

TEXT OF THE INTRODUCTORY ADDRESS DELIVERED BY: **DR IOGNÁID Ó MUIRCHARTAIGH**, Pro-Vice-Chancellor, President, National University of Ireland, Galway, on 23 June 2006, on the occasion of the conferring of the Degree of Doctor of Literature, *honoris causa*, on **JOHN MORIARTY**

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

Cuireann sé an-áthas go deo orm, mar Uachtarán ar Ollscoil na hÉireann Gaillimh, agus go pearsanta, fáilte ó chroí a chur ar maidin roimh duine de mhór scoláirí an domhain, John Moriarty, le go mbronnfar air dochtúireacht oinigh, mar aitheantas ón Ollscoil ar dhuine ar leith.

John Moriarty is a truly exceptional person. Born in Moyvane, Co. Kerry, he attended St. Michael's College in Listowel. His father was from Baile an Lochaigh, near Daingean Uí Chúise, an Daingean or Dingle, and I have a personal connection to John through his father, in that I understand that it was my uncle Thady, from Dún Síon, who inducted John's father into the IRB. John went on to become an outstanding student when he attended UCD, although not unlike the two Christies, the word attended may not be entirely accurate, certainly in relation to his lectures. Even then, he was of independent mind, and was heard to explain his reluctance to attend lectures by the fact that the lecturers were not even asking the questions, let alone attempting to answer them. During his summers at UCD, he went, like most of his contemporaries, to London. But rather than work in factories, he spent his time on the streets, and rather than arrive home with money for the following year, he arrived home with a suitcase full of books. It is said that once, on his return from London to Kerry, he asked his sister to buy him a box of cigarettes. His mother asked him to give her the money. Ní raibh ach leath-réul (a threepenny piece) ina phóca, and his mother said, why didn't you change it at Tarbert so it could rattle in your pocket!

He then went to Canada, where he had an academic position at the University of Manitoba. However, in 1971 he decided that academic life was not for him, and returned to Ireland to plough a very different furrow.

In the introduction of his most recent book, *Invoking Ireland* (2005). John Moriarty was asked 'what is it you are up to here?' John's answer was deceptively simply and direct: 'My endeavour, such as it is, has its source in a question: how, working within our tradition, might we reconstitute ourselves as a people?' But in both the life trajectory that John has pursued over the last thirty-five years, including the abandonment of an outstanding academic career and the relentless search within the context of a minimalist life-style, complemented by the production of an extraordinary series of books over the last decade, has been neither simple nor direct. The 'people' and the 'tradition' referred to in John's answer refer to Ireland and to the Irish people, but at another level, they could and do refer to humanity in general, since John could not be accused of parochialism in either time or place. But his presiding concern is Ireland and its future. In *Invoking Ireland*, the challenging question is posed, that for a people who walked away from their native language in the nineteenth century, a language that provided a frame for seeing and interpreting their world, and in the twentieth-century started to walk away from a religion, which in many ways was a folk religion with all its connotations, what is it that we are walking away from in the twenty-first century? The more pertinent question is, have we come too far too fast, with all its attendant dangers?

This deep concern with a people's reconstitution of themselves, both individually and collectively, has always arguably been a source of anxiety at critical junctures in history. Mathew Arnold, that great purveyor of cultural values, expressed this concern beautifully and poetically in his celebrated poem, 'Dover Beach', which is

informed by a pervasive pessimism and deep anxiety for the cultural values, including religions, of western society when he wrote:

*'The sea of faith
Twas once, too, at full, and round earth's shore
Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furled;
But now I only hear
Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar,
Retreating to the breath
Of the night-wind down the vast edges drear
And naked shingles of the world'.*

We have all in our individual way heard and sensed something of that 'melancholy, long, withdrawing roar' of either cultural values, religious sensibilities or social manners, and have attempted to deal with it either through a retreat into a privatised sense of loss at the passing of these values, or alternatively through an uncritical embrace of futuristic scenarios, whether they be cultural, genetic, economic or technological, which very often cannot even be envisioned, but because they are futuristic are *ipso facto* good. Both responses, while understandable, are fraught with dangers. John Moriarty has pursued uniquely what may be termed a 'third way'. Consistent with the Chinese idiom that says the sage (wise-man) is to be found not walking ahead of humanity, finding a way for it, but behind it, picking up the inestimable treasures it leaves behind it in its flight into an ever-receding future. While John Moriarty would not for a moment claim to be a sage, such is the innate modesty of the man, he has produced in six books to date, starting with *Dreamtime* (1994), a trilogy entitled *Turtle Was Gone a Long Time*, published in 1996, 1997 and 1998 respectively, followed by his *magnum opus* *Nostos* (2001), and last year *Invoking Ireland* (2005), what has been described as a 'wisdom literature'. All these books have been published by an Irish publishing house, Lilliput Press, which had the courage and generosity to engage what must have seemed like a strange and challenging publishing venture.

It is hard to convey, in the words of David Lorimer, 'the sheer erudition and richness of content of John Moriarty's remarkable and epic work.... the voice of a major contemporary figure in Irish literature'. His first book *Dreamtime* (1994), was described as 'one of the most remarkable books ever published in Ireland.... The depth of the scholarship displayed here is astonishing. Like William Blake, whom he resembles, Moriarty engaged with the world not argumentatively but as a single individual singing his own Song of Experience... He takes on almost every one of the world's great religions and many of its mythologies, particularly Ireland's, in an attempt to embody a way to live in our time'. His trilogy, *Turtle Was Gone a Long Time*, was described as the 'the log-book of an Irish Orpheus' (Mark Patrick Hederman of Glenstal Abbey). In the course of this trilogy John explores and subverts many of the fundamental preconceptions and perceptions of our individual and collective psyche. The trilogy is not a treatise of myth or comparative religion, as noted by one writer, but 'is in itself a mythic and religious intervention.... In it John Moriarty has gone further down the backstairs to hell and up the front steps to heaven than most of us dare to follow'. His *magnum opus*, *Nostos* (2001), while described as an autobiography, is in fact a sophisticated philosophical integration of his previous work through the medium of autobiography and is, according to Paul Durcan, 'to Irish literature what Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* is to German philosophy'. John's work remains more spoken about than read; the reading makes demands, serious demands on the reader, as it must do, since Moriarty is the pre-eminent original, radical, and non-conformist questioner in contemporary Ireland. But how this unique corpus of work will be engaged (or negotiated) in twenty-first century Ireland remains to be seen. Reverting again to Paul Durcan, who in a rare and almost licentious outburst of speculation, even allowing for the hyperbole and self-indulgence of poetic irony, ventured the following scenario:

'Strange to surmise that in 20 years from Now, almost all the current icons of Irish cultural life will be in the process of being forgotten, while in the universities there will be courses devoted to John Moriarty, and movie-makers will vie for the rights to make a film of his life. One will see in TCD under the severe, genial eye of Bishop Berkeley the new John Moriarty Chair of Wisdom Literature, endowed by the Bank of Ireland, while outside the GPO cinema in O'Connell Street queues will be forming nightly to gain admission to the latest Oscar-winning movie, Moriarty on Bare Mountains.'

John Moriarty is no stranger to bare mountains or sparse spaces, whether psychic, spiritual, or physical. On his return from Canada, there was first the Aran Islands, then Connemara, and now Mangerton mountain in Co. Kerry. These have been the chosen sites where John has sought and continues to seek 'wisdom' and to produce his 'wisdom literature', that may yet provide us with a guide for surviving the twenty-first century. We welcome here today members of John's family, his sisters and brother, his nieces, and especially his great friend Eileen who gave up her job to go and care for him when he got the news of his cancers last December.

John is a man of great humanity and compassion, displaying a unique combination of profound intellect and deep spirituality. He is very attached to mother earth, and God's creatures. On a recent radio programme, he talked of walking down the quays in Dublin, on his way back to Kerry following a chemotherapy session, [he has observed that the wounded animal always returns to its nest] and looking around him at gridlock on the quay beside him, gridlock on the opposite quay, gridlock up to hill to Christchurch and so on. And then he looked up at the sky and saw the birds flying freely – and he said "we're supposed to be the intelligent ones"!

He is utterly unconcerned about material matters. It is said his bank manager spoke to him some time ago about the state of his account. John asked him how much was in it? €67 was the reply. "isn't that fine" said John "one euro for every year of my life!". He has a great faith in providence, and it has never failed him.

A short few months ago Joe Duffy's Liveline programme on a Monday featured a discussion with John Moriarty on the fact that he had been recently had a diagnosis of triple cancer. Such was the impact of his contribution to that programme that the entire programme was dominated for the week by a discussion of John and his attitude to life and death. The response to the programme was the greatest to any programme ever on RTE Radio. I am pleased that the diagnostic pessimism of that time has since been replaced by a much more positive prognosis and that we can look forward to many more years of John's wonderful presence in our midst.

While John eschewed the academic life all those years ago, and what would unquestionably have been a scintillating academic career, it is our great pleasure

and indeed privilege to acknowledge today, in the traditional spirit of the precious mission of the university to protect and nurture, among other things, original, radical and non-conformist thinking, the extraordinary generous, humane, and utterly civilized manner in which John has lived a unique and indeed a uniquely courageous life.

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, totique Academiae.