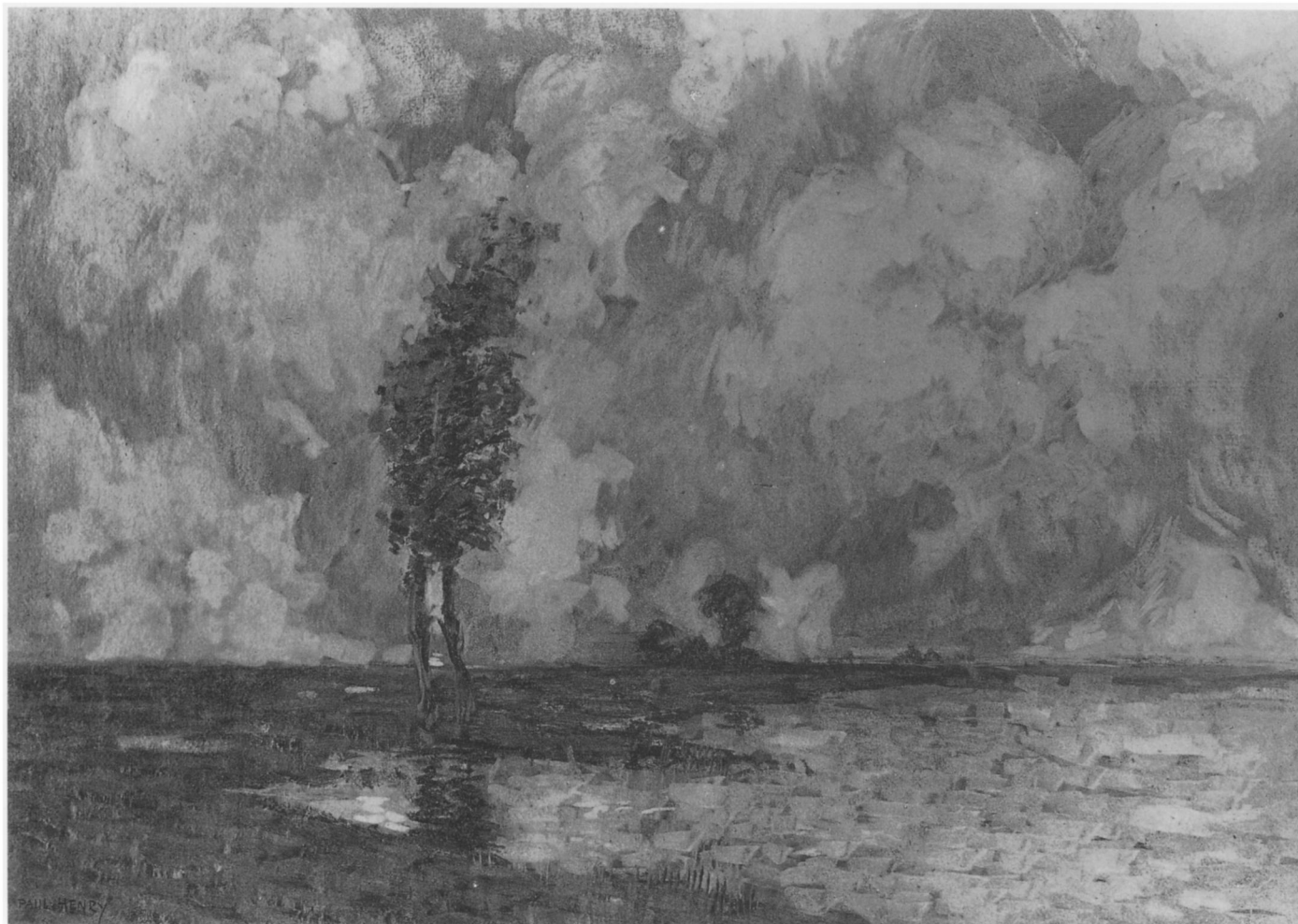
sionist Frenchman” he said. “Those hideous elementals set standing on a hill-top against a stormy sky are not Irish peasants. They are wanderers from that world of Neo-Romanticism, of unreal Realism, to which the characters of, say, Strindberg’s plays belong.”²⁹ MacGreevy would have felt happier with the Social-realist manner of Sean Keating or Maurice MacGonigal, both of whom were more literary in suggestion, and who are often thought of as the true guardians of the west.

Although the years in Achill were happy and fruitful for Paul Henry, his wife, Grace, was less content there and from that time one can trace the restlessness which, sadly, became part of her later life. Grace had been brought up to a more comfortable existence than could be provided on Achill—her parents came from well-to-do families and money was plentiful at home—and no doubt, being by then in her forties, she missed her com-

forts. Also, she had a different outlook on life to Paul and sought brighter lights. Writing to Robert Lynd in March 1915, Jimmy Good, a fellow-Belfastman then working as a journalist in Dublin, commented after seeing the Henrys who were visiting the city: “Mrs. Paul is very sick at the idea of having to go back to Achill & failing Paris her thoughts turn longingly to St. Ives.” And the following year he told Lynd: “Mrs. Henry . . . needs to be cheered up; Achill is for her I think a near approach to purgatory”, while in March 1917 he wrote, again to Lynd: “Mrs. H. has come to Dublin for the winter . . . Henry, of course, declines to stir from Achill.”³⁰ Such comments, unfortunately, chart the deterioration in their relationship from that time until they separated in the late twenties. It seems likely, however, that it was largely due to Grace’s insistence that they moved to Dublin late in 1919 and they were for a time happy there.

On their arrival in Dublin the Henrys took a flat at 19 Lincoln Chambers but early in 1920 moved to a studio at 13A Merrion Row³¹ which they occupied for the next ten years. This transfer to the city coincided with a new phase in Paul’s work in which the figure compositions of his Achill period gave way to landscapes devoid of people, a phase which lasted for the rest of his career as a painter and in the first five or six years of which he produced some of his best remembered pictures. But of more immediate interest to us is his involvement from the summer of 1920 with the Society of Dublin Painters.

When he lived in London Henry frequented some ‘at homes’ organized by the English painter, Walter Sickert—another pupil of Whistler—at his studio in Fitzroy Street.³² In 1907 from these gatherings emerged the Fitzroy Street Group which, revolving around Sickert, Spencer Gore, Harold Gilman, Robert Bevan and Charles Ginner—all Post-



Water Meadows, c. 1907–10, charcoal and white on paper, 34 × 46.5 cms. Collection Ulster Museum.

PAUL HENRY: AN IRISH PORTRAIT

Impressionists—was for a number of years the centre of the English *avant-garde*. Between them the members of the Group shared the expenses of running the Fitzroy Street studio. Out of this company was formed in 1908 the Allied Artists' Association—with which Paul Henry was also associated—which, guided by the critic Frank Rutter (b.1876), was a non-jury exhibiting body determined to counteract the exclusiveness of the New English Art Club and to be a sort of English version of the *Salon des Indépendants*.³³ With these models in mind, Paul and Grace Henry, in association with E.M. O'R. Dickey (another Belfast painter), Letitia Hamilton, Clare Marsh, James Sleator, Mary Swanzy and Jack B. Yeats, formed the Society of Dublin Painters in about June 1920 to circumvent the hostility of the Dublin art establishment towards modern painting. The Society took rooms on the top floor at 7 St. Stephen's Green and there held its first exhibition in August 1920. As well as regular group shows, each member was entitled to hold a one-man exhibition once a year. It is important here to remember that in those days art exhibitions in Ireland, especially small and one-man shows, were not frequent events and the latter were almost unknown. Apart from the annual exhibitions of the Academy, the Dublin Sketching Club and the Water Colour Society of Ireland, few commercial galleries or other venues existed where artists could exhibit their work independently. Before its occupation by the Dublin Painters, the St. Stephen's Green premises had been used as a studio by a number of artists, including an Italian painter called Catanio, who worked there around the 1850s, Augustus Burke (d.1891), Colles Watkins (1833–91), John Butler Yeats (1839–1922) and Walter Osborne (1859–1903). On Osborne's death Yeats again took it.³⁴ Following Yeats, the Gaelic League used the studio for its meetings. Rooms adjacent to this studio also had over the years an artistic clientele, being variously occupied by the Dublin Art Club, the portrait painter Sarah Cecilia Harrison (1863–1941), the Royal Society of Antiquaries, Patrick Tuohy (1894–1930), the Royal Hibernian Academy School (c.1918–39) and Sean O'Sullivan (1906–64).

The Society of Dublin Painters was inaugurated in unpropitious times polit-

ically and culturally. The events which culminated in the Anglo-Irish Treaty of 1921 were of immediate consequence; but the new Irish state, when it came into being in 1922, craved an identity for which it turned to the west, in particular to those areas where the traditions of Gaelic or 'Irish' Ireland were intact. Consequently as the '20s wore on, the political and cultural climate was increasingly coloured by government-inspired policies of isolationism. To a considerable extent this espousal of heritage centred on the culture of the Gaelic Renaissance, itself largely the creation of John Synge, W.B. Yeats, George Russell (AE), Edward Martyn and Augusta Gregory, that is, ironically, of the Anglo-Irish of thirty or so years earlier. As far as the visual arts were concerned the main characteristic required in the period was Symbolism; that works should not only arouse national and patriotic sentiment but, in Cyril Barrett's words, they should also *define* it; they should give some glimpse of what the people were striving for, of the values which they wished to preserve, and of the kind of life they intended to bring into being.³⁵ The full energy of the state was devoted to this purpose, notably after Mr. de Valera's victory in the election of 1932, and he and his party remained in power until 1948, the longest period of unbroken government in the history of the state. In the words of the historian Terence Brown:

*"cultural life in the new state was dominated by a vision of Ireland . . . as a rural Gaelic civilization that retained an ancient pastoral distinctiveness. This vision was projected by artists, poets and polemicists despite the fact that social reality showed distinct signs that the country was adapting to the social forms of the English-speaking world and that conditions in rural Ireland were hardly idyllic . . . this imaginative interpretation of Irish rural life . . . served as an integrative symbol of national identity . . . It helped to confirm people in a belief in Irish distinctiveness, justifying that political separatism which a revolutionary movement had made a lynch-pin of political life in the state."*³⁶

And if the sceptic wanted proof of the distinctive genius of the Irish people he would be reminded of such works as the Cross of Cong, the Ardagh Chalice, the Books of Kells and Durrrow: Ireland, in short, had a glorious past in the arts and could have an equally glorious future.

This was the volatile climate in which the Society of Dublin Painters established themselves. They, however, were not particularly concerned with nationality nor did they yearn for a distinctively Irish School and, as Bruce Arnold has remarked of their generation, many of them felt a strain and a self-consciousness at what 'being Irish' meant,³⁷ a predicament aggravated by the times and, no doubt for several of them, by a background in the protestant ascendancy. But they were the first innovators in Ireland to disregard the intransigence of the art establishment and their gallery, small as it was, became an important venue for exhibitions before other commercial galleries began to flourish.

From the outset the press generally were enthusiastic about the new Society. In 1923, for example, the *Freeman's Journal* thought it was producing some of the best painting in the country and a decade later the *Irish Times* in an editorial thought it had become "an institution of Ireland", putting the country "upon the map" of art. By 1942 Stephen Rynne felt able to write in *The Leader*: "If a person wanted to make an annual check-up of Irish art and had few opportunities for seeing exhibitions then he would best achieve his end by attending the Dublin Painters. Here are the liveliest of the living painters, the explorers and experimentalists . . . They paint what they will, for the most part their touch is light, airy, deft."³⁸ In passing we might note some of the more *avant-garde* artists and works sponsored by the Dublin Painters: Paul Henry showed a version of his 'Potato Diggers' in 1920; E.M.O'R. Dickey, who studied art under Harold Gilman, a member of Sickert's Fitzroy Street Group, exhibited Post-Impressionist landscapes which were refreshing in comparison with the more sentimental work of most Irish artists. At the autumn exhibition in 1923 Mainie Jellett showed two Cubist compositions,³⁹ the first time that such pictures by an Irish artist were seen in Dublin; Cecil Salkeld, who studied art in Germany, showed works done in the manner of the *Neue Sachlichkeit* movement, which dominated European painting in the '20s. In the early '40s Ralph Cusack (1912–65), a painter now almost forgotten,⁴⁰ exhibited some of the first mildly Surrealist pictures to be seen in Ireland.

As well as promoting the cause of



Lakeside Cottages, c. 1923–30, oil on canvas, 40 × 60 cms. Collection Hugh Lane Municipal Gallery of Modern Art, Dublin.



The Fairy Thorn, c. 1917, oil on canvas, 35 × 81 cms. Private collection, Dublin.

PAUL HENRY: AN IRISH PORTRAIT

avant-garde painting through the Society of Dublin Painters Paul Henry, along with Arthur Power (d.1984), organized the exhibition 'Some Modern Paintings', held in Mills' Hall, Merrion Row, in January 1922 as part of Dublin Civic Week. In all about thirty works were shown on that occasion including some by the Continental artists Maillol, Marchand, Modigliani and Vlaminck, but the majority were by the younger British painters, many of whom Henry had known in London. Although the press spoke well of the show, Henry wrote later that "It is difficult to realise . . . how deep rooted was the ignorance and prejudice which existed at that time against any form of art which savoured, even remotely of modernism."⁴¹

Although he had founded the Dublin Painters Society, Paul Henry last exhibited there in 1926, but in those few years he produced, as we have said, some of his best compositions. By the early '20s his manner was mature and his subject-matter—landscape devoid of figures—firmly established. Increasingly his pictures assume a sense of stillness and timelessness rendered through a few bold shapes, a limited palette, simplicity of tone and, especially in the early '20s, an emphasis on the abstract qualities of the composition, characteristics unmistakably Whistlerian. These features are evident in 'Dawn, Killary Harbour', c.1922–23, perhaps his best ever work. However, if we compare this picture with the almost identical view in 'Leenane', 1913 (Ulster Museum), one of his few dated works, it is clear that he had a bold approach to landscape even at that early stage although his brushwork was then much more prominent and less assured. As in the Killary Harbour picture, in these years Henry often observed the landscape at dawn, savouring the stillness and purity of the air at that hour and in an interview with an *Irish Times* reporter in 1941 said he had always been struck by what he called the 'other-worldliness' and the 'sense of mystery' in the Irish landscape.⁴² The absence in his work of literary references, characteristic of so many Irish painters, perhaps contributed to the underlying feeling for abstraction in his pictures. But, as Brian O'Doherty remarked, this duality of abstraction underpinning an apparently representational landscape, makes the best of Paul Henry's work important, for

it differentiates that which is regional and parochial in outlook from that which has more universal implications. "Without it," said O'Doherty, "he could be placed with his imitators, regional sentiment, playing for sentiment."⁴³ Yet, despite these abstract qualities, one senses also in him an intuitive reaction to the landscape—for Henry was no theorist—and an omnipresent awareness of human significance in the eternal conflict between man and the un pitying forces of nature.

From this time onwards he retained the compositional formula of boldly juxtaposed shapes, usually with the sky occupying at least half of the composition, and often, as in 'A Connemara Village', c.1923–30, picked out a few elements—a cottage, turf stacks, the play of light on water—which he highlighted in greater detail than the rest of the composition. Along with the latter picture, 'Lakeside Cottages', c.1923–30, is one of his best works of the time and represents the quintessential Paul Henry. Such pictures helped to foster the popular view of the Irish landscape and fitted well with the social aspirations of the times. His successes in these years also included a drawing of Arthur Griffith which was bought by the British signatories to the Anglo-Irish treaty and subsequently presented to the Irish government; and in 1922 the French government purchased from the exhibition of Irish art then in Paris his 'West of Ireland Village' for the Luxembourg Gallery,⁴⁴ a signal honour for an Irish painter at that time.

About 1925 two of Henry's paintings, 'Connemara' and a 'View of Lough Erne' (whereabouts of both unknown) were reproduced as posters for the London Midland and Scottish Railway Company and distributed to tourist bureaux in Europe and North America. The former picture was also reproduced on the cover of the LMS booklet *Travel in Ireland*. His lucid style was well suited to contemporary reproduction techniques which demanded simplified shapes and the use of only three or four colours. These posters perhaps fixed the archetypal 'Paul Henry' in the public mind but, in the long run, being displayed in literally thousands of sites, they debased his memory more than it deserves. This, perhaps, was the period of his greatest esteem by the public in his lifetime, but, despite these successes, from the mid to

late '20s, at a time when his domestic affairs were in disarray and his financial difficulties were mounting, his work began to fall in quality and became ever more hackneyed. Jimmy Good described his situation at the time in a letter to Sylvia Lynd: "Paul and Grace are having a very thin time, as the picture market in Dublin is dead." But they had spirit, for he continued: "As you would expect they have decided to celebrate the run of ill-luck by taking a furnished flat in Fitzwilliam Square at £3.10 [shillings] a week with 10/- to 15/- extra for a cook. I admire their nerve but shudder at the reaction that is going to follow in the near future." And some months later he wrote to her again saying that Paul was "desperately hard up and I don't see much chance of him making money in Dublin at present or indeed for a long time to come . . . Grace is talking of another trip to Paris and I don't suppose the question of how it will be done troubles her in the slightest."⁴⁵ Perhaps, with these problems, it is not surprising that his enthusiasm for Modernism waned at the same time—despite having recently organized the Dublin Civic Week exhibition—and he was to remain to the end, as his friend Arthur Power observed, guided by the constructional theories he had learned in the Paris of 1900. Power also recounted that some time later he suggested to Henry that he should visit Paris again to see what the Dadaists, the Surrealists and others were doing, but in reply he shrugged his shoulders, asking "What would I get out of it?"⁴⁶ In the late twenties, too, there disappeared the sometimes vibrant colours of his earlier work and the landscape, both literally and metaphorically, seems to have subdued him.

In 1930, after he finally separated from Grace, Paul Henry left Dublin and settled in Carrigoona Cottage, near Enniskerry in Co. Wicklow. There he and Mabel Young remained until a year or so before he died. He had rarely visited the west after his move to Dublin in 1919 and from now on he painted mostly in Co. Wicklow with only occasional forays elsewhere. In 1929 his 'Customs House, Dublin', c.1929 (private collection), was used as a poster for Dublin Civic Week and even at this date, in the thrust and counter thrust of line and the simplicity of the underlying forms, one can still sense the abstract nature of the composition. But as his domestic life grew more

PAUL HENRY: AN IRISH PORTRAIT

stable, his art became less adventurous and often in his pictures painted in these years the composition devolved to a *cliché* and his brushwork and handling of the medium were at times insensitive, although 'Kinsale, Co. Cork', 1939 and 'Ballintoy, Co. Antrim', 1941 (both private collections), are more assured even if a little repetitive. By the '30s, however, he had fallen prey to his own imagery and popularity. Reviewing the Royal Hibernian Academy show in 1937 the *Irish Builder* commented: "To say that in No. 117 ['The Village on a Hill'] is a typical Paul Henry is nothing to his discredit. Paul Henry would, no doubt, paint other things besides mountains if his public would let him. Seeing how well he does these mountains, one cannot blame his public for continually demanding more. One can only hope that it does not become a vicious circle."⁴⁷

Henry painted few portraits and was less at ease in this *genre* than with landscapes. His best examples undoubtedly are all charcoal drawings and include his 'Connemara Peasant', 1910-19, done on Achill—in works such as this we can see the influence of Van Gogh and Daumier, especially in his characterization of the sitter—and 'President Cosgrave', c.1922-3 (private collection), the latter in retrospect arousing a certain pathos. Of his portraits in oils that of his brother, 'Pro-

fessor R.M. Henry', painted in 1933 for The Queen's University, Belfast, is perhaps the best. As in his drawings, here the character of the sitter is conveyed with assurance but the hands and the articulation of the arms are weak. Unfortunately this picture was destroyed in a fire in the Great Hall at The Queen's University some years ago. There are, however, a number of photographs of it. Also, an exact copy in oils was made from one of these photographs by T.E. Spence and that copy now hangs in the special collections reading room of the library at the university. Another copy of the original portrait, painted by James Sleator, P.R.H.A. (1889-1950), in 1948, hangs in St. Salvator's Hall at the University of St. Andrews where the sitter taught for a time after retiring from Belfast.

About 1945 or '46, as the result of an illness, Paul Henry became virtually blind and ceased painting; he then turned to writing and produced the two autobiographies to which we have referred. Despite the repetitiveness of his later work, he never became an academic painter, and while the landscape at times subdued him it never humbled him. Regardless of the obvious influence of his work, Henry was a lone figure in Irish art because none of his landscape contemporaries—Charles Lamb (1893-1964),

James Humbert Craig (1878-1944) or Frank McKelvey (1895-1974), for example—showed a rigour comparable to the work of his years in Achill or the early Dublin period and, by comparison, at best they remained *raconteurs* of the landscape and at worst they turned his vision into a formula. Lamb, Craig and McKelvey were often grouped together by critics when reviewing the Royal Hibernian Academy exhibitions where their works were easily compared one with another. In 1925 the *Irish Times* thought they and some of their fellow-Northerners virtually formed a 'Belfast school' of painting which, it said, "surpasses the Southern painters."⁴⁸ Indeed, it is interesting to note that that school of landscape painting—which is perhaps the nearest thing which has emerged this century by way of a distinctly Irish school, Sean Keating and Maurice MacGonigal notwithstanding, at least as popular imagination would have it—which we have described as descending from Paul Henry through Lamb, Craig and McKelvey and which was continued in the fifties and later by Maurice Wilks (1910-84) and numerous others, was an almost entirely Northern-inspired affair. That is the legacy of Paul Henry's work.

Brian Kennedy

NOTES

(The author is currently preparing a biography of Paul Henry and would be grateful to hear from any reader who may have information about or pictures by the artist.)

1. Paul Henry, *Further Reminiscences*, Belfast, Blackstaff Press, 1973, p. 68.
2. He was one of the first to write about Degas ('Degas: The Painter of Modern Life', *Magazine of Art*, November 1890, pp. 416-25) and Manet painted three portraits of him (these are the oils painted in 1878 and 1879, now in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, and the Paul Mellon Collection, Virginia, respectively, and the pastel of 1879, also in the Metropolitan Museum. For details of these works see Phoebe Poole and Sandra Orienti, *The Complete Paintings of Manet*, Penguin Books, 1985, Cat. Nos. 251, 278A and 278B.) Moore was a *habitué* of the Nouvelle Athènes, a café on the Place Pigalle. During the 1870s and later, it was frequented by many of the leading writers and artists. It was there that he met Manet, Degas, Renoir, Pissarro, Monet and Sisley.
3. Martyn owned two pastel drawings by Degas, 'Two Ballet Dancers in the Dressing Room',

- c.1880 and 'Two Harlequins', c.1885, and an oil by Monet, 'A River Scene, Autumn'. All of these works are now in the National Gallery of Ireland, Nos. 2740, 2741 and 852 respectively. They were bequeathed to the Gallery by Martyn along with a Corot, 'Willows', No. 853.
4. It was one of Whistler's 'Nocturnes' that caused Ruskin to accuse him in 1877 of 'flinging a pot of paint in the public's face', a remark which led to their celebrated libel case. The 1884 exhibition also included his 'Portrait of the Painter's Mother' (1871), now in the Louvre, 'Portrait of Thomas Carlyle' (1872-3), Glasgow Art Gallery and 'Portrait of Lady Meux' (1881-2), Frick Collection, New York. Whistler intended to give the first ever reading of his 'Ten O'Clock' lecture—in which he set down his aesthetic stance—at the exhibition but that did not materialize. See Ronald Anderson, 'Whistler in Dublin, 1884', *Irish Arts Review*, Vol. 3 No. 3, pp. 45-51.
5. The exhibition was held at the Leinster Hall and included, amongst other works, Edward Martyn's two pastels by Degas and his oil by Monet (see note 3 above), a Manet, 'Portrait

- of a Lady', lent by George Moore, and six Whistlers, including 'Miss Cicely Alexander', the latter now in the National Gallery, London.
6. The background to the exhibition of the Staats Forbes pictures, the subsequent events which led to the opening of the (Hugh Lane) Municipal Gallery of Modern Art and the issue of Lane's so-called 'Continental Pictures' are set down in Thomas Bodkin, *Hugh Lane and His Pictures*, Dublin, Stationery Office, 1932 and later editions.
7. 'Exhibition of Modern Paintings', Municipal Art Gallery, Belfast, 20 April-26 May 1906. As honorary director of this exhibition, which was arranged by a joint committee of the Ulster Arts Club, the Belfast Art Society and the Ulster Society of Architects, Lane hoped to encourage in Belfast an interest in modern painting, as he was doing in Dublin. Indeed, in his introduction to the catalogue of the exhibition he wrote (p. ix) "It seems as if it were ordained that Belfast should have the honour of founding the first distinct 'School' in Ireland."

NOTES CONTINUED ON PAGE 54



Connemara Landscape, 1913, oil on canvas, 67 × 79 cms. Private collection, Belfast.



Dawn, Killary Harbour, c. 1922–3, oil on canvas, 69.1 × 83.3 cms. Collection Ulster Museum.

PAUL HENRY: AN IRISH PORTRAIT

8. 'Works by Post-Impressionist Painters', United Arts Club, Dublin, 25 January–14 February 1911. Many of the forty-seven works shown on this occasion were borrowed from the exhibition 'Manet and the Post-Impressionists' held at the Grafton Galleries, London, the previous November. The best known artists included were Cézanne, Denis, Derain, Gauguin, Van Gogh, Maillol, Marquet, Matisse, Rouault, Picasso, Signac and Vlaminck. Ellen Duncan (c.1850–1937), born in Dublin, was a founder member of the United Arts Club in 1907. In October 1914 Lane appointed her curator of the Dublin Municipal Gallery of Modern Art.
9. See 'Modern French Pictures at the United Arts Club', *Irish Review* 11, May 1912, pp. 164–6; 'Post Impressionists and Cubeists' (sic), *Irish Times*, 29 March 1912.
10. Alfred Sensier, *Jean-François Millet: Peasant and Painter*, translated by Helena De Kay, London, Macmillan & Co., 1881.
11. Paul Henry, *An Irish Portrait*, London, Batsford, 1951; Henry, *Further Reminiscences*, op. cit., the latter published posthumously at the time of the retrospective exhibition of his work held at Trinity College, Dublin and the Ulster Museum, Belfast, in 1973. Brian O'Doherty, 'Paul Henry—The Early Years', *University Review* 11, 1960, is the first writer to assess the influences on and the development of Henry's work.
12. Henry, *Further Reminiscences*, op. cit., pp. 15, 20.
13. Henry, *An Irish Portrait*, op. cit., p. 8.
14. The suggestion was made in a letter to the teacher in charge of the Académie Carmen. Whistler's phrase was "why should not . . . the little Irishman be run for Massier . . ." As Henry was the only Irishman to attend the Académie Carmen this phrase clearly refers to him (Whistler Papers in the Library, Glasgow University, ref: Whistler A29). I am grateful to the University Court of the University of Glasgow for permission to quote from this letter. My thanks are also due to Mr. Ronnie Anderson of the department of Art History at the University of St. Andrews for drawing my attention to it.
15. Robert Wilson Lynd (1879–1949), educated at the Royal Belfast Academical Institution (RBAI) and at The Queen's University, he went to Manchester to work on the *Daily Dispatch* before going to London as a freelance journalist. He later became well-known, and is best remembered as an essayist, his finest work appearing under the pseudonym 'Y.Y.' which he used in the *New Statesman* from 1913–45. His essays were collected in book form at intervals. Of his other books, *Home Life in Ireland*, London, Mills & Boon, 1909, *Rambles in Ireland*, London, Mills & Boon, 1912 and *Ireland a Nation*, London, Grant Richards, 1919, are, perhaps, the best known. His wife, Sylvia, was a novelist and poet.
16. Paul Henry Papers, Trinity College, Dublin (TCD), MS 7415; *An Irish Portrait*, op. cit., p. 48, respectively.
17. 'Pictures of Irish Life', *Northern Whig*, Belfast, 11 March 1911.
18. Henry, *An Irish Portrait*, op. cit., pp. 5–6.
19. 'Connemara for the Artist: Mr. Paul Henry's Experience', *Irish Times*, 4 August 1925 and 'As I See It', BBC radio, 29 March 1938, respectively.
20. The catalogue of the annual exhibition of Belfast Art Society, held in the Municipal Art Gallery, Belfast, during October–November of that year gives his address, as for the previous year, as 13 Pembridge Crescent, London, W.
21. Henry, *An Irish Portrait*, op. cit., p. 2.
22. Henry Papers, op. cit., TCD, MS 7415.
23. 'Paintings of Irish Life', *Northern Whig*, 13 March 1911. Henry had met Sygne and W.B. Yeats casually in Paris in about 1898–9. Later, in London, he read *Riders to the Sea*. "There was something in Sygne that appealed to me very deeply," he wrote. "He touched some chord which resounded as no other music ever had done" (*An Irish Portrait*, op. cit., p. 48). Generally speaking the members of the Royal Hibernian Academy may be considered as the exponents of the more conventional approach to landscape painting which Paul Henry shunned.
24. 'Mr. & Mrs. Paul Henry's Paintings', *News Letter*, Belfast, 13 March 1911.
25. Frances Baker (1873–1944), painter mainly of landscapes with figures and occasional portraits. For a brief biographical note see Alan Denson, *Printed Writings by George W. Russell (AE): A Bibliography*, Evanston, Illinois, Northwestern University Press, 1961, p. 222.
26. 'The Five Artists: Pictures at Leinster Hall', *Irish Times*, 16 October 1911.
27. 'Irish Art', Whitechapel Art Gallery, London, 21 May–29 June 1913. Henry's works were catalogued as Nos. 35, 50 and 158 respectively. As Hugh Lane and Dermot O'Brien were members of the exhibition committee, they almost certainly were responsible for his selection.
28. *Irish Times*, 16 April 1917.
29. Thomas MacGreevy, draft for an article, 'The Rise of a National School of Painting', MacGreevy Papers, TCD, MS 8002-19.
30. Letters of 21 March 1915, 11 July 1916 and 12 March 1917 respectively (private collection; hereinafter referred to as Lynd correspondence). James Winder Good (1872–1930), educated at RBAI (where he met Paul Henry) and Queen's College, Belfast, had a distinguished career as a journalist. He worked on the *Belfast News Letter* and the *Northern Whig* before going for a time to Liverpool. From 1918 until its closure in the early twenties he was a leader writer on the *Freeman's Journal*. He was associated with Sir Horace Plunkett and George Russell (AE) in founding the *Irish Statesman* and became its assistant editor before leaving to join the *Irish Independent*. He was also for a time the Irish correspondent for the *New Statesman* and was a founder member of the Ulster Literary Theatre (obituary, *Belfast Telegraph*, 3 May 1930).
31. The rooms in Lincoln Chambers had previously been the studio of the Dublin Arts Club (Good to Sylvia Lynd, letter of 11 December 1919, Lynd correspondence); the Merrion Row studio had previously been occupied by, amongst others, Nathaniel Hone, RHA (1831–1917) and Walter Osborne, RHA (1859–1903) (Henry, *Further Reminiscences*, op. cit., p. 66).
32. Henry, *Further Reminiscences*, op. cit. p. 67. Sickert in these years was the most sympathetic advocate in England of *avant-garde* painting. In his studio he gathered around him many of the young and progressive painters of his day. For a note on his 'at homes' see Robert Emmons, *The Life and Opinions of Walter Richard Sickert*, London, Faber & Faber, 1941, pp. 133–4. Hugh Lane also attended these meetings (Wendy Baron, *The Camden Town Group*, London, Scolar Press, 1979, p. 13).
33. For a note on the Fitzroy Street Group and the Allied Artists' Association see Wendy Baron, *Sickert*, London, Phaidon, 1973, pp. 104–5. Although he frequented its meetings, Henry was not a full member of the former.
34. Katherine Tynan gives a vivid description of the studio during Yeats's occupancy in her *Twenty-five Years: Reminiscences*, Dublin, 1913, p.187.
35. Cyril Barrett, 'Irish Nationalism and Art 1800–1921', *Studies*, winter 1975, p. 398.
36. Terence Brown, *Ireland: A Social and Cultural History 1922–79*, London, Fontana, 1981, p. 98.
37. Bruce Arnold, *A Concise History of Irish Art*, revised ed., London, Thames & Hudson, 1977, p. 139.
38. 'Modern Artists', *Freeman's Journal*, 20 October 1923; 'The Dublin Painters', *Irish Times*, 3 February 1933; *The Leader*, 21 February 1942, respectively.
39. One of these may have been 'Abstract', 1922, now in the Ulster Museum (No. 2296).
40. In 1958 he published *Cadenza: An Excursion*, London, Hamish Hamilton, a sort of autobiographical novel, but in it made no mention of his painting.
41. Henry, *Further Reminiscences*, op. cit., p. 65.
42. H.L. Morrow, 'The Art of Paul Henry', *Irish Times*, 1 November 1941.
43. Brian O'Doherty, op. cit., p. 26.
44. As the collection at the Luxembourg Gallery has long since been dispersed to other French museums this picture is now in the Musée National d'Art Moderne, Paris. It was bought from the exhibition 'World Congress of the Irish Race', held at the Galeries Barbazanges, Paris, during January–February 1922.
45. Letters of 5 October 1923 and 15 April 1924 respectively (Lynd correspondence).
46. Arthur Power, 'Reassessments—17: Paul Henry', *Irish Times*, 29 June 1971.
47. 'Wisbeach', *Irish Builder*, 1937, p. 480.
48. 'Royal Hibernian Academy', *Irish Times*, 6 April 1925.