

TEXT OF THE INTRODUCTORY ADDRESS DELIVERED BY **PROFESSOR J. WALSH**, National University of Ireland, Maynooth, on 17 May 2002, on the occasion of the conferring of the Degree of Doctor of Literature, *honoris causa*, on **SISTER STELLA FITZPATRICK**

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

Today we honour Sr Stella Fitzpatrick by conferring on her the Degree of Doctor of Literature *honoris causa* in recognition of her outstanding contribution to the teaching of Geography in Ireland.

The eldest child in a family of seven, Sr Stella was born in Thurles in 1917. After attending the local Presentation Convent and Coláiste Bríde in Falcarragh County Donegal she trained as a primary level teacher at Our Lady of Mercy College of Education at Carysfort Park in Dublin. Immediately after graduating in 1938 she entered the Loreto Order before commencing her teaching career, the first phase of which spanned the twenty years to 1961 during which she was Principal of Loreto Primary schools in Gorey and Kilkenny.

Appointments to Loreto Order post-primary schools in Enniscorthy and Balbriggan in the 1960s came at a time of considerable innovation in Ireland. The first ever National Soil Survey had been initiated; a new phase of industrialisation was underway; Local Authorities were required under the Planning Act of 1963 to prepare physical development plans; and the increasing importance of science education was reflected in the inauguration of the Aer Lingus Young Scientist awards.

Sr Stella was one of the first teachers to identify the possibilities that were emerging in relation to the teaching of geography, especially in field-based research surveys and cartographic representation of the findings. With very limited resources Sr Stella encouraged her geography students to undertake projects for the annual Aer Lingus Young Scientist exhibition.

She and her students were extraordinarily successful in this initiative. In 1965 three of her Enniscorthy pupils won the top three prizes in the geography section, establishing a pattern of success that was to be repeated over many years. The projects prepared under the supervision of this "wonderful teacher" as she was described in the *Irish Times*, were on a wide variety of topics including rural and urban land use patterns, the spheres of influence of towns, the prospects for industrialisation in small towns and the potential for development based on tourism, all topics that are very relevant today.

The impact of her innovative teaching methods was by no means confined to her students. The results of the surveys and projects that she inspired formed a significant input into the first County Development Plan for Wexford. The pioneering nature of the rural land use maps was noted by the Director of the National Soil Survey who recommended that these projects could provide the basis for a National rural land use map.

Apart from a desire to promote new skills among her students Sr Stella was motivated by much loftier ideals which are recorded in an interview that she gave to the *Irish Independent* in January 1966 during which she said that she had encouraged her students to undertake their projects "in a spirit of civic commitment and as a token of practical, constructive patriotism".

Ever conscious of the need to improve the quality of the resource materials available to teachers and of the need for appropriate contextualisation Sr Stella in the late 1960s undertook the enormous task of writing a text on the geography of the world from an Irish perspective. Her aim was to "make geography a light in the mind, not on a load on the

memory". She also wrote that her treatment of world geography with an Irish perspective "helps not only to give the pupil a realistic view of our country's place in what is now a global village, but strengthens his awareness of himself as a person through an accurate sense of orientation and an understanding of his specific site and location in the world". These words published in 1970 to inform the education of the last generation of the twentieth century are perhaps of even greater significance today as we grapple with the implications of globalisation while at the same time using attributes of places and spaces to establish individual and local community identities.

It was during the 1960s that Sr Stella began her extensive involvement with the Association of Geography Teachers in Ireland which had been founded in 1961. Her contribution to the AGTI was enormous. She became a member of the National Committee in 1967, was Vice-President between 1970-72, first female President between 1972-74 and again Vice-President between 1974-76. She remained an active member until 1981. Over the same period she served as a member of the editorial board of the Association's journal, *Geographical Viewpoint*, and made several contributions in the form of articles and reviews.

She was undoubtedly one of the most prolific writers on pedagogical aspects of teaching geography throughout the 1970s. Her writings drew on a wealth of personal experience as a teacher, her participation in Department of Education Syllabus Committees and her work for the Royal Irish Academy National Commission for the Teaching of Geography.

While undertaking all of these roles she advanced her own understanding of geographical processes through the completion of a BA degree by correspondence from University College London. By now in her early fifties and well known throughout the geographical community in Ireland and the UK it is no great surprise to discover that she was offered a studentship to undertake research on curriculum design in the recently established School of Education at the New University of Ulster in Coleraine.

In 1969 she moved to the University of Ulster to embark on a DPhil degree. This was the opportunity to crystallise her thinking and experience on geography education and to develop much needed research-based guidance for initiatives that were underway within the Department of Education. The accounts of contemporaries at Coleraine provide ample testimony to the striking impact that she made as a scholar and as an individual in this somewhat alien cultural landscape.

Unfortunately at a personal level, but fortunately for Irish geography, Sr Stella's career moved onto another path in 1971 which diverted her from completing her DPhil thesis. She was headhunted by the Mercy Order at Carysfort to take up the post of Head of Geography at a very significant juncture in the history of teacher training in Ireland.

From the outset she was deeply involved in the design of structures for the new BEd Degree and in devising a challenging geography programme which would be taken as an elective subject within the new degree. With the assistance of newly appointed colleagues she devised a programme that proved to be immensely popular with students and which was consistently praised by external examiners for both its content and for the quality of the work, especially independent research, which her students produced.

As Head of Department she took very seriously the responsibilities that came with the provision of a new degree programme in an institution that had only recently acquired the status of a Recognised College of the NUI. She constantly encouraged innovation in both the content and methods of delivery of modules and she was a passionate advocate of fieldwork that took her staff and students on field courses all over Ireland and to more exotic places abroad. One of her more memorable innovations was the introduction of an interdisciplinary module on Geography and Literature with Nobel Laureate Séamus Heaney, then

a colleague at Carysfort, as a contributor. As an administrator she could be as firm as steel on matters of principle, but she also had a great capacity to listen to students, provide good counsel and compassion when needed, and could always rely on her sense of humour to find an escape from the burdens that accompanied her role.

In 1982 it was time for Sr Stella to retire though nobody believed that she was ready to surrender her passport. On the occasion of her departure former colleague John Coolahan observed that "if there ever was a retirement party that was premature this is it. One cannot associate the concept of retirement with her. I am confident that her vitality and energy will continue to find many outlets for beneficial and inspiring activity".

And so it was! Within months Sr Stella had joined the Department of Education here at Maynooth as a supervisor of student teachers taking the Higher Diploma course while at the same time continuing to provide some lectures at Carysfort.

In retirement she completed a postgraduate course on Applied Spirituality at the Jesuit University of San Francisco, graduating in 1983 with a First Class MA. This qualification opened new doors and enabled her to combine her interests in geography and spirituality both at home and abroad.

She travelled extensively and gradually became part of the new generation of wild geese that fly off to the Mediterranean for the winter months. In Sr Stella's case she frequently drove to the Costa del Sol throughout the late 1980s and early 1990s, partly to seek a warmer climate to ease the considerable pain of chronic arthritis, but also to embark on a new career as spiritual advisor to ecumenical groups. In more recent times Sr Stella's activities have become more place-bound around her community of friends in Bray where she resides.

Sr Stella Fitzpatrick, geography teacher par excellence.

PRAEHONORABILIS CANCELLARIE, TOTAQUE UNIVERSITAS:

Praesento vobis hunc 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, totaeque Academiae.