

TEXT OF THE INTRODUCTORY ADDRESS DELIVERED BY: **MR CIARAN McCULLAGH** on 2 June 2006 in University College Cork on the occasion of the conferring of the Degree of Doctor of Literature, *honoris causa*, on **PATRICK GALVIN**

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

The City of Cork doesn't have a poet laureate but if it had and if the poet was to be appointed, as laureates should be, by popular acclaim, then there is little doubt that Patrick Galvin would be the first to get the job.

He was born in Margaret Street in 1927 then an area of considerable poverty and deprivation. His formal education finished when he was eleven. His birth certificate was altered to enable him to get work, in his own words, "by a master-forgery in Barrack Street for a half-crown". Other accounts are more prosaic and suggest it was his mother who did the deed. Either way poverty was the cause.

He worked in various jobs, as a messenger, a newspaper boy and a cinema projectionist. Most significantly he spent three years in a reformatory. These early experiences – of work, poverty and abuse – were to provide the raw material for the first volume of his memoirs – **Song for a Poor Boy** – which gives a vivid account of growing up in the poverty that marked Cork in the 1930s. The title poem of his first collection, **Heart of Grace**, published in 1959, is a powerful account of how a young man was brutalised in a reform school, a theme that was also central to the second volume of his memoirs – **Song for a Raggy Boy**. This was turned into a film, the script for which he co-authored, and the film won a range of awards across Europe and the United States.

He went to Belfast in 1943 intending to join the American Air Force but ended up, as one can, in the RAF, an experience that provided the material for the third volume of his memoirs, **Song for a Fly Boy**, a reflection on the futility of war and starring a unique cast of the characters that the RAF choose to inflict on Africa.

He began to write poetry in the 1950s and since then has produced eight volumes, including his "**New and Selected Poems**" published by Cork University Press in 1996. His latest work is a translation with Robert O' Donoghue of the work of Turkish poet, Yilmaz Odibassi, published in 2005

He was encouraged as a folk singer in the 1950s by the legendary Seamus Ennis and he recorded seven albums of Irish songs. His own songs have been recorded by many other artists, most famously, the classic ballad, "James Connolly", recorded by almost equally famous Christy Moore, among others.

Around this time he also began to write plays for radio and for the stage. These have been produced in London, Dublin, Cork, and most notably in Belfast, where he served as Resident Dramatist with the Lyric Theatre between 1974 and 1977.

The night his play, "Night Fall to Belfast", opened in the Lyric Theatre, a car bomb went off outside. Galvin's response was that "criticism was one thing but this was going too bloody far altogether".

He has contributed significantly to arts in the community in Ireland most specifically through his work in Dun Laoghaire-Rathdown Council and in Cork, through his founding role in the Munster Literature Centre, a move that is credited with triggering a creative rejuvenation among young poets in the city. He has also been Writer in residence in UCC.

Patrick Galvin is held in warm regard by the people of the city as is evidenced by the turnouts for his readings, now sadly curtailed by illness. His work is seen as an expression of Cork's unique history, geography and sense of identity.

But it would be inaccurate and unfair to see him as a Cork poet if that term is meant in some limited or introverted sense. While his work draws on and reflects his experiences in the city it is not limited or constrained by them. His earlier work shows the influence of Gaelic folk poetry while his later poetry reflects his interest in Spanish history and culture, most notably the work of Federico García Lorca. His work has been translated into Italian, German, Danish, Flemish and Turkish.

His reputation as one of Ireland's most distinctive and indeed humorous poetic voices was recognised by his election to Aosdana in 1984.

It is a fitting tribute to his contributions to Irish literature that University College Cork should honour him in this way. It is, to quote one of his poems, "bloody fabulous".

In his Advice to a Poet (1979), he says

"Be a chauffeur, my father said "and never mind the poetry
That's all very well for the rich
They can afford it".

We should be glad he never took that advice.

PRAEHONORABILIS CANCELLARIE, TOTAQUE UNIVERSITAS:

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