

TEXT OF THE INTRODUCTORY ADDRESS DELIVERED BY **PROFESSOR CHRIS CURTIN**,
NUI Galway on 25 June, 2010 on the occasion of the conferring of the Degree of Doctor
of Arts, *honoris causa*, on **ANNE MARIE DENNISON**.

A Uachtaráin, a Sheansailéir, a mhuintir na hOllscoile agus a dhaoine uaisle,

Today the National University of Ireland Galway is proud to recognise one of Ireland's foremost voluntary organisations, the Irish Countrywomen's Association, commonly known as the ICA, by conferring an Honorary Degree on its National President, Anne Maria Dennison. The ICA was first established in 1910 as the United Irish Women's Association in order to improve the standard of life in rural Ireland and to encourage women to play a decisive role in Ireland's social transformation. Strongly influenced by the co-operative ideals of Horace Plunkett it promoted co-operation between rural women and encouraged them to take up leadership positions in Irish society. The strong emphasis on leadership is evident in the words of one of its most influential founding members, Muriel Gahan who wrote that "women to lead are badly needed, women of wide understanding and vision".



In 1935 the United Irishwomen's Association changed its name to the Irish Countrywomen's Association. It continued to promote the preservation of Ireland's rural traditions and handcrafts in particular. It should be noted, however that none of the leaders of the ICA held a romantic view of rural Ireland. They recognized that with the decline of traditional crafts, a way of life was threatened. They were well aware of the extent of poverty in rural areas and the critically important income that could be generated from crafts. Therefore the Irish Homespun Society was set up to advise and support home industries and the ICA shop in Dublin, known to many as the Country Shop provided an outlet for the best of Irish craft products. Many anthropologists and historians have assumed that the position of women in rural Ireland was one of utter subordination. The evidence from the ICA, however, tells a somewhat different story as this organisation effectively used collective self-help to empower ordinary women across the length and breadth of rural Ireland.

The ICA tackled the big issues of the day that affected women's lives. It advocated and provided practical support for the development of basic services such as water and electricity. Even in the 1960s the absence of running water was a major concern for women. The ICA organised a very successful "Turn on the Tap" exhibition at the Mansion House and group water schemes became one of its primary initiatives. The Association's support for the rural electrification scheme was critical to its success and in partnership with the Electricity Supply Board, it designed a "model farm kitchen" that became a mobile unit and toured the country, demonstrating to women how electrification could transform their lives.

The ICA was the first organisation to introduce adult education to Ireland. Classes were organised which served local communities. This was at a time when women tended to have little formal education and educational opportunities provided by the ICA were very significant. For many women, my own mother included, participation in residential courses at An Grianán, the ICA's residential centre was greatly anticipated and appreciated. Purchased with the support of the Kellogg's Foundation, it has been, for over 50 years, the venue for summer schools and a vast range of educational courses.

The ICA has been to the fore in demanding better conditions and services for Irish women. It has successfully campaigned for improved health care and breast cancer screening in particular, equal pay and the provision of and access to education. The records of the ICA, lodged with the National Library of Ireland, provide extensive evidence on the work of the organisation in advancing the position of women in Irish society. It's very close association with the Women's Institute of Northern Ireland and local contacts between members of the two organisations, particularly in the border counties, has resulted in the emergence of close supportive relationships and contributed greatly to peace and reconciliation.

Today the ICA has 12,000 members in 700 guilds throughout the country. In its centenary year it is fortunate to have as National President, Anne Maria Dennison. A native of Abbeyfeale, County Limerick, she joined the ICA in 1989 and over the past 21 years has held leadership roles at every level of the association. Anne Maria was elected National President in 2009 and will hold this office until 2012. The ICA has provided her with the opportunity to develop her interests in the Irish language, public speaking and education. As National Secretary she led a team which carried out a comprehensive review of the organisation. This review resulted in a renewed mandate from members to reinvigorate the ICA for a new century of service to women and the wider community. Anne Maria's work on behalf of the ICA is testament to the extent to which the

association has brought its experiences to bear on the wider society. She has represented the ICA on Limerick County Community and Voluntary Forum, has been a member of Limerick County Council Cultural Action Group, participated in the National Economic and Social Forum on Child Literacy and Social Inclusion Project and is currently a member of the Teagasc Education and Training Forum.

We have in Anne Maria Dennison, to use Muriel Gahan's words again, a "woman of wide understanding and vision" and a most worthy recipient of an Honorary Doctorate on behalf of the ICA.

PRAEHONORABILIS PRAESES, TOTAQUE UNIVERSITAS:

Praesento vobis hanc meam filiam, quem scio tam moribus quam doctrina habilem et idoneum esse qui admittatur, honoris causa, ad gradum Doctoratus in Artibus, idque tibe fide mea testor ac spondeo, totique Academiae.