



Ollscoil na hÉireann
National University of Ireland

TEXT OF THE INTRODUCTORY ADDRESS DELIVERED BY:

PROFESSOR ANNE ENRIGHT on 7 MARCH 2023 in the Royal College of Physicians in Ireland, on the occasion of the conferring of the Degree of Doctor of Literature, *honoris causa* on **CLAIR WILLS**.

A Sheánsailéar, a mhuintir na hOllscoile agus a dhaoine uaisle, is mór an onóir agus an pribhléid é domsa an Dochtúir Sorcha Ní Liam a chur in aithne diaobh agus í a mholadh le céim oinigh.

Chancellor, members of the University, ladies and gentlemen, it is an honour and a privilege to present Clair Wills for the award of the degree of Degree of Doctor of Literature *honoris causa*.

For, among other achievements, her expansive contribution to Irish letters, which moves beyond ideas of territory and nationhood to study diaspora culture, illuminating the complex relationship between Ireland and Britain.

Though her academic career has been crowned by successes of the conventional kind, Clair Wills work refuses to stay in one or other of the usual categories: intellectually, she is 'at large'.

She has, as a matter of integrity, sought a new space between academic disciplines, genres and settled forms of theoretical discourse. A cultural historian who also writes about poetry, fiction, memoir and polemic, she is interested in Northern Ireland, feminism,

in migrations and migrants, and in the carceral institutions in Britain and Ireland.

It seems to me her work shows a remarkable ability to listen to her subjects and also to be led by them. Wills thinking about culture is always tentative, while her methods are rigorous: extensive research, stylistic clarity, a respect for the facts, an alertness to the texture of what might be called ordinary lives.

Wills distinguished scholarship has brought into focus the negative spaces in the stories we tell about ourselves. She is interested in absences, passivities, displacements. She likes working in the fissures and cracks between nations, especially those between Britain and Ireland. Over and over again she shows the porousness of the boundaries between one group and another, one people and another, between those on one side, or the other, of power.

Her work queries the tales of empire and independence on which national mythologies are formed and quietly undermines our attempts to stay separate.

In the late nineteen forties, Clair Wills mother left a small farm outside Skibbereen to take the boat to England. She trained as a mental health nurse at Netherne, the hospital complex in Coulsdon, Surrey which, in the 1950s, housed nearly two thousand patients. Though her mother moved on after a few years - she would eventually retire as an NHS psychotherapist - some of Clair's childhood was spent at the hospital, where her father, the child of Welsh migrants, had been reared in a cottage on the grounds.

Her sense of suburban Surrey was almost bucolic, it was a place of blackberry bushes and apple trees, on the edge of Farthing Downs. But she remembers the hospital corridors very well, and also how much she disliked them. "The shiny, dun-coloured institutional paint; the double fire doors with plastic portholes; the windows that were a bit too high to see out of – at least for me." The Irish nurses in Coulsdon were outsiders, like the patients they tended - sometimes with treatments that seem harsh to us now. It is possible that the

ambivalence of their power opened a space where Wills thinking has flourished, ever since.

Though her sisters were given a Catholic education Clair failed to get into the local convent school, a little to her own relief. “Even then,” she wrote, “I knew it was a lucky break.” It was an academic lapse she would not repeat. A place at Somerville College Oxford was followed by lectureships in Essex University and Queen Mary University of London. Between 2015 to 2019 she was Leonard L. Milberg Chair of Irish Studies at Princeton, and she is now King Edward VII Professor of English Literature at Cambridge and a professorial fellow of Murray College. An Honorary member of the Royal Irish Academy and a fellow of the British Academy Wills bring an ease and conviviality to hallowed halls. She is a keen jazz dancer, who has written about the pleasures of being led on the dance floor. As befits someone so interested in questions of departure and arrival, she is a much-travelled scholar who has visited, as fellow or professor, Trinity College Dublin, Tokyo University, Boston College, Dublin, Notre Dame and, most recently at the Columbia Global Centre in Paris.

Her first book was on Northern Irish poetry and then more specifically, in 1998, on the work of Paul Muldoon. After this, Wills graciously lent her scholarship to the 2002 Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing, Volume V, which served as a corrective to the botched original enterprise. In it, she focussed not on poetry but on feminist non-fiction, a step sideways in a journey that became increasingly interested in making a new path.

In 2007 she published her landmark book *That Neutral Island: A cultural history of Ireland during the Second World War* which, more or less fearlessly, looked closely and fairly at a morally ambiguous time in Irelands international relations. A book about the 1916 rising was followed by two more that worked in a liminal space between cultures, a study of post war emigration from Ireland called, *The Best Are Leaving: emigration and post-war Irish culture* and, in 2017, *Lovers and Strangers: an immigrant history of post-war Britain*. Typically, Wills does not exclude one or another kind of migrant from her study. Though one sixth of the Irish population was thought to live

in Britain in the fifties, she focuses equally in the Windrush generation and includes migrants and refugees from Eastern Europe.

Her current research is on life stories told across the boundaries of carceral institutions, including post-war British psychiatric institutions and Mother and Baby Homes in Ireland. Wills is not just interested in the facts, but in public and private attitudes to those facts, and especially in the gaps in our thinking. She asks the question: “how do we learn to not see what we see, or not know what we know?” This is a moral question about the mechanisms of denial and how may be overcome. “It is as though,” she says in an *London Review* interview, “the past has to be believed in by sufficient numbers of people in order to qualify as the past.” The horrors of the Magdalene homes were not hidden at the time, but they were unseeable. “It is there on the surface,” says Wills. “And we don’t want to look at it.”

This question of visibility, of making things available, is one of the reasons Wills is so interested in the framing afforded by fiction. Art places reality “under torsion” she says, “so that we can see something that is in plain sight but that we have not yet recognised.” This interest runs through all her work. “I believe in my heart that the literature can help us see things we mightn’t have seen... It’s kind of about hearing the tone, where it came from and why it was there.”

“Shame” is not one of Clair Wills key words. As a concept or feeling it is, perhaps, too full of spooks and frights. But part of her fearlessness and her simplicity has been an ability to go into shame-bound spaces in Irish life - and Lord knows we have enough of them - bringing clarity and context, turning the past into history, so it can be put to rest. She goes into the neglected rooms of the past and turns on the light.

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.