

TEXT OF THE INTRODUCTORY ADDRESS DELIVERED BY:

PROFESSOR ENDA MCDONAGH, on 3 June, 2005, on the occasion of the conferring of the Degree of Doctor of Laws honoris causa, on HUGHIE O'DONOGHUE

A Sheansailéir, agus a mhuintir na hOllscoile,

Painting is slow work. Painting, on the scale on which Hughie O Donoghue usually works and on the basis of the detailed research, which it regularly involves, must be particularly slow and time-consuming. Yet at fifty-two years of age and spanning a career, which really began less than twenty-five years ago, the quality and volume of his work, the global reach of his exhibitions and awards plus the inclusion of his work in so many public collections, are positively astounding. But we will be coming to that.

Hughie O'Donoghue was born in Manchester in 1953. His father Daniel worked as a clerk accountant with the railways following in his father's footsteps. His mother, Sheila, had emigrated from Bangor Erris, North-west Mayo, in 1937 to join her sisters in Manchester and to find work. By Hughie's account she was an unwilling emigrant/exile and returned every summer to her home-place. Here Hughie spent much of his early summer holidays. The bleak beauty of the landscape and its melancholy mood, it was still deeply marked by its famine history, all this exerted a major influence on his subsequent development as an artist.

More influential still was his father's experience of World War II as recorded in his letters to Sheila, his diaries and his photographs. Daniel was a keen and gifted photographer with the photographer's sharp eye which his son no doubt inherited. Beyond that his travels in Europe from early embarrassment of the retreat to and then from Dunkirk but more particularly his experience with the Allied Forces in their invasion of Italy and his travels in Southern Europe gave him a sense of the great tradition of European culture from ancient Greece and Rome down to the present day. With much of that duly recorded he engaged his son later with the cultural achievements available through books and the local Museums and Galleries. With this encouragement Hughie eventually became a serious student of art and above all painting. However after experimenting with some of the conventional and then fashionable trends he began to find his own subjects as he might call them and his own techniques and style, which by now have made him the internationally renowned painter that he is. Of course where he is now is far from the end of his development. In a telling remark he admits that the painting he starts is seldom the painting he finishes; beginnings can lead in so many and unpredictable directions. So his massive series on World War II, on the Passion of Christ, his recent smaller one on the Prodigal Son exhibited here in Cork in the Spring and his innumerable shorter series and individual paintings all have a story, a journey in which the climax or destination is seldom discernible in the first painterly strokes.

Hughie is given to pithy remarks about painting, including his own, which are of great help on occasions like this when one has to speak in the absence of the paintings themselves. One of my favourites is his phrase 'the poetry of coincidence', which he uses to describe how some chance encounter with a historical or mythological event opened him up to new artistic connections and explorations. 'The Flaying of Marsyas' proved one of these, as can be observed in some of his Passion paintings. I think in particular of a painting entitled 'Cruelties I' which portrays the scourging of Christ. It is not just the subject matter but the quality of the paintwork in which the inhuman cruelty is so painfully portrayed in the detachment of the skin while the texture of the skin remains so beautiful and the human dignity of the victim so marvellously protected and projected. From ancient myth to Christian

turning point to modern warfare, O'Donoghue is able to expose man's inhumanity at its extreme and the resilience of humanity in face of that inhumanity.(651)

In quite a number of paintings from the War Series and the Passion series as well as in independent paintings like this University's Knocknalower, the elongated human figure, in very different shapes and contexts, rests as Hughie puts it at home in its painterly setting. A number of poetic coincidences are at work here. Escape of the

Crucified from the great tradition of Passion painting seem obvious to the untutored eye. Yet the immediate stimulus was a photograph of Grauballe or Tollund man uncovered after thousand of years in a bog in Denmark. How it lay there enabled him to understand, he says, how a human figure might rest on the canvas. The poetic coincidence goes further overlapping with that other great insight of O'Donoghue's of painting as 'archaeological excavation'. As he layers on the paint in as apparent cover-up he uncovers a still deeper truth. In this instance the memory of the local river where he spent his summer holidays as a child around Bangor Erris, the Glenculler River I believe. There was also a family story, disputed by some, of how his maternal grandfather was lost and died in a bog by Bangor Erris and was buried there in December 1920. Covering with layers of paint (or bog) to uncover is one of O'Donoghue's primary artistic characteristics.

The poetry of coincidence combines with the coincidence of poetry in the case of the Tollund man. Seamus Heaney evidently saw the same photographs and also independently became artistically engaged. So much so that he published at least two poems on the subject and sensed the deeper connections to 'Everyman'. I quote the final two stanzas of the first poem.

Tollund, Grauballe, Nebelgard
Watching the pointing hands
Of country people,
No knowing their tongue
Out there in Jutland
In the old man-killing parades
I will feel lost
Unhappy and at home.

Hughie O'Donoghue has pursued his subjects and his research into their background and meaning to produce an extraordinary collection of individual paintings as well as a number of imposing series which have been acclaimed around the world, merited many prestigious awards and figured in many public as well as private collections.

His decision to move with Clare his wife and his family to live in Ireland has greatly enriched Irish artistic life in his emerging works and in the cultural subsoil which he continues to uncover and in which great art must grow. His return to Cork to receive this honorary doctorate is a source of special joy for the university, not least because he gives generously of himself on the management committee of the Glucksmann Gallery. At a time when the best universities may be under ideological and financial threat his recognition by Cork is an iconic Countersign. For these and many other reasons I feel privileged to recommend for the award of this degree honoris causa.

Praehonorabilis Cancellarie, totaque universitas.

Presento vobis hunc meum filium, quem scio tam moribus quam doctrina habilem et idoneum esse qui admittatur, honoris causa, ad gradum Doctoratus in Utroque Jure, tam Civili quam Canonico, idque tibi fide mea testor ac spondeo, totique Academiae.