A Canadian Literary Pioneer's Improbable Trip from Acclaim to Outcast to a Pauper's Grave

Katherine Hughes: A Life and a Journey
by Pádraig Ó Siadhail. Newcastle, Canada: Penumbra, 2014). Hardcover, 377 pp., $29.95

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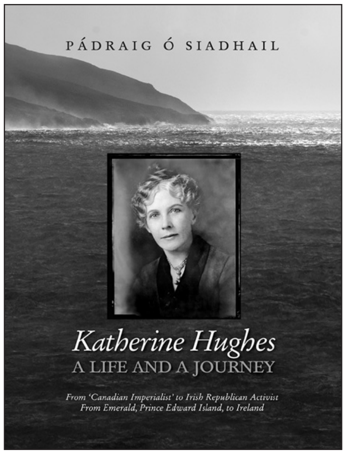
PÁDRAIG Ó SIADHAIL
Katherine Hughes
A LIFE AND A JOURNEY
From 'Canadian Imperialist' to Irish Republican Activist
From Emerald, Prince Edward Island, to Ireland

As he conducted research on a famous Irish writer, Pádraig Ó Siadhail chanced upon an unpublished play that his subject cowrote with a woman named Katherine Hughes.

Siadhail was surprised. Intrigued. He considered himself an expert on Pádraic Ó Conaire, yet he'd never heard of the play Ó Conaire wrote with Hughes, never heard of Hughes, and had no idea how the two linked up.

Curiosity aroused, Siadhail sought to learn more about "this mysterious woman." Now, more than twenty-five years after coming across her name, the associate professor of Irish studies at Saint Mary's University in Halifax, Canada, has published an absorbing account documenting the life of an extraordinary woman born in the 1800s who worked, as Siadhail notes, alongside some of the most powerful men of her time.

Her accomplishments are astonishing: teacher on a Native reserve, pioneering journalist and perhaps the first woman to cover a provincial legislature, acclaimed biographer on an international scale, first provincial archivist in Alberta, and first female private secretary to a Canadian premier. But it is her transformation from loyal government servant to someone viewed as a traitor to her country that occupies Siadhail.

Literary journalism scholars might naturally gravitate to her work as a journalist and author and give it more attention than Siadhail does here. Yet her controversial stance as an activist for Irish independence during World War I and beyond, to which Siadhail devotes most of his attention, played a crucial part in the most devastating incident of Hughes's writing life, as her provocative political views cost her authorship of a book that certainly would have enhanced her reputation as a literary figure in North America.

Born on November 12, 1876, on Prince Edward Island, Katherine Angelina Hughes was one of nine children. Her uncle served as archbishop of Halifax for more than two decades, and Siadhail details the family's roots in Ireland, their environment on Prince Edward Island, and Hughes's upbringing in a close-knit Irish Catholic family where service on behalf of the church was highly valued.

As a teenager in the early 1890s, Hughes trained to become a teacher. She then moved east to work in a church-run school on a Native reserve bordering Quebec and Ontario. Canadian government policy at the time promoted assimilation, and Native children were often taken from their parents and placed in residential schools, many run by the Catholic church, where they were effectively stripped of their language and culture. Hughes, like the majority of Canadians, supported the policy, although her letters to church officials—and her journalism—show that she empathized with Native people and, in particular, sought the betterment of her students.

Hughes left the teaching profession around the turn of the century and turned to journalism, writing for the *Montreal Daily Star* and later for the *Edmonton Bulletin.* She also set about documenting the life of her uncle, who died in 1906. *Archbishop O'Brien: Man and Churchman* depicts Cornelius O'Brien in reverent terms, with references to figures in ancient history and contemporary literature, showing both the breadth of the author's knowledge and the beginnings of her literary flair. Hughes also evinces a deep feeling for Ireland in the book, which would surface mightily a decade later.

Hughes left fulltime journalism in 1908 to become Alberta's first provincial archivist. She brought a hands-on journalistic approach to her new job, undertaking a rugged two-month journey through the wilderness of northern Alberta by stagecoach, riverboat, and canoe, using immersion reporting to gain first-hand accounts of the landscape and the population. The only woman among the travelers, she displayed her literary style in accounts for the *Bulletin*, to which she periodically contributed. "When my canoe shot in over the rough water to the landing," she wrote, ". . . coppery small boys ran towards us on the beach, while lean depressed train dogs made sad haste to the canoe, mutely inquiring for fish" ("In the Promised Land of Alberta's North," *Edmonton Bulletin,* January 8, 1910).

While still a journalist, Hughes had been approached to write a book on Father Albert Lacombe, recounting the priest's departure from Quebec as a young man in the mid-1800s to establish Catholic settlements and schools in the untamed West. Freed from daily journalism in 1908, she began drawing upon historical documents and an array of personal interviews with Lacombe and others to capture the priest's inner thoughts, feelings, and actions. Hughes drew high praise for *Father Lacombe*: *The Black-Robe Voyageur.* The *New York Times Review of Books* deemed it one of the best biographies of 1911, stating, "[A] good biographer is 'rarer than hen's teeth,' but Miss Hughes is one. Out of her book stands a figure as compelling as any in history. She has painted him like an artist . . . She has literally written history like a novel" (December 31, 1911).

Father Lacombe had served as chaplain for the railway construction crews when the Canadian Pacific Railway expanded west in the 1880s, and Hughes asked retired railway titan Sir William Van Horne, a transplanted American and the driving force behind Canada's transcontinental railway, to write the preface for her book. Van Horne agreed. Hughes and Van Horne would attempt to collaborate again a few years later, but not with the same happy outcome.

By 1913, the peripatetic Hughes was again on the move, accepting an appointment as assistant to the agent general for Alberta—an "agent general" being the representative of a British colony stationed in London, England. The move would augur a startling change in Hughes, which Siadhail relays in depth.

In 1914 London, as Siadhail details, Hughes befriended figures in the Irish separatist movement, and she learned Gaelic. It is here, Siadhail believes, that Hughes would link up with famed Irish-language writer Pádraic Ó Conaire, who taught Irish-language classes for the Gaelic League in London. Siadhail writes that although no proof exists, it would be tempting to envision that a romantic liaison developed. Hughes had become enraptured by discovering her Irish roots, and even used the Irish form of her name, Caitlin Ni Aodha. But working against a relationship, Siadhail notes, was the fact that Ó Conaire had a long-time partner and four children. Nevertheless, Siadhail believes their relationship went beyond teacher and pupil, as Hughes and Ó Conaire collaborated on a play (for which Hughes had high hopes), and Ó Conaire provided her with an introduction to significant figures in the Irish independence movement. Hughes would align with Eamon de Valera, the most influential political figure in Ireland in the twentieth century, and would remain close to the man she addressed as "Chief" for years to come.

While Hughes worked in London, Sir William Van Horne entered her life again on a visit to the city, asking her to help him write what he envisioned as a multivolume history of the Canadian Pacific Railway. She embraced the task and resigned her post in the summer of 1915 in order to begin the project. But when Van Horne died suddenly, his son Richard prevailed upon Hughes to instead write his father's life story.

By late 1915, Hughes had relocated to Montreal, earnestly gathering material for the biography. Between 1916 and 1918, she read thousands of letters and documents and traveled for months conducting interviews with old friends and associates of the railway tycoon. At the same time, she emerged as the public face for the Irish independence movement in Canada and the United States. She wrote an eighty-five-page book, *Ireland*, which appeared in 1917. Geared to a Canadian audience, it contained a study, derived from first-hand observation, of what Hughes viewed as the deplorable social, economic, and political conditions in Ireland.

With World War I still raging, the influential Canadian publication *Saturday Night* commented in March 1918 on a speech that Hughes made in Montreal sympathetic to Sinn Fein, calling the movement pro-German, anti-British and thus an aide to the enemy. Hughes, the magazine stated, had a "pleasing journalistic gift," but could find more productive work than "exploiting a cause which has meant the loss of hundreds of British lives."

Siadhail spends much of the book documenting Hughes's exhaustive travels through Canada and the United States, organizing and speaking on behalf of Irish independence. As her stance became ever more controversial, Siadhail notes that the Royal Canadian Mounted Police kept an eye on her movements.

That was the atmosphere swirling around Hughes as she finished the Van Horne biography. On the eve of her departure for Australia to promote the Irish cause, she was astonished to learn that her manuscript was about to be published under the name of Walter Vaughan, a former railway employee, a friend of Van Horne's, and the retired bursar of McGill University, to whom Richard Van Horne had given the manuscript to edit without her knowledge.

Hughes knew her political stance had cost her the authorship. Siadhail makes it clear that Vaughan's role was essentially "that of editor determined to whip into publishable shape another's manuscript, not that of author, for the book in its final published form remained substantially the work of Katherine Hughes, as researched and written by her." Stunned and outraged, Hughes demanded "an equitable settlement" from Van Horne, and while no documentation exists, Siadhail believes a settlement of some sort may have resulted. Nevertheless, the event shattered Hughes. She felt like an outcast in Canada, and referred to herself as "a once-upon-a-time Canadian." She moved to New York, where her sister lived. She was broke when she died of stomach cancer in 1925 at age forty-eight. Siadhail traces her burial site to a pauper's grave in the Bronx.

In the introduction, Siadhail states that he hesitated to undertake the biography due to a lack of material detailing his subject's inner thoughts and feelings. She kept no personal diaries, nor did she write a memoir. By necessity, Siadhail writes, his "study focuses on the external life —what she did—rather than providing matching treatment of the internal life—why she did it."

Despite his reservations, Siadhail has done a masterful job revealing the emergence of a modern woman in an era when the ideology of separate spheres still dominated society's worldview. And by documenting the range of Hughes's accomplishments as well as her journey from political insider to outcast, Siadhail's book importantly highlights the price Hughes paid for her controversial views. Already an accomplished writer, had she been properly credited with Van Horne's biography, perhaps Hughes might have died famous instead of forgotten.