

UNIVERSITY COLLEGE DUBLIN
HONORARY CONFERRING

Tuesday, 16 June 2009 at 12 noon

TEXT OF THE INTRODUCTORY ADDRESS DELIVERED BY **PROFESSOR MARY CLAYTON**, UCD School of English, Drama and Film, University College Dublin, on the occasion of the conferring of the Degree of Doctor of Literature, *honoris causa* on **DENNIS O'DRISCOLL**

Dennis O'Driscoll belongs to a very distinguished group among Irish poets – like Thomas Kinsella and Padraic Fallon, he has, for most of his life, been a full-time civil servant who, despite all the claims of a demanding day job, is a poet of international stature. In addition, he is an essayist, critic and editor whose work is published in the most prestigious periodicals and who has been instrumental in introducing international poetry to an Irish readership. His knowledge of poetry is prodigious; indeed, Seamus Heaney has said of him that 'no-one is more informed about poetry in the world than Dennis O'Driscoll'. As a critic, his independence and detachment have been salutary for the entire Irish poetry scene.

Dennis O'Driscoll is the author of eight collections of poetry and three chapbooks, as well as numerous essays and reviews, many of them collected in his *Troubled Thoughts, Majestic Dreams*. His most recent work is *Stepping Stones*, the acclaimed collection of autobiographical interviews with Seamus Heaney, a book which elevates the interview to an art form.

He was born in Thurles on 1 January 1954. A very early reader, he was exhibited, he says, as a 'freak show' to every visiting nun and inspector in the Presentation Convent. Addicted to reading, the addict's craving is summed up in his own account of how, even now, he is filled with panic at the 'realization that –despite having renounced TV, cinema, DVDs, pubs, thrillers, golf, morris dancing, and just about everything else – the odds are stacked against my being able to tick off as read all of the books that anyone half-civilised should know'.

After being educated by the Christian Brothers in Thurles, Dennis O'Driscoll was appointed an Executive Officer in the civil service at sixteen, working in Death Duties. Part of his civil service training was a study of law and he attended lectures in UCD as a King's Inns student. There are, he says, 'worse groundings for a poetry critic than the study of law', sharing as they do a meticulous attentiveness to words. At twenty-nine, already a published poet, Poetry Editor of *Hibernia* and presenter of a weekly poetry programme on RTE Radio, he was promoted to Assistant Principal and he has resisted further promotion ever since. He is now editor of the Revenue's journal *Tax Briefing*.

The day job, however, is only the beginning of what Dennis O'Driscoll does. From an early age, he knew that he wanted to write and poetry in school - Shakespeare's 'When icicles hang by the wall' or Yeats's 'The trees are in their autumn beauty' - elicited a physical reaction. In Dublin, he attended poetry readings, met poets and began to write both his own poems and reviews of others' work. His first collection, *Kist*, was published by Dolmen Press in 1982 and he has since published *Hidden Extras*, *Long Story Short*, *The Bottom Line*, *Quality Time*, *Weather Permitting*, *Exemplary Damages*, *New and Selected Poems*, *50 O'Clock*, *Reality Check* and *All the Living*. His work has also been widely anthologised. The titles of Dennis O'Driscoll's collections are significant pointers to his poetic territory, which covers areas otherwise largely uncharted in Irish poetry and which, at first

sight, might appear unpromising material. He scrutinises Ireland before and during the Celtic Tiger, the Ireland of the commuter and the office-worker, of commerce, of modernity; his finely-tuned and demanding ear is super-sensitive to the language that has accompanied these developments, especially the corporate language and clichés that have engulfed us in the last twenty years. His view of modern Ireland is one which combines cutting satire with empathy, the caustic with the comic.

Dennis O'Driscoll is by no means, however, restricted to this terrain. Other recurring themes in his work are the environment, poetry and the poetry scene, the body, medicine, religion, loss and love. His first job in *Death Duties* proved to have a grim aptness; both his parents died very young and death – their deaths in particular and death as a universal – has been a theme to which he has returned over and over, looking at it in very different ways as he himself grows older. He is adept at striking and unexpected combinations of linguistic registers, as in 'The Call', in which God is always out or his line is busy:

Has he ceased believing in his mission statement, lost faith
in his epoch-creating role? Can this universe have spun out
of his control, his conglomerate diversified so much that
a personal touch, a hands-on customer service, is unviable?

A new direction is signalled in 'Skywriting', the long poem which ends *Reality Check*. Its closing lines are lyrical, clear-sighted and cautiously optimistic:

Difficult to second-guess what might
happen next, what climate of fear
we have coming to us in the future.
But, over today's horizon, May
appears in perfect working order,
seen in the best possible light;
bringing out the colour in furze bushes,
granting leaves a seasonal reprieve.
Butterflies contrive a soft landing
on extravagant polyanthus.
Grain shoots are gaining ground.
Sprays of rowan disperse scent.
And a still-gentle sun caresses
the brow of the hill: a cow
licking her newborn calf.

Dennis O'Driscoll's awards include the Lannon Literary Award from the Lannon Foundation in 1999, the E. M. Forster Award of the American Academy of Arts and Letters in 2005 and the O'Shaughnessy Award for Poetry from the Center for Irish Studies in Minnesota in 2006. He was also elected to Aosdána in 2006. These honours are richly deserved, both for his own poetic oeuvre and for his services to poetry, and UCD is delighted to add to them today's award of the Degree of Doctor of Literature.

Praehonorabilis Praeses, 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.