

## Hughie O'Donoghue: Broader strokes of family history

The artist's new exhibition explores the personal and political, 'the complex, detailed, contingencies of people's lives'

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Aidan Dunne



Hughie O'Donoghue: 'If you want to get at all close to a true version of events, you have to make room for the inconvenient bits as well.' Photograph: Alan Betson / The Irish Times

Hughie O'Donoghue is the living embodiment of one of the main themes of his work: the interwoven histories and circumstances that inform and shape identity. In the course of many projects, the layers and turns of his own family history have illuminated broader swathes of human experience.

The working of memory is key. The grandfather with whom he shares a first name moved from Co Kerry to Manchester in 1911 to work on the railways. He had O'Donoghue says, nationalist sympathies. His cousin was head of the IRA in Manchester during the War of Independence. He was jailed and, after the Treaty, deported to Ireland. O'Donoghue's father, Daniel, grew up in Manchester and went to work as a railway clerk.

Conscripted into the British army after the outbreak of the second World War, he saw extensive service on the European mainland, first with the expeditionary force that retreated via Dunkirk and then during the invasion of Italy.

He also had a keen interest in European culture generally – literature, music and art – an interest he encouraged in his son. O'Donoghue's mother was Irish, and had emigrated to England only reluctantly, in 1937, for economic reasons. She stayed in close contact with her family in rural Co Mayo, and O'Donoghue enjoyed prolonged annual stays there. That put him in touch with another historical lineage, one extending back to the Great Famine and the desperate poverty of neglected, marginalised communities that were, nonetheless, rich in cultural resources. His links with Ireland have endured, even strengthened.

He has certainly researched both sides of his family in more depth than most people have, but he found that there are still discoveries to be made.

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The Irishmen who served in the Great War were cast in an anomalous historical role. The ground had shifted at home between the war's beginning and its end. "Nineteen-sixteen had happened. Sympathies changed." Sinn Féin's decisive election victory in 1918 was a prelude to the War of Independence. Until very recently Irish veterans of the first World War were subject to a kind of historical amnesia. It was inconvenient to remember them.

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To his surprise O'Donoghue learned of an uncle of his mother's whom he'd never heard of. "His name was Michael O'Donnell. Somehow, in 1915, he ended up enlisting as a soldier in a Scottish regiment – I suspect because he went to Scotland to pick potatoes – and was promoted to sergeant. He actually fought on the Somme, and managed to survive, but he did not survive the war. He was killed at some stage in 1918 and is buried in France."

For whatever reason, he was all but forgotten in the family. "History is always partial. It depends on who's doing the remembering."

### One Hundred Years and Four Quarters

That notion underlies the rationale of O'Donoghue's exhibition *One Hundred Years and Four Quarters*, at Galway International Arts Festival this month. He takes 1916 as a historical moment and proposes four perspectives on it: those of revolutionary, soldier, sailor and peasant.

He had in mind Akira Kurosawa's classic film *Rashomon*, in which four characters present conflicting accounts of a single violent incident, none quite true, all self-serving. "But if you want to get at all close to a true version of events you have to make room for the inconvenient bits as well."



O'Donoghue also wanted to emphasise that history happens to individuals.



Beyond the broad strokes of great events lie the complex, detailed, contingencies of people's lives. When he visited Pearse's cottage at Rosmuc in 2013 he "was struck by the fact that this little cottage, a kind of pastoral cliché, was a very unlikely location for the beginnings of a revolution."



The image doesn't contradict the prosaic setting, but in the series of paintings based around the cottage the palette is obviously keyed to the bands of the Tricolour. Perhaps there is a nod here to the vital role of the west in emergent Irish identity.

*The Railway Man* is his grandfather. Like most of the work it is a construction, a composite, incorporating photography, painting and a section of railway sleeper. Other works include collage, floorboards, a tarpaulin and other materials. Several of the photographic sources are faded or blemished.

"Inevitably, we have a fragmentary grasp of the past. I had very much in mind the idea of putting pieces together, of reconstructing a story, putting disparate bits of documentation together. There's something recuperative about this as well." O'Donoghue has spoken of painting as excavation, digging into the ground and working the surface to bring things to light.

Photographs as documents feature large – literally, given that he aimed to make the figures as life sized as possible. "No generation in history has had anything like our access to such an extensive photographic archive. It's not just the existence of the material, it's the technology of access."

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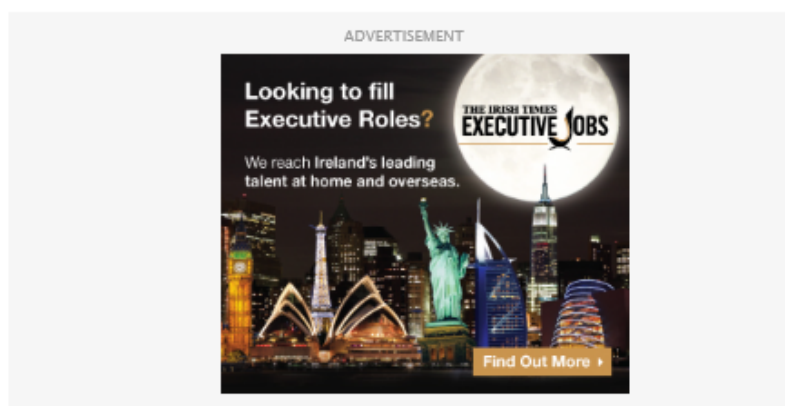
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The woman seen standing against a haystack in *Widow's Mite* is his grandmother. The photograph was, he reckons, taken in the mid-1940s by his father, just out of the army. "What struck me was that it's a timeless image. She could be a woman from 50 years before that." She stands still but looks off to the side, making no allowances for the camera.



Several paintings are built around photographs he acquired of battleships at sea: huge ships with vast gun batteries. He uses them to allude to another turning point in 1916. In the space of several hours in the fading light of the last evening in May close to 9,000 sailors lost their lives in horrific circumstances in the North Atlantic, off Jutland.

It was the last great clash of battleships in world history. The British and German fleets, numbering an extraordinary 250 vessels between them, manoeuvred and bombarded each other. Britain lost more ships, and many more men, than the Germans, but from that point on the German navy concentrated on its submarine offensive against shipping. The British were hoping for a clash as decisive as Trafalgar, but the historical consensus is that the loss of all those lives earned only an inconclusive result.



## Mechanised destruction

A study of agricultural labourers with a steam threshing machine, a faded photograph dating from about 1910, suggests the promise of industrialisation that became the nightmare of mechani

sed destruction on the Western Front, on the ocean and throughout the planet and in the air. A 10in howitzer – a gun emplacement at Ypres – looms over *The Wasteland*. "I don't think it's an exaggeration to see 1916 as marking the end of the old world." The familiar world came apart at the seams. Revolution and transformation became the rule. "And with the level of destruction the people lost faith not only in their rulers but in belief systems generally. We're still living with the consequences of all that."

For O'Donoghue himself the past 12 months or so have been more than usually busy. It's not just the epic scale of the exhibition he's made for Galway, although that would have kept him more than fully occupied. He's had other work commitments, including a series of paintings, *Seven Halts on The Somme*, exhibited at Leighton House Museum, in London, and based on a residency at [Eton College](#): a frightening number of the college's past pupils became war casualties, he observes, because they were junior officers, who suffered disproportionate losses. O'Donoghue is also involved in the [Royal Academy](#) in London.

Besides which he and his wife, Clare, have been establishing a base in Co Mayo, including a studio, and reorganising their lives so that they spend a predictable amount of each year in Ireland and the rest in London. Clare, he notes, has borne the brunt of this particular project, which involved moving their entire personal library.

Coincidentally, he features in the opening show of a new contemporary gallery in Westport. It's their son's venture: "He lives there, and he's keen to see if there's a place for a small gallery with a very strong quality ethos. He has this conviction that you can marry high quality with affordability."


*Hughie O'Donoghue: One Hundred Years and Four Quarters*, an exhibition of new paintings, constructions and sculpture, is at Galway International Arts Festival until July 24th; [giaf.ie](http://giaf.ie) Hughie O'Donoghue also features from today, with [Ian Burke](#), [Diarmuid Delargy](#), [Will Maclean](#), [Nick Miller](#), [Barbara Rae](#) and [Stevey Scullion](#), in the opening show of the Green Fuse gallery, in Westport, Co Mayo; [greenfuse.ie](http://greenfuse.ie)

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