

TEXT OF THE INTRODUCTORY ADDRESS DELIVERED BY
PROFESSOR MARY DALY, University College Dublin, on 16 June
2006, on the occasion of the conferring of the Degree of Doctor of
Literature, *honoris causa*, on **JOSÉ SARAMAGO**

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

José Saramago was born in 1922, into a family of agricultural labourers. In his Nobel lecture he described his grandparents and their community as 'primitive peasants obliged to hire out the strength of their arms for a wage and working conditions that deserved only to be called infamous.... Common people... deceived by a Church both accomplice and beneficiary of the power of the State and of the landlords, people permanently watched by the police, people so many times innocent victims of the arbitrariness of a false justice'. In the same Nobel lecture he spoke affectionately about his maternal grandfather: - 'the wisest man I ever knew' - an illiterate swineherd, 'who could set the world in motion just with a couple of words'. From this childhood he gained a love of story telling; an ability to move freely between dreams and reality, and a strong awareness of nature. The images with which Saramago invokes his childhood: gleaning the stubble in the cornfields; sleeping outdoor under a fig tree with his grandfather, watching the night sky, listening to the stories told to him by his grandfather and grandmother bring to mind Irish writers such as Patrick Kavanagh, and Seamus Heaney. But this harsh peasant lifestyle with its exploitative landlords also gave him a strong sense of natural justice and a life-time commitment to human rights. In *Risen from the Ground*, a novel that traces the life story of three generations of a peasant family up to Portugal's revolution in 1974, Saramago addresses themes of landlord exploitation and rural poverty, that will resonate with anyone who is familiar with Irish history or with the work of Liam O'Flaherty or Peadar O'Donnell.

José Saramago moved to Lisbon in the 1930s, where he studied at a technical school before becoming a mechanic. Lisbon gave him access to public libraries, where he spent long hours reading at random. He began to write - poetry, drama, essays and novels, while working as a mechanic, a civil servant, publisher and finally as a journalist. In 1975, when his membership of the communist party made his newspaper position untenable, he became a full-time writer. Over the past thirty years he has produced a remarkable series of novels, that have gradually secured world-wide recognition, culminating in the award of the Nobel Prize for literature in 1998.

Saramago's writings are steeped in Portugal's history and culture. In the *History of the Siege of Lisbon*, a humble proof-reader, checking proofs of a history book of that title, decides to revise the past, because history no longer has the capacity to surprise. He

changes 'yes' to 'no' in a key passage of the text, and is then forced by his publisher to rewrite the rest of the story. In the process Saramago conveys memorable pictures of Lisbon in the 12th century, and lyrical images of Lisbon today. And being Saramago this alternative history is written from the point of view of a common soldier. *The Year of the Death of Ricardo Reis* is both a novel about the great Portuguese poet, Fernando Pessoa, and a commentary on Portugal in the 1930s, as seen by Pessoa, his alter ego Raimondo Reis, and by Saramago. One reviewer said that 'the density and poise of its descriptions of Lisbon in 1936 recall Flaubert's descriptions of Paris in 1848 or Joyce's Dublin in 1904'. Saramago himself claims that this novel can only be fully appreciated by someone with a deep knowledge of Portuguese history and culture.

But Saramago's writings go well beyond Portugal; they address themes of global significance. In *The Stone Raft*, he transforms the Iberian Peninsula into an island, separated from Europe, floats it across the Atlantic, where the culture of the Iberian peninsula defies and challenges the dominance of the USA. In *Blindness* the citizens of an unidentified country are struck by a temporary epidemic of blindness, and confined to a mental asylum, where some try to maintain moral standards in the face of societal collapse. *Blindness* is of course a metaphor, one that suggests that citizens are powerless. In his 2004 novel *Seeing*, over 80% of citizens in this same state cast blank ballots in a municipal election. Faced with this massive vote of no confidence, the government abandons the capital city, and gradually introduces a reign of terror. Saramago is deeply concerned about the shortcomings of contemporary society. His acceptance speech at the Nobel banquet opened, by referring to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. He went on to warn of the threat that powerful multinational companies posed to democracy, and the failure of today's citizens to fulfil their duty to speak up and demand their rights.

In honouring José Saramago we are honouring one of the great novelists of our time; a writer who has brought the history and culture of Portugal to a world-wide audience; a tireless champion of human rights, and a man whose life and work has enriched the world.

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.