

TEXT OF THE INTRODUCTORY ADDRESS DELIVERED BY **DR W.J. SMYTH**, Pro-Vice-Chancellor, President, National University of Ireland, Maynooth, on 16 May 2003, on the occasion of the conferring of the Degree of Doctor of Laws, *honoris causa*, on **MOYA DOHERTY** and **JOHN MCCOLGAN**

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

In the closing years of the eighteenth century the Belfast Harpist Festival provided the impetus for the collection and preservation of a musical tradition that was fast disappearing in a rapidly changing Ireland. Almost exactly one century later, in 1897, the first Gaelic League Céilí was held in London and from that event stemmed a process aimed at creating Irish dance as a distinctive style of cultural nationalism with an approved repertoire of steps, styles and costumes. A further century passed, and in 1994 there was born the phenomenon of *Riverdance*. As with its two predecessors it has come to be regarded as a pivotal point for the projection of group national culture. Like its predecessors, it is situated in the wider global context of its time. Declining folk traditions in the face of modernity lent impetus to the rescue mission of the eighteenth century Belfast Harpist Festival. A rising sense of nationalism, contextualised in the revivalist movement of late Victorian romanticism, may be discerned in the activities of the London-based Gaelic League. Similarly, the self-confident “can do-ism” of the emerging Celtic Tiger is clearly evident in the design and timing of *Riverdance*.

Dispensing with the rigidities of the Canons of Irish dancing, tried and tested in parish hall feiseanna over generations, *Riverdance* projected itself as what the sociologist Barbara O'Connor has described as a hybrid, drawing inspiration from international dance movements and cultivating a deliberate global appeal. Gone were the rigid dresses decorated with Celtic motifs; gone was the directory of approved steps. In place there was a visual spectacle embracing speed, sound and, owing a lot to popular American show biz, tap dancing, Flamenco and modern ballet. *Riverdance*, the new cultural entity, was an internationally inspired Irish creation which took the national and global imagination by storm. Fittingly, its two earliest stars – Michael Flatley and Jean Butler were the children of Irish immigrants in Chicago and New York respectively. The Irish ghetto had returned home, attained a new sense of direction, and re-entered the world with a transformed internationalised gaelic seal.

A decade on from the first appearance of *Riverdance* as a seven minute interval spectacle and the most remembered feature of the 1994 televised Eurovision Contest it is appropriate that we reflect on the nature of this international success story, and acknowledge two of the key figures behind it – Moya Doherty and John McColgan. Perhaps also it is especially fitting that we acknowledge their success in National University of Ireland, Maynooth, for three years on from *their* inaugural success, an undergraduate music student from this University, Eimear Quinn, won the Eurovision contest of that year in Oslo. Her performance, like the original *Riverdance* interval act, was broadcast to an audience of more than two hundred million world-wide.

Moya Doherty, in her role as RTE producer, conceived the idea of the original *Riverdance*, and together with her husband, John McColgan as Director, they turned the interval act into an international phenomenon. To date *Riverdance-the-Show* has been seen live by over 13.5 million people in 21 countries across 4 continents and the first video of the show, directed by

John McColgan, has become one of the biggest selling videos in history. So successful has been their identification of the show with this country, that it has become a metaphor for the New Ireland. Social scientists, cultural commentators and newspaper columnists have devoted books, articles and yards of newspaper column inches to interpreting what has transcended economic significance to become a phenomenon of national iconic importance. Who are the architects of this achievement?

Two Ulster counties, Donegal and Tyrone, more famed for their landscapes than their forays into post-modernism, were the birthplaces of Moya and John. Indeed their regional origins are articulated in the name of their highly successful TV and film company, Tyrone Productions. From the northwestern borderlands their paths took them along a well-trodden migrant route – life and early jobs in Dublin, followed by a stint in London, and back to Dublin in time for the then recent revolution of Irish success in the Arts and Industry.

Moya Doherty's first job was with RTÉ. The late 1970s and early 1980s were exciting years in the evolution of Radio Telefís Éireann. The National broadcasting station was expanding rapidly, developing a second television channel, increasing its output especially in the area of entertainment, and introducing a vast range of new programmes requiring new talent. In this environment Moya flourished, rising through the ranks from Production Assistant to Presenter and eventually to the post of Producer-Director. Along the way she presented *The Live Arts*, an arts programme on television, and co-hosted *Daybreak LA* which provided early-morning coverage of the 1984 Olympics held in Los Angeles.

When Moya later left RTÉ for London she joined TV-AM, becoming a segment producer and part-time co-presenter, and linked up with her former RTÉ colleague John McColgan. Once more she expanded her range of broadcasting talents, presenting and reporting on various programmes and working with such TV personalities as David Frost, Anne Diamond and Henry Kelly. Although her career thrived in the UK, she was tempted to return to Dublin with an offer of a place on one of RTÉ's television producer-director training courses. After five years in Britain, the 1990s were about to begin and the career of Moya Doherty was about to take off.

Having produced the *People in Need Telethon* in 1992 and having secured a Jacob's Award for her documentary on child sexual abuse, *The Silent Scream*, Moya Doherty was asked to produce the 1994 Eurovision Song Contest for Radio Telefís Éireann. Faced with the challenge of devising an interval act, *Riverdance* was born.

John McColgan first indulged his love of broadcasting when he joined Radio Éireann in 1961. He wasn't long in the old Henry Street studios however, when he moved to the fledgling Telefís Éireann which had begun broadcasting from Montrose on New Year's Eve 1961. Joining the station in 1963, John worked as a vision-mixer and was promoted to cameraman and floor manager. He built up his knowledge of the industry at a time when the new medium of television played a crucial role in Irish life. Programmes like *Seven Days* and the *Late Late Show* reflected and helped transform Ireland from an insular nation to a rapidly developing modern society. In this environment, John perfected his broadcasting skills while working alongside media exponents of the time like Gay Byrne, Frank Hall and Bunny Carr.

John was promoted to television producer-director with RTÉ in the mid-1970s, taking up his post at a time of unprecedented expansion in the station's entertainment output. For the remainder of that decade and into the early-1980s, he was regarded as one of the finest entertainment producers within RTÉ. He won a Jacob's Award for 'the consistently high quality of his entertainment programming,' which included the acclaimed *Murphy's America* and *Murphy's Australia*. Promoted to the post of Head of Entertainment with RTÉ, John remained with the national broadcaster until the early-1980s when he decided to further expand his broadcasting horizons by moving to London in 1982 to work with TV-AM. There, of course, he inevitably worked alongside Moya Doherty who also joined the new television service from RTÉ. Although John was appointed Controller of Programmes at TV-AM, both he and Moya subsequently returned to Dublin where Tyrone Productions was formed. The independent television production sector was, at the time, in its infancy and the company started from small beginnings. In time, however, it became Ireland's largest independent production company responsible for major television series including 'Open House' and 'Ros na Rún'. Among its more recent ventures is 'Who Wants to be a Millionaire', hosted by John and Moya's friend and neighbour, Gay Byrne. Today, it is one of the most innovative production companies in Ireland, with output that includes drama, documentary and entertainment programming.

Following the 1994 Eurovision Song Contest and the success of the *Riverdance* premiere, the lives of John McColgan and Moya Doherty were changed forever. John played a key role in the evolution of *Riverdance* from the original Eurovision interval act and went on to direct the full stage spectacular and video. They, and their *Riverdance* companies, have toured the world many times and with considerable success. Back home they have also lent their professional and personal support to broadcasting and the Arts. John is Chairman of Today FM and also a member of the board of the Abbey Theatre. Moya has served as the Chairperson of the Dublin Theatre Festival and together they have supported the world of scholarship in very many ways including endowing Fulbright and Canada-Ireland scholarships which support young Irish academics wishing to study in North America.

In historical terms dance and national image have been entwined. The accuracy of the detail of the creation is less important than the overriding captioning and projection of a sense of identity at a particular time. De Valera's image of comely maidens dancing at the crossroads of rural Ireland may in its time have been no more justified than an image of 1990s *Riverdance* Ireland with its sense of liberation and fusion of global styles. But both are remarkably powerful popularised symbols of collective identity.

As cultural ambassadors, as artists in their own right, and as major influences on the revival and direction of modern popular Irish culture Moya Doherty and John McColgan are a team of international renown, worthy candidates for the highest honour of the National University of Ireland.

PRAEHONORABILIS CANCELLARIE, TOTAQUE UNIVERSITAS:

Praesento vobis hosce meam filiam filiumque meum, quos scio tam moribus quam doctrina habiles et idoneos esse quos admittantur ad gradum Doctoratus idque tibi fide mea testor ac spondeo, totique Academiae'.