

The Donegal Hills

Derek Hill's Donegal Paintings



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John Dixon by Derek Hill (detail)

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Foreword

On the 10th Anniversary of the death of Derek Hill the Office of Public Works is delighted to exhibit a collection of his paintings. The Donegal Hill's celebrates Derek's life in Donegal with portraits and landscapes drawn from public and private collections throughout Ireland and the UK.

In the early 1980's Derek Hill gave his home and gardens on the shores of Lough Gartan, now the Glebe House and Gallery, to the people of Ireland. The Derek Hill collection contains over 300 pictures gathered by him over his life. The Glebe House and Gallery remains a key heritage facility managed by the OPW, and continues to build on its outstanding tradition of first-rate exhibitions with this show.

This exhibition could not have been realised without the personal and professional commitment of so many. I would particularly like to extend my appreciation to everyone at the National Gallery of Ireland, Dublin City Gallery the Hugh Lane, AIB, and to the many family members, friends and collectors of Derek Hill's work, who generously lent their pictures to the exhibition.

Dr Martin Mansergh

Minister of State with special responsibility
for the Office of Public Works and for Culture



Derek Hill (1916–2000)

In his Foreword to my life of Derek Hill, the English art critic, Brian Sewell, recalls the awakening moment he had about the talent and greatness of Derek Hill. 'For decades,' he says, 'my ill-formed first view of the man and his paintings remained unchanged. He seemed very much of the old establishment, the ubiquitous and often noisy presence at the lordly dinner, ownership of his paintings a mark of privilege and proof of aristocracy. I damned him as a roving painter to nabobs, nobs and snobs, paid little attention to his canvases and, gallivanting in Italy in 1961, missed the one event that might have remedied this error of judgement – his retrospective exhibition at the Whitechapel Gallery.' Sewell then came to an entirely different view of Derek Hill when 'nodding acquaintance ... suddenly burgeoned into friendship. I am glad that we left it so late. We were by then both of us so old and frail that we had neither time to waste nor need to dissemble and pretend; age makes some men astonishingly frank, and in a trice it seemed as though Derek had always been my old and honest friend. In those five years I had the very best of him.' And Sewell concludes, 'a seriously underrated painter'.



Derek Hill in his studio, 1969

Not many have made a like confession. Derek remains under what seems a cloud of social obligation, of deference to title, wealth, name and status. This gets in the way of recognising what a good painter he was, how diverse and rich in his range, his understanding and the depth of penetration into character that caused him to paint so many good portraits.

I knew and admired Derek for many more years than did Brian Sewell, writing admiringly of his work in the 1960s, staying with him in the beloved Glebe and receiving from him postcards and letters that gave a frank and searching account of his lifelong hunt for excellence as an artist. He achieved this and did so without deliberately searching for fame or success. Rather, he longed to be understood. Most people made the wrong judgment about this and Derek himself was in part to blame, his life being an engagement book with people while in the secret of his own heart he was always the painter, brush in hand, small wooden cigar box lid receiving his visual raid on the unscripted reality of what he saw before him.

Those paintings are his legacy. The stories and anecdotes are the mythic material surrounding him, most of them true but not really relevant. Time will sift them out, leaving them as the unique and rich reality of his life's work.

Bruce Arnold July 2010



Dining Room at Saint Columb's



Derek Hill's Donegal

Donegal may appear at first a rather unlikely location for Derek Hill, the 'last of the English gentleman painters' to settle, but he was drawn here by the magic of the landscape and its people. The county was to prove a constant source of inspiration for him, and for those around him.

Derek Hill was born on the 6th of December 1916 in Hampshire. Upon leaving school at 16, he studied for a time in Munich and travelled through Europe, Russia and the Orient. He worked first as a stage designer for ballet and opera, but by 1938 he had taken a studio in Paris and began to paint seriously. Hill was encouraged in his painting by his friend, the couturier Edward Molyneux, who gave him access to his wonderful collection of Impressionist paintings along with a portable easel that Hill used for the rest of his career. In the early 1950's, Hill became the Artistic Director at the British School in Rome, and his time in Italy had a profound impression upon his life. There he encouraged emerging British artists such as Joe Tilson, Derrick

Greaves and John Bratby, and in turn, came into contact with Italian artists and intellectuals. He was also deeply influenced by the American art historian Bernard Berenson and was a regular visitor to Berenson's Florentine villa, 'I Tatti'.

In England, Hill made his name as a portraitist of the rich and famous and as a remarkable draughtsman, his preferred approach to portraiture was to paint his subject for a few hours each morning and leave the canvas to dry a little overnight. Amongst those who sat for him were, Bernard Berenson, Arthur Rubenstein, Lords Mountbatten and Longford, Sir Noel Coward, Sir Yehudi Menuhin, Kenneth Clarke, Anthony Eden, John Betjeman, Isaiah Berlin, Erskine Childers, Tony O' Reilly and his close friend Prince Charles. For all these however, the portraits Hill painted of his Donegal friends and neighbours including his housekeeper Gracie McDermott, his gardener Eddie Moore and Tory artist John Dixon (brother of James) are some of his finest and closest to his heart.

Although Hill had visited Ireland before, he had not travelled as far north as Donegal until he stayed at Glenveagh Castle as a guest of his friend, the American art collector, Henry McIlhenny. "Henry told me about a house nearby, Saint Columb's, it was an old rectory...For years it had been a fishing hotel...I immediately fell in love with it; it was on a lake, it faced south and the ground fell away from it; it was just the right size and charming architecturally, exactly the sort of house I'd always wanted to live in and the countryside about it was miraculous" (p. 124 Grey Gowrie). Hill had, by this time, gathered an impressive collection and was looking for somewhere to house it. Gartan proved to be the perfect setting and he bought Saint Columb's and 26 acres in 1953 for one thousand pounds. He was 37 years of age.

Often he would be called away to exotic locations around the world to paint commissioned portraits, but these were punctuated by frequent trips back to Saint Columb's. In the almost 50 years that Derek Hill called Donegal home he built up a substantial body of work. Many of his best works were painted here and they fall easily into two categories – pictures made on Tory Island and those he painted in and around the Gartan area.

Tory Island is perhaps the place most associated with Hill. He was only living in Donegal a few short years when he made his way further west to Tory, his curiosity having been sparked through a chance meeting with the island's lighthouse keeper. Although he went to paint the rugged landscape, Derek quickly fell in love with the people and painted many of their portraits. He visited Tory Island frequently and dedicated a full fortnight every year to painting there. He spoke very fondly about his times on the island, describing how Gracie, his housekeeper, had to plan enough provisions to last him for the duration. In return, the island's solitude concentrated Hill's painting skills and the results are stunning. The writer Monk Gibbon observed in 1963 – "What is strange is that someone like Derek Hill,



West End Village by James Dixon

a humanist with a keen love of social contacts, should have discovered in one of the bleakest and most remote corners of the western Europe the seascape and landscape themes which many people consider has led him to complete artistic fulfilment." His friend Grey Gowrie, writing in Hill's obituary (The Guardian, 10 August, 2000), puts it well –



View from Lough Salt by Pietro Annigoni

'Hills larger paintings of rocks and sea on Tory rank among the very best pure landscapes painted anywhere since 1945.' Indeed, Hill's wonderful painting 'Tory Island from Tor Mor' (1958), which hangs in the Belfast Museum, is a testament to this.

Derek Hill's other great contribution to Irish Art, was his encouragement and patronage of the Tory Island artists and in particular James Dixon. The oft-quoted story that Dixon had never painted before meeting Hill is erroneous. Dixon does appear to have claimed he "could do better" after observing Hill painting on the island one morning, however some of his paintings clearly pre-date their first meeting. What is true is that Hill, impressed by Dixon's confidence, supplied him with paint and paper and encouraged him at every turn. Following their meeting, Dixon began to paint more prolifically, beginning to include still lifes and imaginative compositions in his subject matter. His masterpiece 'West End Village' is arguably one of great Irish paintings of the Twentieth Century.

Derek painted regularly around his home, Saint Columb's. He converted the outbuildings into a studio where he produced many portraits. He preferred to paint his landscapes 'en plain air', working quickly to catch the fleeting intensity of the passing light. The portraits are of his friends - some are neighbours and some came to stay as his guests. Hill's home at Saint Columb's never failed to inspire his visitors. Artists came to paint (a pursuit Derek actively encouraged often lending out his studio). Some came to be painted. Seamus Heaney described this experience in his poem 'The Sitting'

*I looked through the pane
past the waving leaves of ash
and eyes looked
over the edge of the canvas
There was a scuffing and dabbing
"The mouth is not a physical feature.
It's an expression."
Therefore I came to pass
as an expression
I came out again
head-first but
grey-haired this time
and already confirmed.*

His landscapes document the Gartan area over a fifty-year period, taking in every season and all weather conditions. Many are farming scenes and these were the landscapes closest to his heart. Derek Hill's last visit to Donegal was in the Easter of 2000, a few months before his death. Before leaving for London, he walked the grounds at Saint Columb's (as he often did prior to departing). It was as if he was painting a mind's eye picture of the gardens – to grasp it and hold it in his sight until he next returned home.

The Donegal Hills collects together, for the first time, Derek Hill's Donegal paintings. The earliest being a small painting of Glenveagh (c 1949), created on one of his first visits to Donegal. The last was painted shortly before his death. The exhibition charts almost fifty years of Hill's life and fifty years in the life of Donegal. He always used oil paint. His earlier pictures are more intense and brooding and his pallet lightened as he grew older. His early landscapes were large and bold and the late ones were almost always small, delicate and painted on the lids of cigar boxes that his friends saved for him. The early portraits were similarly more brooding; the later ones are almost caricatures. There are a small number of drawings in the exhibition. Long before thoughts of donating Saint Columb's to the Irish people had crossed Hill's mind, he was already exhibiting his collection. He began acquiring pictures in 1940 and in the fifteen years that followed he managed to assemble a very impressive collection. In 1956, two years after

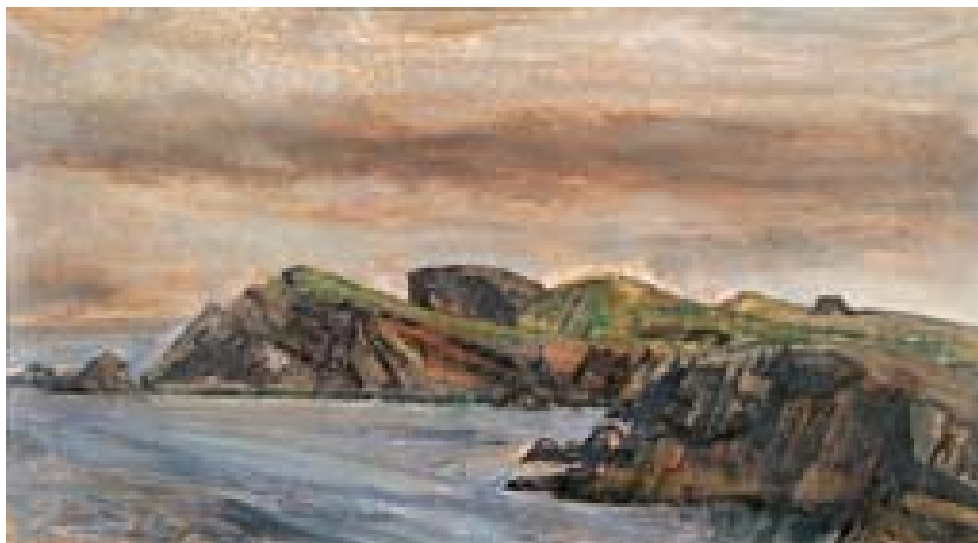
moving to Donegal, he showed these pictures in the Belfast Museum and Art Gallery and in Dublin at the Little Theatre in Brown Thomas & Co. The exhibition contained one hundred and nineteen pictures, amongst them works by Braque, Corot, Degas, Landseer, Moore, Picasso and Renoir. There were two notable groupings of emerging artists in his collection, young British artists which included John Bratby, Lawrence Gowing, Joan Eardley, John Craxton, Mary Kessell and Jack Smith and young Italians including Pietro Annigoni, Emilio Greco, Renato Guttuso, Giacomo Manzù and Zoran Music. Hill had begun to gather Irish paintings upon his arrival on these shores and works by Grace Henry, Evie Hone, Nathaniel Hone and Jack B. Yeats were also shown in the exhibition. Many of which still hang at Saint Columb's.

Adrian Kelly July 2010

Tory



1. Golgotha | 44 X 90 cm, Oil on Canvas - Private Collection



2. East End Cliffs, Tory Island 49 x 89.5 cm, Oil on Canvas · Private Collection



3. Greenport, Tory Island, 1961 62 X 72 cm, Oil on Canvas · Private Collection



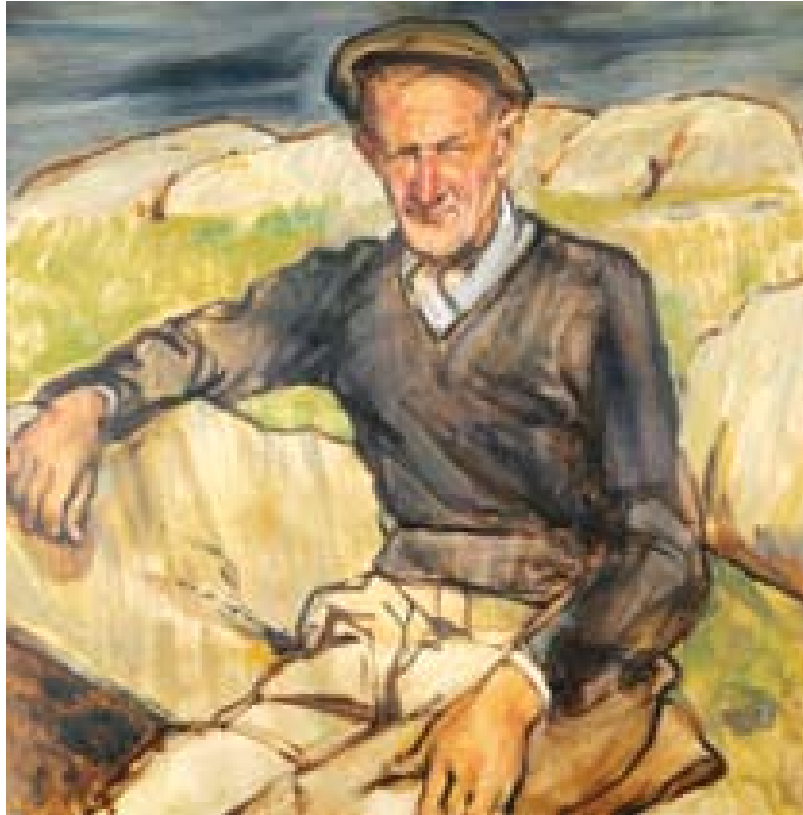
4. Homage to Paul Henry, 1961 15 X 18.5 cm, Oil on Board · Private Collection



5. James Rodgers 48 X 52.5 cm, Oil on Canvas · Derek Hill Collection



6. McGinty's Chicken Coop, Tory, 1991 15.5 X 22.5 cm, Oil on Board · Derek Hill Collection



7. John Dixon, c.1972 64 X 64 cm, Oil on Canvas - Private Collection



8. Erskine Childers, President of Ireland, 1974 91.5 X 100.5 cm, Oil on Canvas · Office of Public Works Collection



9. Fields Behind West Town, 1962 79 X 117 cm, Oil on Canvas · Private Collection



10. Tory and the Mainland from my Hut, 1992 15.5 X 39.5 cm, Oil on Canvas · Private Collection



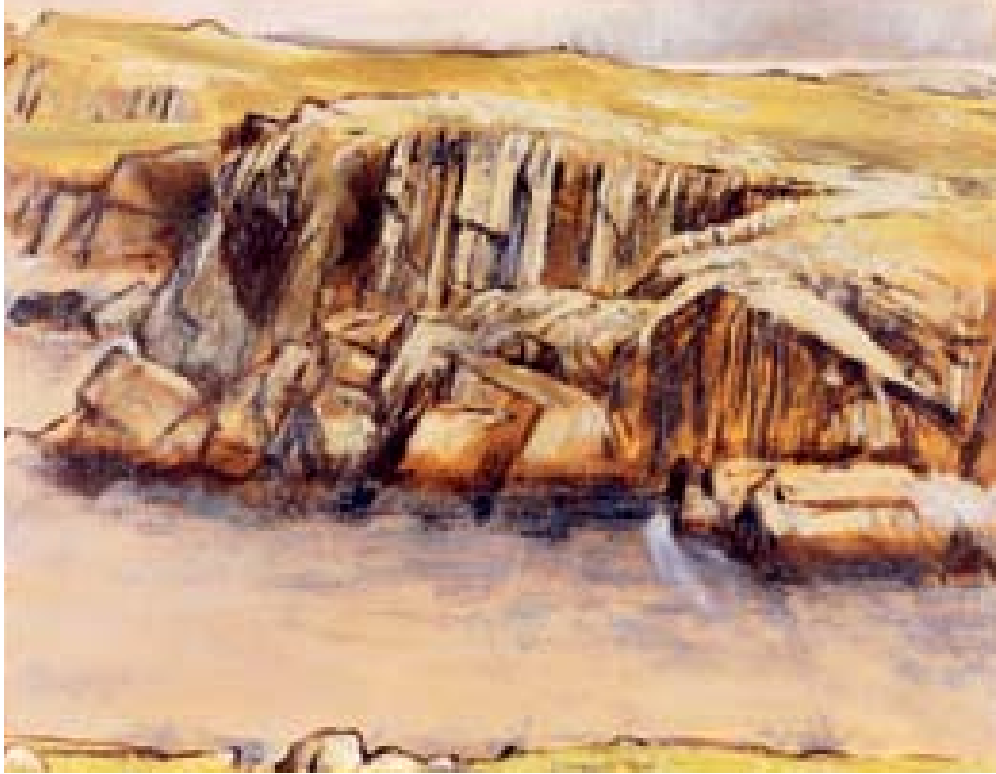
11. Golgotha II, c.1978 25.5 X 47.5 cm, Oil on Canvas · Private Collection



12. Rocks on Tory, 1960 17 X 27.5 cm, Oil on Canvas · Private Collection



13. Tory Island Hayricks, 1960 72 X 62 cm, Oil on Canvas - Private Collection



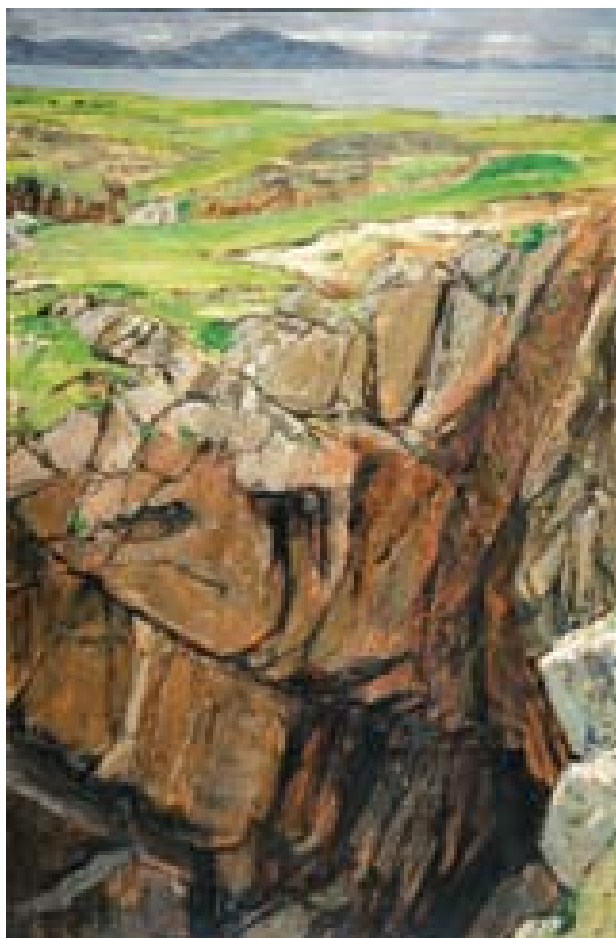
14. The Cliffs at Greenport, c.1970 61 X 76 cm, Oil on Canvas - AIB Collection



15. The End of Tory 39 X 44 cm, Oil on Canvas · Private Collection



16. Tory 52 X 39 cm, Oil on Paper · Private Collection



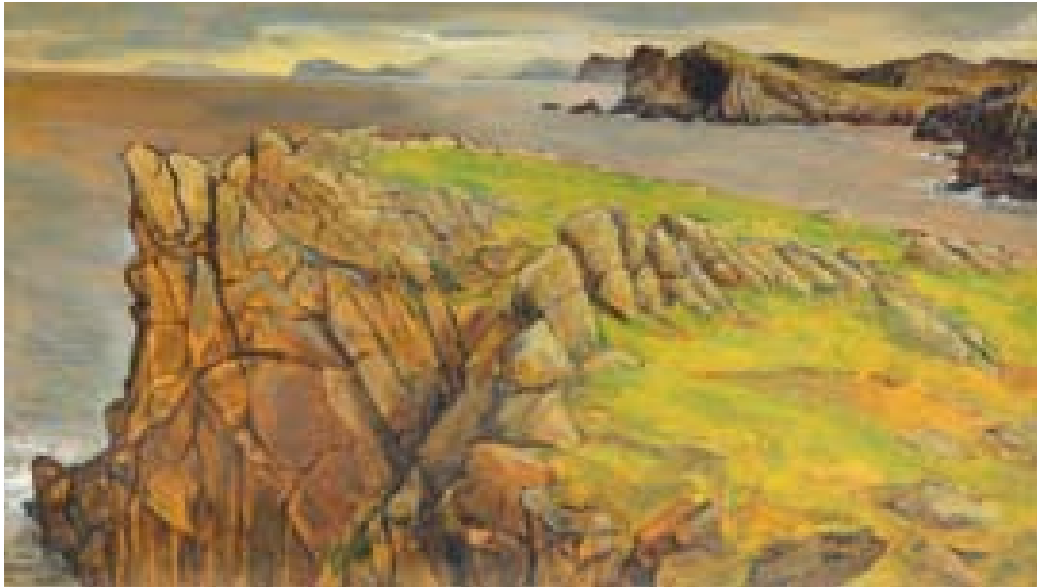
17. Tory Gully, 1978 74.5 X 49.5 cm, Oil on Canvas - Private Collection



18. Towards Horn Head, Tory Island 14.5 X 29.5 cm, Oil on Canvas · Private Collection



19. West Town, Tory Island 80 X 115.5 cm, Oil on Canvas · On loan from Dublin City Gallery the Hugh Lane Collection



20. Untitled 50 X 90.5 cm, Oil on Canvas · Private Collection

Gartan



21. Eddie Moore, 1972 61 X 71 cm, Oil on Canvas - The Derek Hill Collection



22. Donegal Late Harvest, 1962 91.5 X 122 cm, Oil on Canvas · The Derek Hill Collection



23. Foreen at Glenveagh, 1950 20 X 25 cm, Oil on Board - Private Collection



24. Anne Crookshank 56 x 60.5 cm, Oil on Canvas · National Gallery of Ireland Collection



25. Gartan from Gracie's Cottage, 1989 13 X 20 cm, Oil on Board · Private Collection



26. Gartan from Harley's of Glendowan, c.1958 34.5 X 61 cm, Oil on Card - Derek Hill Collection



27. Gracie McDermott 44 X 39 cm, Oil on Canvas - Derek Hill Collection



28. Lough Gartan, 1995 16.5 X 24 cm, Oil on Board · Derek Hill Collection



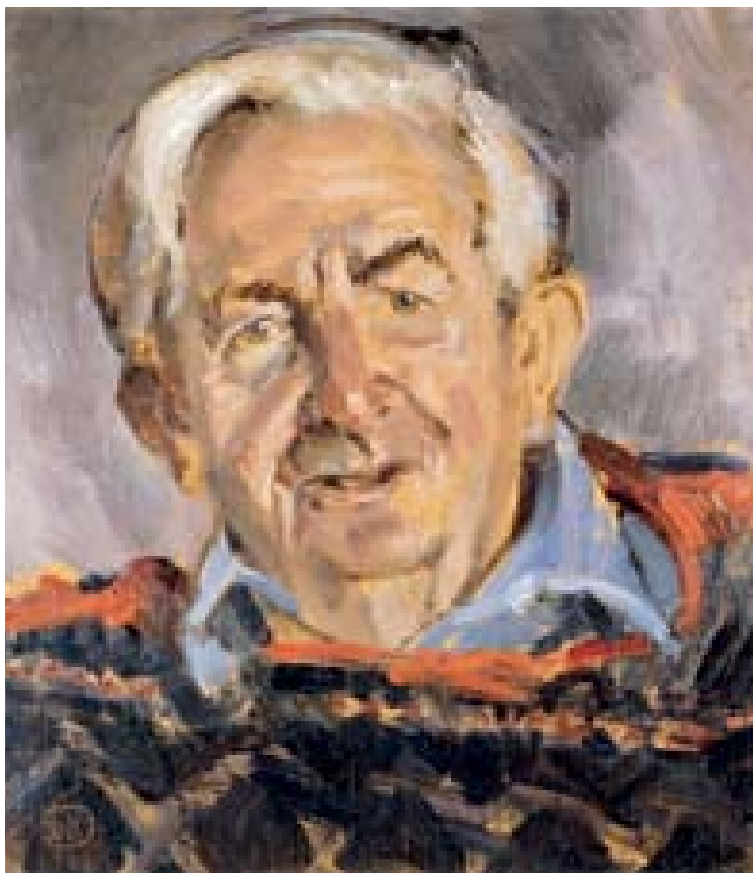
29. Harvesting at St Columb's, c.1960 71 X 98 cm, Oil on Canvas - Private Collection



30. John Mangan, 1961 121 X 150 cm, Oil on Canvas · Dublin City Gallery the Hugh Lane Collection



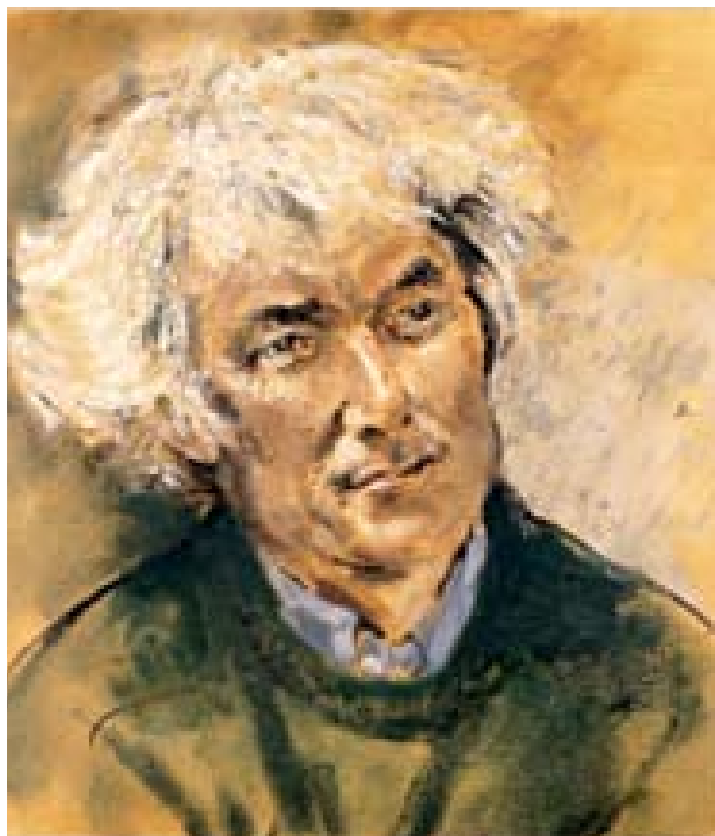
31. Landscape 14 X 21.5 cm, Oil on Board · Private Collection



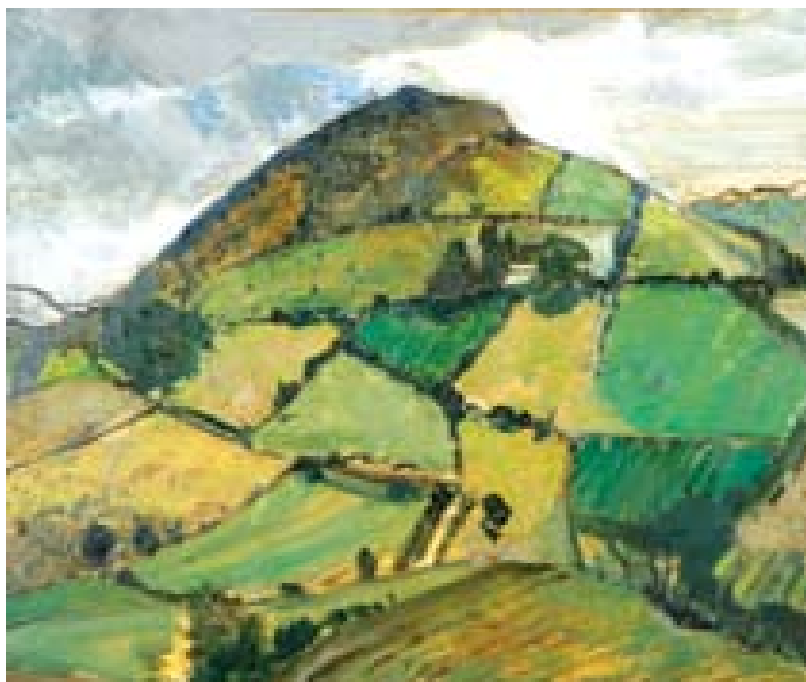
32. Liam McCormack 21 X 20 cm, Oil on Board - Private Collection



33. Michael Blake, Letterkenny 38 X 28.5 cm, Mixed Media on Paper · Private Collection



34. Seamus Heaney 45 X 45 cm, Oil on Canvas · Private Collection



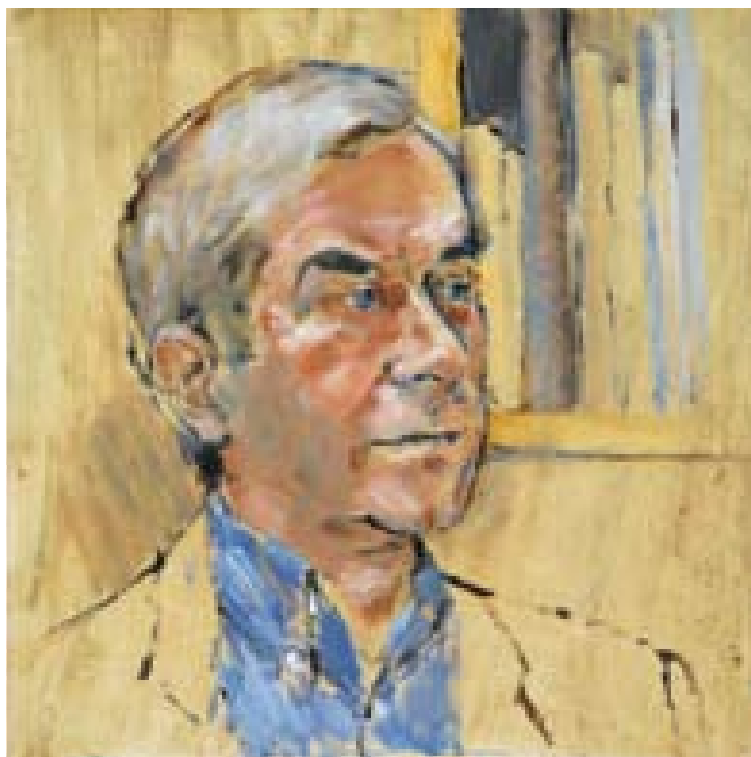
35. Trentagh Hillside 59.5 X 72.5 cm, Oil on Canvas · Derek Hill Collection



36. Sergeant Patrick Francis, 1955 54 X 41.5 cm, Oil on Board · Private Collection



37. Sketch of Sergeant Patrick Francis, 1955 26 X 32.5 cm, Mixed Media on Paper · Private Collection



38. Tommy Francis, 1999 39 X 39.5 cm, Oil on Canvas · Private Collection



39. Lough Gartan in Winter, 1956 49 X 75 cm, Oil on Canvas · Private Collection



40. John Hume 1988 32 X 32 cm, Oil on Canvas · Private Collection



41. Rory Donohue c.1999 38.5 X 28 cm, Pencil on Paper - Private Collection

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