

TEXT OF THE INTRODUCTORY ADDRESS DELIVERED BY: **MR MOORE McDOWELL**, Member of NUI Senate on 1 December 2011 in the Royal College of Physicians in Ireland, on the occasion of the conferring of the Degree of Doctor of Celtic Studies *honoris causa*, on **DIARMAID Ó MUIRITHE**

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

Diarmuid Ó Muirthe has an academic reputation that is only surpassed by the interest and affection of those who have read and heard his contributions in newspapers and on the airwaves for a generation and more. The simple facts of his life tell us of a man of great experience and involvement in the study and dissemination of knowledge of words and language. His commitment in so much of his life has been to the preservation of cultural memory in an age when the sense of history is weakening as education is increasingly focussed on the requirements of the workplace of the future rather than an understanding of how we have been shaped by the past.



NUI Chancellor Dr Maurice Manning presenting Dr Diarmaid Ó Muirthe with his Honorary Doctorate of Celtic Literature

Diarmuid Ó Muirthe, born in New Ross in Co Wexford in 1935, and educated there, and in Ballyvourney in the Muskerry Gaeltacht, became a primary school teacher, and was, for two years, principal of Carroreigh National School in Co Wexford. His involvement in theatre and drama, I believe, was born there when he produced a school play, written by his father, called *An Tailluir*, about which Diarmuid is now very reticent, as he is in dealing with so many facets of his life. It is not surprising to learn from his CV that he was subsequently responsible for a dozen radio plays broadcast over RTE.

In the early 1960s Diarmuid moved from teaching to journalism, becoming a freelance writer and working in RTE's newsroom. He matriculated into Trinity College, Dublin, and graduated MA and MLitt, before moving to work and study at University College Dublin where he read for his PhD under the guidance of Tomas de Bhaldraithe. UCD remained the bedrock of his career until he retired. It was there that I came to know him, largely through informal seminars conducted by our present Chancellor in a setting that encouraged good conversation and great raconteurs. From the early 1970s to this year, Diarmuid wrote and edited, alone or with others who shared his interests such as Terry Dolan, no fewer than twenty books, in both Irish and English, on cultural history, poetry and poets, and on his driving interest, words and language. In language studies he has become an internationally respected expert on dialect based on his knowledge of English dialects and what has now been recognised as a distinct field of study, Hiberno-English.

I hesitate, as a mere economist, to make a judgment on relative importance of different pieces of Diarmuid's work, and I couldn't extract much help from him in trying to do so. That said, I suspect that two books published in 1996 will be seen as major foundations for language studies in Ireland. These are his *A Dictionary of Anglo-Irish Words and Phrases from Gaelic in the English of Ireland*, and (co-authored with Terry Dolan) *The Dialect of Forth and Bargy, Co Wexford, Ireland*.

Diarmuid was never content to limit himself to an academic treatment of his subject, but has continued over this time to produce works aimed at creating and sustaining a wider knowledge of the treasury of language that we let slip from us at our peril. His radio and TV programmes and his column in the Irish Times have been the most continuous vehicle for welcoming us into the witty and lightly worn world of his deep knowledge, but he has also encapsulated much of this in a series of books on words, their meanings and origins, that have become best sellers. The latest of these, *Words We Don't Use (Much Anymore)*, based on material originally produced for the Irish Times, appeared this year.

I say, at our peril, because in an amateur fashion I share Diarmuid's passion for language and meaning, for its importance to a people in appreciating how we came to be what we are. This was brought home to me about twenty years ago, driving down I95 from Philadelphia to Baltimore. When we crossed the beautiful Susquehanna River, I asked my economist companion what the name meant. His answer was: "Nothing...it's just a name".

The last words of Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose*, are the now famous lines of the aged monk protagonist, based on a saying of Bernard of Cluny:

Stat rosa pristina nomine; nomina nuda tenemus.

Loosely translated, and a gloss on Diarmuid's contribution to intellectual life, this can be rendered:

The rose of yesteryear remains only as a name; names, words, are the only things that last.

PRAEHONORABILIS CANCELLARIE, TOTAQUE UNIVERSITAS:

Presento vobis hunc meum filium, quem scio tam moribus quam doctrina habilem et idoneum esse qui admittatur, honoris causa, ad gradum Doctoratus in Litteris Celticis, idque tibi fide mea testor ac spondeo, totique Academiae.