

G. A. Hayes-McCoy

(1911-75)

Irish history has suffered a sad loss in the untimely death of Gerard Hayes-McCoy. He was a devoted, even passionate, historian, but he combined a romantic love of the past with the discipline of a trained scholar and the shrewdness of an acute mind. His writings have warmth and colour, but they can stand the test of criticism. His main interest was in the sixteenth century, and he made himself an acknowledged authority on the history of Ireland in that period. Battles and the techniques of warfare had a strange fascination for one who was the most peaceful of men. He had a high reputation as a military historian, but he was more than that. He used his wide reading and his imaginative insight to portray the social structure of Gaelic Ireland in its later stages. He loved maps and pictures and all manner of artefacts, and this gave an unusual width to his concept of history. His last work, completed shortly before his death, was a history of Irish flags.

He was born and brought up in Galway in an environment that clearly awoke affection and curiosity in a sensitive boy. When he went to college he was fortunate in his professor, Mary Donovan O'Sullivan, who likewise had a love, and an informed knowledge, of old Galway. Liam Ó Briain, the professor of romance languages, was an exciting polymath and a stimulating influence. The young Hayes-McCoy used his National University studentship to go to Edinburgh in 1932 to pursue his research into the Scottish mercenaries who came to Ireland in the sixteenth century. Scotland became his second love, and Robert Louis Stevenson his hero. The result of his study was a fine book, *Scots mercenary forces in Ireland*, published in London in 1937.

When he came back to Ireland in 1937 after two years at the Institute of Historical Research, London, history posts were hard to get, but he obtained an appointment in 1939 in the National Museum where he eventually found a congenial niche in charge of the military collections. All the while he was contributing articles to learned journals on various aspects of Irish history. His first contribution to *Irish Historical Studies* was a review (September 1939) of Sir Charles Oman's *A history of the art of war in the sixteenth century*, followed in 1941 by a comprehensive article on strategy and tactics in Irish warfare, 1593-1601.

He took an active part in the formation of the Military History Society of Ireland in 1949 and was the first editor of its journal, *The Irish Sword*. He was a strong editor, insisting on a high standard of writing, ruthlessly pruning verbose contributions. In cooperation with Colm Ó Lochlainn of the Three Candles Press he gave the journal an attractive form with a distinctive style of paper and typography. The *Irish Sword* soon acquired an international reputation for the quality

and variety of its contents and the excellence of its production. The Military History Society gave him a consuming interest. He delighted in outings to fields of battle and in social intercourse with soldiers of different traditions. He saw a unifying force in a shared concern for the achievements of Irish warriors of the past, under whatever flag they fought. He was tireless in his work for the society, presiding over committees, conducting tours and giving lectures. Some of this work found permanent form in an excellent book, *Irish battles* (1969), which surveyed a series of engagements from Clontarf to 1798.

In 1956 he at last obtained the university post that his talents and writings fully deserved, when he became professor of history at University College, Galway. He took great pleasure in his teaching. He had a very individual style of lecturing, using voice and gestures to convey feeling as well as information, absorbed in his subject and at the same time in rapport with his audience. He took a close interest in his brighter students and steered many of them into the subjects that concerned him most.

He was a member of the Irish Manuscripts Commission and made several contributions to its publications, notably *Ulster and other maps, c. 1600* (1964), in which his love of maps and pictures found full scope in the presentation and elucidation of the pictorial maps made by Richard Barthelet, who accompanied Lord Mountjoy on his campaign in Ulster.

The mature expression of his prolonged study of sixteenth-century Ireland is to be found in the three fine chapters he contributed to the third volume of the *New history of Ireland*, just published—chapters that, sadly, he did not live to see in their published form. They show him as a historian of high quality, handling complicated events with deceptive simplicity, eloquent and warm-hearted but never losing his sense of proportion, objective and free from prejudice, absorbed in the problems of Ireland but seeing them in a wider context, linked to the problems of England, Scotland and western Europe. Those chapters will enhance his reputation and add to the sorrow of his friends and fellow-historians that one who had so much still to give to Irish history did not live to give it.

J. G. SIMMS