

OLLSCOIL na hÉIREANN
NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF IRELAND

TEXT OF THE INTRODUCTORY ADDRESS DELIVERED BY:

PROFESSOR MARY DALY on 1 December 2016 in the Royal College of Physicians in Ireland, on the occasion of the conferring of the Degree of Literature, *honoris causa*, on **PROFESSOR GEARÓID O TUATHAIGH**

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

Is mór an onóir a bhí ann cuireadh a fháil chun an D.Litt a bhronnadh ar Ghearóid Ó Tuathaigh, ach glacaim leis le beagáinín faitíos, toisc go bhfuil daoine eile i láthair linn inniu a bheadh i bhfad níos oiriúnaí labhairt ar Ghearóid, agus toisc go bhfuil sé beagnach dodhéanta cur síos ceart a dhéanamh ar réimse leathan a chuid gaiscí agus gníomhartha sna focail omóis gairid seo. Go háirithe, braithim nach féidir liomsa cothrom na Féinne a thabhairt dá chuid taighde agus scoláireacht Gaeilge.

Chancellor, vice-chancellors, members of the NUI Senate and guests, I am honoured by the request to present Gearóid Ó Tuathaigh for a D.Litt. but I do so with a certain trepidation because there are other present here today, who are much better fitted to speak about about Gearóid, and because it is almost impossible to capture the range of his achievements and contributions in this short encomium. In particular I fear that I cannot do full justice to his contributions to scholarship relating to the Irish language.

Gearóid Ó Tuathaigh is a distinguished historian of modern Ireland. Through his writings, his lectures both in NUIG and to diverse public audiences, and as supervisor and mentor to young researchers, he has played a major role in expanding the range of Irish history most especially in social, cultural and local history, and by bringing Irish language, literature and culture into the main field of historical inquiry. He has been a father figure for younger historians who sought to develop the history of sport – perhaps not surprising given Gearóid’s deep love for the GAA – if I was using Powerpoint at this point a would show a photograph of a Cambridge GAA match in the early 1970s....

Gearóid has combined his career as a historian with a daunting record of public service: a member of the Senate of NUI; the Fulbright Commission; chair of Udarás na Gaeltachta and Bord na Gaeilge, a member of the Expert Advisory Group on Commemorations, and most recently as a member of President Higgins’ Council of State. Born and educated in Limerick city (Ennis Road area), Gearóid Ó Tuathaigh came to the then UCG as an undergraduate, and having undertaken doctoral studies in history at Cambridge, he returned to his alma mater as senior lecturer, and over the next 44 years, he taught and supervised many students, and served as dean, governor and vice-president.

In 2015 he was honoured by a splendid festschrift, *Culture and society in Ireland since 1750*, which includes a memorable introduction by his old friend Joe Lee. I cannot compete with Joe – his friend since their days as graduate students in Cambridge (and Joe has a much more generous word limit!). The calibre of the contributors and the wide range covered in their essays are a just reflection of Gearóid’s scholarly interests and the esteem in which he is held.

Gearóid made his mark as a historian with the publication in 1972 of *Ireland before the famine* – which has been reprinted and updated on several occasions – and it's still widely read today (multiple copies in UCD library). His most recent publication *I mBéal an Bháis: the Great Famine and Language Shift in Nineteenth Century Ireland*, a wonderfully comprehensive essay on decline of the Irish language, was published within the past year. Some of his most significant contributions have been as a critic and a reviewer – his contributions are marked by his remarkably wide reading, elegant language and judicious, light-hearted, and very pertinent comments, and they include essays on poets and writers, notably Mairtín O Caidhn, Máire Mac an tSaoi and John McGahern. Despite his extensive reflections on Irish history and historiography he has managed to avoid the reductive and sometimes bitter debates over revisionism; this is testimony to his judicious language, and his sense of perspective – he rejected the tendency to divide historians into different camps.

Throughout his career he has been remarkably generous, even profligate, with his time and his intellect; there can be few local history groups, summer/winter schools, student societies in any part of Ireland that he has not addressed. So it's no surprise that he has often been called on as a public speaker – chosen by fellow Limerick man Jim Kemmy to give his funeral oration. More recently his old friend President Higgins asked him to speak at the publication of his collected speeches. With characteristic modesty Gearóid slipped away quietly when the speeches ended. His affection for and continued links with Limerick are evident in the county history of Limerick which he co-edited and most especially in his chapter 'Writing Limerick: historians and other chroniclers' – which ranges from Ferrar's *History* published to 1767 to Frank McCourt and his critics, to which he added a lively commentary on the development of local history, and social change in Limerick history and county.

I will conclude by quoting a paragraph from Gearoid's 1994 essay on 'Irish Historical 'Revisionism': State of the Art or Ideological project – because I believe that it summarises his contribution to history and to public life.

'Historians do not live only in the ivory tower. It is incontestable that some wider social role is performed by the historian: as textbook-writers for schools, as advisors to government and educational bodies, to publishers and the providers of historical resources for learning, as contributors to popular newspapers, to radio and television programmes, and the thorny question of the role of 'school history' is not an issue which the academic historian can honestly ignore..... We need to remind ourselves that the historian shares the past with many other 'users', trained and untrained, using it purposefully and unconsciously – as memory, as sanction, as excuse, as emotional resource.'

PRAEHONORABILIS CANCELLARIE, 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.