

OLLSCOIL NA hÉIREANN, GAILLIMH
NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF IRELAND, GALWAY

Text of the Introductory Address delivered by **PROFESSOR CAROLINE MC GREGOR**, National University of Ireland, Galway on 15 October 2018 on the occasion of the Conferring of the Degree of Doctor of Arts *honoris causa*, on **CATHERINE CORLESS**.

A Uachtaráin, a mhuintir na hOllscoile agus a dhaoine uaisle....

The history of the present, in any given moment, tells us a great deal about our society, culture, values, our strengths and our weaknesses. And the history of this present is forever shaped by our knowledge of what has happened in the past.

Catherine Corless is a historian from Tuam, Co. Galway. She is most well known for her illuminating local historical research into the Mother and Baby Home (St. Mary's) in Tuam and her advocacy work on behalf of the survivors and the children who lost their lives there.

Catherine Corless has been recognised for this outstanding work in many ways including the Bar of Ireland Human Rights Award 2018, the

News Brand Ireland Journalism Special Award for investigative journalism in 2017 and a Rehab People of the Year Award also in 2018.

We have the honour here today to add to these well-deserved accolades by awarding an honorary doctorate from the National University of Ireland, Galway.

The most well-known research carried out by Catherine Corless has led to the discovery of the remains of potentially 796 children in a septic tank used as a burial ground at St Mary's – the Mother and Baby Home in Tuam which operated from 1925 to 1961.

Prior to this research there were fragments of truths about the burial grounds, some history of discovery and recovering of bones of children (1974), secrets, personal stories and indeed probably folklore surrounding the home.

Catherine Corless did not begin her project with the aim of exposing the plight of children who died in the home during its existence, but it was the truth of the findings that she was exposed to as she did her research.

After completing a local history course in 2012, she decided a year later to write an article about the Tuam Mother and Baby Home. The aim was to reveal the history of the Bon Secours Sisters who ran the Home which was once the old Tuam Workhouse.

Some months into this research using primary resources of State documents, archival newspaper snippets, and from conversations with former Tuam Home residents, Catherine Corless made the discovery that is now internationally known.

As reported widely, the discovery by Catherine Corless has raised greater awareness of the extent to which unmarried mothers and their children were demonised in the past through both Church and State practices and the shocking way in which their rights to dignity and respect denied.

The work of Catherine Corless has opened up many doors for others to come forward to tell their stories and add weight to the call upon the Church and State to apologise for the actions of this time and take steps to help those survivors (former residents) as far as is possible in seeking truth about their own histories and/or their families and providing support

to those suffering in the present due to these actions and inactions of the past.

With regard to her historical work, the approach Catherine Corless took to her research was meticulous and painstakingly precise, an approach so important to ensure credibility and reliability. That she applied and paid for each individual death certificates of the children who died at the home to establish the cause of death is testimony to her in-depth approach. She has sought to neither sensationalise nor minimise her discovery but rather focus on the facts and the truth.

The quest for knowledge in the academy is fundamental to what we do. The production and dissemination of knowledge has many purposes including explanations, descriptions, illuminations, critiques, analyses and so on.

Catherine Corless has used the knowledge she has gained for one of the noblest of reasons, to advocate for rights, justice and retribution.

Catherine Corless through her advocacy work has sought to re-subjectify the children who had died and their families and relatives because in the moment of their death, they were treated more like

objects to dispose of rather than subjects with right for dignity, justice and respect in life and in death.

In the current context of research and academia, a major concern for research is that it has a measurable and identifiable impact. The work of Catherine Corless has certainly had that major impact through the raising of awareness and consciousness about what happened to the children in the Mother and Baby home, influencing renewed interest to investigate other mother and baby homes in Ireland and similar institutions in other jurisdictions too.

The commission of Inquiry due to report in February 2019 was established specifically in response to the discoveries of Catherine Corless and the reactions to the truth that emerged during 2014.

That discovery by Catherine and her advocacy work that has emerged from it serves as a reminder to us about a recent past where certain children and mothers were dealt with in a callous and cruel way as they were judged harshly to be less deserving of basic rights of dignity and respect.

Her work serves as a warning for our present and future that we face up to the painful truth of the past and that we show leadership, commitment and perseverance in doing the just and right thing in the present.

Catherine Corless, it is an honour to address you today and to welcome your family - including your husband of 40 years, your four children and your seven grandchildren. We congratulate on your on your outstanding civic contribution.

PRAEHONORABILES PRAESES, TOTAQUE UNIVERSITAS:

Praesento vobis hanc meam filiam, quem scio tam moribus quam doctrina habilem et idoneum esse qui admittatur, *honoris causa*, ad gradum **Doctoratus in Artibus**, idque tibe fide mea testor ac spondeo, totique Academiae.