

Text of the introductory address delivered by **Dr Ron Callan**, 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 **Harry Clifton**

Harry Clifton was born in Dublin and educated at Blackrock College and University College Dublin (BA and MA). His Master's dissertation, with UCD's Department of Philosophy, examined the poetry of Wallace Stevens—a daring MA subject in 1975.



Two years later Gallery Press published Harry Clifton's *The Walls of Carthage*—the first of six books with the press. His publications also include a chapbook with Metre and a translation of his poems in French. Harry Clifton's most recent collection, *Secular Eden: Paris Notebooks 1994-2004*, was published by Wake Forest Press in 2007. And there are two books of prose: *Berkeley's Telephone*, a short-story collection, and *On the Spine of Italy*, his account of a year he lived in Abruzzo with his wife Deirdre. He is a member of Aosdána, has won the Patrick Kavanagh Poetry Award, and The Irish Times Poetry Now prize; he represented Ireland at the Iowa International Writers' Program, has been an International Fellow at the University of Iowa, and the Poet-in-Residence at The Frost Place. He is the current Ireland Professor of Poetry.

Harry Clifton is a poet who came of age in the late 1960s and 1970s, part of a generation which knew Ireland as home and as a point of emigration. He moved abroad to live and to work for extended periods in Africa, as a teacher, in Asia, administering aid programmes, and in Europe. His poetry and fiction reflect an exceptional range of cultural, social and political contexts.

These journeys affect not only the content but the form of his work. Throughout his poems, his "relative states" point to states of mind and states as nations. In each there are levels of uncertainty as traveller faces home or tourist faces citizen. However, there is a remarkable level of control in beautifully crafted poems so that, for example, the exploratory journeys are often housed in rhyme. Indeed, there is a delight in the sound of words, and the connections and distinctions such sounds express. In addition, Harry Clifton is a magnificent poet of the stanza, sections separated by spaces, varied in form and seemingly chiselled out of the blank page to reflect his concentrated vision.

For Harry Clifton nation and home are not easily known or defined, and so his masterful command of form reflects the play of differences as he travels, both literally and imaginatively. The opening stanza of "Experience," in *The Liberal Cage*, is set in a train station:

Child, at this unknown station
Don't descend . . . the platforms are too bare
And the distances, in a Shiva's Dance of air,
Are more than the map of Ireland could unravel
In space so remote from travel
Or destination. ("Experience" 9)

Here he questions terms like "travel" and "destination" when they are set in the fixed coordinates of known experience—in this case Ireland. The voice of the poem, instead, speaks with authority from the experience of "relative states"

("Experience" 10). This insight into journeys moves not to reject Ireland but to know it as if from the outside and so know it differently.

Harry Clifton's latest collection of poems is the magnificent *Secular Eden*. Many of the values evident in his work to this point are intensified here. He listens intently to others with rapt attention and honours a range of international artists in tracing the meeting points with an accuracy that is shocking—though the figurative language is tellingly muted, the surprise of rhyme, half-rhyme, and punctuation deepen the drama.

These are the qualities evident in the opening poem of "Notebook Three" (one of four sections in this book) and its concluding stanzas are:

I was pushing an open gate. Its rusty scraque
Was a raven's caw blown off the neighbouring peaks.
How lonely it might be, to swim there naked,
I could only imagine. Ireland, so to speak,

Had come between us, like a foreign word.
I saw right through it, in a state of grace
And absolute certainty, with the shadow-world
Of travel behind me. This, at last, was the place.

("The Place" 115-116)

It seems to me that the knowledge here, that "absolute certainty" of place, has the qualities of "relative states" because, for all its imagery of Ireland, it is a location that is unnamed in the end. It is, in Robert Kroetsch's phrase, a "dangerous middle," a meeting of the foreignness of home and the shadow of travel, and the voice of the poem is poised, certain of a foothold in each.

Derek Mahon wrote of Harry Clifton's poems having "soul, song and formal necessity" (10). To which I would add, courage, courage to move beyond borders, to travel middle territories and to find the words to express those journeys with accuracy.

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.