

## 2<sup>ND</sup> ALEXANDER v. HUMBOLDT SYMPOSIUM

### **‘Brains become Minds when they learn to Dance with other Brains’ - Post-Genomic Reflections on what it means to be Human’**

On the afternoon of Friday 13<sup>th</sup> February 2009 the Alexander von Humboldt Association of Ireland, in association with the Royal Irish Academy and the School of Philosophy, UCD, will hold an informal symposium. Inspired by the spirit of Humboldt and following the success of a similar event last year, its aim is to encourage a lively debate among people working in the natural and the human sciences/humanities. The keynote address will be given by Professor Lenny Moss, from the University of Exeter, UK, who holds doctoral degrees in both biochemistry and philosophy. His paper is entitled ‘Brains become Minds when they learn to Dance with other Brains’ - Post-Genomic Reflections on what it means to be Human’ (see summary below). This will be followed by a panel discussion in which a number of different perspectives on the question will be presented briefly. The panellists are Dr. Kevin Mitchell, School of Genetics and Microbiology, Trinity College Dublin, Professor Lawrence Taylor, Department of Anthropology, National University of Ireland, Maynooth and Nuala Ní Dhomnaill, poet and writer. The floor will then be opened for a general discussion. All are welcome to attend the symposium and there is no charge for participation. However, since space is limited, **registration is mandatory**. To register, please e-mail [maeve.cooke@ucd.ie](mailto:maeve.cooke@ucd.ie) by **Wednesday 11<sup>th</sup> February at the latest**. Places will be allocated on a first-come, first-served basis. Some preparatory reading material is available on request: again, please e-mail [maeve.cooke@ucd.ie](mailto:maeve.cooke@ucd.ie)

#### **Programme**

**Venue: Royal Irish Academy, Dawson Street, Dublin 2 ([www.ria.ie](http://www.ria.ie)).**

**2:30pm:** Welcome by Professor Maeve Cooke, MRIA, President A. von Humboldt Association of Ireland

**2:45 pm:** Keynote address by Professor Lenny Moss

**3:30pm:** Tea/coffee

**3:45pm:** Panel discussion (see below)

**4.30pm:** Open discussion

**5.30pm :** Wine reception (sponsored by the German embassy, Dublin).

#### **Summary of Professor Moss’ Paper**

**‘Brains become Minds when they learn to Dance with Other Brains’ - Post-Genomic Reflections on what it means to be Human’.**

In the wake of the surprising findings of the Human Genome Project life-scientists have become notably circumspect about our ability to say what it is that makes humans distinctive - but perhaps we’ve been looking in the wrong places. In this talk, early anthropological intuitions about human ‘underdevelopment’ will be revisited in the light of current thinking in comparative genomics, cognitive neuroscience and social anthropology. The distinctive capacity of human brains to ‘dance with other brains’ will be addressed in terms of a biology of ‘natural detachment’ and a correlative (and dire) need, as well as ability, to seek and secure ‘compensation.’ **Professor Lenny Moss PhD, Berkeley (Biochemistry); PhD, Northwestern (Philosophy). Associate Professor of Philosophy and Senior Fellow ESRC Centre for Genomics in Society, Department of Sociology and Philosophy, University of Exeter, UK.**

<http://huss.exeter.ac.uk/sociology/staff/moss/>

Prof. Moss’ work is structured by the view that the life sciences are fundamentally inseparable from the study of, and reflection on, what it is to be human, with lines of influence going in both directions. Accordingly he is interested in both a biology which is equal to the task of doing justice to the experience of being human and in developing an account of what it is to be human that is informed by and engages with the most important work coming out of the human and life sciences.

#### **Panellists:**

**Dr Kevin Mitchell, School of Genetics and Microbiology, Trinity College Dublin**

[http://www.tcd.ie/Genetics/mitchell\\_research.php](http://www.tcd.ie/Genetics/mitchell_research.php)

**Professor Lawrence Taylor, Department of Anthropology, National University of Ireland, Maynooth**

<http://anthropology.nuim.ie/ltaylor.shtml>

**Nuala ní Dhomnaill, Irish Language Poet and Writer**

<http://www.nualanidhomhnaill.com/>