

**OLLSCOIL na hÉIREANN  
NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF IRELAND**

TEXT OF THE INTRODUCTORY ADDRESS DELIVERED BY:

**PROFESSOR PATRICK O'DONOVAN** on 1 December 2016 in the Royal College of Physicians in Ireland, on the occasion of the conferring of the Degree of Doctor of Literature *honoris causa*, on **PROFESSOR HELEN WATANABE O'KELLY**

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

49 Merrion Square has been on occasion the melting pot of the federal University and has witnessed its share of dramatic scenes, a number of which have been grippingly recounted in the histories of the constituent institutions. For generations, aspiring scholars have been summoned to present themselves in the same great house, to be interviewed by the Professors in their discipline for the award of the Travelling Studentship. In the case of the woman whom we honour today, their deliberations, once the candidate, in time-honoured fashion, had been invited to withdraw, cannot have detained them for very long. Helen Watanabe O'Kelly, who grew up in the most scholarly of homes and enjoyed a superlative career as a student in University College Cork, was indeed awarded the Studentship in German in 1971. Without further ceremony, she was duly sent on her travels, and obtained her doctorate from the University of Basel in 1976.

Since then, she has lived and worked in the UK. Helen is a highly distinguished Germanist, though in fact her work displays a stupendous scope, extending into other European literatures, ancient and modern, and areas as diverse as the Italian Renaissance, early modern courtly life, the rituals of confessional and civic as well as courtly spaces, royal entries, festival books, biblical drama, even mining and porcelain as sources of the wealth of Lutheran Saxony. Helen's achievement has been to show that early modern Europe — in her phrase, *Europa triumphans* — is to be seen as a cultural whole, where art is the paramount tool by which rulers can display their power and articulate their political ambitions. Since 1989 (the year, incidentally, in which she moved from her original post in the University of Reading to a fellowship in Oxford), she has redoubled these efforts in the now much more easily accessed archives of eastern Germany. Among the most important contributions of this work has been its searching investigation of gender and monarchy, and in particular its reappraisal of the agency of queen consorts. Helen has shown how a consort's highly constrained confessional choices could prove to have an unforeseen political impact in calling into question the legitimacy of those of her husband.

Helen's has been a rich and full life of sustained scholarship, in which she has displayed the dynamism of learning in all its vitality. Thus, her successive books have not only depicted the past in a new and surprising light, but have consistently opened up fresh avenues of investigation, prompted by her

exceptional readiness to shift the focus, angle of view and the composition of the panoramas that she presents to us. Building on her own acute grasp of women's long-hidden place in early modern culture, Helen presided over an innovative history by several hands of German literature from its origins to the present day — by giving women writers and readers their due place, it has provocatively reconfigured our conception of the canon as a whole. And then in turn, in her own massive investigation of the female warrior — beauty or beast — in German literature since the Renaissance, she has shown to devastating effect how the portrayal of women as transgressive creatures serves simply to give renewed expression to the age-old urge to subjugate them.

Chancellor, have we by any chance recaptured the holder of the Studentship in German whom the University despatched to Europe in 1971? Surely not. Helen Watanabe O'Kelly is as mobile and as active as at any moment in her career. She currently leads a major European project, *Marrying Cultures*, which focuses on queens consort and on their part in fluctuating European identities between 1500 and 1800. Having long been a student of the courtly music and dance of the past, Helen is now engaged in a multidisciplinary collaboration, not only with librarians and cultural anthropologists, but also with scholar-practitioners of these arts, the better to understand the construction of cultural memory and the afterlives of cultural genres. In brief, Helen's work is as much a force of cultural transfer as the panoply of pan-European sources whose historical significance she has revealed to us.

Today, the University puts on its own 'triumphal shew' (to borrow once more one of Helen's titles). Our rituals do not run to the equestrian ballets, the sectarian jousting, the spectacles and fireworks that Helen has documented to such illuminating effect. It is no doubt rightly so, for we celebrate the ventures and the attainments, not on this occasion of a princess or a consort-to-be, but rather of an exceptional cultural historian, a Professor of German Literature in the University of Oxford, a past fellow in the Herzog August Bibliothek, the Getty Institute, the Alexander von Humboldt Stiftung, a model and a sterling support to other *Germanisten* and in particular to *Germanistinnen*, a Fellow of the British Academy, and now too a double Doctor of Literature.

**PRAEHONORABILIS 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 Litteris, idque tibi fide  
mea testor ac spondeo, totique Academiae.**