

Aitheasc Éirithe As

Introductory remarks

Thank you, President, and thank you former colleagues for your presence here tonight and for your generous present.

I am thinking of my paternal aunt Peg, known as ‘Margret Quigley’ in this college, where she worked as a member of the Kitchen Staff, in this refectory, and also as a member of the Cleaning Staff for many years, and whose death in 1977, at the age of 65, unfortunately preceded my appointment by two years. Few of the academic staff knew me, when I arrived in the College, other than the Kitchen and Cleaning Staff, whose acquaintance I had made at my aunt’s funeral. I recall how proud they were that their former colleague’s nephew had been appointed a professor. I particularly recall Miss Black and Miss Horgan, who had been so solicitous for the welfare of my aunt, whose generosity knew no bounds and who was extremely careless about her own financial security. It was my Aunt Peg’s practice to stay with us at weekends. She always arrived on Friday evenings with copies of various comics as well as sweets and bars. In our teens she shared generous amounts of cigarettes and money with us and bequeathed us a rich heritage of song.

Maternal Ancestors

My maternal ancestors were dispossessed for Fenian activism in East Galway in the 19th century. They were irredentist throughout the War of Independence, the Civil War, and subsequent campaigns, combining militant Republicanism with local activism on behalf of small farmers and farm labourers. They built creameries and cattle marts and tutored generations of community activists and hurlers.

My mother left primary school at fourteen to work on her parents’ farm, most of which consisted of bog-land. Fortunately an offer of financial support from a relative allowed her to begin second-level studies at 17. She sat her Leaving Certificate at 21 and, having been disqualified from pursuing a teaching career because of an inability to sing, she completed a secretarial course and gained employment with CIE in the Dublin Broadstone Depot. Within six months she had made the acquaintance of my father, when they noticed each other, as he cycled up Constitution Hill, near her place of work, on a bicycle with only half a handlebar. During the period of their courtship it was their practice every Sunday to visit, on foot, seven churches in inner-city Dublin.

My mother reared four sons including my very special brother Brendan. She taught us to make ‘The Sign of the Cross’ and taught us ‘The Lord’s Prayer’, ‘The Hail Mary’, ‘The Glory Be’, ‘The Prayer to the Guardian Angel’, ‘Grace before Meals’, ‘Grace after Meals’, and ‘The Angelus’ as soon as we could talk. She read passages from the Douay – Rheims Roman Catholic Bible on Sunday afternoons.

Kidnapped is the first book I recall her buying for me. I recall her buying *Children’s Britannica Encyclopaedia* and the following books all of which I had read by the age of twelve or thirteen: Hans Anderson’s *Fairytales*, *Pride and Prejudice*, *Wuthering Heights*, *Jane Ayre*, Charlotte Brönte, *The Pilgrim’s Progress*, *Fr Brown*, *Selected Stories*, *A Book of Narrative Verse*, and *The Moonstone*, Wilkie Collins, *Palgrave’s Godlen Treasury with Additional Poems*, *The Vicar of Wakefield*, *The Mill on the Floss*, *Cage at Cranford*, *Moorland Cottage*, *Great Expectations*, *Moby Dick*, *The Master of Ballantrae*, *Gulliver’s Travels*, *The Warden*, *Robbery under Arms*, *Robinson Crusoe*.

Peadar O Donnell’s *Islanders* is the first work of fiction by an Irish writer I recall reading. By the age of 16, I had read Ó Faoláin, O Connor, Yeats, Colum, McNiece and many others. Críostóir Ó Floinn, a graduate of this college, was the first contemporary writer working in the Irish language whose work I read. I have been privileged to have become a good friend. I also read works by Proinsias Mac an Bheatha and Anraí Ó Liatháin as well as the weekly newspaper *Inniu*.

My mother taught me to type at sixteen so that I could write for a revolutionary socialist youth publication and she bought me copies of Dinneen’s *Irish – English Dictionary* and de Bhaldraithe’s *English – Irish Dictionary* which I use to this day. My mother sold her own vegetables, eggs and tomatoes door-to-door in order to supplement my father’s modest income. Subsequently, she offered typing- and-shorthand lessons and when my father retired she established her own commercial college. I regret not accepting her invitation to involve myself in that venture. I had felt it would have been in conflict with my contract here in Saint Patrick’s College.

Paternal Ancestors

My paternal ancestors’ home in East Limerick was ransacked by the Black & Tans. My grandfather was shot at as he escaped through the fields, and survived a mere six months. My father, then one-year-old, and his sibling sisters were

threatened with death by one of the marauding Tans, who was eager to shoot the 'f-ing b-s', who were only spared by the intervention and humanity of one of his number. My grandmother, secreted in a closet, with her rosary held to the door, escaped attention, as the lights were shot out of their holdings and food and drink looted from the huckster shop cum public-house. Descent into abject poverty followed.

My grandmother cried in despair as kindly neighbours fed, cleaned and dressed my father for his First Holy Communion. This was in stark contrast to his elder brother's experience, seven years earlier, when he had been offered the option of a serge suit, a satin suit or a tweed suit. My father was to witness three of his four sisters being carried out of their home in coffins, in their early teens, as they succumbed to tuberculosis. These memories were forever engraved on his mind. They did not make him bitter but greatly concerned for the welfare of those worse off than he, whose situation he sought to alleviate through a life of Catholic action, trade-union activism and volunteerism. It was with great sadness that having followed in his footsteps as a trade-union activist that I felt it necessary, recently, to resign my union membership on a matter of conscience. My father while always unhappy at the partition of Ireland held English people in the highest regard. I am the only poet, to my knowledge, to have marked the occasion of her Royal Highness Queen Elizabeth's visit to Ireland by way of a bilingual acrostic poem which she personally acknowledged in the warmest of correspondence. It is also the case, that, as one of the 38% of the people of the Republic of Ireland without party representation in Oireachtas Éireann, I now look to the Democratic Unionist Party, the Ulster Unionist Party and the Traditional Unionist Party of Northern Ireland to defend the culture of life.

My father, a life-long pioneer, worked for thirty-two years in Guinness's Brewery, starting in the racking shed, graduating to lorry driver, delivering porter all over the country, and ending as personal chauffeur to the most senior executives of the company. A man of deep faith, and known to colleagues as 'Honest Jack' and 'Father John', his life was a continuous growth in holiness, as a Legion of Mary activist assisting prostitutes in the inner city, and feeding hungry men in the Morning Star Hostel. He was a wonderful singer in traditional, modern, and semi-classical modes, an accomplished traditional dancer, a fine musician on violin and melodeon, a magnificent whistler and lilter, and a powerful storyteller.

Seán McHaughey's death on hunger strike in Mountjoy Jail on May 11th 1946 caused my father to lose all confidence in Éamon de Valera and to refuse to vote for Fianna Fáil for over fifty years, until I convinced him that a strategic vote would help keep abortion at bay. He was a daily Mass-goer, who recited three rosaries daily, and a lifelong advocate on behalf of the intellectually disabled. It was my father's habit to offer my mother his unopened wage packet every Friday evening. He was an avid newspaper reader. I still, at moments of great personal challenge, wear a work pullover of his which he gave me when I was eighteen.

Personal Biography

I grew up on Jamestown Road, Finglas, Dublin 11, although I was delivered in a nursing home, located in a building, which no longer exists, at 67 Lower Drumcondra Road. At eighteen-years of age, in 1970, I had a motor-bicycle accident, close to the place of my birth, at the corner of Drumcondra Road and Clonliffe Road. I came to work in Saint Patrick's College in 1979, just a week before the Papal Visit of Pope Saint John Paul II, whose poetry I would later translate into Irish, and in whose memory I convened a conference, entitled 'The Heritage of John Paul II', the transactions of which were subsequently published. It was from Saint John Paul II that I learned the phrases 'a culture of life' and 'a culture of death', as well as to embrace Christ's phrase: 'Be not afraid'. I try to promote 'a culture of life' and not to be afraid to oppose 'the culture of death'. I also try to act on John Paul II's request to creative artists that they place their creativity at the service of the Church.

I developed a taste for alcoholic drink as a young child. I was introduced to illegal substances in early teens. Involvement in political activism encouraged the tendency to abuse alcohol. By the age of sixteen I had come under the influence of a number of Trotskyist groups allied to extreme militant republicanism and I had read many of the works of Karl Marks, including *The Communist Manifesto*, and the very challenging *Das Kapital*, and many of the works of Frederick Engels, Vladimir Lenin and Leon Trotsky, especially *Permanent Revolution* and his work of literary criticism, *Literature and Revolution*. These authors and their works had a very profound effect on me. However their shared belief that the destruction of the family was a necessary element of a successful revolution and the endemic sexual abuse of female comrades caused me to reject their politics.

My interest in Philosophy, Economics and History ran in parallel to my interest in language and literature, particularly in Irish, but also in English and French. I continued to be a voracious reader and when I entered university, I was amazed to find that I had already read many of the prescribed texts. Unfortunately, my substance abuse increased to the extent that I dropped out of university in my final year. Within a year, I found myself having recourse, for rehabilitation, to a drug centre in Jervis Street, and subsequently being referred to a drug centre located on Usher's Island, where I was to spend six months. In the middle of all this turmoil, and in imitation of a fellow substance abuser who had extricated himself from a cult, then known as 'the Children of God' and now 'the Family International', I managed to read a pocket-size version of the King James Bible from beginning to end.

It was while attending the Usher's Island centre that I finally sat my degree examinations, under the influence of authorized medication and having done little study. An overall second -class honours degree, with a 2.1 in Irish, was an almost miraculous result, under the circumstances, and I owe a debt of gratitude to my former professor Breandán Ó Madagáin who managed to make contact with me and encouraged me to resume my studies. My grade in Irish warranted a call for interview and helped me secure a two-year scholarship, which allowed me, while working part-time in the Department of Folklore, to pursue an MA by major thesis, an expanded version of which was subsequently published.

I am even more in Prof. Ó Madagáin's debt because of the fact that he later gave me my first academic position in University College Galway. The late Professor Breandán Ó Buachalla, who was for so long attached to Saint Patrick's College gave me my second academic position in University College Dublin. He subsequently, along with former College President Fr John Doyle CM, Séamas Ó Mórdha, Stiofán Ó hAnnracháin and Professor Alan Harrison, all now sadly deceased, interviewed me for and appointed me to a permanent position here in Saint Patrick's College.

I cannot say whether the depression and anxiety which I have experienced, throughout my life, are the result of substance abuse or whether the substance abuse was a response to a pre-existing condition. I had been robbed of my childhood innocence, as an eight-year-old, through homosexual abuse, and further homosexually abused and exposed to sexual depravity some years later. The connection between these traumatic experiences and substance abuse is difficult to determine.

This year is the 90ieth anniversary of the death of Venerable Matt Talbot and an appropriate year for me to end my connection with Saint Patrick's College, Drumcondra, as it was in Clonliffe College, Drumcondra that Matt Talbot first took the pledge to abstain from alcoholic drink. I was much younger than Matt when I first used alcohol. I was also three years younger than him when I last used and abused substances at 24. I have neither used nor abused any substances for thirty-eight years, thank God.

I think of Stephen Hopkins and the late Stiofán Ó hAnnracháin, two pioneers, former colleagues and close friends. I think of Fr Fachtna and his loyalty to the liturgy in Irish; and of all the Vincentian Fathers whom I have had the privilege of knowing as colleagues, friends and spiritual advisors, not least Fr Clyne, whose commitment to the use of Irish in celebrating the Mass on a daily basis was a wonderful encouragement. I think of all former colleagues living and dead, present and absent, including academics, but especially administrative, library, portering, kitchen, cleaning and support staff whom I have been privileged to encounter and from whom I have learned so much. I especially wish to thank those of you whose faithfulness and palpable sanctity have been such an encouragement to me.

I have chosen to leave at this time because it would be intolerable for me to acquiesce by my presence in the disestablishment of Saint Patrick's College as a Catholic College in 2016. I have tried to act as a conscientious member of the College professoriate by professing the Catholic Faith in which I believe, by explaining it to those who inquired of its tenets, and by defending it, to the best of my ability, whenever it was attacked.

Speaking to students in my final seminars and lectures, I said, I hoped they understood how important the Irish language, its literature and heritage were to me, and that they would strive to become ever more competent in these areas. I also said I hoped they would carry with them my belief that more important by far is the search for truth, beauty and goodness. I told them that, as a Catholic Christian, for me, God is truth, beauty and goodness. I suggested to them that if, throughout their lives, they continued to search for truth, beauty and goodness, that they would not go wrong. I can do no better than proffer you, members of this community, the same advice. Thank you for your attention and may God spare you the health.