

TEXT OF THE INTRODUCTORY ADDRESS delivered by **PROFESSOR CAROLINE FENNELL**, Dean, Faculty of Law, in University College Cork on 6 June, 2008, on the occasion of the conferring of the Degree of Doctor of Laws, *honoris causa*, on **SAMANTHA POWER**

A Leas-Sheansailéir agus a mhuintir uilig na hOllscoile,

There is an extent to which we are always living in an age of translation and interpretation. In the same way as the *seanchaí* or singers of tales of old always imbued their stories with a new slant in their re-telling, our current world abounds with versions of stories or approximations of the truth. In the cacophony of voices inhabiting our media-encrusted world it can be difficult to hear a new or true voice. Moreover in the same way as the ear must become accustomed to, say, classical music or rap, and in like manner our modern day deafness to the language, say, of Jane Austen, our failure to 'hear' certain stories is a feature and failing of modern life.

So it is all the more remarkable and welcome when a voice emerges that is not only fresh and clearly audible, but distinctive. Such a voice is that of Samantha Power. The reason for that audibility is deceptively simple and quite profound: Samantha Power describes the subject of her latest book *Chasing the Flame (Sergio de Mello)* as a cross between James Bond and Bobby Kennedy. In like vein, her own work can be seen as a cross between the best of crime fiction and a classic political and legal analytical commentary. The mixture of genres not only ensures the reception of the work, however, and its larger impact; it also reveals an important truth about the importance of the relationship between the particular and the general. In lives lead and in the smaller systems we see 'the world [that is] in a grain of sand' (Blake). As Tom Murphy, playwright, says: all life's stories are in his native Tuam and so the real delivery of human rights is on the ground: in activism; in respect played out and displayed by and for individuals literally making the 'airy nothingness' of human rights possible by giving it, as Bryan MacMahon said of poetry, 'a local habitat and a name'.

Samantha Power does all of this in her work. Born in Ireland, educated in Ireland and America, she offers in the tone of her commentary on world affairs a combination of confidence, depth and reflection which marks perhaps the new contribution of Ireland to America and the world, - that of a voice born of both experiences, not limited by either. Power is a graduate of Yale and Harvard Law and her first book *A Problem from Hell: America and the Age of Genocide* grew out of a paper she wrote in Law School. It won the Pulitzer Prize for General Non-Fiction in 2003. She is currently Anna Lindh Professor of Practice of Global Leadership and Public Policy at the Carr Centre for Human Rights Policy, at Harvard's John F Kennedy School of Government.

In 2004 she was named by Time Magazine as one of the 100 top scientists and thinkers of that year and in 2008 one of the top 100 public intellectuals by *Foreign Policy: Prospect*. Power has served as senior foreign policy adviser to Senator Barack Obama's 2008 presidential campaign. Her most recent book is *Chasing the Flame: Sergio Vieira de Mello and the Fight to Save the World* (Penguin Press 2008).

Samantha Power takes on the world's most important topics: genocide (*A Problem from Hell*) Human Rights activism (*Chasing the Flame*) and in her journalism the burning locations and issues of the day - such as Darfur - to great effect. Yet her touch is a light - that is to say deft - one. This might be because she is conscious she is telling a story; that she has an audience and that she does not want to lose their attention. In the acknowledgment to her most recent book Power gives an insight to this where she refers to advice from Terry George (director of the film *Hotel Rwanda*) whom she credits with asking her:

"But what is the universal story here, the tale that does not depend on time or place?"

Gracious though she is in that credit, Power perhaps always knew that was important. Her tale of genocide and the interweaving of the personal stories and immense contribution of individuals like Raphael Lemkin in *A Problem from Hell* pay testament to that insight.

Power also celebrates or perhaps manifests occasional and necessary dissent. She admires and celebrates all those who do not always toe the party line. Witness her comment that

“...[Sergio Vieira de Mello] knew that the UN, the multinational organisation that he believed had to step up to meet transnational security, socioeconomic, environmental, and health concerns, had a knack for “killing the flame” - the flame of idealism that motivated some to strive to combat injustice and that inspired the vulnerable to believe that help will soon come”.

In *A Problem from Hell* she also documents the fact that Hooper and Johnson, career foreign service officers, sent an important memo on Bosnia to Eagleburger (Acting Secretary of State) through the dissent channel, introduced at the end of the Vietnam war, so that those who disagreed with policy could make their views known to senior officials without having to clear them with immediate bosses.

The significance of the local in terms of the global has similarly characterised Power’s work. In *A Problem from Hell* she examined genocide through the lens of particular experiences and contexts. More recently the human rights community generally has come to appreciate intellectually as well as practically the critical nature of that interrelationship for both: for the local where human rights norms and standards may provide a useful guide to assessment, and the global to ensure effective enforcement of International Conventions and Treaties. This puts the lie to the notion that there are two distinct fields of endeavour - national and transnational, global and local, particular and general, and makes the point that their interconnectedness is what makes them powerful.

Samantha Power has herself made the point that:

‘The battle to stop genocide has been lost - and can be won - in the realm of domestic politics’ at (p3 Conversations in *A Problem from Hell*); while in an interview which she gave to *Browne Journal of World Affairs* in Fall 2005 she further commented ‘We need to stop overestimating American power, and diversity, be more solicitous of local opinion’.

So let us take that advice and reflect a little on the local here and its role in the making of this remarkable individual.

Samantha Power, the individual who makes a difference and does it differently; a woman in a long line of strong women; an Irish person who went from the local to the global and learned perhaps by living herself in translation, to bring her message to a wider world on a topic of importance to the whole world.

The importance of the personal - which came late perhaps to Vieira de Mello, the subject of her latest book - has always been a source of strength, and important, to Power, as is evident in the acknowledgments and tributes in her books.

The nourishment of the whole person and the humanity, humour and delight that characterises Power’s work are not accidental. Samantha Power’s mother Dr Vera Delaney has been a source of strength, inspiration and influence, and she and Edmund Bourke provide an enviable source of support, constructive critique and advice on her work. Here UCC can claim some credit as Vera is a first class honours Biochemistry graduate of UCC, who then went on to study Medicine. Munster can claim a role also, as Vera played both hockey and tennis for Munster. With local pedigree like that it is small wonder that Samantha went on to take on the world, and we should take local pride in that achievement. Perhaps that strong sense of being rooted in a family identity and community influenced also the nexus between idealism and realism which is a constant theme of Power’s work. It connects with the idealist and pragmatist approach found in Vieira de Mello by Power, and is manifest in her own writing and activism. It celebrates a commitment to language (and here we turn full circle) as the key to a people’s culture, and culture as a key to their heart (at p310 *Chasing the Flame*). This latter is reflected in Power’s own strength of narrative, which ensures that her message and her work is neither lost in translation, nor buried beneath the weight of a ponderous and unwieldy expression (the allusion to the United Nations *is* intended).

Conor Gearty in his Hamlyn lecture 2005 ‘Can Human Rights Survive’ (at 56-57) expressed the following view:

“In this current age of doubt, with cruelty abundant in the gaps left in our culture by the abandonment of all our truths, and with the retreat of our soldiers of certainty swelling into a panicked stampede, we have reached the point where we should now admit that humankind

simply cannot cope with too much unreality. We need truths, especially if they are true but also even if we have to make them up. It is not enough to leave everything to sentiment; our better selves need more help than a few recommended readings, a movie or two, and a deft capacity to dodge unpleasant conversations. Our culture is simply not up to jettisoning so much of the past while holding out such intangible and unsupported hope for the future. And if the good guys give up on the language of human rights, the others, less principled, differently motivated, will fill the words with a bleaker kind of meaning...The term 'human rights' is the phrase we use when we are trying to describe decency in our post-philosophical world. It provides a link with the better part of our past while guiding us towards the finer features of our future."

That latter, providing a link with the past and guiding us towards a finer future, seems to me to exemplify the work of Samantha Power.

PRAEHONORABILIS VICE-CANCELLARIE, TOTAQUE UNIVERSITAS,

Praesento vobis hanc meam filiam, quam scio tam moribus quam doctrina habilem et idoneam esse quae admittatur, honoris causa, ad gradum Doctoratus in utroque Jure, tam Civili quam Canonico, idque tibi fide mea testur ac spondeo totique Academiae.