

Seán Keating (1889-1977) | *Men of the South*

1921-22, oil on canvas, 127 x 203.4 cm, 75-P, Gibson Fund Acquisition (1924)



Presented as a heroic frieze with strong nationalist themes, this painting depicts a 'Flying Column' of the Irish Republican Army poised in readiness for action. Set within the Irish landscape and based on the artist's own sketches and photographs of several members of the North Cork Brigade, it is symbolic of

courage, heroism, and the long wait for Irish independence. The landscape expresses subtle hints of the Irish tricolour as a nationalist backdrop to the assembled male group. United in purpose and direction, the men look towards the evergreen bay laurel, symbol of victory.

The artist Seán Keating invited his friend Seán Moylan (1888-1957), leader of the North Cork Brigade, and his men to sit for this group portrait in late 1921. This was a period of ceasefire in the Irish War of Independence during which the Anglo-Irish Treaty was being negotiated and out of which the Irish Free State was born. Some of the tension of the time can be sensed in both the atmosphere of the painting and the circumstances surrounding its creation. Arriving at the Dublin Metropolitan School of Art where Keating's studio was located, the group frightened the porter who had not been expecting their visit and who suspected that either he or the artist were in danger. Keating, however, immediately took quick studies of the men and used his time with them fruitfully over the following two weeks. Although recognisable, the six men in the painting – Jim Riordan, John Jones, James Cashman, Denis (Denny) O'Mullane, Roger Kiely, and Dan Brown – are depicted as being older than their years at the time. Notably, Moylan does not feature in the painting.

Men of the South was well-received when it was first shown at the Munster Arts Club Exhibition (1922) in Cork. Given its importance, the painting was subsequently purchased from the artist for £200 in 1925 by the Crawford Art Gallery's Gibson Bequest Committee.

To find out more, see Éimear O'Connor's essay on this painting in *Three Centuries of Irish Art* (2014) which is available at the gallery bookshop.