

**OLLSCOIL na hÉIREANN
NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF IRELAND**

TEXT OF THE INTRODUCTORY ADDRESS DELIVERED BY:

DR CATRÍONA CLUTTERBUCK on 9 October 2019 in the Royal College of Physicians of Ireland, on the occasion of the conferring of the Degree of Doctor of Literature *honoris causa*, on **BERNARD O'DONOGHUE**

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

Bernard O'Donoghue, on whom this honorary doctorate is conferred today, is an inspirationally humane and discerning presence in the world of Irish letters. In his dealings with others, he combines generosity of response with exactitude of expectation. Similarly, his characteristic diffidence with regard to his own writing both disguises and serves that work's breadth, precision and stringency of aim and claim.

Bernard O'Donoghue was born in 1945 and grew up in a farming family near Cullen, close to Millstreet in north Co Cork, adjacent to the Kerry border - an area to which he has returned both physically and imaginatively throughout his writing life. At the age of sixteen, along with his family, he emigrated to Manchester (his mother's home city) after his father's sudden and untimely death. Even though he has lived in Oxford for most of his adult life, for sixty years now, O'Donoghue has been a regular returnee to and leaver from this north-west corner of Munster in which he grew up.

O'Donoghue has spent his teaching career in the University of Oxford, first at Magdalen and then at Wadham College, where he is now Emeritus Fellow and Tutor. He is a specialist in Old and Medieval English, linguistics, the history of the English language, and modern and contemporary Irish poetry. Editor of an influential anthology of medieval European lyrics, *The Courtly Love Tradition* (1982), and a major translator of classic medieval texts including *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (2006) and *Piers Plowman* (in progress), O'Donoghue also is the author of *Reading Chaucer's Poems: A Guided Selection* (Faber,

2015). For him, medieval poetry's combined "structure of narrative and moralitas" is "both comforting and destabilizing at the same time" (interview by Paddy Bullard, 1996) – this well describing the effect of his own original creative output.

Bernard O'Donoghue is a highly-regarded reviewer and critic of modern and contemporary Irish poetry. He has produced ground-breaking work on Seamus Heaney in particular, including a monograph, *Seamus Heaney and the Language of Poetry* (1994) and an edited collection of essays, *The Cambridge Companion to Seamus Heaney* (2009). O'Donoghue is co-editor (with Rosie Lavan) of Faber's forthcoming edition of the collected poetry of Seamus Heaney.

A Whitbread and Cholmondeley Poetry Prize winner (1995 and 2009), O'Donoghue's own internationally-acclaimed poetry builds unbounded moral vision upon an accessible base of local, immediate reference. This work is essential reading for anyone interested in the wider challenge of revival in this country. Following his three poetry pamphlets in the 1980s, O'Donoghue to date has published six full-length collections. He published first with Chatto & Windus, and, since his *Selected Poems* in 2008 (which volume was shortlisted for the TS Eliot Prize), with Faber. These volumes of original poetry are as follows: *The Weakness* (1991); *Gunpowder* (1995); *Here Nor There* (1999); *Outliving* (2003); *Farmer's Cross* (2011) and *The Seasons of Cullen Church* (2016). These books include poems on nature and the seasons, on parents, children and siblings, and on locality and emigration; there are poems here on the economy, class hierarchies, and gender relations, as well as poems on politics, religion, education, music and sport. This list gives but a flavour of this writer's remarkable breadth of concerns.

Bernard O'Donoghue deeply appreciates the pull of the local amidst life's insecurities – but not as idealized space. His work has revitalized Sliabh Luachra as an Irish literary territory which is at once given and provisional, available and incomplete. To borrow a few of his book titles, his poems chart states of being neither "here nor there", affirming the migrant's power to turn their contingent relation to identity into the blessing of active self-creation. His Sliabh Luachra therefore invites us to "move" through and beyond our assumptions of what is fated in order to "feel the breeze's blessing" of alternative possibilities in this world and beyond ("Elijah on Horeb" , *Gunpowder* p.32).

His larger work claims “poaching rights” on belonging across all sorts of borders: those of Ireland and Britain, contemporary and much older worlds, this life and the after-life, and of course languages – old, middle and contemporary, Irish and various Englishes, in all their rich differences and exchanges. Discovering new contact zones in the spaces between divergent cultures and realms, O’Donoghue’s subtle lyrics generate vantage points from which to resist imperiums of many kinds, as his poetry facilitates development of the human imaginary’s moral scope, rigour and inclusivity. Above all, his poems are the work of a master storyteller who models how to playfully toy with our own myths of identity, so that we can seek – and genuinely hope to find – a new accommodation between our losses and our potential for renewal.

O’Donoghue’s poetry typically re-balances darkness with light and vice versa, many poems being poised on a knife-edge between heroism and futility. This poet recognizes fully the precariousness of the human condition: there is a recurring focus in his output on bodily vulnerability, loss, and death. Many poems trace the violent limitation of human life through moral blindness and insularity of heart. His work specifically highlights how Ireland’s excluded citizens pay the price of Ireland’s failure.

However, Bernard O’Donoghue also credits the possibility of regeneration, hope and visionary alterity within or beyond our present delimited situation - notwithstanding his awareness that such positive trajectories remain ever-liable to reversal in human history. All of O’Donoghue’s work – whether negatively or positively inflected - is concerned with the values of human interdependence, justice, faith and love, in work which affirms the universality of human claims to compassion.

In a poem published on the verge of the new millennium, Bernard O’Donoghue wrote of how even a scattering of snowflakes at Christmas are “enough to change the light” (*Here Nor There*, p. 19). So too, the cumulative effect of this poet’s creative and critical output is changing the light by which we view each other in this country and beyond. To borrow a phrase from another of his 1999 poems, O’Donoghue’s particular form of “weightless communication / Influences the far receiving heart” (*Here Nor There*, p.22): may his honouring here today send that signal ever further.

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.**