

Text of the introductory address delivered by **Professor Frank McGuinness**, UCD School of English, Drama and Film, University College Dublin on 16 June 2011, on the occasion of the conferring of the Degree of Doctor of Literature, *honoris causa* on **Ciaran Carson**

A graduate of Queen's University, Ciaran Carson is a Belfast man, born in 1948. He worked as Traditional Arts Officer for the Northern Ireland Arts Council until he was appointed Professor at Queen's. He is now Director of the Seamus Heaney Centre for Poetry.



Ciaran Carson's place at the pinnacle of Irish writing is secure. His poetry, his versions and translations, his memoirs and his fiction stem from one of the most fertile imaginations and intrepid intellects revelling in the English language over the past forty years. For him art is an adventure, a mysterious, marauding exploration of the possible and impossible, a pleasurable task consistently, fearlessly refining itself as it changes character and form with enchanted, breathtaking fluency: 'If this be magic, let it be an art/Lawful as eating'.

Shakespeare desired this in the last act of *The Winter's Tale* and such is the nourishment Ciaran Carson provides for his audience, leaving us to marvel at the speed and sheer dexterity of his craft.

It is a craft that has been in the business of redefining itself through the enormous range of his books, from the first volume, *The New Estate* in 1976 down to his most recent collection, *Until Before After* in 2010. *The Irish For No*, *Belfast Confetti*, *First Language*, *Opera Et Cetera*, *The Twelfth Of Never*, *Breaking News*, *For All We Know* and *On The Night Watch* – these constitute the body of his poetic achievement.

And add to these acclaimed publications his outstanding versions and translations of *The Táin*, Dante's *Inferno*, Merriman's *The Midnight Court*, together with peerless reconfigurations of Baudelaire, Mallarmé, and above all, Rimbaud in his volume, *The Alexandrine Plan*. The monumental scale of Ciaran Carson's work soars. He has found global voices to sound his most intimate, most subtle wanderings through the human psyche and made them most complexly, most uniquely, most clearly his very own. Playful and referential, or solemn and sudden his music may be, yet it is entirely of his own making. His visions are a hall of gorgeous mirrors, reflecting his themes, yes, but letting them acquire a life of their own, each one bearing a genetic resemblance to the next, entirely linked, entirely different, at once entwined with, yet breaking free from their roots.

This most restless, most nomadic of authors on the printed page has displayed deep loyalty to the city of his birth, Belfast. In *The Irish for No*, meditating on the meaning of what is Belfast Confetti, he observes:

' I know that labyrinth so well – Balaclava, Raglan, Inkerman, Odessa Street, Why can't I escape?...What is My name? Where am I coming from? Where am I going? A fusillade of question marks.'

Right through to his examination of the Crimean War reports of William Howard Russell in *Breaking News*, Carson has continued to explore dilemmas of 'Why', 'What', and 'Where'? He has trekked through many strange places of plantation,

most especially in his poem 'The Brain of Edward Carson', a lyric that bears extraordinary testimony to the Ulster patriot:

'The map of Ulster opened up, hexagonal and intricate, tectonic :

Its shifting plates were clunked and welded into place by laws
Masonic.

The ladder and the rope. The codicils. The compass by which they
sail

Unchartered futures. The outstretched hand. The crown. The sash.
The secret nail.

And then disintegration intervened, the brain eluded them :
Sphynxlike, catonic.'

The whole poem shows how Ciaran Carson carefully, accurately diagnoses the cultural density of his city, giving it substance and profundity, eschewing the easy and the predictable, listing instead an enormous catalogue of dazzling images dredged from the river-bed of story and myth. The breadth of reference and the massive erudition so brilliantly outlined revitalises the Medieval genre of litany as learning that lies at the core of the Lallans Scots 'makar', William Dunbar, whose shade Carson so appropriately, so craftily invokes here.

Ciaran Carson has been the recipient of many awards; the Eric Gregory Award, the Alice Hunt Bartlett Award, the Irish Times Literary Prize, the T.S. Eliot Prize, the Cholmondeley Award, the Forward Poetry Prize. His fiction, memoirs and writings on Irish traditional music have also won wide praise. He is a giant presence in our culture, and yet his ceaseless interrogation of our language, its limitations, its dreams and defiances bears testimony to his unease, his dissatisfaction, his intense quarrel within himself, a struggle that Yeats defined as poetry. If James Joyce drew his epiphanies from the streets and sagas of Dublin, then in Belfast Ciaran Carson has received his visitations, confirming the news that something has been seen and heard, something has been felt, that in his telling is something truly, wonderfully magnificent.

Praehonorabilis Praeses, 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.*