

## Introduction Mr Ambassador Tom Hanney

Today, we are very honoured and glad to welcome the Irish Ambassador to our University. H.E. Mr Hanney is already somewhat familiar with our institution, as he is a Board member of the LCIS, Leuven Centre for Irish Studies, which was inaugurated in March 2010 in the presence of Seamus Heaney. On that occasion this Nobel Prize winner observed that Leuven had played an important role in the preservation of the Irish/Gaelic culture, comparable to that of the US for Jewish culture. So in this brief introduction I want to touch upon two strands which are interwoven: the links between literature and politics in Ireland, and those between Ireland and Belgium.

The main similarities between our two countries are to be situated on the religious and the social level. Indeed, both communities were strongly moulded by our formerly predominant Catholic culture, and now have to deal with the disenchantment it brings. Second there is the social structure. In 19<sup>th</sup>-century Belgium, the Flemish, mainly farmers & servants to a French speaking bourgeoisie, mostly belonged to the lower orders; in 17<sup>th</sup>-century Ireland, the impoverished Irish served in the Big Houses which were mainly Protestant households.

Yet in Ireland the divide between both groups was more radical. Under the Penal Laws of the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century the local Irish did not only lose their land but they were also forbidden to speak Irish and to live according to Gaelic customs, so many left their country and came over to the continent, some to be hired as soldiers, others to study at Leuven University. And this is where the big difference between Belgium and Ireland shows: whereas Belgians are said to be born with a brick in their stomachs, the Irish feel more like exploring the world, to the extent that they seem to feel most at home in exile.

Indeed the formation of the diaspora actually started from the 6<sup>th</sup> century onward, when the Irish monks, incorrectly called the “Scoti”, christianized the European continent. It was not an organized movement, but famous individuals like St Columbanus founded monasteries in Vienna, Sankt Gallen, Bobbio: “We Irish ... live at the edge of the world ” one of them wrote, and that was true in all senses of the word. While some of the monks travelled extensively, others stayed in their cells, so-called beehive huts, which were mostly built on awe-inspiring cliffs, in the spray of the Atlantic ocean and with stunning views over endless horizons. This lifestyle of living individually and with an edge was a characteristic which distinguished the Irish monks from continental orders like St Benedict’s, or the later ones like the Cistercians and Norbertines, who always shared dorms, chapels and refectories.

A strong individualism and a strong sense of hierarchy characterized Gaelic society from the start: in the Golden Age, the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> century, there were no less than 150 kingdoms on the island, each with his leader, his *Taoiseach* (the word is still used today, but it now denotes the Prime Minister). And each king had his poet, because as the Gaelic culture was an oral culture, the poets were the only ones who knew the genealogies by heart, so they were the ones who were consulted in questions of succession. Poetry was part and parcel of politics, but the monks too were very literary. So it is argued that the Irish monks are the ones who spread the idea of “courtly love” over Europe. According to old sources they lived with a “*Virgo subintroducta*”, a lady who helped them in their spirituality, by sleeping with them without doing the full sexual exercise. This tantalizing situation was to sharpen bodily desire to new, more spiritual heights. On the other hand there was the figure of the *Sheela-na-nGig*, the woman who opens her legs to all and sundry, while the upper part of her body sports a skeleton. She is the representation of nature, of Ireland, of life and death really, and we find her in many raw but magnificent poems, like in the fantastic “The Old Woman of Beare” who reminisces about the kings who shared her bed; but “Now all I know is how to die. / I’ll do it well.”

Gaelic culture thrived until the 17<sup>th</sup> century, when James I of England gave the Irish aristocracy of Ulster the choice: either you become English gentlemen or you leave. They opted for exile. Finding France in turmoil, they settled in Leuven for a while with their court. It is at this court, with the threat of extinction of the old Gaelic culture looming, that the vital work to rescue that culture, was done, when the Annals of the Four Masters were compiled. This happened in the 1630s. Ten years later, Cromwell went on a punitive expedition to Ireland and destroyed most of the remaining traces. But Leuven had a good repository and preserved this for many centuries. It is also in Leuven that the first books in Gaelic were printed; the letters were all designed by the Irish Franciscans. The college, along with three other Irish colleges, housed many Irish students who enrolled at the university to be trained as theologians, lawyers, bishops ... many of which were martyred, when back in Ireland.

During the 17<sup>th</sup> century, some new bardic poetry was written by the Gaelic poets who came to Leuven to join the court of the Domhnaill family. Right now the LCIS is in the process of digitizing one of those 17<sup>th</sup>- century manuscripts, *The Book of O'Donnells daughter* (Nuala ni Dhomhnaill) which will be made available for scholarly research later this year, in cooperation with ISOS, Irish Script on Screen.

But from the 18<sup>th</sup> century onward, the so-called Anglo-Irish literature becomes important too. One of its champions is Jonathan Swift, master of satire, who writes *A Modest Proposal* and *Gulliver's Travels*. Swift's proposal to counteract the double problem of famine on the one hand and too big families on the other is very straightforward: eat the children. This streak of black humour is rather characteristic of Gaelic culture; we find it again in Thomas McDonagh's plays and in films like *In Bruges*.

As the 19<sup>th</sup> century brought unprecedented forms of Famine to Ireland when the potato crop failed, this island was dramatically depopulated and remained haunted by this trauma. This would give rise to the Gothic novel: dark castles and deserted villages are still full of the keening and crying of lost souls.

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century the links between politics and literature are strengthened again when, in preparation for Home Rule, a group of writers gets together in the 1890s to form a National Theatre that must present people with an identity for the nation – no less. The characters of their plays speak a characteristic Hiberno-English: an English in which the structures of Gaelic grammar are still audible. Like “Drinking too much he did, and now a headache is upon him.” But the national theatre is controversial and promised independence is postponed. This causes again a traumatic history which is powerfully summed up in films like *The Wind that Shakes the Barley*. In 1980 we find another instance of literary politics when the conflict in Northern Ireland comes to a head. A theatre group was founded, the Field Day Company, where Catholic and Protestant playwrights and actors got together to help bring peace to Northern Ireland – and it seems to work, somehow.

I want to end with a quick, sweeping survey going from Eamon De Valera to Mary Robinson. When De Valera comes to power in the 1930s he passes a Constitution which is very traditionally and paternalistically Catholic; and as he rules Ireland for about 30 years, this causes a lot of frustration in the country. Frank O'Connor gives voice to this frustration in the short story, which he says is the best genre to express isolation and oppression. Indeed, this becomes one of the top genres of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, with Ireland producing a host of masterful short story writers, up to this day.

Yet now, and since the presidency of Mary Robinson (1993), the whole atmosphere is almost inverted, in the sense that people have opened up to totally new perspectives: socially, culturally, philosophically, and also in literary techniques. (Whereas splendid writers like Anne Enright, Colm Toibin are Colum McCann used to focus on the xenophobia of the Irish, we) now find that transnationalism is the key word, not only in fiction and drama, but also in poetry, as we see in the 2010 Anthology *Landing Places (2010)* edited by two editors, one

half Hungarian and the other half German. One of the best poems in this anthology is written by the Nigerian writer Oritsegbemi Jakpa, who rewrites Seamus Heaney's famous poem "Digging" giving it an very un-Irish twist.

But what is Irishness? In his short story "57% Irish" (*The Deported*, 2007), Roddy Doyle describes how the Home Office wants to develop a test for Irishness, only at some stage the minister himself fails miserably. All I can see is that since the Robinson Era and the Ryanair generation the old contacts between Ireland and the rest of the world, also between Ireland and the KULeuven, have very much intensified, to our great delight. And I am very glad we have the best possible person in our midst to tackle the question of Irish Culture and Identity: H.E. Mr Tom Hanney, the ambassador of Ireland to Belgium.