

**TEXT OF THE INTRODUCTORY ADDRESS** delivered by: **PROFESSOR COLBERT KEARNEY**, in University College Cork on 8 June, 2007, on the occasion of the conferring of the Degree of Doctor of Literature, *honoris causa*, on **RICHARD FORD**

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

There is a minor episode in Richard Ford's novel *Independence Day* when the central character, Frank Bascombe, pulls off the highway to fill the car, get a coffee, go to the toilet, use the public phones to check for messages. When a trucker finishes his call, Frank picks up the receiver and notices that it still retains 'the gritty warmth of the trucker's grip as well as the lime-cologne odor from the restroom dispensers'. As we savour the detailed description – the touch, the temperature, the slightly sickly smell – we feel we are recognising something from our own past; but that's an illusion, a sleight of the writer's hand: it is most unlikely that before reading the quoted line we'd ever experienced the public phone booth so fully and so clearly and so memorably.

Writers, like scientists and philosophers, enrich our lives by widening our awareness of what it is to be alive, by taking us into the lives of other people in other times and places. We are especially indebted to writers who open our eyes to the richness of people and places that have hitherto been disdained as uninteresting and who do so in stories that linger in the memory, pleasing and intriguing in equal measure, never losing their appeal, always inviting us back for another hearing.

Richard Ford is such a writer. He was born in Jackson, Mississippi, in February 1944, and grew up across the street from the house in which his illustrious predecessor and future friend, the writer Eudora Welty, had lived. Because of his father's ill-health, Richard, an only child, spent a great deal of his time with grandparents who ran a hotel in Arkansas, thus beginning a nomadic tendency that would feature in his life and writings.

He studied at Michigan State University where he met his wife Kristina Hensley whom he married in 1968. Having graduated BA he briefly studied Law, abandoning it to join the creative writing programme at the University of California at Irvine, graduating MFA in 1970. His first novel *A Piece of My Heart* appeared in 1976, followed by *The Ultimate Good Luck* in 1981. They were both well received – *A Piece of My Heart* was runner-up for the Hemingway Award – but did not sell enough to prevent him, a sports enthusiast, from abandoning fiction in favour of sports-writing for the New York magazine *Inside Sports*. The closure of the magazine in 1982 would prove a blessing, however heavily disguised at the time. He returned to fiction and to the work that when published as *The Sportswriter* in 1986 established him as a major novelist, and introduced us to Frank Bascombe, a character who seems destined to join John Updike's Harry Angstrom as a spokesman for white middle-class America in the latter part of the twentieth century. Two years later, the collection *Rock Springs* showed him to be an equally outstanding master of the short story. (It might be noted in parentheses that he has always acknowledged Frank O'Connor as a major influence and on his short story writing and he deserves credit for his role in the recent restoration of O'Connor's prestige on this side of the Atlantic.)

In 1995, Frank Bascombe returned in *Independence Day*, the first novel to win both the Pulitzer Prize and the PEN/Faulkner Award for Fiction. In 2002 *A Multitude of Sins*, another even more stunning collection of short stories, was published, and last year saw the completion of the Frank Bascombe trilogy with *The Lay of the Land*.

To list all his honours and achievements would leave no time to pay our own tribute to the work of this extraordinary man who has written so eloquently, so convincingly, so movingly and so accessibly of the so-called ordinary life of suburban America. Is there a composer who has caught the music of motoring with such zest? A painter who has so perfectly caught the passing spectacle of small towns and districts, from manicured suburbs to the wasteland barriers between the races? And yet Richard Ford's greatest achievement is the creation of Frank Bascombe, the novelist-turned-sportswriter-turned-real-estate-agent, with his ability to detect the slightest shifts in community values and to distinguish between the idealism of first-time buyers and the confused and often antagonistic desires of those who are trying to start again.

The Bascombe Trilogy is essentially the tragi-comedy of a man and his fractured family at the end of the American Century. Frank is a flawed but ultimately admirable man who realises that he can no more undo the history that haunts him – the death of his son, the end of his marriage to the mother of his children – than he can prevent the physical decline that awaits him. His honesty consists of an extraordinary ability to register the thousands of passing sensations that make up the epic of his existence, from his early dreaminess to his later downheartedness in the shadow of death.

The complexity of his relationship with his wife Ann is delicately delineated across the three novels, from the anguish of parting to the heartbreaking pain of separation to the even more heartbreaking realisation that there can be no new beginning. It is not always easy to know whether crying or laughing is the more appropriate response; often we settle for both simultaneously. Frank must tread carefully with his daughter Clarissa who begins by taking her mother's side but returns to nurse her father through his prostate cancer. His son Paul is among the most unlovable children in literature and yet Frank tries manfully to do his fatherly duty, taking Paul with him to the Baseball Hall of Fame as an Independence weekend treat, with predictably grotesque consequences.

“Isn't that what makes a writer great? Sympathy for human weakness?” The questions are not Frank's and it is characteristic of Richard Ford that he has given the lines to Charley O'Dell, the new husband of his ex-wife Ann, a man Frank once hated, despised and wanted to hurt but later tended like a good Samaritan.

As we close the books we know we have been living vicariously the life of a New Jersey real estate agent, an imagined man in a distant culture, and yet, thanks to the magic of Richard Ford's storytelling, we feel we have also been reading about ourselves.

*PRAEHONORABILIS VICE-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.*