



Ollscoil na hÉireann
National University of Ireland

Text of the Introductory Address delivered by Professor Mary Daly, Emeritus Professor of History UCD, on 9 November 2023 in the Royal College of Physicians on the occasion of the conferring of the Degree of Doctor of Literature, honoris causa on Mr Conor Brady

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

Over the past fifty years, Conor Brady has carved out a remarkable career as a journalist, author, and public servant, whose achievements have been recognised in Ireland and internationally. It is quite common today to ask an author to supply a short list of key words for their piece. If National University of Ireland, heavens forbid, adopted that practice, the two words that are foremost in Conor's career are 'journalist', and 'garda' or 'policing'.

He was born in Tullamore, County Offaly, the son of a senior member of the Garda Síochána. His father died, when Conor was only twelve years of age, but he obviously had a major influence on his son. Conor's interest in journalism emerged when he was a student at the Cistercian College Roscrea, where he founded the short-lived Junior Journal, and later edited the school magazine The Vexillum. At UCD, where studied History and Politics, he edited Campus, one of two student newspapers, and he contributed articles on university life to several newspapers. This remarkable energy and productivity are recurring features of his career. When he graduated, he joined the Irish Times as a trainee journalist. Conor entered Irish journalism at a time of change; graduate journalists were uncommon. Irish newspapers were expanding their range to reflect a changing society. As a young journalist Conor worked on the EEC desk, in Northern Ireland and in London and in the late 1970s he reported from what was then known as Southern Rhodesia, (now Zimbabwe)

In 1973, at the advanced age of 24, he left the security of the Irish Times to become editor of the Garda Review, the inhouse paper of the Garda Síochána. This decision must have amazed his colleagues, given that the Review was moribund, but it is evidence of his determination to take on a challenge, and his long-term interest in policing. Having resuscitated the Garda Review, he returned to the Irish Times as Features Editor only to leave again in 1980 to edit the

Sunday Tribune. This two-year old Sunday newspaper had a circulation of 100,000, and a reputation for breaking important political stories. But, as editor of the Sunday Tribune Conor learned that a good newspaper must have financial stability. When Tony O'Reilly acquired the Sunday Independent, Conor was his first choice as editor. He rejected the offer, conscious of the potential for tension between the editor and a powerful owner, and returned once more to The Irish Times.

When the job of editor was advertised in 1986, Conor submitted a 70 page prospectus, setting out his plans for the paper. He was not the first choice of the journalists, who apparently saw him more as a manager than a journalist, but an editor needs to ride both horses. Some Irish Times journalists also doubted whether he shared their left-wing politics – and again an editor needs to retain a sense of balance – which Conor did, most controversially, when the Irish Times gave its guarded support to Fianna Fail in the 1987 general election. He was the first Catholic to hold the position; the first NUI graduate to do so, and when he retired in 2002, only Douglas Gageby (who served two terms as editor) had longer service. Between 1986 and 2002 Conor Brady was the voice of The Irish Times on the most important issues; he wrote the editorials on the Northern Ireland peace process, the X case and the scandals in the Catholic Church.

He began his term as editor of the Irish Times towards the end of a golden age for print journalism and especially for daily newspapers: - a time when newspaper journalists were sprinkled with the glamour of Woodward and Bernstein, and other investigative journalists. Circulation rose from 85,000 to over 120,000. This was partly a reflection of a changing Ireland. In 1986 when Conor became editor, the economy was in recession; emigration was rampant, and the national mood was pessimistic. When he retired in 2002, Ireland was a country of net immigration, and employment had soared, most especially in highly-paid jobs in modern service industries. The Irish Times had 50% of Ireland's ABC1 readers. As editor he oversaw a major expansion in foreign coverage – with resident journalists in Moscow, Beijing, Washington, Paris and Rome, and a correspondent in Africa. This expanded footprint reflected the more outward-looking Ireland. The paper also addressed changing interests, more sport, more visual content, weekend supplements, columns on science, and a continuing focus on education. He was conscious that the Irish Times should not just aim to be the best in Ireland; it had to benchmark itself against leading international newspapers As editor he was an active member of a number of international newspaper groups.

But by the 1990s there were twenty-four-hour news TV channels, and the digital revolution was on the horizon. When Conor became editor in 1986, Irish Times journalists were still bashing out copy on manual typewriters; newspaper was printed much as they had been at the beginning of the twentieth century, and newspapers were black and white. As editor, he oversaw the introduction of computers in the newsroom; and the transition to computerised printing, though he acknowledges that the change was probably too gradual, and it was resisted by the staff. In 1992, showing remarkable foresight, the Irish Times established a web presence and secured the iconic web domain **Ireland.com**. The initial plan was to publish a daily email summarising major news stories – many newspapers now do that, but that idea didn't prosper in 1990s Ireland. In 1996 however, the Irish Times became one of the first half a dozen newspapers in the world with a web edition. Conor wished to integrate the journalists working on the print and web newspapers but that was vetoed by the commercial interests; such integration is now the norm. The massive investment to transform the Irish Times into a twenty-first century newspaper was funded by the windfall from the sale of Reuters shares, and by lucrative advertising revenue for recruitment and property, but this advertising revenue was vulnerable to a downturn in the economy. Conor extended his term as editor to steer the paper through the fallout from the post 2000 dot.com crash, which left the Irish Times in deficit and needing to cut staff numbers. When he retired in 2002 the paper was again in profit, though the future of print journalism was less certain.

Retirement afforded him the time to take on a variety of public service roles such as The Remembrance Commission established under the Good Friday Agreement to compensate victims of the Troubles, the Chair of the British-Irish Association, and membership of TLAC, which is responsible for appointment the most senior public servants. In 2005 he published *Up with the Times*, a memoir of his career as a journalist and editor, which I regard as one of the most perceptive books on Ireland since the 1970s. Conor likes to describe the Irish Times, not as a newspaper of record, but a paper of reference: *Up with the Times* is unquestionably **the** reference book for the Brady editorship, as I discovered having looked at numerous books on Irish newspapers seeking new insights into Conor Brady's editorial career, only to discover that all the material was taken from his memoir!

His 1974 book *Guardians of the Peace*, which was based on his UCD Politics MA, was the first scholarly history of the Garda Síochána. Written at a time when none of the archives were available, it benefited from the fact that Conor's father was among the founding generation of gardaí. His colleague Kathy Sheridan has described policing as 'his lifelong interest', so we

shouldn't be surprised that he has written detective stories, set in nineteenth century Dublin, with a policeman, Joe Swallow as the central character. He was a visiting Professor at John Jay College in New York City, which is internationally known for its expertise in criminology and policing. And in 2005 he was appointed as one of the first three members of GSOC – the Garda Ombudsman Commission, which has statutory powers to investigate allegations of criminality in the gardaí. With a staff over one hundred, recruited from within Ireland and internationally, Conor has described it as a 'miniature police force'. GSOC Commissioners have investigative powers similar to those of a senior garda on all aspects of crime except national security – so Conor has truly followed in his father's footsteps. His 2014 book, *The Guardians of Ireland*, traces the story of Irish policing from the 1970s, in a manner that is both critical and sympathetic. His deep knowledge of policing and his commitment made him an obvious member of the 2017 Commission on the Future of Policing.

I want to conclude, as I began, with two words, 'journalist' and 'policeman'. In a 2014 article published in the journal *Eire-Ireland*, Conor reflected on the symbiotic relationship between the two professions. Both were 'seekers of the truth, or should be...at their best. . . both claim to protect and defend the interests of the weak'. He concluded, as I shall, by reflecting that each could learn from the other: 'it would be good if journalists had the same reverence for facts as the good police investigator', and he suggested that police might solve cases more quickly 'if they had more of the flair and intuition of the journalist'. In Conor Brady's remarkable career, we see ample evidence of his concern for the facts, and his capacity to deploy flair and imagination.

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.**