

TEXT OF THE INTRODUCTORY ADDRESS delivered by: **DR JOACHIM BEUG**, University College Cork, National University of Ireland, Cork on 4 June, 2004, on the occasion of the conferring of the Degree of Doctor of Literature, *honoris causa*, on **HILARY PYLE**

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

In Hilary Pyle we honour the 'doyenne of all Jack Yeats scholars'. Years of dedicated and meticulous research led in 1970 to the publication of her book, which bears the simple title: *Jack B. Yeats, A Biography*. Despite this characteristic understatement it was and remains **the** biography of this great Irish artist.

Hilary's fascinating biography was a truly groundbreaking achievement. It is difficult to imagine today that at that time the great painter was all but unknown in Ireland and his international reputation was in its infancy. Thus her book prepared the ground for the discovery of Yeats in his native country and beyond. It also provided the basis for all later Yeats scholarship and, most importantly, for the Yeats Museum in the National Gallery. We owe this great collection in the form we know and love it largely to its curator and director Hilary Pyle.

Hilary did not start out as an art historian in the sense that there was no such academic course available in Ireland at the time. Neither can she be circumscribed by a single term like that; she is a biographer, art critic, scholar, curator, wife and mother and also a published poet! Born in Dublin, educated at Alexandra College and Trinity, she studied English and Irish and upon graduation was awarded the Robert Gardner scholarship to Cambridge, where she completed her MLitt thesis on the Irish novelist and short story writer James Stephens. This thesis was subsequently published as her first book, followed in 1966 by *Portraits of Patriots*, which focuses on the Irish woman artist Estella Solomons among others. More recently publications on Kate Cullen and the poet Susan L. Mitchell appeared.

Her time as Assistant Curator at the Ulster Museum working with Anne Crookshank was a form of higher apprenticeship that significantly shaped her further career.

In 1971 Hilary moved with her family to Cork, a move that proved to be momentous not only for her family, that was to grow and flourish here, but much more so for the city and the region and also for the university and the art college.

Having established herself as an art critic with the *Irish Times* even before the move she soon became the main critic for the then *Cork Examiner*. It has been suggested that a collection of her reviews would provide a unique and highly valuable record of the young and slowly developing visual arts scene during the years of Cork's rise towards a center of excellence in this field. Her highly informed and always fair and sensitive reviews would have often been an encouragement to young artists and always provided orientation for the readership of the paper. Hilary is a long term and active member of the International Art Critics Association and has made very valuable contributions to this organization.

At UCC Hilary was probably the first lecturer ever to give courses in Irish and European art history and her involvement with the earliest initiatives to introduce history of art to the university proved to be visionary. She must be recognized as one of the initiators of a development that has now led to the recent introduction of

history of art as an undergraduate degree course and the magnificent new art gallery about to be completed on this campus.

In 1975 Hilary selected and curated the fifth ROSC exhibition at the Crawford Gallery, for the first time giving central place and due emphasis to Irish Art of the 20th century.

Returning to Dublin in 1993 her work on Jack Yeats again took center stage. She was appointed curator of the Yeats Museum and director of the archives. Then her monumental 'catalogue raisonne' began to appear; three volumes of oil paintings, followed by further volumes on watercolors and drawings, and cartoons and illustrations. She also presented important exhibitions of Yeats's work in Sligo, Dublin and Monaco and produced the accompanying catalogues. Hilary's Yeats scholarship has had a worldwide impact. Her deeply comprehending and sympathetic reading of the artist and his work is perhaps best summed up in the following statement by a colleague: 'Hilary Pyle occupies a unique place in Yeats scholarship, and without her work no one can venture into study of Yeats, still less into writing about him.'

In recognition of her outstanding contributions Hilary was in 2000 elected Honorary Member of the Royal Hibernian Academy. It is a proud and joyful occasion for University College Cork, to renew its association with Hilary Pyle by conferring upon her the Degree of Doctor of Literature, *honoris causa*.

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 Litteris, idque tibi fide mea testor ac spondeo, totaeque Academiae.