

Mairéad Ní Éimhigh: some reminiscences

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(i dtosach don ócáid, *Remembering Margaret Heavey*, ar 28 Meitheamh 2017)

The Lectures were given by her and by Seoirse Mac Tomáis (George Thomson) upstairs in her room immediately adjoining the Aula on the left, the room previously occupied by Professor W.A. ('Billy') Byrne, Professor of English till his death in 1933. The Library provided a reclining settee-type chair there for her to enable her to lie down during the day if desired. She brought a flask of tea and sandwiches with her every day, as there was no eating place on campus.

She travelled by train from Athenry when it operated – and during the War it often did not – and then cycled from the station to the College. She often came to the Library often around 7pm to get assistance from Christy Townley in the delicate task of preparing the carbide lamp for the bicycle for the long lonely journey on the rough road back to Athenry in winter. She was a physically strong person, with great stamina - unlike her sister Susan, a popular student, who died suddenly in 1933 and who was much smaller.

(Above verbal reminiscences shared with the author by the late Christy Townley, Librarian.)

Mairéad normally introduced herself to First-year classes as, 'My name is Miss Heavey – H,e,a,v-E-y'.

Least liked class by students was the Scansion class on Saturdays, 1pm-2pm, where she used to beat out the metre with her foot. Some lines which bore an abnormal metrical pattern till the penultimate word, reverting then to the orthodox pattern, she wittily accounted for in terms of 'the Deathbed Conversion principle'.

Years 2 + 3 classes were grouped together for lectures, which helped to ease the lecturing burden.

Many of her Greek classes were, because of the small numbers, held in her office in Áras de Brún.

Dr Tom Mitchell (ex-Provost TCD) was the first graduate of hers to go to North America for Doctoral studies – to Cornell, followed there some years later by myself and Pádraig Ó Cléirigh.

Mairéad had a particular concern about language and accuracy. She regarded a misspelling - which she accepted might have been due to a simple misread or visual error originally – as a much less grievous offence against the language than bad punctuation. The latter, e.g. a comma instead of a semicolon or colon, she viewed as betraying a conceptual ignorance of the syntax and logic of the language.

For Conferral ceremonies, the English and Irish translations of the Latin formulae at Conferring, as printed in the Conferring brochure over the years, are hers. They display a rhythm and cadence, and of course the accuracy, typical of her writing:

'... I present to you these my sons and these my daughters whom I know to be, in respect both of character and of learning, fit and proper persons for admission to the Degree of ..., and I pledge to thee and to all the Academy my solemn word that so it is.'

‘... Cuirim in bhur láthair na mic agus na hiníonacha seo liom arb eol dom iad a a bheith fóinteach feilteach, ó thaobh béas agus léinn de, le go ligfí ar aghaidh iad chuig Céim ..., agus bheirim daoibh agus don Acadamh uile m’fhocal sollúnta gur amhlaidh atá.’

An tOllamh Ní Éimhigh was the living embodiment of the caring University – the alma mater. A constant presence on campus, putting in long hours into the evening and taking only a fortnight’s holidays in August. Her humorous response to a new Lecturer who enquired as to the hours of work expected of him was, in her own words, ‘Oh, at least 24 hours a day!’ She was rigorous and demanding about the maintenance of high standards and strict in requiring work and effort from students, but equally she was understanding, supportive and helpful to her students.

Mairéad Ní Éimhigh lived her professional life with the attitude that Latin and Greek were, and ought to be, still living realities in modern life and culture. Though often expressed playfully, such as in voicing her ‘expectation’ that her students would be able to speak Latin as Cicero did, her pedagogical technique in combating the alienation naturally felt by many students towards those subjects was to try and get those authors perceived as continuing living presences. We all recall her introductory remark to classes, ‘Today, as I am sure you all know, is Cicero’s - or Horace’s or somebody else’s - birthday’, or dating her letters in similar fashion.

Her writing style, however, was also animated by that urge to remind us that, especially in a University and particularly so in the Faculty of Arts, the Classics heritage still retained – or ought to retain - a prominent role in the discourse. To illustrate that: I came across the following remarks by her in the course of correspondence about the proposed inscription on the foundation stone to be laid by Éamon de Valera, Uachtarán na hÉireann, in 1971 for the new Library and Arts/Science buildings. She was advancing the idea that a Latin inscription by itself - which of course, on request, she had drafted with her usual elegance and minute attention to details of Roman-style inscription and punctuation - was perfectly adequate:

Latin is now beyond space and time and therefore is as Ireland-Galway-1971 as would Irish be itself. Therefore there’s no need for an Irish inscription alongside – the Latin inscription subsumes it. Put it like this: Irish would be needed alongside English, but neither is needed alongside Latin.

I do not think her point carried the day, as the stone eventually seems to have carried, in formulas befitting the importance of that major expansion, both Latin and Irish inscriptions, the latter supplied by an tOllamh T. S. Ó Máille, with glosses from Mairéad.

During her two terms as Dean of the Faculty of Arts from 1970 to 1976, her Minute-writing was noted not just for its detail, accuracy and elegance, but also for the way in which on appropriate occasions she gave free, almost poetic, rein to her conceptualisation of the continuing vital presence of the Classics. In 1973 a certain Junior Lecturer in the Faculty of Arts here was appointed to Seanad Éireann, spurring her to compare him to Senators in ancient Rome who had the distinction of wearing a broad purple stripe (*laticlavus*) on their *tunica*. So, she wrote, with the nonchalant, if whimsical, implication that Faculty members would, or should, be familiar with that term and tradition:

'The Registrar directed the Faculty's attention to the presence of Mr Higgins, now attending for the first time in laticlavian dignity. All members applauded their senatorial colleague'.

With that initial accolade, how could Michael D. Higgins not end up holding the highest office in the land!

Again in 1974:

At this point the President directed the Faculty's attention to Dr Declan Larkin, Professor of Electron Physics and Acting Registrar of the College, now for the first time exercising by the act of physical presence his newly acquired ex officio membership of the Faculty of Arts (including Philosophy). The President moved a vote of welcome to the Registrar, and the Faculty passed it with unanimous applause. The Dean observed that it was still possible in this College to graduate Bachelor of Arts in Physics. With this in mind, and remembering too the glories of Aristotle, Lucretius, and Isaac Newton, we should regard ourselves not as wishing our new Registrar 'welcome!' but as wishing him rather 'welcome home!'.

Her deep commitment to the concept of the academic community, the *collegium* – imperfectly as it might have been realised in the here and now - was evident not just in the spirit of those Minutes, but also in her work generally as Dean, and in her dealings with students and her staff colleagues. In smaller ways, too, she demonstrated it, as in her commitment to continued attendance at the General Interview (an opportunity for Academic Council and Faculty members to ask questions of candidates) for Lectureships and Professorships at a stage when, with the effective shifting of the academic judgement to the individual Boards of Assessors, the turnout was usually very low. Her typical remark to candidates on such occasions, was, 'Dr X, I confess to knowing nothing at all about your subject; my presence here today is merely a gesture to the unity of learning'.

Professor Martin L. Newell recalls with relish her quite effective method for discouraging Science students from taking Latin in first year. Referring to the standards expected of her students, she put her expectations of students on the lines of: 'If people were to come across, a lost page, lying in the Archway, of your Latin translation, they would say, 'Ah, surely this must be the work of 'Kikero' (*not* 'Sisero') himself!'; **and then**, for the Honours course, ...'!

Later, when he and Iggy Ó Muircheartaigh wrote to her as Dean for help in getting them an office each, she responded with a very sympathetic letter, noting that she understood well how they must feel, as she herself had had to wait 30 years for her own room!

