

Text of the introductory address delivered by **Dr Catriona Clutterbuck**, 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 **Michael Longley**

Michael Longley is one of Ireland's most distinguished, and distinct, voices in literature. In critic Eamon Grennan's words, Longley's poetry 'unites emotion and intelligence in an idiom of awareness'. Through the almost-five decades of his writing career to date, his work has made craftsmanship the basis of an exemplary witness to the astonishment and grace of living in the real world.



Born in Belfast, Michael Longley attended the Royal Belfast Academical Institution and Trinity College Dublin, where he read classics. He taught in Dublin, London and Belfast before working for the Arts Council of Northern Ireland for over twenty years. He is a celebrated anthologist and editor, and is the author of over a dozen collections of poetry. Michael Longley is winner of the Whitbread Poetry Prize, the Hawthornden Prize, the TS Eliot Prize, and the Irish Times Irish Literature Prize for Poetry. He is holder of the Queen's Gold Medal for Poetry as well as the Ireland Professorship of Poetry. He was appointed Commander of the Order of the British Empire (CBE) in the 2010 Queen's Birthday Honours List, and is a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature. He lives in Belfast.

Michael Longley's work, in the words of critic Neil Corcoran, is 'a site where profound interconnections can be made with tact'. Tact in Longley functions through form – through this poet's lyrical, exact, and persuasive way with language. Form, as he himself says, 'produc[es] a shape which makes emotional, spiritual and linguistic sense', all three operating together. His own 'elegantly probing' body of verse (Longley, 'Greenshank') is extended proof of his central contention that 'the deployment of words at their most precise and most suggestive remains one of the final antidotes to death-dealing dishonesty'.

Michael Longley's signature gift is his acute naturalist's eye, his clear-eyed wonderment before the world's manifold detail. As he suggests in the poem 'Frozen Rain', the poet's job is to 'slow down the waterfall to a chandelier.../ [to] save pockets of air for the otter to breathe'. For example, his 'perfectly cadenced catalogues' of flora and fauna (Corcoran), presented in unforgettable poems of succour such as 'The Ice Cream Man', are ones where tiny particulars bear enormous emotional weight (Peter Sirr). Healing is embodied in this poet's sense of spontaneous delight in the constant difference the world offers us. Such a 'creative habitation of fragments' (Grennan) is manifested in a special way in Longley's ongoing exploration of his multiple cultural allegiances: to Ulster, England, and to Ireland as a whole. His sense of the capaciousness in any one individual's identity is at the core of the contract to help which underpins his poetic voice.

Michael Longley has described his preoccupations as being centred on the relationship between Eros and Thanatos – Love and Death. As well as being a love poet who has rendered the 'tenderness of erotic mutuality' (Terence Brown), he is rightfully renowned as one of the greatest war poets of our time. His authority here is generated through his understanding that the individual victim's suffering must be the final court of judgement in all states of conflict. Michael Longley's larger poetic attunement to the materiality of the body and its

sacredness as the basis of life, sensitises him to that suffering in a very particular way.

His poetic truth telling is all the harder because it is non-retributive. We can see this in his poem 'Wounds', on an 'everyday' sectarian killing in the North, the victim 'shot through the head / by a shivering boy.' The poem famously ends by proposing the apologetic voice of this killer: 'to the children, to a bewildered wife, / I think 'Sorry missus', was what he said'. That closing glimpse of humanity is crucial to the poem's success in exposing the raw brutality of the event it describes. Yet only through that same glimpse of humanity can the poem host even the possibility of overcoming the horror it confronts.

For Michael Longley, the role of language is not only to locate our real experience but also to evoke alternative possibilities *for* that experience. Longley is truly our poet of 'a hundred doors', to use the title of his just-published latest collection. His poetry has 'opened a way over the bridge / For [...] all refugees' from darkness (Longley, 'The Poker'), as it proceeds 'In pursuit of spring' (Longley, 'A Gust').

This writer has identified the link in 'the art [he] love[s] the most', as that which 'transforms the everyday and shows the divine'. The treasure hoard that is Michael Longley's larger body of work, is replete with such 'God-sparks' (Longley, 'Horseshoe'), moments of poetic revelation that – approximating the power of the classical verse he loves – promise to 'glint across thousands of years' to reveal and change how we humans know ourselves.

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.