

OLLSCOIL na hÉIREANN

NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF IRELAND

TEXT OF THE INTRODUCTORY ADDRESS DELIVERED BY:

PROFESSOR JOE BRADY on 5 May 2022 in the Royal College of Physicians of Ireland, on the occasion of the conferring of the Degree of Doctor of Literature *honoris causa*, on **DERMOT BOLGER**

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

Dermot Bolger is a wordsmith – he works with words to persuade, cajole, encourage, and sometimes bully them to express what we often struggle to express. He is a craftsman and scholar whose skill ranges across drama, poetry, novels, short stories and in all the mediums whether theatre, broadcast or podcast. His list of works testifies to his lifelong engagement.

He is a northsider, born in Finglas and now living in Drumcondra. Patrick Kavanagh in his poem ‘Epic’ invited us to consider that the big can be seen in the small, the global in the local. This has been one of Bolger’s great skills – he often shows us a view of Dublin which is interesting (and sometimes alien and disturbing) in itself but it is one in which the universal themes resonate.

His first novel (1985) looked at a Finglas in the 1980s with high unemployment and little hope as he explored the clash between traditional values and the modern world. The *Lament for Arthur Cleary* was first staged in the Project Arts Centre in 1989 - people of a certain age will remember the venue and the necessity to pick one’s seat with care if it happened to be raining outside.

This is another look at *Caoineadh Airt Ui Laoire* but transposed to Dublin and an Arthur Cleary who returns to the city of his youth and finds it unrecognisable. – a story of love and loss but also one of great spirit. His more recent play *Last Orders at the Dockside (2019)* captures the end of a dockland community in Dublin in the face of regeneration but it is a story of love, betrayal and sacrifice as sharp and as timeless and universal as any. The enigmatic title of his one-person play – the *Messenger* – (a reference to the Sacred Heart Messenger) performed online during Covid in 2021 by Axis in Ballymun is a clever entrée into a story of loss and hope.

While Dublin is never far from his work, his novels often deal with a wider geography. *The Family on Paradise Pier* (2005) explores the fortunes of the real-life Goold-Verschoye family, originally from Donegal, though the War of Independence, the General Strike in Britain, 1930s Moscow, the Spanish Civil War, and on to Soviet gulags, Irish internment camps, and Blitz-era London. Brian Goold-Verschoye has the unfortunate distinction of being one of three Irish people who died in Stalin's purges. He returns to the family in *An Ark of Light* (2018) and tells the story of the later half of the life of Eva Fitzgerald, perhaps the central character of the family.

The novels are universal in scope but as with his drama, Dermot Bolger can tell a good story. *The Lonely Sea and Sky* (2016) tells, among other things, the unlikely but true story of the MV Kerlogue's heroic rescue of 168 German sailors as it made its way back in 1943 from Portugal on the perilous route to Wexford where it was liable to be attacked by both sides.

Poetry is a different matter. Poetry requires the poet to open his soul. This is never more so than in *The Venice Suite: A Journey through loss* (2012) in which he explores the impact of sudden bereavement, of life turned upside down and certainties rendered ephemeral – tough, open, honest poems for which the phrase 'searingly beautiful' seems very appropriate. His most recent volume, published a couple of months ago, is *Other People's Lives* – which he described as the nearest thing to autobiography he will ever produce – looks at connections with other people, both close and at a distance. His reflections on Herbert Simms, the tragic city housing architect and Arthur Fields, the O'Connell Bridge photographer, are particularly moving.

Dermot Bolger is the recipient of many awards and accolades, too many to mention, and has been widely translated. But there is nothing aloof about this novelist, poet, dramatist and storyteller. He will be found working with community groups just as readily as with universities.

He knows the power of words but also knows that words need an audience and that authors need publishers. He established Raven Arts Press in 1977 and published early books by Patrick McCabe, Colm Toibin, Sara Berkeley, Fintan O'Toole, Eoin McNamee, Kathryn Holmquist, Michael O'Loughlin, Sebastian Barry and Rosita Boland as well as the first English language translations of Nuala Ni Dhomhnaill. New Island Books became the successor to Raven Arts in 2002 and Dermot continues to have an active association with it and the practical business of getting words into press.

Chancellor and colleagues, this is the briefest of brief outlines of a poet, a novelist, a dramatist and a publisher - a scholar who exemplifies the ideals of the university and is a fitting recipient of this degree.

**PRAEHONORABILIS CANCELLARIE, TOTAQUE
UNIVERSITAS:**

**Praesento vobis hunc meum filium, quem scio tam moribus quam
doctrina habilem et idoneam esse quae admittatur, *honoris causa*,
ad gradum Doctoratus in Litteris, idque tibi fide mea testor ac
spondeo, totique Academiae.**