

TEXT OF THE INTRODUCTORY ADDRESS DELIVERED BY:

PROFESSOR COLBERT KEARNEY, on 3 June, 2005, on the occasion of the conferring of the Degree of Doctor of Literature honoris causa, on DAVID MARCUS

A Sheansailéir, agus a mhuintir na hOllscoile,

Is not a patron, My Lord, one who looks with unconcern on a man struggling for life in the water and when he has reached ground encumbers him with help? The magnificently insolent words of Samuel Johnson, addressed two hundred and fifty years ago to the mighty Lord Chesterfield, from whom Johnson had vainly sought help while compiling his Dictionary. Those familiar with the cultural history of Ireland will recognise the situation: as a nation we take great pride in many dead writers for whom we did little when they were alive and in need of support. There are noble exceptions and foremost among them is David Marcus, Corkman, Jew, Gaeilgeoir, author and democratic patron of Irish writing.

David Marcus was born in Cork in 1924 and grew up on the Mardyke, the grandson of a Jewish refugee from Czarist persecution in Lithuania who had come to Dublin and founded a picture-framing business which he then took to Cork. Having distinguished himself at Pres, he came up to UCC to study both Arts and Law: David wanted to be a writer but, in the gloom of World War Two, the arguments in favour of a secure profession were irresistible. An omen of his later ability to seek out talent: the other student at the Law lectures was Jack Lynch, famous even then for his sporting achievements.

In 1945 David was called to the Bar but what pleased him more that year was the publication, thanks to the support of fellow Corkman, Frank O'Connor, of his translation of Cathal Buí Mac Giolla Gunna's poem, An Bonnán Buí. (David would later translate and stage Cúirt an Mheáin Oíche.) Back in Cork, with little behind them apart from youthful imagination and optimism, David and Terence Smith, a sub-editor on the Cork Examiner, produced the literary quarterly, Irish Writing, which flourished from 1946 until 1957 largely because of David's ability to attract contributions from almost every contemporary Irish writer of note, among them O'Connor, O'Faolain, Somerville and Ross, Kavanagh and O'Casey. David also founded Poetry Ireland in 1948 and edited it until 1954 when his first novel, To Next Year in Jerusalem, was published and he moved to London.

Thirteen years later, David surrendered to his first love, abandoned a career in insurance and returned to Dublin with a view to involving himself in journalism. Because of rising costs the literary magazine was becoming extinct and with it the traditional place of first publication for writers of fiction. While some prophesied the death of the short story, David thought of ways to save it. In 1968, through a series of happy chances, he became literary editor of the Irish Press with permission to introduce New Irish Writing, an entire page every week dedicated to the work of developing writers. The page was an immediate success, inspiring hundreds of young writers, attracting a monthly average of sixty stories and more than two hundred poems. Success was confirmed with the establishment of the Hennessy Literary Awards for previously unpublished writers and in 1976, with Phillip McDermott, David founded Poolbeg Press, in which many graduates of New Irish Writing first appeared in book-form. It would be invidious to offer a selection of celebrated writers who first found their voices on this page because it is as yet too soon to decide just how influential the page has been in the history of Irish writing.

With one exception. In 1969 Ita Daly submitted a short story. It was rejected but with David's encouragement she went on to become a celebrated writer, winning two Hennessy Literary Awards. She also won the heart of David Marcus whom she married in 1972 and whose life she has shared with their daughter Sarah.

In 1986 David Marcus retired from the Irish Press to concentrate on his own fiction, which had found a new lease of life with the publication of two novels, A Land Not Theirs (1986) and A Land in Flames (1987), and a collection of stories, Who Ever Heard of an Irish Jew? (1988). All were immensely successful. A Land Not Theirs, set in Cork during the Troubles, is particularly valuable for its insider's portrait of the Jewish community, probably the only one of its kind. Two volumes of autobiography followed, Oughtobiography in 2001, Buried Memories last year.

David has received many honours, not least a special Rooney Prize in 2001 for services to Irish writing, and today it is our privilege to congratulate the man of whom it is often said that a list of the writers he discovered is a catalogue of the best of modern Irish writing. Comhghárdeas agus mazel tov! [780]

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, totius Academiae