

# Ollscoil na hÉireann

THE NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF IRELAND

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TEXT OF INTRODUCTORY ADDRESS DELIVERED BY MICHAEL P. MORTELL,  
M.Sc., M.S., Ph.D., Vice-Chancellor of the University; President, University College,  
Cork, April 6th 1989, on the occasion of the conferring of the Degree of Doctor of  
Literature, *honoris causa*, on SEAMUS HEANEY.

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## CHANCELLOR AND MEMBERS OF THE UNIVERSITY:

Seamus Heaney was born to Patrick and Margaret Heaney on 13 April, 1939 - one week short of 50 years ago - on a farm called Mossbawn in Co. Derry. He was the eldest of nine children, two girls and seven boys. His father, in addition to being a farmer, was also a cattle dealer. When Seamus was fourteen the family moved from Mossbawn to a farm at the other end of the parish called The Wood. The move may have been connected with the death of a brother at that time in a road accident —

“He lay in the four foot box as in his cot.

.....

A four foot box, a foot for every year”.

Heaney says of himself

“From the beginning I was very conscious of boundaries. There was a drain or stream, the Sluggan drain, an old division that ran very close to our house. It divided the townland of Tamniarn from the townland of Anahorish and those two townlands belonged to different parishes, Bellaghy and Newbridge, which are also in two different dioceses: the diocese of Derry ended at the Sluggan drain, and the diocese of Armagh began. I was always going backwards and forwards. . . . I seemed always to be a little displaced; being in between was a kind of condition, from the start.”

Seamus Heaney's first book of poems, *Death of a Naturalist*, in 1966 put him in the first rank of Irish poets. He has since consolidated this achievement, having published to date seven volumes of verse. Each volume has been a major achievement in its own right: together they show the growth of a first rate poetic intelligence and sensitivity.

Heaney has produced some of the finest lyric and contemplative poetry written in modern Ireland. He is a master of the door into the dark, the slow contemplation that reaches beyond the false and shrill. He has shown us how in Gallarus oratory, ‘A core of old dark walled up with stone / a yard thick’ the community

sought themselves in the eyes of their King  
Under the black weight of their own breathing.  
And how he smiled on them as out they came,  
The sea a censer, and the grass a flame.

Heaney has revealed the beauty in our place names, explored

*Anahorish*, a soft gradient of consonant, vowel-meadow.

He has written love poetry of great lyric tenderness. He can tell his muse how

In your presence  
Time rode easy, anchored  
On a smile; but absence  
Rocked love's balance, unmoored  
The days. They buck and bound  
Across the calendar  
Pitched from the quiet sound  
of your flower-tender  
Voice.

In two decades in which the voices of hatred in Ireland have threatened to shout down all quiet discourse, Heaney has with sure integrity sifted true commitment from false. In his poetry he has faced the horrors of these years in the nightmare images of the Spanish Master, Goya:

Gigantic Chaos turning his brute hips  
Over the world. Also, that holmgang  
Where two beserks club each other to death  
For honour's sake, greaved in a bog, and sinking.

He has made of our island a parable, where '(some day) / they are going to start to mine the ore of truth'. He has cast a cool satiric eye on

the subversives and collaborators  
always vying with a fierce possessiveness  
for the right to set 'the island story' straight.

Seamus Heaney has, of course, also proven himself as Lecturer and Professor, at the Queen's University of Belfast, at Carysfort and at Harvard. He has written two major volumes of critical essays. In the most recent, *The Government of the tongue*, he has given us, in a meditation on

"The Old Lie: Dulce et decorum est  
Pro patria mori",

a memorable summation of the poet's liberation, the real freedom which the poet achieves, for himself and his audience, in the creative act:

'The achievement of a poem, after all, is an expression of release. . . . The tongue, governed for so long in the social sphere by considerations of tact and fidelity, by nice obeisances to one's origin within the minority or the majority, this tongue is suddenly ungoverned. It gains access to a condition that is unconstrained and, while not being practically effective, is not necessarily inefficacious'.

A fine critic in poetry and prose, Seamus Heaney knows all too well the limitations as well as the strengths of scribes and academics. Indeed, he once wrote

I never warmed to them.  
If they were excellent they were petulant  
and jaggy as the holly tree  
they rendered down for ink.

Heaney knows perhaps too much about the 'myopic angers' of the academic life, how

They snarled if the day was dark  
or too much chalk had made the vellum bland  
or too little left it oily.

But even academe can on occasion honour the greater art of the poet. We remind him that he himself wrote

And if I never belonged among them,  
They could never deny me my place.

Queen's University, Belfast, York, Fordham, Dublin University and other smaller American Colleges have already acknowledged Seamus Heaney's place among the poets, and now the National University of Ireland does so. In gratitude for what Seamus Heaney has given Ireland and all those in the world who love poetry, we summon him to acknowledge his 'not inconsiderable / contribution to (our) jealous art'.

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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.