

# OLLSCOIL na hÉIREANN

## THE NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF IRELAND

TEXT OF THE INTRODUCTORY ADDRESS DELIVERED BY:

**PROFESSOR PATRICK O'DONOVAN**, in University College Cork, on 6 June 2014, on the occasion of the conferring of the Degree of Doctor of Literature, *honoris causa*, on **BENEDICT ANDERSON**

A Sheansailéir, a mhuintir na hOllscoile agus a dhaoine uaisle,

The appeal to cosmopolitanism as a self-consciously alternative outlook is today something of a commonplace, not least on an occasion such as this. And yet, our lives continue to be strongly shaped by national cultures. So much so that the scholar of another society is by vocation a polyglot extraterritorial — a self-transformation often compounded by the mobility of the academic.

Such is the paradox of our exposure to other cultures and their impact on our own self-understanding. Globalization has excited our interest in other nations, and made them seem less remote to us, but the pull of identification in the long run only confirms that to understand societies different from ours means a sustained and thoroughgoing engagement in their lived experiences. In so doing, we do find ourselves mobilized as world citizens. The study of other regions has all too often amounted to the most direct, sometimes shocking, confrontation with civil conflict. Nations, our own no less than others, can make extreme demands of our capacities to engage and to interpret.

Today, we honour a scholar who has found his life repeatedly interwoven with just such grand historical experiences, an Irish citizen whose career has been spent in America, whose initial research on Indonesia has led in turn to studies of unmatched brilliance on a global scale. Benedict Anderson is a thinker and scholar whose writings have had a seminal influence in the study of Southeast Asia. His research on imperialism and colonial revolutions has been followed by writings on nationalism

based on far-reaching comparisons, historical as well as spatial, between the globalized societies of modernity. This work in particular has had an impact very far beyond the ordinary, contributing to a powerful restatement of nationalism as a problem in political science — and, just as importantly, has opened the question of nationalism to interrogation from all angles within the humanities and social sciences. He is Aaron L. Binenkorb Professor Emeritus of International Studies, Government and Asian Studies in Cornell University. His whole professional life has been spent in Cornell, interspersed with extended periods of fieldwork in Indonesia, Thailand and in the Philippines.

Benedict Richard O’Gorman Anderson was born in 1936 to an Irish father, James O’Gorman Anderson, known as Séamus, and an English mother, Veronica Anderson, in Kunming, China. His father grew up in Waterford, where generations of Andersons have lived since the 1690s, and had worked in the Imperial Maritime Customs Service of China since 1913. Unable to return from China to Europe during the war, the family lived in California and then in Colorado from 1941, and came back to Ireland in 1945, settling in a house just to the east of Waterford city overlooking the Suir. Benedict Anderson attended Newtown School for a time. Soon, he, with his younger brother and his sister Melanie, whom we welcome today, were all to go to boarding schools in England, returning to Waterford in each vacation. He graduated from Cambridge with a degree in classics in 1957.

Things then took an unexpected turn. By chance, he had the opportunity to go to Cornell to be a teaching assistant in politics. Under the direction of George Kahin, he began to work on Indonesia — a post-imperialist state riven by civil conflicts that could not have been more urgent politically at that time. He went to Jakarta in December 1961 to carry out fieldwork; staying until 1964, he studied the unstable multiparty ruling coalitions that had created the armed revolutionary struggle for independence from the Netherlands between 1945 and 1949. This would lead to his first book, *Java in a Time of Revolution*, published in 1972, a work that was important for its treatment of the mobilization of radical youth. In these years, Indonesia was the scene of constant political conflict. With Ruth McVey, Benedict Anderson produced a preliminary analysis of the failed coup of 1965, which had led to the death of half-a-million Indonesians identified as being on the left. This work

contradicted the official government account that the Indonesian Communist Party was behind the coup. When it became public by being leaked, it would lead to Anderson being banned from Indonesia until the late 1990s. The issues he sought to address in his subsequent work were prompted by the turmoil he had witnessed — how to comprehend extreme political violence? how to understand difference, even from the vantage point of a commitment to human solidarity? how to reconcile the cultural artefacts to which we look to create political meaning with transnational economic and technological processes? This research extended to Thailand and the Philippines, as well as Indonesia, and resulted in further major books, among them *Language and Power: Exploring Political Cultures in Indonesia*, published in 1990, *The Spectre of Comparisons*, in 1998, and *The Age of Globalization* in 2005.

Benedict Anderson's work had taken an even more marked comparative turn from the late 1970s. In 1983, he published a book which sought to explain how the secular concept of nation characteristic of modern societies came to exert so powerful an influence on mass consciousness. His key claim is that the nation is a constructed reality, coming into existence as traditional and hierarchial forms of society give way to universal conceptions of national space, and reinforced by print capitalism as a process of mass communication. He then explored the varieties of this modular form of nationalism found in all regions of the globe. As telling as it is concise, this book has transformed research in the humanities and social sciences for thirty years; in that time, it has been translated into as many languages. Its title? *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism*. This clarion call to embrace the whole of lived political cultures has had many echoes too among scholars charting Irish national experience, both the conditions under which nationalism on a specific territorial scale came to be fashioned in Ireland, and the cultural framework of negotiation and exchange through which Irish identity has continued to evolve since independence.

Benedict Anderson's own Irishness is as real as any, rooted in the lives and the memory of his forbears, Irish and Anglo-Irish — Catholic United Irishmen, affiliates of O'Connell, Parnellite MPs, and the Chevalier O'Gorman, collector of Irish manuscripts, all on the side of his paternal grandmother, Protestant landholders, doctors, clergymen and senior army officers among the Andersons. Even more, it

has been shaped by the closest of family attachments, in the years when, as for many in the 1960s and 1970s, Shannon Airport was Ben's point of return, an experience which taught him to what extent 'the nativeness of natives' themselves is always just as 'unmoored' as that of the exile. In this and other ways, Ireland is a home that has been as much imagined as experienced. Imagined, as he himself has said, 'through a complex of mediations and representations', it has been a resource to him: the Irish quest for independence from an imperialist state has been a sustaining example in the effort to account for other difficult struggles for autonomy. In presenting him for the degree of Doctor of Literature, we honour Benedict Anderson for the tenacity, the independence of mind that have made him so celebrated a scholar — and for the light shed by his meditations on the paradoxical experiences of nationality which many of us here share with him.

**Praehonorabilis Cancellarie, totaque Universitas!**

**Praesento vobis hunc clarissimum virum, filium doctissimum meum, 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!**