

TEXT OF THE INTRODUCTORY ADDRESS DELIVERED BY:

**PROFESSOR CAROLINE FENNELL**, Head of College, College of Arts, Celtic Studies and Social Sciences, University College Cork, on 17 May 2011, in University College Cork, on the occasion of the conferring of the Degree of Doctor of Literature *honoris causa*, on **HARRIET O'DONOVAN SHEEHY**

A Seach-Leas-Sheánsailéir, a mhuintir na hOllscoile agus a dhaoine uaisle, President, Colleagues, Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen:

President John F Kennedy in his last formal public speech, at the Aerospace Medical Center in San Antonio, anecdotally recalled an incident from Frank O'Connor's autobiographical classic, *An Only Child*. It was the moment when O'Connor decided that he wanted to be a writer, regardless of the fears and difficulties he would have to overcome in order to achieve this dream. O'Connor describes it thus: All that did matter was the act of faith, the hope that somehow, somewhere I would be able to prove that I was neither mad nor a good-for-nothing; because now I realized that whatever it might cost me, there was no turning back. When as kids we came to an orchard wall that seemed too high to climb, we took off our caps and tossed them over the wall, and then we had no choice but to follow them.

I had tossed my cap over the wall of life, and I knew I must follow it, wherever it had fallen.

(O'Connor, *An Only Child*, New York: Knopf, 1961; repr. Belfast: Blackstaff, 1993, 180.)

John F Kennedy depicted America's space exploration programme as the nation having "tossed its cap over the wall". In a similar fashion, it might be said that Harriet O'Donovan Sheehy (*née* Rich) tossed her cap over the wall when she married Frank O'Connor, Ireland's master of the short story, as well as one of the leading Irish public intellectuals of the twentieth century.

Harriet was born Harriet Rich in Baltimore, Maryland, USA, in July 1923. She first met Frank O'Connor (whose real name is Michael O'Donovan) while he was lecturing at Harvard University in 1952. They married in December 1953 in England, and having stayed for six months in Britain, while O'Connor worked for BBC radio, they moved to New York in July 1954, where they lived for several happy and eventful years. Their only child, Hallie Óg, was born in the US in June 1958, and the following year was spent living in Dublin. The family returned to live in America in the spring of 1959 when O'Connor took up a lecturing position in Stanford University in California. Due to O'Connor's poor health, the family made their final move back to Ireland in 1961 and they remained there until O'Connor's premature death five years later in 1966.

Harriet O'Donovan Sheehy chose to remain on living in Ireland, and her contribution

to the Arts since that time has been immense. Internationally Harriet O'Donovan Sheehy's philanthropic activities cross the ocean from Ireland to America, and are manifest in her long-time funding of education as well as her generous financial patronage of numerous charitable causes. Descended from a family of philanthropists, Harriet continued this honourable tradition with her own financial sponsorship of her family's 'Rich Scholarship Fund' in Maryland. The philosopher John Dewey once said that "education is not a preparation for life; education is life itself"; and in a shared belief in the importance of education, Harriet has quietly and magnanimously funded educational scholarships for impoverished young people for the last fifty years.

However, it is in Harriet O'Donovan Sheehy's passionate and tireless single-handed management and conservation of the Frank O'Connor Literary Estate that we see the enormous contribution made to this country and Ireland's literary heritage and reputation. Harriet has ensured as wide an audience in as many countries, and as many languages as possible, for Irish writing.

At 87 years of age, she currently still manages and preserves an extensive private archival collection of O'Connor's papers, and has repeatedly and warmly opened her home to scholarly examination of this archive. Life-long friendships have resulted between O'Connor scholars the world over, as a result of their time happily spent in her welcoming home. Importantly, she herself has provided valuable literary insight and stimulation of thought in relation to O'Connor's writings, as is evident in the countless acknowledgements and tributes to her in books from the world of Irish Studies, and Cultural & Literary Studies.

Harriet O'Donovan Sheehy is the author of several engaging articles and essays on O'Connor; and has successfully selected, edited and introduced posthumous publications of O'Connor's writings. Moreover, she has generously given of her time to several radio and television interviews over the last forty years, the most recent of which was her December 2010 interview for UCC School of English's six-part radio series on O'Connor, entitled 'A Man of Many Voices'. In the course of this work, she has been a vocal advocate for Irish literature in general. A tireless champion of independent thought, she has consistently supported the promotion of literature within Ireland and, most specifically, within the Cork and Munster region, through her involvement with, and support for, the Munster Literature Centre; the Cork International Short Story Festival, and the annual Cork International Frank O'Connor Short Story Prize (the largest financial prize in the world for a short-story collection).

She has ensured the importance of a sense of place in O'Connor's legacy, and secured the identification of O'Connor with Cork and its educational, cultural and literary organizations, through her donation of several important works of art and literature to Irish museums, including her donations to the Crawford Art Gallery in Cork, the Mayfield Library in Cork and University College Cork, in particular enabling the establishment of the official UCC Frank O'Connor website in 2008, [frankoconnor.ucc.ie](http://frankoconnor.ucc.ie). She has provided original resources for the development of the

study and criticism of literature within UCC through her generous bequests to UCC's Boole Library of rare manuscripts, rare books, and specialist archival material. She has thus entrusted to UCC the custodianship of this important part of Ireland's priceless literary heritage, thereby rendering UCC a destination of choice for all serious scholars of the short story, O'Connor, and Ireland's literary heritage. For this we are immensely grateful, as we are cognizant of the nature of that trust and the responsibilities of that role.

Up until now, Harriet has received little public acknowledgment for this generous support of education and literature, and so it gives me immense pleasure on the part of the College of Arts, Celtic Studies and Social Sciences and University College Cork, in recognition of her immense and passionate contribution over the last forty-five years to Irish Studies, her benevolent support for education, her commitment to this country and her endorsement of the important place of Munster, Cork, and UCC, in Irish literature and in particular in Frank O'Connor's heritage, it is our honour to bestow this degree.

*PRAEHONORABILIS CANCELLARIE, TOTAQUE UNIVERSITAS:*

*Praesento vobis hanc meam filiam, quam scio tam moribus quam doctrina habilem et idoneam esse quae admittatur, honoris causa, ad gradum Doctoratus in Litteris, idque tibi fide mea testor ac spondeo, totique Academiae.*