

TEXT OF THE INTRODUCTORY ADDRESS DELIVERED BY: **PROFESSOR CAROLINE FENNELL**, Head of the College of Arts, Celtic Studies & Social Sciences, University College Cork on 8 June 2012, on the occasion of the conferring of the Degree of Doctor of Education, *honoris causa*, on **MARY O'DONOVAN**

A Sheansailéir agus a mhuintir uilig na hOllscoile,

Mary O'Donovan matriculated at the age of 15 and entered University College Cork with a scholarship at 16 in 1941. She graduated with a BA in French and English in 1944, followed with a Higher Diploma in Education in 1946 and an MA in 1947, as a result of which she received a travelling studentship in Modern Languages. She began a Doctorate on the French poet Ronsard but due to the situation in post-war France, was unable to pursue this at the time. She lectured in Sedgley Park Training College in Manchester from 1949-51 and it was there that she met the co-founder of Scoil Mhuire, Kathleen Cahill, also from Cork. It was an auspicious meeting and friendship that would change the educational architecture of a city and many young women's lives.

Mary O'Donovan believes in the development of an independence of spirit. She and her colleague Kathleen Cahill, to whom she generously attributes all of the inspiration for Scoil Mhuire, founded that school in 1951 when she was only 28 years of age. Together with her colleagues in independent schools in Cork to whom she refers continuously (Mary and Annie McSwiney who founded Scoil Ite, St Bridget's in the Mardyke, Daisy Corrigan who founded Regina Mundi College and Ms O'Sullivan's on the Mall) - she fashioned an architecture which made a very particular space in education for Cork's young women.

Many of us in education count it a success if we fashion an idea which reaches our students, and do not dare to dream of sparking a line of inquiry, much less developing an institution whose legacy will live on and influence generations. Scoil Mhuire is just such an institution. It is part moreover of a remarkable and significant tradition in Cork, of women setting up independent schools (with a Catholic ethos) for young women. The defining characteristic of the Scoil Mhuire pupil being an 'independence of mind' was emphasised from the beginning, as Mary O'Donovan herself felt the idea behind the school emerged from a perspective that Irish education in the 1950s was over-influenced by the primary cert. She informed me that when they got into the school, it took them a year to get the students to ask a question!

Martha Nussbaum in her book *Not for Profit* (at p 134) makes the point regarding education "... that part of the issue here is content, and part is pedagogy. Curricular content has shifted away from material that focuses on enlivening imagination and training the critical faculties towards material that is directly relevant to test preparation. Along with the shift in content has come an even more baneful shift in pedagogy: away from teaching that seeks to promote questioning and individual responsibility towards force-feeding for good exam results."

Mary O'Donovan shares that sense of the importance of *content*. She recognises that there is a real danger in a system that will allow the student to read the notes - and not the actual poems - or to know the language and speak it well but not know the literature. The commitment in Scoil Mhuire under her stewardship to doing a Shakespearean play every year - not just one - and to having arts and music in the curriculum, as well as having a staff who listened to a report on every child at the end of the year, demonstrates that this was not just a special place to educate young women - but represented a very particular approach to education - with a philosophy which informed the design of the curriculum and united the purpose of the staff room. Further evidence that this was a partnership emerges from that fact that the establishment of a parents' council emerged from a suggestion from a parent - how else?

That commitment and loyalty of parents and past pupils in partnership with the school undoubtedly ensured its success educationally and reputationally. It also meant that although she assured me they nearly hit the rocks financially several times Scoil Mhuire survived and thrived.

The issue of its remaining a single sex school she answers with a wry comment that it was 'one complication less', as well as pointing out that the students knew how to work and were not waiting to be spoonfed! She also notes of course that the literature might suggest mixed schooling is an advantage to boys (and - she doesn't say this - maybe they have enough of those!).

Virginia Woolfe in *A Room of One's Own* extols that women need money and a room of their own if they are to write. Mary O'Donovan ensured that space was there so they could write - and do other things. BG MacCarthy - also of this parish, a graduate and a professor of English in this University - took another view, which was that Shakespeare's sister failed to write - not only because she was maltreated by men, but also because she did not much care for her brother's sort of plays. Whichever view you take, young women in Cork had the education and the opportunity as to whether and what to write or do, in part at least, due to other women, and in particular Mary O'Donovan, whom we honour here today.

The ultimate accolade and tribute to her legacy is that they then show their training in their lives and there cannot be a better boast. Mary O'Donovan speaks proudly about all of the pupils and graduates of the school, in fact she always talks in the plural: "Scoil Mhuire owes its existence to Kathleen and not me; it was she who was a visionary and a great person." In her recognition of the five independent schools tradition in Cork, it is similarly one of Cork people and Irish people - a tradition she hopes we should keep up.

I might quote from Mary herself, from an article she penned for the Scoil Mhuire publication celebrating 50 years of golden memories, where in addressing the question in the hockey chant 'People always ask us, Who we are', she opines:

"Perhaps through the things we have recalled together, the answer is emerging. We in Scoil Mhuire are people with a vision. Life is worth living: we face it with confidence, together, happy facing challenges without being overwhelmed, excited by work which opens up new ideas and stirs imagination, prepared to give the best that is in us, ambitious but sensitive to the needs of others. In an age which aims at individual fulfilment, we care also for friends and for the less fortunate, and we know that we have something to contribute to society. We try to think straight, to act honestly and to speak truthfully."

At 88 years of age, Mary O'Donovan has now been involved in Scoil Mhuire for over 60 years, carving out a remarkable and generous legacy that has produced over 3,500 women graduates. In so doing, she has been entrepreneurial - but also much more - she has literally changed the face of education in our city, rendering it more nuanced, adding to its diversity and impact, emphasising its role in the formation of citizens, democracy and a good society.

Mary O'Donovan has a long association with UCC - her father was Prof James O'Donovan and her brother is Dr Tom O'Donovan. Many of her past pupils are numbered amongst UCC graduates and staff. She began a Doctorate on the French poet Ronsard which she was unable to pursue, so this conferring on her today of an honorary doctorate in recognition of her immense contribution to education is particularly appropriate.

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 Arte Paedeutica, idque tibi fide mea testor ac spondeo, totique Academiae.