

**TEXT OF THE INTRODUCTORY ADDRESS** delivered by **PROFESSOR J. COOLAHAN**, National University of Ireland, Maynooth, on 17 May 2002, on the occasion of the conferring of the Degree of Doctor of Celtic Studies, *honoris causa*, on **DIARMUID BREATHNACH AND MÁIRE NÍ MHURCHÚ**

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

Páirtíocht speisialta atá againn i Diarmuid Breathnach agus Máire Ní Mhurchú. Ba leabharlannaithe proifisiúnta iad beirt. Chomh maith le postanna eile, d'oibrigh Diarmuid i Leabharlann RTE ó 1967 go dtí 1987; ina phríomhleabharlannaí ó 1974. D'oibrigh Maire i Leabharlann RTE ó 1968 go dtí 1989. Ár ndoigh bhí siad ag obair as lámh a chéile ag tabhairt cúnamh don stáisiun náisiúnta. Ba mhinic a thug an bheirt acu léachtaí ar chursaí staire agus cultúrtha. Rinne Diarmuid a lán sraith cláranna don radio agus d'fhoilsigh sé a lán altanna sna nuachtáin agus in irisí mar *Comhar*, *Feasta*, *Scríobh agus Bliainiris*. Bhí dlúthbhaint ag an mbeirt acu le Cumann Merriman ar feadh na mblianta.

Ba i 1980 a thosaigh siad ar a mhórshaothar *Beatháisnéis*. D'fhág Diarmuid RTE in 1987 agus Máire i 1989 chun tabhairt faoi *Beatháisnéis* go lánaimseartha. Ba as a stuaim féin a thosaigh siad ar an éacht seo. I mbliana tá seacht n-imleabhar foilsithe acu, agus imleabhar eile idir lámhaibh acu. Táimid faoi chomaoin mór acu as ucht an tsaothair atá curtha ar fáil acu dúinn.

Níl ní is tábhachtaí ag tír ar bith ná a mhuintir — an mhuintir a bhí, an mhuintir atá agus an mhuintir a bheidh ann. Ní taise d'Éirinn é. Tá a bhfuil bainte amach againn mar phobal agus mar náisiún in iliomad réimsí an tsaoil bunaithe ar fhís, ar dhúthracht agus ar shaothar daoine ag obair astu féin nó i bpáirt le daoine eile.

Fágann sin gur iomaí laoch atá againn inár stair, agus is cuí go mbeadh tuairisc, tuiscint agus cuimhne againn orthu ar fad, idir mhór agus mhion. Ní beag mar easpa orainn é, áfach, nach bhfuil mórshaothar beathaisnéise náisiúnta de chineál an *Dictionary of National Biography* fós againn, agus is boichte go mór muid gan a leithéid a bheith ann.

Breis is fiche bliain ó shin, bheartaigh Máire Ní Mhurchú agus Diarmuid Breathnach, beirt leabharlannaí, ar chuid den easnamh sin a chur ina cheart trí chuntais a thabhairt ar dhaoine suntasacha a mhair idir na blianta 1882 agus 1982, agus a raibh baint acu leis an nGaeilge nó le Gluaiseacht na hAthbheochana. Más cúng le daoine áirithe é seo mar shlat tomhais, cuimhnimis gurb í gluaiseacht na teanga a chéadspreag go leor díobh siúd a ghlac páirt i ngluaiseacht na saoirse agus níos deireanaí i mbúnú an Stáit. Go deimhin is beag duine de thábhacht a mhair sa chéad chuid den aois seo caite nach ndeachaigh gluaiseacht na teanga i bhfeidhm air ar bhealach éigin.

Sa bhliain 1986 a foilsíodh *Beathaisnéis a hAon*, an chéad imleabhar sa tsraith. Bhí sé i gceist an uair sin ag na húdair go mbeadh cuntais tugtha ar 500 duine nuair a bheadh deireadh déanta acu. Faoin am ar foilsíodh *Beathaisnéis a Cúig*, i 1997, bhí cuntais ar breis is 700. Fós féin níor leor leis na húdair an éacht a bhí curtha i gcrích acu. Leathnaíodh an réimse agus foilsíodh dhá imleabhar breise: *Beathaisnéis 1782-1881* i 2000 agus *Beathaisnéis 1560-1781* i mbliana. Idir na seacht n-imleabhar sin tá beathaisnéisí againn ar bhreis is míle duine a mhair idir 1560 agus 1982:

scríbhneoirí, polaiteoirí, sagairt agus ministéirí, scoláirí agus múinteoirí, amhránaithe, ceoltóirí, bailitheoirí béadoidis agus na céadta, céadta eile nach iad.

Leacht i mbuanú a gcuimhne, agus caibidil mhór i stair chultúrtha na tíre seo atá i mBeathaisnéis. Leacht í a tógadh ar dhiansaothar agus ar dhíograis mhuirne, a tógadh le cion agus le meas, agus leis an umhlaíocht is dual don bhfíorscoláire. Caibidil fhíorthábhachtach i stair chultúrtha na tíre seo atá scríofa ag an mbeirt a bhfuiltear ag bronnadh gradaim orthu inniú.

There are many striking features of Beathaisnéis which reflect very favourably on the research, resourcefulness and resilience of the authors. One is very struck by the range of personalities involved. More than a thousand people feature in this major compendium. They include scholars, administrators, poets, teachers, landlords, politicians, priests, antiquarians, musicians, folklorists, eccentrics – all human life is there. They are of many religions and no religion, Irish born and of many foreign countries. The unifying link is their interest in and contribution to the Irish language and its culture.

As well as the range of personalities, one is also struck by the range of source materials. No doubt their professional training as librarians facilitated their access to a vast range of periodicals, journals, newspapers, books, censuses, parish archives, correspondence, and registers of births and deaths. However, the search went far beyond documentary records to include exploration in odd areas such as old graveyards, but in a very particular way to the oral records of surviving personalities and of a vast network of relations of those involved. This latter dimension emphasised the timeliness of the project, as much was still obtained from a living record which would, otherwise, have been gone forever.

If the authors had not been professional librarians, they could certainly have enjoyed distinguished careers as detectives. The nature of the quest and their acuity of pursuit from clue to clue, would have impressed a Sherlock Holmes or an Agatha Christie! The style of presentation is another distinctive feature of their *magnum opus*. They limit the treatment of major figures about whom a great deal is already known, but rescue the memory and contributions of many others, likely to be lost to oblivion. For each such person, future scholars are provided with what references are available in relation to them. The style of writing is engaging, succinct, with the foibles and quirks of human nature incorporated as well as admirable achievements. The hagiographic is not the approach taken which deepens the humanity of the treatment – a type of human comedy. This is further emphasised by the sense of humour and irony which is incorporated – the rogues, the saints and the scholars, all get their due.

The remarkable partnership of Diarmuid and Máire, driven solely by concern and enthusiasm, has performed a signal service to the linguistic, cultural and social history of Ireland. The seven volumes cover over four centuries from 1560 to 1982, and you will be glad to know that they are still at work. Volume VIII will encompass the years 1983 to 2002. The management of a vast range of material and the quality and clarity of presentation are exemplary. As an indication of both their humanity and sense of responsibility, from the beginning the authors have allowed for and, indeed, invited corrections, additions or clarifications to be incorporated in subsequent volumes. The fact that Diarmuid and Máire carry their learning lightly does not mean that it should be taken for granted by the academic community. Accordingly, I think that it is very appropriate that the National University of Ireland,

which itself has been *fite fuaite* with the Irish cultural renaissance and development of modern Ireland, should honour Diarmuid Breathnach and Máire Ní Mhurchú with the Honorary Degree of Doctor of Celtic Literature.

*PRAEHONORABILIS CANCELLARIE, TOTAQUE UNIVERSITAS:*

*Praesento vobis hanc meam filiam et hunc filium meum, quos scio tam moribus quam doctrina habiles et idoneos esse qui admittantur ad gradum Doctoratus in Litteris Celticis idque tibi fide mea testor ac spondeo, totaeque Academiae.*