‘Joannes Clericus’
The Life and Work of the Revd John Rooney

Marion McEnroy
introduces the paintings of an early
19th-century Galway artist

A rare example of a painting from the Famine period, signed and dated in old Gaelic lettering: ‘Sean O Ruainadh Sagart 1847’, was donated in February 1998 to the Department of Folklore of the National University of Ireland, Dublin by the late Mr Brian Foley of Athenry, county Galway. Research into the life and work of Father John Rooney (c.1809-50) has revealed that in a relatively short period of activity as an artist he produced a number of works and was a regular exhibitor at the Royal Hibernian Academy.

In one of Father Rooney’s obituaries, it is mentioned that he was a native of the city of Galway. Unfortunately, no record of his birth date can be found in parish records. Fr Martin Coen’s article on Galway students in Maynooth College shows that Rooney matriculated on 4 September 1826, while Patrick T Hamell reports that he attended the humanities class in Maynooth and was ordained a Roman Catholic priest in 1833. Assuming that he was at the average age of 24 at ordination, this would date his birth to c.1809. After ordination, Rooney returned to work on the mission in his native Galway in the parishes of Oranmore and Moycullen.

Rooney’s route to becoming a painter was an unusual one. As a result of an illness early in his career as a curate, he had a heart condition for the rest of his life. However, this was not the only blow to his health that he was to suffer. On 19 June 1839, he was injured in a shooting accident which was reported in the Galway Advertiser, 22 June 1839: Melancholy Accident. Rev. Rooney who had some time previously been in a delicate state of health, accompanied the Messrs. Blake of Frenchfort, on a shooting party in the Bay, one of the fowling pieces being on a level with the unfortunate gentleman’s chest discharged, the contents grazing his breast, and entering his right arm, completely shattering it.

Consequently, Rooney was unable to perform his duties as a priest, as he himself wrote in a letter of April 1844 addressed to the historian James Hardiman of Crew, Castlebar, county Mayo: I am going to ask a favour of you. It is, to write to Mr. (George) Petrie in my behalf [sic]. You must know, necessity has turned me into an artist at length. I have been for the last year from delicacy of health, incapable of attaining to the mission, and as there is no provision in this diocese [sic] for disabled journeymen, I have taken to the canvass and brush for my support, I have just ready to send to the Dublin exhibition of this year, a picture ‘The Denial of Peter’. I flatter myself you would do me a service and as I understand Mr. Petrie and you are intimate friends, I request that you will write to him to have my picture put in a good light at the exhibition...indeed I am more anxious, I acknowledge, to know what price Mr. Petrie will set on it (for he of course is an excellent judge) than what price it may really bring. I will not publish my own name, for the Art Union Committee I am told are of a certain class, and if they discovered the artist to be a priest perhaps he would have very little to boast of at their hands. The name I assume is “John Clarke quasi Joannes Clericus” — and this is the name I wish to have introduced to Mr. Petrie.

Rooney’s enthusiasm about exhibiting his work is palpable from this letter. He obviously overcame his apprehensions about how he would be received by the Art Union committee as he dispensed with the pseudonym John Clarke when he exhibited at the following four annual Royal Hibernian Academy exhibitions.

There is no evidence that Rooney ever received a formal training as an artist. Indeed, due to the rigorous daily schedule at Maynooth College, it is highly unlikely that he would have been able to enroll in drawing classes during his education there. It is mentioned in one of his obituaries that he was self-taught. Rooney may have had access to prints and paintings at Maynooth brought back to Ireland by priests who trained or travelled abroad. He may also have referred to manuals of practical artistic instruction such as Dobley’s Perceptor which had been recommended to the students of the Dublin Society School of Figure Drawing since its establishment in the 18th century.

Prints made after prizewinning paintings such as The Blind Girl at the Holy Well by Frederick William Burton (1816-1900) and The Young Mendicant’s Novitiate by Richard Rothwell (1800-1868) were widely distributed and may have been additional sources of inspiration. No doubt the annual Royal Hibernian Academy exhibitions in Dublin were welcome occasions for artists such as Rooney who lived in the West of Ireland to observe current developments in painting.

The Royal Hibernian Academy of Arts Index of Exhibitors lists Revd John Rooney as having exhibited two watercolour paintings entitled Sympathy and Contentment in 1847. An article in Duffy’s Irish Catholic Magazine gives a review of these works: The two works by the Rev. John Rooney, no. 184, Sympathy, and no. 270, Contentment, afford great promise, and so far as artistic treatment is to be considered, show considerable improvement by this artist since last year. His ‘May-Day at Menlo’ exhibited last year gave us hope, which we are glad to find has not been disappointed. There was room for improvement in composition and drawing, which we perceive is rapidly taking place.

The painting now located in University College Dublin (Fig 1) is most probably the work referred to as Sympathy, since apart from the fact that it is dated 1847, the pathos of the subject matter corresponds to the title. Although there is some...
Sympathy is in some way symbolic of the famine. Although Rooney was no longer in active service as a curate, he would have known of the suffering going on around him. The area surrounding the parish of Oranmore where he had served as a curate until 1839 lost forty percent of its 1841 population during the ensuing famine years. He was probably aware of the fact that overt references to the gloom of the Famine would not have been well received by the RHA and since he wished to exhibit and sell his paintings, it is possible that he opted for an allegorical approach to this morbid subject. Indeed, paintings that addressed the famine more directly, such as _The Discovery of the Potato Blight_, 1847 by Daniel MacDonald (1821-53) and _The Evicted Family_, 1853 by Erskine Nichol (1825-1904) were very rare.

Having received an education in the Humanities, Rooney would have had some knowledge of Christian iconology and Classical mythology. The spinning wheel may refer to the attribute of Lachesis, one of the three fates who was often depicted as '...spinning the thread of life, and measuring and cutting off the allotted length.' In Christian iconology birds have often been identified with the spirit or soul and a dead bird can symbolise loss of freedom and hope. If we take this into account, it is conceivable that this painting has an allegorical meaning beyond the confines of a simple genre scene.

Only three other extant works by Rooney – all of which are portraits – have been located. In the National Library of Ireland there is a mezzotint portrait (after a lost painting by Rooney) of Thomas Francis Meagher (1822-1867) (Fig 2). The portrait was probably executed while Meagher was in Galway on an election campaign in 1847. A contemporary critic states that the engraving '...certainly surpasses anything we have yet seen in its truthful delineation of every feature and lineament in the young tribune’s beaming countenance.' Meagher was a supporter of the Nationalist Young Ireland movement and was instrumental in the deterioration of relations between Young Ireland and Daniel O’Connell’s Repeal Association. The inclusion of an attache case, book, and document are allusions to Meagher’s career. Rooney included a facsimile of Meagher’s inscription below his own signature on the portrait: ‘Your sincere friend Thomas Francis Meagher’ which suggests that this was not a commissioned portrait but rather a tribute to a man whom he was proud to acknowledge as a friend.

Despite the relatively fine technique evident in Rooney’s portrait of Meagher, the print has a somewhat deliberate quality which combined with the slight pentimento in the positioning of the head would indicate a lack of extensive experience in this.

 awkwardness and stylisation in the treatment of the woman, it is a wonderfully naturalistic study of a child. The light source appears to come from the upper left-hand side of the picture and the use of highlights on the drapery, fleece, and spinning wheel create a sense of warmth and volume.

The composition is set in a simple cabin interior and depicts a woman seated at a spinning wheel turning towards a girl who is holding a dead bird in her hands. The subject matter of this painting is quite similar to the sentimental works originally developed in the 18th century by Thomas Gainsborough (1727-88) which were rather pejoratively described as ‘Fancy-pictures’ by his rival Sir Joshua Reynolds (1725-92). The intention of the artist in these ‘Fancy-pictures’ was to evoke sentiments of sympathy and charity in the viewer. Although the painting is clearly an emotive response to the sorrow of a child confronted by death, it is a matter of interpretation as to whether or not
medium. His observation of the effect of light may be seen in the
translucence of the left eye and rendering of textures through-
out the work.

The remaining two portraits – one of the former Bishop of
Galway, Revd Dr Laurence O'Donnell (Fig 3) and the other
of the bishop's sister, Mrs Kirwan – are both oil paintings.
Although they are not signed, clerical tradition and newspaper
reports from the period record both as being the work of Revd
John Rooney.20 The former now hangs in the residence of
the present Bishop of Galway, the Most Revd James Mcloughlin,
at Taylor's Hill, while the portrait of Mrs Kirwan is in a private
collection.

The Revd Dr Laurence O'Donnell (b. 1777) was bishop of
Galway from 1844 until his death in 1855. Bishop O'Donnell
was very supportive of the young curate and when Rooney's
health began to fail him, the Bishop took him in to his home,
'Fort Lorenzo' in Taylor's Hill, where Rooney died on 10 August
1850.21 He was buried in the cemetery of the Dominican Fathers
at the Claddagh in Galway, although no identifiable headstone
remains.22

The use of colour in Rooney's portrait of Bishop O'Donnell is
rather frugal and uninspired but a dash of crimson in the silk-
buttoned shirt-front, combined with the bishop's ruddy com-
xplexion and the highlighting of his ring, serve to relieve an
otherwise earthy palette.23 The treatment of drapery resembles
that of the mezzotint portrait of T F Meagher but the lack of any
strong chiaroscuro or mastery of the technique of glazing con-
tributes to a certain degree of flatness about the work. The por-
trait does, however, convey the artist's keen observation of the

character of the sitter, despite these technical shortcomings. A
contemporary report on the accuracy of the portrait's likeness to
the sitter, describes it as the '...most lifelike drawing we have
ever witnessed.'24

Although undated, Rooney's portrait of Bishop O'Donnell's
sister, Mrs Kirwan, shows an improvement in his skill as a
painter. The composition of this three-quarter length, seated
portrait is more dynamic and voluminous in its treatment of the
figure. Of all the extant works by Rooney, this is the most
accomplished, with flesh tones, highlights on the fingernail,
eyes, and gilded book-edge all achieved by means of a more
inventive and sophisticated use of colour.25 A woman of consid-
erable means, Mrs Kirwan resided in the stately medieval
house known as 'Lynches Castle' in Galway. It was she who purchased
for her brother the grand house which he promptly named, 'Fort
Lorenzo', in the Italianate manner.

Although the Revd John Rooney was a painter of modest tal-
ents, he certainly merits documentation in the history of Irish
art. His work is a testimony to his commitment as an artist and
the struggle of talent and dedication over obstacles such as the
lack of formal training, relative isolation from exposure to the
work of other artists, and ill health. It is also interesting to
observe from such a small selection of works, a development in
Rooney's technical skill and a willingness to experiment with a
variety of media. His works offer us a valuable insight into Irish
life and culture during a dark but intriguing historical period.

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1 Which translates as 'John Rooney, Priest' in English.
2 Galway Vindicatour (14 Aug 1850).
3 M Coen, 'Galway students in Maynooth
4 J P Hamell, Maynooth Students and
5 Royal Irish Academy Manuscripts of James
Hardiman MS 12, N 21, no 240.
6 Galway Mercury (17 Aug 1850).
7 J Turpin, 'The School of Figure Drawing of
the Dublin Society in the 18th Century',
Dublin Historical Record, vol 40 (1986-87),
pp.42-6.
8 E Black, 'Practical Patriots and True Irishmen,
The Royal Irish Art Union 1839-59', Irish
9 A M Stewart, Royal Hibernian Academy of
Arts, Index of Exhibitors and Their Works 1826-
1979, vol 3 (Dublin 1987).
10 Duffy's Irish Catholic Magazine, vol 1 (Dublin
1840), pp.149-51.
11 The report by the Paper Conservation Studio,
Dublin, of 6th Oct 1997, states that the
watercolour was in a bad state of repair due to
smoke damage and having been treated over
the years as an oil painting.
12 Notes from a lecture in the National Gallery
of Ireland by Hugh Belsey, Curator of
Gainsborough's House, entitled 'Gainsborough
and the Fancy-Picture'.
13 Folklore Department, NUI, Galway
14 National Gallery of Ireland.
15 J Hall, Hall's Dictionary of Subjects and Symbols
(London 1974).
16 The print was originally part of the library of
Jasper Robert Joly (1819-92), a discerning col-
lector of prints, books, music, maps, and
manuscripts who acquired the print while serving
as the Protestant Vicar General of the diocese
of Tuam.
17 R Elms, Catalogue of Engraved Irish Prints
(Dublin 1937) p.134.
18 Galway Vindicatour (5 Aug 1846).
19 Rooney's obituary entitled 'Irish Genius, the
Rev. Rooney', Galway Vindicatour (14 Aug
1850).
Galway Archaeological and Historical Society,
21 (As note 20) p.74-7.
22 (As note 20) p.77.
23 The painting is in good condition, having been
cleaned in 1991 by Ms Vicki Crowly, Barna,
Galway.
24 (As note 18).
25 In all four of the extant works there is a dis-
tinctive, rather wooden treatment of the
hands which would support traditional attribu-
tions to Rooney of the unsigned works.

The following is a list of known works by the Revd
John Rooney. Unfortunately, I cannot verify the
medium used, or the location of some of these
works:

1840: Copy of Ecce-Homo by Guido Reni. Now
lost.
c.1847: Portrait of T F Meagher mezzotint, NLI
1846: Lithograph after the Painting, May
Day at Menloagh. Lost
Undated: Portrait of Bishop O'Donnell, Oil on
Canvas (Residence of Dr J Mcloughlin,
Bishop of Galway)
Undated: Portrait of Mrs Kirwan, Oil on Canvas
(Private Collection)

RHA Exhibitions:
1844: Denial of Peter
1845: The Sick Child
1846: May Day at Menlo
1847: Sympathy (watercolour)
Contentment watercolour (Lost)
PortraIt of Thomas Francis Meagher,
Oil on Canvas (Lost) 1848
PortraIt of the Children of the
Right Hon The Chief Baron
(Blake of Frenchfort?) (Lost)

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