



THOMAS CARNDUFF (1886-1956): Poet and Playwright

Thomas Carnduff was born in 13 Kensington Street, off Sandy Row, Belfast, on 30 January 1886. He spent his early childhood in Dublin, where he was educated at the Royal Hibernian School and the Royal Military College. He worked as a butcher's boy, in a thread and needle factory, in a printing house, as a drover in a linen factory, and in the Belfast shipyards. While working in the Belfast Steam Print Company from 1906 to 1914 he revelled in the camaraderie of his well-versed, articulate co-workers. He read widely in order to contribute to their stimulating levels of daily debate on the social issues of the time. In 1914 he started work as a plater's helper at Workman, Clark and Co.

He joined the Young Citizens' Volunteers and in 1916 enlisted in the Royal Engineers, serving at Ypres and Messines. On leaving the army in 1919 he was re-employed at Workman's, remaining there until the firm was wound up in 1935. It was hard, dangerous work, which often involved working at heights – the fear of which Carnduff never entirely overcame. Accidents were a daily occurrence in the yard, and on one occasion he was taken to hospital after suffering injuries from a heavy spanner which had been dropped from 40 feet.

Carnduff was involved in the Labour and trade union movements and active in the Independent Orange Order. He was a friend of Peadar O'Donnell and supported the Connolly Association. All his life he had written poetry, and in 1936 he formed the Young Ulster Literary Society and was a member of the Irish Pen Club. He wrote for several newspapers, including the *Bell* and published books of poems, one of which was *Songs from the Shipyard and Other Poems* published in 1924. He wrote many plays: *The First Warrant* (1930); *Workers* (1932); *Traitors* (1934); *Castlereagh* (1935); *Birth of a Giant* (1937); *The Stars Foretell* (1938) and *Murder at Stranmillis*. Some of these were performed in the Abbey Theatre, Dublin and the Empire Theatre, Belfast; *The Birth of a Giant* was a play written for radio. His later years were spent working as a caretaker in the Linen Hall Library, where his portrait now hangs.

Thomas Carnduff died on 17 April 1956 leaving behind a legacy of exceptional writing and social commentary. He had used his writings to highlight the plight of the under-privileged and to inspire them to realise their higher potential. He strove to demonstrate that the working classes merited a valued place in modern society. He is buried in Carnmoney Old Cemetery, Co. Antrim.

Patrick Devlin