

Tribute to a Poet,
Scholar and Critic



MAURICE HARMON

A Tribute

Not to walk in the m
fellowship.

not to rest for the ti

Not to sleep with a

SAMUEL JOHNSON

When we are young
we are full of
many pleasures
but as we grow
older we find
that all these
pleasures are
but a shadow
of the life to come

When I was in school
I had a great
friend who was
very kind to me
and I was very
grateful to him
for his help and
encouragement
I will never
forget him
and his kindness
to me

MAURICE HARMON

Modern Irish Literature

1800-1950
A Reader's Guide



Leabharlann UCD
UCD Library

with UCD SCHOOL OF ENGLISH, DRAMA AND FILM

To Maurice Harmon, 5 October 2017

Christopher Murray

Abstract: *Speech at University College Dublin, School of English, Drama and Film, paying tribute to Maurice Harmon on the occasion of his book donation to the Special Collections Reading Room.*

Keywords: *Maurice Harmon; editor; poetry.*

Dr Howard, Dr Rogers, ladies and gentlemen. It is a great privilege for me to be asked to speak here on this important occasion, to pay tribute to my friend and former colleague Maurice Harmon, and to celebrate the reception of his books and archives by the James Joyce Library in UCD. It is good to see present his wife Maura and daughter Maura. Also to see so many of Maurice's contemporaries, friends and admirers. In order now to describe and, indeed, appreciate the extraordinary donation Maurice is making, i.e. over 4,000 books and 50 boxes of archival papers, I want to provide a context. (Here I am indebted to Barbara Brown for providing me with copies of the two catalogues of Maurice's books and papers).

Donal McCartney entitled his history of this university *UCD: A National Idea*. Today, however, the term is "globalised" rather than "national"; UCD promotes itself as "Ireland's Global University". Before UCD became "globalised" it positioned itself as culturally and actively involved with issues of national identity and the role of education in same. That landscape has now changed. We look outside the window and we see the Confucius Institute announcing a quite different emphasis on campus. Maurice Harmon belongs, like myself, to the earlier generation, when the contours were different, when the idea of a university was still that of Newman, reinforced by modern Irish history. The landscape then had different signposts.

They did point outside the country, however, to the United States in particular, where the new ideas for the modernisation of the Humanities and for the teaching of the Humanities were to be found. Maurice spent some ten years in the USA after completing BA and MA in English at UCD, under Jeremiah Hogan, taking a significant Teaching Fellowship at Harvard for three years, before moving on to Oregon as Assistant Professor of English, finishing his PhD, teaching as Associate Professor in Notre Dame for two years, and then recirculating home to teach at UCD, still located at Earlsfort Terrace. Such a brief summary covers ten years of growth, of assimilation, especially at Harvard under John Kelleher, of high standards and new ideas. After that period, the move to

Belfield in 1970 signalled a new phase in the history of UCD, and Maurice was to fit most effectively within the new outward-looking generation of scholars with experience abroad that would shape the new UCD.¹ It is within this framework of tradition and cosmopolitanism that Maurice's contribution to UCD must be appreciated.

There are, I think, two components to what the archives signify. First they speak to us of the contribution of a man Terence Brown has described, by associating him with Seán Ó Faoláin, as a "public intellectual".² This is significant. It implies a figure who, like O'Faoláin or, indeed, our president Michael D. Higgins – and I'm thinking here of Mr Higgins's recent book *When Ideas Matter: Speeches for an Ethical Republic* – takes writing seriously as contributing to the public good.

What is it that a university lecturer in literature might contribute in this context? In the last chapter of his book, *Ireland 1912-1985: Politics and Society*, the Cork historian J.J. Lee explores how our main universities have – as he put it – made a "contribution to national thought", given the largely anti-intellectual nature of Irish society. Joe Lee finds that there was a core of teachers and thinkers in Ireland who fought against the conservatism, the censorship, the sectarianism and the educational shortcomings present in this country right up to the 1980s. Interestingly, for a UCC man, Lee's hero is T. Desmond Williams, professor of modern Irish history at UCD at the time Maurice was starting to teach. Williams stands as a model, even a symbol, of the intellectual who by example and brilliance of argument spreads ideas that bring about change for the better. Williams's example of the academic as thinker drew around him kindred spirits in UCD, such as Patrick Lynch, Professor of Economics, described by Lee as playing "a central role in raising awareness of the importance of both scientific and technological change for Irish development".³ When Maurice Harmon returned to Dublin from the United States in 1965 he quietly began to involve himself in this intellectual revolution.

The link, the organ, for Maurice was the journal he founded in 1970, namely *Irish University Review*. This was actually a *re-founding* of a graduates association review established within the Department of English in 1954, lasting intermittently until 1968, by which time Maurice was involved. But the *IUR* was a clean slate. On the editorial board were Desmond Williams and Patrick Lynch. Maurice's advisory board included Conor Cruise O'Brien, who had an article on Machiavelli in the first issue of the new *IUR*, autumn 1970, nicely applied to contemporary American foreign policy but relevant to Ireland also. Autobiographically, O'Brien told his student audience at NYU that he was about to return to Ireland from New York to Dublin North-East (Harmon country, remember) in order to become a Labour T.D., by means of which political changes would follow in Ireland, and O'Brien added: "It is all one struggle, though it has to be carried on in different places under different conditions and symbols."⁴ Harnessing such talent, Maurice aligned himself with the progressives at UCD.

Maurice had on his editorial board alongside Patrick Lynch and John O'Meara from Classics, none other than Roger McHugh. Here was a most important figure and mentor in Harmon's career. McHugh had in 1967 been appointed the first Professor of Anglo-Irish Literature and Drama at UCD and was a powerful figure in the college,

a member of the senate, and so on. In brief, McHugh now set up a new graduate programme in Irish Studies and made Maurice a leading figure within it. The curriculum was broad and comprehensive, as McHugh believed in inter-disciplinarity before the dreadful term was invented. Lectures were offered on three days a week, covering prose, drama and poetry. McHugh inducted lecturers from other Departments, Irish Folklore, Modern Irish History, and Modern English, and also invited in special speakers, usually practitioners such as Mervyn Wall, Francis Stuart, John McGahern, Seamus Heaney, the Irish-American Tom Flanagan and so on, giving students a real feel for Irish writing as international. The MA attracted big numbers for those times, many applicants coming from the USA. In this environment Maurice flourished. The range of the courses seemed to suit him. Something the poet Tom Kinsella wrote in tribute on Maurice's 80th birthday is appropriate to quote here, as it sums up pithily Maurice's skill as scholar and as teacher, of poetry in particular. Here is what Kinsella in part wrote:

I have always admired and respected him for his unobtrusive efficiency. It is an uncommon quality, accompanied in Maurice's case by the related ability to identify the necessary work, regardless of current opinion, and to deal with the matter. [Kinsella the former civil servant!]
It [This quality] showed on the wider scale [Kinsella continues] in his special attention to a vital period in Irish poetic creativity, having little to do with Anglo-Irish literature as usually understood: the modern generations collecting themselves in a time of psychic stress, of hesitancy after recent great art, against a background of overwhelming world violence.⁵

The fruits of this keen teaching talent are to be seen in the cogent examination to be found in Maurice's edition of *Irish Poetry after Yeats: Seven Poets* (1979), a groundbreaking book, where the young Seamus Heaney wins a secure place in the pantheon, alongside Austin Clarke, Patrick Kavanagh, Denis Devlin, Richard Murphy, Thomas Kinsella and John Montague. This kind of close analytic work had not been done before in Irish criticism of Irish literature. Its purpose was to lay down scholarly standards in the field and to demonstrate how principles of criticism can be applied to living as well as dead authors. This was to extend the canon and to expand its modernist range. This is how Maurice proceeded. He did the work, as Kinsella says, and he showed how others might learn how to do it too. With Roger McHugh Maurice co-wrote *A Short History of Anglo-Irish Literature* in 1982, following up the research tool Maurice titled *Select Bibliography for the Study of Anglo-Irish Literature and its Backgrounds*. A new subject was being invented for international consideration.

Maurice also taught in a two-year M.Phil. in Irish Studies at UCD, embracing Old Irish, mythology, history, literature and archaeology. In this environment he found companionship among the best scholars in Ireland. He was director of this M.Phil for eight years. His much-admired translation of *Acallam na Senórach*, published in 2009 under the title *The Dialogue of the Ancients of Ireland*, has its roots in that environment.

In all of this work Maurice Harmon practised what he preached. He stood out as a sterling example of what a top-class scholar should be, and in that way he enriched the university. He is enriching it again now in donating over 4,000 books which were the foundation of his scholarship. Indirectly, by their means his teaching career goes on; future students and researchers will discover this treasure trove and find themselves inspired to range widely and think afresh about the subject of Irish literature and its values.

The catalogue of Maurice's books fills 139 typed pages. The entries stretch alphabetically all the way from AE to W.B (Yeats, of course), with secondary and critical works included along the way. The graph shoots up, predictably, when a name happens to be the subject of a book Maurice himself wrote. Yet the list for Mary Lavin is surprisingly long also, ditto for Ben Kiely, writers Maurice greatly admired. And so it is too with Brian Friel, Tom Murphy, John F. Deane, Dennis O'Driscoll, Eavan Boland, Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin and many other contemporary writers, some of them present with us here today. Their books are all here.

The other component of the archive I must describe relates to the fifty boxes of Maurice Harmon's papers. What a wonderful acquisition this is for UCD to have! It must be unique in Ireland. The lists alone of the contents come to 117 typed pages. They relate in part to personal correspondence to and from contemporary authors, essays, talks, book reviews, research notes and no fewer than eight boxes containing additional material on the books Maurice published, which include two books on O'Faolain – one a critical study, the other a fine biography – as well as four others on Beckett, Clarke, Kinsella, and Richard Murphy, plus the books he edited at strategic times, in 1972 *J.M. Synge: Centenary Essays*; in 1984 *The Irish Writer and the City*, marking the first IASIL conference at UCD, which Maurice as chairman organized; and in 2001 the book of essays celebrating Liam Miller's Dolmen Press. Such books mark key points in our cultural history.

Again, the papers are unique in that they complement the books. (The Beckett book, incidentally, *No Author Better Served*, marks a different sort of project, and a different achievement. On a fellowship at the Burns Library, Boston College, Maurice was invited to edit a newly acquired correspondence between Beckett and the American theatre director Alan Schneider, to be published by Harvard University Press in 1998. The result was a quiet coup for Maurice, since his book anticipated the first volume of Beckett's collected letters by eleven years.)

But Harmon's own poetry is another matter. I refer here to the five books of poetry he has had published over the past twenty years or so, following his early retirement from UCD. Let me just name these in order of publication: *The Last Regatta* (2000), *The Doll with Two Backs* (2004), *When Love is Not Enough* (2010), *Loose Connections* (2012) and *Hoops of Holiness* (2016), an extraordinary achievement. Academics in departments of English have been known to dabble a bit in this pursuit, and some succeed in getting the odd poem or two published, but very few reach the level of publishing a book of poems; and as for five books from an internationally recognised publisher of poetry, why, that is the stuff of dreams.

Once more the MS archive complements the book collection. The genesis, the raw material is here, the drafts, the proofs, the unpublished poetry, as well as various drafts of what has been published, the correspondence about, etc., all evidence of the committed writer. Maurice Harmon does not dabble. Rather, it is with him as Patrick Kavanagh famously declared: “A man . . . dabbles in words and rhymes and finds that it is his life.” Maurice knows this in his bones. As he writes in a long autobiographical poem “Broken Lights, Broken Lances” as a young teacher in Oregon:

The poem on the page [was] a sacred text to him
its meanings not imposed but traced, inferred
from close inspection, clues disclosed –
touchstone, texture, the tracery of signs.

He loved the entering
the feel of an inner shape when elements fused
the leap of faith where the imagination’s
secret flame cleared the lines.⁶

The imagination’s secret flame, indeed. The Muses have certainly bestowed it on Maurice, and he has not hoarded it. He has done an immense amount to support, advise on and further the publication of poetry in Ireland. He has fostered the flame in many others. And this flame comes as a double bonus to his alma mater now, with the collection of books and the personal archive he has donated.

Maurice’s gifting of his library and his papers to the James Joyce Library at UCD is a noble and generous gesture and these will prove a great resource not only to future generations of students and scholars but also to historians of education and chroniclers of UCD, the global university. Thank you all for your kind attention.

Notes

- 1 In *UCD: A National Idea* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1999), Donal McCartney says concerning the 1950s and 1960s: “It was an era in which there were signs of great upheavals trying to happen, reflecting circumstances in the world and the country brought on by the new communications technology and the emergence of the global village” (412). Globalisation was down the line.
- 2 Terence Brown, “Foreword” to Maurice Harmon, *Selected Essays*, ed. by Barbara Brown. Dublin, Irish Academic Press, 2006. viii. Brown singles out Maurice’s essay, ‘Sean O’Faolain: Man of Ideas’ as “the central essay” in the collection.
- 3 J.J. Lee, *Ireland 1912-1985: Politics and Society*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989. 641.
- 4 Conor Cruise O’Brien, “What Exhortation?”, *Irish University Review*, 1.1 (Autumn 1970) 48-61 (p.59).

- 5 Thomas Kinsella, "A Note for Maurice's 80th", *Honouring the Word: Poetry and Prose Celebrating Maurice Harmon on his Eightieth Birthday*, ed. Barbara Brown. Cliffs of Moher: Salmon Publishing, 2010. 26-27 (p.26).
- 6 Maurice Harmon, *The Doll with Two Backs and Other Poems*. Cliffs of Moher: Salmon Publishing, 2004. 30.

The Professor

Maurice Harmon

Loved the sound of his own voice
which he cracked like a whip
into every corner of the theatre;
unable to tolerate inattention,
enraged if students presumed to talk,
ejected them emphatically;
as though they were still in junior school
and he the bully in residence.

Ridicule

Maurice Harmon

We had a professor one time, intellectually
head and shoulders above the rest of us
but he liked to gossip with his staff about his staff.
One colleague, an unassuming scholar,
whom we admired, spent years
preparing a definitive edition
of Milton's shorter poems.
The Professor doubted he would ever finish.
Another's lectures were so insightful and helpful
that students were eager to hear him.
The Professor thought such populist behaviour
out of place.
A woman colleague liked to give parties.
You met interesting people there –
Negotiators with the IRA, financiers, film directors,
Writers, painters, actors. It was the place to be.
The Professor deplored its 'vulgarity'.
This fondness for derision altered our view of him.
Belittling others he belittled himself