

TEXT OF THE INTRODUCTORY ADDRESS DELIVERED BY **PROFESSOR DENIS I.F. LUCEY**, on 10 April, 2003 on the occasion of the conferring of the Degree of Doctor of Laws, *honoris causa*, on **MARY DUFFY**

A Sheansailéir, agus a mhuintir na hOllscoile:

Noreen and Tommy Duffy, both of whom hailed from Mayo, made their home together in Tullamore in the 1950s. When they discovered that their third baby, born at home in the early 1960s, had no arms, it was a bolt from the blue! Which of us can imagine the mixture of emotions and feelings that raced through their minds, the confused set of Yeatsian "angers that are like noisy clouds" which set their hearts abeat as they learned how to live as a family in the new situation in which they found themselves with their special baby.

The baby, Mary Duffy, has long since left the family nest as she has developed what the internationally acclaimed Mexican disabled artist Frieda Kahlo calls her own "wings to fly". Crucial to helping Mary to learn to fly were the loving contributions of Noreen who taught her not to care a lot about what other people might think and of Tommy from whom she learned a fierce determination to succeed. We are delighted that Tommy, now in his eightieth year, is here to celebrate this day, while Noreen who died in 1991 after a long illness is smiling benignly somewhere as she contemplates the occasion.

In her provocative and challenging art performance 'Stories of a Body', Mary recalls how she felt disempowered by the medical profession as a child, as they labelled, categorised, and re-defined her very existence. Like many babies born without arms, she was actively discouraged from using her feet. Instead, she was given non-functional artificial arms while scientists rushed to create mechanical prostheses. Mary says that she knew instinctively that these efforts were not made for her real, true, seen need, but rather arose from the compulsion to make her look 'normal', because it was only within the 'normal' that future possibility was seen to lie.

Mary had an early awareness that what was required, however, was that society adjust and expand and change to include her, rather than demanding that she adjust to fit into society. Many decades on, this is at the heart of the disability civil rights movement today. In a recent article in Public Culture, David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder of the University of Illinois at Chicago single out Mary Duffy's open rejection of patronising assumptions to see her body as incomplete. "To insist", they say, "that the disabled body forego prosthetic concealment unashamedly relocates disabled bodies within a continuum of biological variation". This key insight, they claim, enables Mary Duffy, her colleague disabled artists and the disabled generally, "... to reclaim the sloughed-off disabled exterior as a mantle of future possibility".

A singular commitment to self-definition and a determination not to be patronised by the non-disabled world, have, therefore, been and continue to be guiding principles in Mary's life. As an adult, Mary rejected images of disabled people as tragic, pathetic or brave. She wanted to create new images and new stories that told of her reality as a disabled woman with images that reflect disability as being a part of being human and with all of the richness, pain and diversity that this identity entails. At the core of all of Mary's work is a desire to communicate about the reality of being disabled, recognising it, expressing it, validating her experiences and giving them a place in society. She says that her work is always about opposing cultural norms and making strong and vibrant statements about her life and the lives of other disabled people, their commitments and their values.

Often it is to children we have to turn to help us cast off our societal preconceptions. "The best answer I got", says Mary, "regarding what to say to kids came from a three-year-old neighbour when I was twenty or so.... three of us sitting on the doorstep... the sun setting and the six year old asks why don't I have any arms. The three year old replied without missing a beat 'because she doesn't need any, silly!' ".

Mary graduated from the National College of Art and Design in 1983 and initially worked in a number of art teaching jobs and residencies, including artist-in-residence positions in Mountjoy and Portlaoise prisons. Her first show was exhibited in Glasgow in 1983, her graduation year. Thus began an illustrious and internationally acclaimed career as an artist with exhibitions and performances at top venues in Europe, America and Asia. "When disabled people succeed it is commonly thought that those individuals are amazing for overcoming their disabilities and thriving in life. Is this really what they are doing?" says Sheri-Lynn Romanick in a recent study, which analyses the work of Mary Duffy, Frieda Kahlo the wheelchair bound Mexican artist and Vassar Miller the American poet who suffered from cerebral palsy. These three women, says Romanick, "transform their disabilities into the ability to create complex forms of art that force the audience to gain a different perspective on disabilities. Their disabilities become their power. The artists use this power to force their audiences to look at their disabilities in an utterly new way using the "stare and tell" method. These women do not succeed despite their disabilities, but instead succeed because of them."

Mary's later work as a programme-maker has provided rare insights into the lived life of disabled people, unvarnished accounts of the struggle for rights, for tolerance, for acceptance, for love, for respect. Her first radio documentary, *The Lino Crossing - Tales of the Observed*, was nominated by RTE for the Prix d'Italia Broadcasting Awards, in 1999.

In the 1990s, Mary initiated a number of ground-breaking educational and training projects for disabled people, including the Women's Initiative for Leadership and Disability and the

Disability Equality Trainers Network, which simultaneously raised the issue of disability within an equality framework and also strove to answer the questions raised. Like many of Mary's projects, it was ahead of its time and would come to fruition only after major legislative changes in equality were introduced in Ireland in the late 1990s. At the same time, Mary studied for a Master's degree in Equality Studies at UCD – NUI, Dublin, graduating in 1993. She currently works as a researcher in RTE on the 'Today with Pat Kenny' radio show.

Mary and her spouse, Denis Buckley, live in Newcastle, where Mary is an organic fruit and vegetable gardener and keeps a flock of a rare breed of hens - where does she get the time! Of course there have been funny moments in her life. Mary and Denis once had a left hand drive camper van, the indicator was faulty so, wishing to move right to change lanes in O'Connell Street, Denis asked Mary to stick her leg out the window to signal the intended lane change!

Mary has inherited her parent's fondness for the west of Ireland. Chaith si roinnt ama sa Ghaeltacht freisin and on her recent radio documentary series 'Disability Rites and Passages' she interviewed Máirtín Ó Neachtain on Spideal, an enriching interview on how a native Irish speaker has lived with disability.

It is entirely fitting, Chancellor, that the National University of Ireland recognises 2003 as the European Year of People with Disabilities not only by recognising the long-standing disability policies of the NUI and its Constituent Universities as well as the active disability support services provided by highly dedicated staff in the Constituent Universities but also now by offering our highest honour to one of our own distinguished graduates, Mary Duffy, who has inspired and motivated a generation of disabled people.

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 utroque Jure, tam Civili quam Canonico, idque tibi fide mea testur ac spondeo totique Academiae.