

**OLLSCOIL na hÉIREANN
NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF IRELAND**

TEXT OF THE INTRODUCTORY ADDRESS DELIVERED BY:

DR BAIRBRE NÍ FHLOINN on 28 May 2019 in the National University of Ireland, on the occasion of the conferring of the Degree of Doctor of Literature *honoris causa*, on **DR MICHAEL CONRY**

A Sheansailéir, a mhuintir na hOllscoile agus a dhaoine uaisle, is rí-mhór an phribhléid dhom an óráid seo a thabhairt in onóir Michael Conry agus a bhfuil bainte amach aige i réimse an bhéaloidis agus na heitneolaíochta, agus i réimse stair shóisialta na tíre seo. Is iontach an rud é go bhfuil aitheantas á thabhairt inniu ag Ollscoil na hÉireann don obair atá déanta ag Michael ins na réimsí seo, agus fáiltíonn muid roimh an aitheantas seo ó chroí.

It is a great privilege for me to give this address here today in honour of Michael Conry, and a source of great satisfaction to see his remarkable achievements acknowledged and honoured by the National University of Ireland. In 1924, Daniel Corkery published his classic work, *The Hidden Ireland*, which revealed aspects of Irish culture which had previously languished in comparative obscurity, their riches unknown and unsung by the Irish people at large. I believe that Michael Conry's work has uncovered a hidden Ireland of another kind, in bringing to our attention aspects of the social and economic history and vernacular culture of Ireland which were previously unknown and undocumented in the official records of Ireland's past. As distinguished economic historian and NUI graduate, Professor Cormac Ó Gráda, has said about Michael, he is 'an outside-the-box' scholar who has shone light on areas neglected by most academics.'

In Michael's many publications, we meet with men and women, and indeed children, who showed an extraordinary resourcefulness and ingenuity in the ways in which they interacted with and responded to their environment in their work practices, in the structures they built and in their everyday lives. Here we have invaluable accounts of the material culture, industrial heritage

archaeology and domestic history of great swathes of the Irish population, whose day-to-day lives were simply under the radar as far as the conventional histories were concerned. Here we encounter the builders and makers of Carlow's elegant granite fences, of the culm crushers used to produce domestic fuel, of the corn stacks on stilts which are still to be seen in some farmyards in parts of the country, and of the animal-powered churning devices used on the Castlecomer plateau. Here we also meet the master stonecutters of Co. Carlow who left a legacy of buildings and other structures in the beautiful granite of that county, along with the thousands of people and the hundreds of communities in south Leinster and east Munster for whom the picking of bilberries was an integral part of their livelihood and household economy throughout the first half of the twentieth century. Similarly, the stories of those involved in the rabbit industry in Ireland are told in detail for the first time by Michael in his latest publication, where he reveals that, as well as their role at home as an important element in the domestic diet, millions of rabbits were exported from Ireland to Britain each year in the earlier part of the last century, providing the basis for an important source of income in many parts of the country.

The research resources which Michael consulted for all of these fascinating studies were not, for the most part, to be found in archives or libraries, but on the lips and in the memories of those who had themselves engaged in these activities and therefore acted as living primary sources for Michael in his research. And it must also be said that a huge part of the work Michael did in recording these people simply could not be done now, for the most obvious of reasons. So for the eleventh-hour rescue of these vibrant elements of Ireland's social, cultural and economic history, we should be truly grateful to him.

In total, Michael has produced nine book-length studies and a number of booklets on various aspects of the material culture and industrial heritage archaeology of Ireland. This priceless body of information is rendered all the more remarkable when we remember that this work was not, after all, Michael's day job, so to speak. Instead, Michael is a highly qualified and

internationally acclaimed soil scientist and crop husbandry specialist, with a truly impressive list of scientific books – numbering nine in total – and over forty peer-reviewed papers, in the course of a career which has taken him from his native Roscommon to Carlow, via Ghent, the Middle East and Africa, among other places. Michael's work on Ireland's material culture and industrial heritage was done, then, and almost incredibly, in his spare time or, as he puts it himself, as part of his extra-curricular activity. The mind boggles at his sheer productivity, his vision, his awareness and his originality, and, ultimately, at his ability to look at the ordinary and see the extraordinary. In this connection, mention might be made of a man who had a major influence on Michael and his development as a scholar – the inimitable Professor Frank Mitchell of Trinity College, a true giant and pioneering figure in the study of the Irish landscape in all its aspects, and an inspiration to so many of his students including, happily, Michael Conry.

In conclusion, it is my opinion, as someone who has worked in the area of ethnology and vernacular culture for many years, that Michael's contribution to the field is inestimable and will most assuredly increase in value as the years go by. His imagination, his world-view and his vision are exceptional, and we owe him a debt of gratitude which has not yet been fully realised. At the beginning of most of his books, Michael quotes Blasket Islander, Tomás Ó Criomhthain, in his wish, 'Go mbeinn beo agus mé marbh'. I would end by saying that Michael need have no worry on that score, as his books will undoubtedly stand as a treasured monument to him for countless years to come.

Ár mbuíochas ó chroí leat as an éacht atá bainte amach agat, a Mhichael; nár laga Dia do láimh agus go maire tú an céad. Go raibh míle maith agaibh.

PRAEHONORABILIS CANCELLARIE, TOTAQUE UNIVERSITAS:

Praesento vobis hunc meum filium, quem 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.