

Thomas O'Hagan Pioneer Poet and Scholar

by

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It has been suggested to me that I present the life work of Thomas O'Hagan to the members of this association. I do this happily, in all humility, in the hope that someone else, at a future time, will be able to add more artfully to the record of a refined, elegant and accomplished Catholic intellect. Eleven years have passed away since every newspaper on the Continent spoke of the death of a great Catholic teacher, poet, critical essayist and journalist.

Thomas O'Hagan was born in the Gore of Toronto, March 6th, 1855. He was the youngest child of John O'Hagan and Bridget O'Reilly from County Kerry. He had three brothers, Eugene, Patrick and John, with one sister Annie.

The O'Hagan family were pioneers in two very rich areas of Upper Canada. They came rather late to the Gore of Toronto, for the survey of the five Peel Townships had been done in 1819. At that time, and onwards, many new-comers arrived from Ireland, settled on their allotted lands and built up fine farms. Much of the early history of the Church in Upper Canada occurred along those primitive roads and amongst those far-sighted and vigorously loyal people.

In 1848, by an Order-in-Council, the area known as Queen's Bush was opened to pioneers. We know that section today as the County of Bruce in Ontario. In those days there were three frontier outposts from which pioneers took their departure for the forest wilderness, Goderich, Durham and Owen Sound.

The government in 1850 had let contracts for the chopping and logging of the Durham line through the Township of Brant and the erection of bridges over the Saugeen River and the following year through to Lake Huron. In 1852 work was commenced on the Owen Sound Post Road. These contracts only bargained for sleigh tracks for, in winter's snow or summer's muck, the early settler's only vehicle was a jumper.

The settlers built their homes – each a log shanty with its single pane window, its flat roof covered with scoops, its chinks filled with cedar splits, and its saddle-notched corners. By the doorway, side by side, were the grindstone and axe.

Into this primitive forest the O'Hagan family ventured in 1856. Thomas O'Hagan claimed to be the youngest pioneer of Bruce County.¹

John O'Hagan with his wife and five children settled on fifty acres which lay

¹ *Port Elgin Times* of August 3, 1899.

one mile and a quarter north by a mile and a quarter east of Paisley. Here he built his home. Here little Thomas grew up in all the faith and beauty of a Catholic pioneer's environment.

Young Thomas began his life of study at the first log school in that country. At the present time the Loucherby school stands on the corner of the old O'Hagan farm, but this building is in brick and cannot be the original school. In one of his poems he writes:

The old log-cottage school-house, John,
I think I see it yet,
Just but a step from two cross-roads,
Where you and I oft met.

From the log school he went to Walkerton where there was a continuation school of some sort. This town, then in the County of Brant, had a population of nine hundred people, the largest in this newly opened territory. When the opportunities of the Walkerton school were finished he went to St. Michael's, Toronto, where he graduated with honors in English and Latin in 1874.

In July 1899 Professor Houston of the Ontario Board of Education, who had been invited to the fiftieth jubilee of the settlement of Bruce, wrote a letter to the *Port Elgin Times*, in which he recalled memories as far back as 1857. He told of the common experience of all boys of that time. They chopped wood, they logged, they cut wheat with the sickle and threshed with the poverty stick. He paid special tribute to the teachers. "What impressed me most about them all" he wrote "was that their conversation showed unmistakable indication of real culture which had been acquired far away from Bruce backwoods. The business which keeps me from you – that of reading examination papers sent in by intending teachers – reminds me of the difference between these degenerate times, when it takes a candidate for a certificate a week to show how much he knows and a month to learn whether he knows enough for the purpose, and the heroic pioneer days when I could walk from my home to Southampton, pass a varied examination, and get my certificate before six o'clock of the same day, the distance I had to travel being twenty-two miles."²

In the spell of this new land, by unnamed masters, a taste for true scholarship was developed in Thomas O'Hagan. He was one of the finest scholars we have had in the last hundred years.

THE TRUE TEACHER.

This editorial appeared in the *Globe and Mail* of Toronto on the death of Thomas O'Hagan:

² *Ibid.*

“Dr. Thomas O’Hagan, who died in Toronto this week, was a bright example of the Ontario farm-boy who advanced to high place in the realm of education. He became noted for sound scholarship and far his eminence in the domain of literature. He carried the degrees of many Universities: M.A., Ph.D., Litt.D., and LL.D., and had taken post-graduate courses in famous centres of learning in France, Belgium, Germany and Switzerland. Five languages were at his command.

Dr. O’Hagan pursued knowledge for its own sake. By nature he was the student, and mature scholarship was revealed in the contributions he made to Canadian literature. His adult years were spent in teaching, chiefly in Catholic schools; in writing and in extensive travel as opportunity occurred. His frequent contributions to the press on controversial subjects were marked by lucidity of expression and courteous moderation in the presentation of his views. Dr. O’Hagan was a kind-hearted man of refined thought, an interesting personality with a gift for friendship, who passed from the scene of his labours as quietly as he had lived.”³

Mr. O’Hagan began to teach in Catholic schools in the infant days of the Separate Schools of Ontario. It is doubtful if any other Catholic layman in his native province has done as much for their upbuilding. In 1878 he organized the first Provincial Separate School Teachers’ Association and was appointed its first president; and out of this movement, which he set on foot, has grown nearly all the legislation which has made for the betterment of the Roman Catholic Schools of Ontario.⁴

St. Thomas Aquinas writing on the works of the active life gives us his doctrine on the principle and dignity of the teacher’s vocation: “There is one (active work) which springs from the fulness of contemplation teaching ... and this is preferable to simple contemplation. For just as it is a greater thing to shed light than to be full of light, so it is a greater thing to spread abroad the fruits of our contemplation than merely to contemplate.”⁵ And in another place “the contemplative life is the principle of teaching ... moreover it is the calling nearest the perfection of the Episcopacy.”⁶

Like his patron saint O’Hagan was to realize this principle early in his life. Like a hungry lion he roamed the earth in search of truth and scholarship.

The Basilian Fathers of Toronto, I am sure, encouraged these noble ambitions in Thomas O’Hagan. While he was with them, their motto and their lives must have impressed him very much “Teach me goodness, discipline and knowledge.”

At first I could not explain why toward the end of the eighteen-seventies

³ *Globe and Mail*, Toronto, March 3, 1939.

⁴ *Catholic World*, N.Y., Portrait and Biography, 65: pp. 708-10, August, 1897.

⁵ *Summa*: (2-2, 188, 6).

⁶ *Summa*: (1 cit. ad 2m.)

Thomas O'Hagan entered Ottawa University and not his old school St. Michael's. The reason undoubtedly was that although St. Michael's was invited to join the federation which became the University of Toronto in 1881, it was 1910 before the college was able to take advantage of the affiliation. Consequently, St. Michael's conferred no degrees when O'Hagan wanted them.⁷

On the other hand the College of Bytown was incorporated by 1849 and its title changed to the College of Ottawa in 1861. By civil charter this institution received the power of granting degrees in 1866.

There is no doubt that eighty years ago the need of qualified lay teachers in Canadian and American schools was very great. One needed to possess a chivalrous or apostolic strain to enter this vocation. The material returns were very little and the preparatory years had to be viewed not as an end but a means. For the Christian concept of culture, the encouragement of the arts, is meant for a purpose far beyond this world.

Thomas O'Hagan, in a most admirable manner, dedicated his life's energies to this cause. Without haste and without rest he fought his way along the path of scholarship to an unchallenged pre-eminence.

He gained his B.A. from Ottawa in 1882 and his M.A. in 1885. He majored in English, the Classics and Modern Languages. By middle age he was accredited publicly with fluency in five languages and an acquaintance with as many more.

From 1884 to 1888 he taught Classics and Modern History at the Barrie, Pembroke and Mitchell Collegiates. Then he entered Syracuse University to major in History, English and the Romance Languages. Here he came under the marked influence of Dr. Corson, the eminent Shakespeare and Browning scholar. This University gave him his M.A. on examination and his Ph.D. in English Literature in 1889.

When he left Syracuse, he taught at the Walkerton High School and then became Principal of the Waterdown Collegiate.

Dr. O'Hagan however had craved an opportunity to study at Cornell University under George Lincoln Burr, Stambaugh Professor Emeritus of History, about whom he had heard most encouraging reports. In 1893 he enrolled as a graduate student.

Professor Burr fulfilled his highest hopes. The two men became fast friends. The Professor told O'Hagan that he had reached that point of scholarship where no man could help him. What he needed was the use of the great libraries of America and the old world. Carlyle was right when he said "a library is a true university." Thus advised, he spent 1901 and 1902 at Wisconsin and Chicago Universities, while 1903-04 were given to Grenoble, Louvain, Bonn and Fribourg.

⁷ "The Very Rev. J. R. Teefy, C.S.B. LLD." *Can. Cath. Hist. Review Report*, 1939-40.

Now he had his material for contemplation. He returned to the United States to lecture at practically every Catholic college and convent on the continent. For many years he was a regular lecturer at the Champlain Catholic Summer School and the New Orleans Catholic Winter School.

Dr. O'Hagan prized the aims, the achievements and the friendships of the Summer and Winter Schools. These years, from 1892 onwards, thanks to the initiative of Warren E. Mosher, formed the romantic epoch of scholarship in America. In the summer of 1915 a young maple tree near the chapel of the Champlain School inspired the lines of Kilmer's immortal "Trees." Amidst these associations culture sparred with culture, young and old profited from a medley of renowned artists. In this movement was born the *Reading Circle Review*, a booklet which continued the work of these seasonal lectures over the year.

I recommend that you read the essays of Thomas O'Hagan. In them you will discover the depth and spirit of his culture. His work of 1909, *Essays Literary, Critical and Historical*, ought to be read by every teacher. The weaknesses which he exposes in these papers are equally true today.

The Rev. John Cavanaugh, C.S.C., who was president of Notre Dame University, Indiana, when Dr. O'Hagan was in his prime, has among many words of praise, said of him: "He is under a perpetual tyranny of facts and principles in every department of knowledge, religious, literary and historical. Let the scholar, bearing to us the riches of the library, and the wide-visioned traveller fresh from the fields of life, be heard for the wisdom and wholesomeness of their message."⁸

Three universities honoured him with Doctorates: Laval conferred on him a Litt.D. in 1914, Notre Dame gave him a LL.D. in 1917 with this citation: "On a literary worker of zeal and ability, whose writings are as wholesome as his philosophy is refined and spiritual: Thomas O'Hagan, of Toronto, Canada." In 1924 Ottawa University honoured an old student with a Doctorate in Letters.

All through his life this scholar used his earnings to add to his own learning and to urge younger folks along the same way. He offered medals for competition in most of the schools of his home province. A further testimony to this truth is found in his last will and testament: "I give \$500.00 to each of the following institutions of learning for an annual prize to be known as the O'Hagan Prize: – Laval University – for a French Poem, Ottawa University – for an Essay on French Canadian Literature, St. Michael's College – for an Essay on Catholic Literature of Canada, Notre Dame University – for an Essay on Irish History, Catholic University, Washington, D.C. – for an English Poem, Louvain, Belgium – Activities of Louvain Students in Catholic Church of America, St. Jerome's College – for Essay on the Catholic Church in Ontario, the China Mission Society, Toronto, for my soul."⁹

⁸ Preface to *With Stag and Scrip*, Ryerson, pp. 19, 24.

⁹ *Toronto Daily Star* files of 1940.

THE POET

As a poet, Thomas O'Hagan, was fortunate to win the praise of the most illustrious *literati* of his day. His first book of poems *A Gate of Flowers* appeared in 1887. This work received the immediate commendation of the American poets John G. Whittier and Dr. Oliver Wendell Holmes, together with such Canadians as Charles G. D. Roberts, Dr. Louis Fréchette and Pamphile Lemay. Roberts wrote: "Mr. O'Hagan possesses that ear for melody which never fails the charming poets of his race."¹⁰

From Ireland came these words of the writer Katharine Tynan Hinkson: "Mr. O'Hagan's poetry possesses Irish sweetness and melody."¹¹

One day Nicholas Flood Davin, the poet, journalist and parliamentarian was reading the *Canadian Monthly* and came upon O'Hagan's "Ireland in 1880." He immediately wrote the doctor: "I cannot deny myself the pleasure of telling you what I think of these verses. They are instinct with true inspiration, and should have for all time, a place in Irish Literature."¹²

The volume *A Gate of Flowers* was translated into French in Paris.

In 1893 his second volume of poetry, *In Dreamland*, appeared. This publication attracted wide attention. The competent critic of the *Canadian Magazine* declared that the poem "The Song My Mother Sings" was the finest of its kind ever published in Canada.

If you know the country-side of the County Bruce there will be no wonder that poets were born of its good earth. Isabella Valancy Crawford was from Paisley. She and Dr. O'Hagan are the two Canadian poets who have dealt with the simple themes of pioneer life on the farm. There are two experiences of life which O'Hagan never forgot – faith and the farm. In many of his *Poems of the Settlement* you get the very atmosphere of pioneer days. That is why I told you a little about the founding of Bruce. Upon a silent day you hear the lowing of cattle and the light breezes, among the pines and maples, as the voice of rippling waters.

The faith and personality of Thomas O'Hagan enters into all his poetry. All of his literary work is marked by a depth of feeling expressed with rare delicacy and lyric grace. He was a man of simple faith despite all his travels and acquaintances.

"Hearts oft bow before strange idols,
Strength of power and breath of fame,
And forgetful of life's morning

¹⁰ Preface to *The Collected Poems of Thomas O'Hagan*.

¹¹ "Portrait and Biography," *Catholic World*, 65: pp. 708-10, August, 1897.

¹² Dean W. R. Harris: *The Collected Poems of Thomas O'Hagan*.

Dream of noontide's gilded name;
But the idol that I cherish
Knows no glory e'en in part –
'Tis the simple faith of childhood
Long grown strong within my heart."¹³

In easy, serene, tender, restrained and natural rhythm O'Hagan related scenes and experiences without and within the souls of men. His ministry was that of simplicity, humanity and faith. He wrote of country happenings, home, mother, early school days, songs of patriotic pride, love, life, death and God. He won the heart of Kilmer who treasured as a work of beauty and perfection "Giotto's Campanile." "In his ears was a certain music, to his eyes came the inscape of the objective world, to his nostrils the scent within the scent of nature, to his spirit both the stress and the quietude of Divine Revelation."

Such a soul expresses itself best in apocalyptic, elegiac and commemorative versification. It cannot be questioned that in these forms of poetry O'Hagan was without a Canadian equal.

Four more collections of poetry were added to his record in regular succession. *Songs of the Settlement and Other Poems* was printed in Toronto in 1899. In the same city, in 1914, *In the Heart of the Meadow* appeared; in 1922 *The Collected Poems of Thomas O'Hagan*, and in 1928, *Tide of Love*.

When the Honorable Justice Longley heard of the plan to publish these *Collected Poems* he wrote Dr. O'Hagan on November 10th, 1921: "I cannot express to you how delighted I am to learn that it is your intention to bring out a complete edition of all your exquisite poems."¹⁴

There are many notes which indicate the esteem in which Dr. O'Hagan was held by his fellow Canadian *literati*. Alexander Louis Fraser insisted that it be he who would review *People of the Street and Other Poems* in the *Canadian Bookman*. Dr. William Henry Drummond, though not of the same faith, always had time for visits with him. He was admired as "a man of sterling integrity and honor; a hater of sham in every form, loyal to his friends and generous to his foes. None seemed to enjoy a wider and more deserving friendship."¹⁵

ESSAYIST AND JOURNALIST

There was another field in which O'Hagan moved with confidence and distinction. In fact, it is perhaps as an essayist and journalist that he was most widely renowned. He contributed to the *Catholic World* for over thirty years. Until recent years that periodical spared a section to "Our Contributors."

¹³ Preface to *The Collected Poems of Thomas O'Hagan*.

¹⁴ Letter to Thomas O'Hagan, November 10, 1921.

¹⁵ *Catholic World*, 65: pp. 708-10, August, 1897.

Among these introductions are tributes of the sort: "Thomas O'Hagan, M.A., Ph.D., the distinguished author, editor and lecturer, has been a frequent and highly esteemed contributor for over thirty years. Dr. O'Hagan is one of the finest ornaments of Catholic literature, to which he devoted his life. His published works are both numerous and excellent, from the first issued in 1887, to the latest."¹⁶ "His eminence as poet, scholar and critic remains unchallenged."¹⁷

His career as newspaperman began in 1890 when he joined the staff of the *Daily Tribune*, Duluth, Minn. He was editor of this paper for one year. This position he resigned to become principal of the Waterdown High School.

As an essayist he is continentally acknowledged. These are some of the newspapers and magazines to which he was a prodigious contributor: In Canada, to the *Globe* and *Catholic Register* of Toronto, to the *Canadian Bookman* and the *Canadian Magazine*, to the *Makers of Canadian Literature*. In the United States, to the *Catholic World* and *America* of New York, to the *Reading Circle Review*, to the *New World*, to the *Catholic Encyclopedia*, to the *Catholic Educational Review*, Washington, D.C., to the *Boston Pilot*, *Donahue's Magazine* and the *Milwaukee Citizen*. In Ireland, to the *Rosary Magazine*.

Thomas O'Hagan is the author of several volumes of essays, editorials and lectures. These cover a wide variety of subjects, poetic, literary and historical.

The progress of Catholicism in U.S.A. during the second half of the last century was phenomenal. The Fathers of the Baltimore Council expressed a desire that Catholic weeklies be established in the major dioceses of the country. In accordance with this wish Archbishop Feehan of Chicago sent forth the first copy of the *New World* on September 10th, 1892. The, attractive title of this diocesan weekly was a happy choice. It came into being in the year selected for the world's Columbian Exposition in honor of Christopher Columbus. In all its fifty years it has maintained a high order of literary merit. It became the mirror of Catholic events in this marvellous city, which in the memory of living men had grown from an outpost village to a great metropolis.

In the history of this paper the name of Thomas O'Hagan is immortalized. From the beginning of this venture he was the generous contributor and wise councillor. At that time he was an undergraduate at Cornell. His fidelity and interest finally led him to the editorship upon the death of Charles J. O'Malley in March, 1910. I quote a part of the tribute paid to him in the Jubilee number of the *New World* of 1942. "Then the scholarly Dr. Thomas O'Hagan became editor. His contributions to literature were immense. He was celebrated as an editor, lecturer, poet and author. During his editorship the *New World* was published full size, with seven crowded columns of interesting editorial and

¹⁶ *Catholic World*, November, 1923 and October, 1926.

¹⁷ *Catholic World*, April, 1927.

news content.” He resigned from this position in 1913.

In a long and prolific career many honours came to him. In 1933 a rare tribute was paid when he was invited by the Historic and Heraldic Institute of France to be corresponding honorary member of the society. He was a fellow of the Catholic Scientific Congregation of Europe, a member of the American Historical Society, the Irish American Historical Society, the Celtic Society of Montreal, the Authors’ League of America, the Dante Society of Florence, the Academy of Catholic Poets of America, the Alliance Française of Detroit, the Baconian and Author’s Clubs of London, England, the Canadian Hamilton and the National Press Club of Washington, D.C.

Dr. O’Hagan has merited a place in the history of Canadian letters. His life demonstrated what the son of a pioneer can do towards the upbuilding of the Church and education over a continent. Neither Church nor country could reproach this excellent ambassador. He never married, yet he devoted his life’s labours to give a love of God and the things of the mind to young men and women for over fifty years. This memory of him is still dear to many who found in him a companion rather than a tutor, whose life was the example, not his precepts. For these same students he published his last work in 1936, *What Shakespeare is Not*.

In time his strong physique was worn out with unceasing toil. After an illness of two years, with sight and sound denied him, he came to everlasting rest, in Mercy Hospital, Toronto, on March 1st, 1939. How well he deserved this peaceful deliverance who had expected, prepared and laboured for no other goal than the truth!

The remains of this distinguished Catholic son of Bruce were brought to the church of St. Mary Immaculate, Chepstow, Ontario for Requiem High, Mass on March fourth. All that was mortal of the Canadian poet, author, scholar, teacher, lecturer and world traveller was returned to the scene of his childhood. He was interred in the family plot in the old church cemetery.

“In vigils watched thy heart,
Through toil of every day ;
A knight of God supreme
Thou led’st the way.
Faith simple and secure
Thy torch and goal ;
Beloved thy memory dear
Peace to thy soul:”¹⁸

¹⁸ *The Collected Poems of Thomas O’Hagan*, p. 106.