

TEXT OF THE INTRODUCTORY ADDRESS DELIVERED BY **DR ANTHONY ROCHE**, University College Dublin on 16 June 2006 in University College Dublin on the occasion of the conferring of the Degree of Doctor of Literature, *honoris cause*, on **ANTHONY CRONIN**

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

It is singularly appropriate that we gather on June 16th for UCD to honour Anthony Cronin with a Doctorate of Letters. One of the university's most distinguished living graduates, he has written with distinction across the range of poetry, fiction, drama, literary criticism and biography, touching nothing which he has not adorned, to adapt Dr Johnson on Goldsmith. Through his involvement in the world of public affairs, rare in an Irish writer, he has had a profound and lasting impact on the enhanced position of the writer in Irish society, particularly through the founding of Aosdana. He is that rarest and most valuable of things in Irish writing, a man of letters, *un homme d'affaires*, an unabashed intellectual. If it is appropriate to honour him on June 16th, the fact that it is Bloomsday has a particular significance in Cronin's case.

To explain, I would visually like to conjure up one of the most iconic images in Irish culture – a photograph taken on June 16th 1954 showing five intrepid pilgrims on Sandymount Strand. One of them is a nephew of James Joyce's; two of them are Patrick Kavanagh and Brian O'Nolan/Flann O'Brien/Myles na gCopaleen, now widely recognised as the most important Irish poet and prose writers of the mid twentieth-century; John Ryan, who published them both in his magazine *Envoy*; and Anthony Cronin, the very image of the artist as a young man. The five figures are alone on the strand, celebrating the Joycean occasion at a time when it was (in Myles's immortal words) neither popular nor profitable. The survivor of that Bloomsday of over fifty years ago is with us today and, as he reminds us in his long poem *RMS Titanic*: "We live by living, survive by mere surviving/Stubborn beyond our stubbornness or strength/Our virtues, like our weaknesses, prevail."

Anthony Cronin has borne witness in his writings to that embattled group of Irish writers – Kavanagh, O'Nolan, Behan - who held out against the spirit-deadening inhibitions of the time at great personal cost. He first did so in a series of remarkable pen portraits in *The Irish Times* in the mid 1970s, subsequently gathered in book form as *Dead as Doornails*. Colm Toibín recalled his excitement at reading them in the wonderful essay he contributed on Anthony Cronin to the volume *The UCD Aesthetic: Celebrating 150 Years of UCD Writers*: "I devoured the sections on the journey, hoping the bus would take its time pulling into its final destination at College

Green, so I could read the pieces again." Since then, Cronin has produced two major biographies. The first is 1989's *No Laughing Matter: The Life and Times of Flann O'Brien*, a title as mordant and unsentimental as the earlier *Dead as Doornails*. In this, as in the earlier volume, Cronin never loses sight of the writings of his subjects, never substitutes the cult of personality for their achievement, but he remains focussed on them as complex human beings. The book also contains an illuminating account of life at UCD in the early 1930s. Cronin's life of Brian O'Nolan has no competitor. But his 1996 biography of Beckett, *The Last Modernist*, appeared in the same year as the 'official' Beckett biography by James Knowlson, *Damned to Fame*. Knowlson places great emphasis on the facts; and every line warrants a substantiating footnote. The Cronin offers a good deal more, including speculation both literary and biographical; it acknowledges the importance of Beckett's drama, while remaining passionate about the prose fiction; it makes its claim for Beckett as an Irish writer by finding no contradiction between that status and a life of continental peregrinations; and it brings to life the people with whom Beckett worked and socialised, like the actor Patrick Magee or the poet Thomas McGreevy.

The near-destitution suffered by those mid-twentieth-century writers who had to eke out a living in Ireland has, I believe, inspired the work that Anthony Cronin has done in improving the status of the writer in Irish society. In discussing the founding of Aosdána last month at a Royal Irish Academy Conference, Cronin stressed how the last thing the Arts Council thought it should do in its early decades was to give money directly to writers. No, it existed to facilitate performance or exhibition or (possibly) publication; but to facilitate the production of work was unheard of. The idea of Aosdána crystallised as "a major scheme for providing ongoing support for major artists" and as a recognition of artistic achievement. Cronin sees its self-electing mode of governance as obvious but necessary, and he ended his talk by stressing art as a vocation. My own view is simple: as long as Aosdána helps one major writer to live sufficiently to practice his or her vocation as a writer, it has more than justified its existence.

Many readers and writers first encountered Anthony Cronin as a poet. For me, it was coming across *RMS Titanic* in the brown-covered Penguin paperback of *Longer Poems*; for Colm Toibin, reading Cronin's "For a Father" in Brendan Kennelly's *The Penguin Book of Irish Verse* revealed that its author, like himself, hailed from Enniscorthy. Dermot Bolger has acknowledged how important an example Anthony Cronin's poetry – urban, not rural, restless and inquisitive in its probings yet braced by the possibilities of language – was not only for him but for an entire generation of poets. Last year the magisterial New Island edition of the *Collected Poems* was

reprinted within two weeks of its initial publication. It is, I think, as a major poet and as the outstanding biographer of Irish writing in the mid to late twentieth century that Anthony Cronin will have his most enduring literary influence. Also in the sheer multifariousness of his activities, in his refusal to adopt a purely aesthetic stance but instead to engage directly with the cultural and political world he inhabits in order to transform it, he offers a living model of the exemplary man of Irish letters to the twenty-first century.

PRAEHONORABILIS CANCELLARIE, TOTAQUE UNIVERSITAS:

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