Thomas MacGreevy and the Rise of the Irish Avant-Garde

By Francis Hutton-Williams

This book examines Thomas MacGreevy’s central role in the development of Irish culture from the arrival of national independence in 1922 to the moment of programmatic modernisation during the early 1960s.

It makes a strong case for the reassessment of his achievement across the full range of his activities as poet, First World War combatant, Irish nationalist, art critic and curator, sponsor of abstract art and Director of the National Gallery and establishes his social position among the individuals and groups that collaborated to produce, exhibit, consume and debate some of Ireland’s most radical works to date. In so doing, the book expands our understanding of a period that has often been regarded by cultural historians as one of depressing failure.

Its close and extended readings of poems, paintings, notebooks and draft materials – and compelling discussions of relevant social, literary and art-historical contexts – provide new insight into the creative work that challenged and reshaped Irish culture and identity when an authoritarian state (Saorstát Éireann) was a force for censorship, national conservatism and cultural homogeneity.

The book’s attention to social networks brings alive the bruising encounters between Irish avant-gardists and their adversaries, as does its assured handling of drafts, letters and other archival materials, giving additional resonance to these debates. Especially valuable are the close readings of individually significant poems and paintings that shed new insight on the issue of cultural representation. These readings add much to our understanding of the vexed and deeply charged connections between art and nationalism. Although it necessarily assumes an informed audience with an interest in questions like the avant-garde or the politics of culture, the book furnishes succinctly and effectively the conceptual and historical context needed to understand its arguments. It features a useful chronology as part of its prefatory material, hundreds of endnotes that support further discussion, and ten vivid illustrations that allow the reader full immersion in visual masterpieces.

*Thomas MacGreevy and the Rise of the Irish Avant-Garde* will benefit scholars and students of Irish Studies, international modernism and postcolonial literature. It will also find an audience among Irish art historians and students of twentieth-century art.

Francis Hutton-Williams is a Teacher of English at Dulwich College, UK.