

PATRICK KAVANAGH

The poet who wrote 'The Great Hunger,' the greatest epic poem of the Irish countryside since 'The Deserted Village,' died on the last day of November. Micheal O hAodha writes a tribute to Patrick Kavanagh.



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AT THE RISK of repeating an alleged libel, I would like to quote an excerpt from the controversial and anonymous profile of Patrick Kavanagh which appeared in *The Leader* in 1952 and was the subject of a famous court case:

"The imagination that gave birth to *The Great Hunger* is no common one and deserves our indulgence, if not our approval, for the foibles of the conscious mind. Apart from anything else, too. Authority has treated our finest living poet harshly — not only the impatience and *amour propre* of editors have proved unkind to him."

Now that Kavanagh has gone from us, we need not concern ourselves unduly with "the foibles of the conscious mind"; but the attitudes of Authority to writers of his distinction should concern us deeply.

Kavanagh, like several other writers of his generation, suffered from the pricks and kicks of an official and unofficial censorship which operated with an incredible ferocity in the forties and early fifties. But it is only fair to add that in recent years our academic and cultural institutions have tried to make some amends for the mistakes of the past.

The truth of the matter is that Kavanagh would be the last man to crave our indulgence or approval. His foibles were his own and he could wield a cudgel as good as the next in his own defence.

Ever since he left his native Monaghan in 1939 to become a Dublin character and man of letters, Patrick Kavanagh in his public appearances seemed

to conform to the popular but erroneous notion of what a poet should be — a rather rumbustious unconventional fellow without a care in the world or a penny to rattle on a tombstone.

But to have known Kavanagh "the character" is not to have known Kavanagh the poet who has written the greatest epic poem of the Irish countryside since Goldsmith's *The Deserted Village*.

With the publication of *The Great Hunger* in 1942, Kavanagh became a portent in the literary world. Here was a mind of flint which could strike poetry from the stony grey soil of Monaghan.

In some ways his finest poem, *The Great Hunger*, and the semiautobiographical *Tarry Flynn*, a current Abbey Theatre success, are complementary. *Tarry Flynn* is a great comic creation, illumined by the lost innocence of childhood. As the cold clay loses its grip on Tarry, his fantasy-soaring mind saves him from the fate of Maguire in *The Great Hunger*, whose life is stifled by the clods and stones.

His later works, *A Soul for Sale* and *Come Dance with Kitty Stobling* won him wider recognition abroad; just as his journalistic sallies and critical sniping gained him greater notoriety here at home.

But one can never doubt the integrity of his poetic vision which not only sustained him in his jostle with life but in his brave uncompromising bid for enduring fame:

*If you ever go to Dublin town
In a hundred years or so
Inquire for me in Baggot
Street*

*And what I was like to know,
O he was a queer one,
Fol dol the di do,
He was a queer one
I tell you.*

*On Pembroke Road look out
for my ghost,
Dishevelled with shoes untied,
Playing through the railings
with little children
Whose children have long
since died.*

*O he was a nice man,
Fol dol the di do,
He was a nice man
I tell you.*

*He had the knack of making
men feel
As small as they really were
Which meant as great as God
had made them.
But as males they disliked his
air.*

*O he was a proud one
Fol dol the di do,
He was a proud one
I tell you.*



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