

TEXT OF THE INTRODUCTORY ADDRESS delivered by **AN tOLLAMH NOLLAIG MAC CONGÁIL**, NUI, Galway on 26 June, 2009 on the occasion of the conferring of the Degree of Doctor of Literature, *honoris causa*, on **PROFESSOR PHILIP O'LEARY**

Since early historical times Ireland has been renowned beyond her shores as a centre of learning. Over the following centuries formal learning was avidly practised among and under the auspices of privileged groups. In the course of time this learning was shared with peoples and countries in different continents, usually dictated by religious or political situations at home or in the host countries.

It is ironic, therefore, that when literacy was introduced nationally at primary level in the early nineteenth-century, the Irish language and all that went with it, formerly the bedrock of Irish learning, was excluded from what was to be the greatest learning tool in history. The total anglicisation of Ireland thereafter proceeded at an alarming rate and the imminent demise of the Irish language was confidently predicted.

It was at this point that learned scholars from the Continent came to our assistance. We are indebted to them for their timely intervention on our behalf. Directing their great linguistic knowledge on our ancient language, literature and culture, they reintroduced us to our past, taught us the rudiments of our language and placed us on the path of Gaelicisation.

Ba dheacair a rá cén bhail a bheadh ar Éirinn inniu murach gur dhírigh siad siúd a n-intleacht mhór, a ndúthracht agus treo a gcuid léinn ar an tír seo tráth nárbh acmhainn dúinn an cúram sin a ghlacadh orainn féin. Is iad a scaoil rún ár dteanga, ár litríochta agus ár gcultúir dúinn agus is iad, ar thoradh moille, a bhí mar oidí múinte ag an gcéad ghlúin dár gcuid scoláirí dúchasacha féin.

European scholars were initially and continuously to the fore in uncovering and recovering Ireland's Gaelic past. North America, as a strong emerging player in learning and intellectual discourse, has also played its part over the last century, and increasingly so in recent decades. We are here today to mark the achievements of one American scholar who has made an enormous contribution to Irish Studies during his lifetime not only in his own country but in Ireland and in other places across the globe where an academic interest in Irish Studies has developed.

Professor Philip O'Leary of Boston College is third generation Irish of mostly Munster extraction. He had a distinguished undergraduate career in Holy Cross College, taking a BA in English *summa cum laude*. This he followed up with an MA and PhD from Harvard University, concentrating mostly on Early Irish Literature. He is currently Professor of English in Boston College, which has been to the fore for decades for the excellence of its Irish Studies programme. He has received many prizes for his publications, he has had lecturing contracts at several universities in America and Ireland and has been associated with many organisations publishing, promoting and debating Irish Studies.

Professor O'Leary has delivered a steady stream of publications for decades, mostly in English, and some – including one book – in Irish; many deal with Early Irish literature but his chief focus is Modern Irish literature. His main claim to fame, however, is his tetralogy on Modern Gaelic literature from 1881 to 1951. This four-volume work is easily the most ambitious, wide-ranging and comprehensive analysis of Modern Gaelic literature ever undertaken and unlikely to be surpassed. This is his *magnum opus*, this defines him as a person and a scholar; in the words of Gerard Manley Hopkins, he can justifiably say: 'What I do is me, for that I came.'

Imagine the single-mindedness, the dedication, the perseverance of a scholar located in Boston, visiting libraries in Ireland every summer, without the physical, social and intellectual proximity of colleagues working in the same field, examining in detail every scrap of information in and about the Irish language and its literature during that protracted period he had selected. No other scholar has trawled through such a range of primary sources, particularly the more inaccessible and less consulted ones viz. English language national and local newspapers and magazines. He has single-handedly rehabilitated the role of primary sources in Gaelic scholarship. Having consulted the sources, he brought a highly critical and analytical mind to bear on his material and produced a well-articulated, cogently argued, insightful and contextualised exposé of Gaelic literature. In addition, by producing his gargantuan work in English he has introduced Modern Gaelic literature to a global audience and stressed the importance and centrality of Gaelic to Irish Studies.

Go maire tú do chéim úr agus go maire tú féin go ceann blianta fada faoi shéan is faoi shláinte i gcuideachta do mhná, do mhuintire agus do chairde ag saothrú na ceirde sin ar chaith tú dúthracht do shaoil léi. Táimid, mar atá, pobal mór na Gaeilge agus an Léinn Éireannaigh, faoi chomaoin mhór agat.

Praehonorabilis Cancellarie, Totaque Universitatis:

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.