

TEXT OF THE INTRODUCTORY ADDRESS DELIVERED BY:

PROFESSOR SEÁN Ó COILEÁIN, on 3 June, 2005, on the occasion of the conferring of the Degree of Doctor of Celtic Studies honoris causa, on NUALA NÍ DHOMHNAILL

A Sheansailéir, agus a mhuintir na hOllscoile

In an article in the New York Times Book Review in January 1995, entitled “Why I choose to write in Irish, the corpse that sits up and talks back”, Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill says: “If there is a level to our being that for want of any other word for it I might call ‘soul’ (and I believe there is), then for some reason that I can never understand, the language that my soul speaks, and the place it comes from, is Irish. At 16 I had made my choice. And that was it. It still is. I have no other.”

Born to Irish parents in Lancashire, in 1952, she spent part of her childhood with her mother’s family, in the Corca Dhuibhne Gaeltacht. Her parents, who were medical doctors, returned to Ireland and Nuala was educated at Laurel Hill School, in Limerick and at University College, Cork, obtaining a BA in Irish and English in 1972. She subsequently spent seven years in Turkey, with her Turkish husband, and her first two children were born there. In 1979, having been awarded an Arts Council Bursary, she returned to Ireland, to the West Kerry Gaeltacht. She has been living mainly in Ireland since then, in Dublin and in West Kerry.

Her journey back westward was also an inward one, as she describes in her poem, Ag Tiomáint Siar:

Labhrann gach cúinne den leathinis seo liom
ina teanga féinig, teanga a thuigim.
Níl lúb de choill ná cor de bhóthar
nach bhfuil ag suirí liom,
ag cogarnaíl is ag sioscarnaigh.

Tá an Chonair gafa agam míle uair
má tá sé gafa aon uair amháin agam.
Fós cloisim scéalta nua uaidh gach uile uair,
léasanna tuisceana a chuireann
na carraigreacha ina seasamh i lár an bhóthair orm
faoi mar a bheadh focail ann.

Every nook of this peninsula can speak to me
in its own tongue, in words I understand.
There’s not one twist of road or little grove

that can’t insinuate its whispered courtship at my ear.
I’ve crossed the Conor Pass a thousand times
if I’ve gone once, yet each time it unveils
new stories, revelations clear to me
as rocks along the road, as actual
as words articulated.
(Trans. Michael Coady)

This is where she belonged, as of right: these were her places and her people, this an inheritance from which there was no escape:

I mBaile an tSléibhe
tá Cathair Léith
is laistíos dó
tigh mhuintir Dhuinnshléibhe;
as san chuaigh an file Seán
'on Oileán
is uaidh sin tháinig an ghruaig rua
is bua na filíochta
anuas chugham
trí cheithre ghlún.
In Baile an tSléibhe
is Cathair Léith

above Dunleavys’ house
from which one time
the poet Seán moved
out to the Great Blasket:
his foxy hair
and craft of words
came down to me
through four generations.
(Trans. Michael Coady)

Like Ó Ríordáin before her, it was not simply a matter of leaving it there: she had to make her own of this inheritance. She had, in the words of Máire Mhac an tSaoi, to “put a name on the age-old nightmare that haunts the geometrically defined gardens of our city housing estates, the nightmare that followed us in from the country”. But it had not simply come in from the country: it had also welled up from within and was all-pervasive. The archetype of the folk story helped to confront this nightmare. So the story, told with regard to the O’Sheas and other families in West and South Kerry, of the mermaid whose cloak is stolen by a human and who cannot, as a consequence, return to the sea, her natural habitat, but must remain with the man who has deprived her of it, is used to illustrate and resolve the predicament of modern woman:

Ní gan pian
a thángas aníos
ar thalamh.
Do bhriseas
an slabhra réamhordaithe,
do mhalairtíos snámh
ar luail cos,
ag priocadh liom
ar nós na gcuirliún.
Creid uaim gur grá, ní Dia,
a dhein é a ordú.

D’imís
is thógais leat mo chaipín draíochta.
Níl sé chomh furast orm teacht air,
is a bhí sa scéal
i measc cearachailí an díona.

Not without pain
have I landed:
I broke the natural law.
I swapped swimming
for walking on earth,
picking my steps
like a curlew.
Believe you me
it was love, not God,
who gave the order.

You left and took my magic cap.
It’s not as easy to get back
in the roof’s rafters
as it was in the fable.
(Trans. Michael Hartnett)

This is both modern and traditional at once: as she has said, “Even the dogs in the street in West Kerry know that the ‘otherworld’ exists, and that to be in and out of it constantly is the most natural thing in the world”.

Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill has won numerous awards for her poetry, including the Seán Ó Ríordáin award, the Arts Council Prize for Poetry, Duais Bhord na Gaeilge, the O’Shaughnessey Poetry Prize from the Irish–American Cultural Institute and the American–Ireland Fund Literary Award. She was the first writer–in–residence at UCC (1992). She has been the Burns Visiting Scholar at Boston College (1998–9), Heimhold Visiting Fellow in Irish Studies at Villanova University (2000–1) and in 2001, she was appointed to the Ireland Chair of Poetry. She edited the Modern Irish Poetry section of the Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing. She is a member of Aosdána, and is currently poet–in–residence at St Patrick’s College, Drumcondra, Dublin.

In a poem entitled Ceist na Teangan she describes the fragile boat of language in which she has chosen to place her equally fragile poems:

Cuirim mo dhóchas ar snámh

i mbáidín teangan
faoi mar a leagfá naíonán
i gliabhán

a bheadh fite fuaite
de dhuilleoga feileastraim
is bitíúman agus pic
bheith cuimilte lena thóin
ansan é a leagadh síos
i measc na ngiolcach
is coigeal na mban sí
le taobh na habhann,
féach na h-
féach na h-
féach na h-

ca dtabhánairín an stáin é,
féachaint, dála Mhaoise,
an bhfóirfidh iníon Fharoinn?

I place my hope on the water
in this little boat
of the language, the way a body might put
an infant in a basket of intertwined iris leaves,
its underside proofed
with bitumen and pitch,
then set the whole thing down amidst
the sedge and bulrushes by the edge
of a river only to have it borne hither and thither,
not knowing where it might end up;
in the lap, perhaps,
of some Pharaoh's daughter.
(Trans. Paul Muldoon)

That boat has brought her back here today to her alma mater where Seán Ó Ríordáin first proclaimed the merits of those early poems in which she developed the female persona in the figure of Mór, native goddess of Corca Dhuibhne. It was here, also, that Seán Ó Tuama, pre-eminent critic of modern literature in Irish, declared Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill to be the pre-eminent poet in Modern Irish in succession to Ó Ríordáin himself.

PRAEHONORABILIS CANCELLARIE, TOTAQUE UNIVERSITAS:

Praesento vobis hanc meam filiam, quam scio tam moribus quam doctrina habilem et idoneam esse quae admittatur, honoris causa, ad gradum Doctoratus in Litteris Celticis, idque tibi fide mea testor ac spondeo, totique Academiae.