

**Eleanor Knott  
(1886 to 1975)**



(image © RIA)

**Memorial Discourse**

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It is very nice to be asked to deliver the 2020 memorial discourse, and I would like to thank the Provost for the invitation. It is great too to have this opportunity to tell you all about a wonderful scholar and a person of real substance, Eleanor Knott.\*

We in Trinity can be very proud of the first hundred years of our Irish Department, which has been home to many great Irish language scholars – and Eleanor Knott enjoys pride of place among them.

She lived from 1886 to 1975. She was a renowned scholar of Early Irish and Early Modern Irish. Her brilliance was recognised in her lifetime and her work is still widely referred to throughout the world. Books she wrote almost a hundred years ago are still standard texts – in particular *Irish Syllabic Poetry* and *The bardic poems of Tadhg Dall Ó hUiginn*.

She was a trailblazer of women's rights. She started to lecture here in Trinity in 1928, one of our first women lecturers. She became Professor of Early Irish here in 1939, making her one of Trinity's (and Ireland's) first women professors. She was also one of the group of four women elected to membership of the Royal Irish Academy in 1949 when the Academy finally changed its rules to admit women.

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She worked here from 1928 to 1955.

She was initially employed to teach Old Irish for 4 hours a week for £25 a term, taking over Edward Gwynn's Old Irish classes. Gwynn had recently become Provost, and this might account for the request in Knott's letter of appointment that, before starting this part-time job, she should "drop in to see the Provost". Her workload was increased to 6 hours a week the next year, in 1929, and her pay was doubled to £50 a term. A letter from Gwynn makes clear that this improvement in her conditions of employment was a sort of consolation prize after she came second to Éamonn Ó Tuathail in the competition for the Professorship of Irish. She was made permanent as a lecturer in 1934 and got a personal chair in 1939. She retired in 1955.

She is still remembered around College.

When Brian McMurry was an undergraduate, "she was a very striking figure walking across Front Square, always with her mortar board on".

Kenneth Milne knew her well and remembers her as a remarkable and very considerate person.

The late and very much lamented Barbara Wright studied Irish as an undergraduate under Knott. Barbara remembered her, as a not-so-wonderful lecturer (I'm not in the business of hagiography here) but as a great scholar and as a very kind person who was especially supportive of women students.

Like all women in College at the time, Knott cuts a slightly marginalised figure. For instance, for the sin of being a woman, she was not eligible for membership of the Senior Common Room. She and the few other women lecturers had to "slum it" in House 6 with the women undergraduates, where the "skip", Margaret, would fuss over her and shoo young women students out of her way.

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Eleanor Knott reached the heights she reached in her life by a circuitous, and often difficult, route. While her great ability was certainly obvious early in her life, and while her upbringing

definitely advantaged her in many ways, few would have predicted that she would achieve so much in her life – as a woman in a country in which women’s rights were being steadily eroded from the 1920s onwards, as a “gentle, shy person with a somewhat severe manner” and, indeed, as a university lecturer who had never herself attended university.

A letter she received in 1960 refers back to the fateful day, more than half a century before then, when she took her first hesitant steps towards a career in Celtic studies:

I enjoyed your letter [...]. I like to think of you plucking up the courage to walk to the counter in the Nat[ional] Library amid the imagined critical gaze of the students. Did you then foresee your scholarly successes, your professorship at TCD and your assured place among the leading Celticists? I am sure that, even with all your shyness, you had an interior serenity and confidence.

The writer of this letter asked Knott to go back in her memory and in her imagination to the days before she became an acknowledged authority in her field. In the same way, I would like now to ask you to do the same, to try to forget for a moment about her later successes – to go back to a time before she became “the great scholar, Eleanor Knott”, to a time when she was simply “Eleanor Knott”. And I will take you back, as much as possible, by allowing her and her contemporaries to speak for themselves, in their own words.

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The 1901 census gives a convenient snapshot of the household she grew up in. On the night of 31 March 1901, there were five people in the family home on York Street (in off Stephen’s Green): the man of the house (Eleanor’s father), John Knott, who filled out the form, gives his age as 47, his county of birth as Roscommon and his “rank, profession, or occupation” as “Physician. M.A., M.D., Ch.B., & Dip. Stat. Med. (Univ. Dub.); F.R.C.S.I.; M.R.C.P.I.; M.R.I.A.; &c.”. Also there on census night 1901 was Eleanor’s mother, Philippa Annie Knott, aged 50 and born in “Yorkshire”. There were two children in the house: Eleanor herself (“Philippa Marie Eleanor”), aged “13”, and her brother Billie (“William Ion Harloe”), aged “15”, both schoolchildren and both born in Dublin. Besides the Knott family, there was also Mary Conyers, classed as “Servant” in the census, from Co. Westmeath. She was the only Catholic in a household in which everyone else was a member of the Church of Ireland.

Eleanor’s father was a most remarkable man. He studied at Trinity (among other places) and merits a memorial discourse himself. Fortunately, he has been brought to life very vividly in the work of the noted medical historian, John Lyons, which I will draw on here to give a brief account of him.

Eleanor’s father was John Freeman Knott (1853–1921). He was from Kilnamanagh parish in Co. Roscommon. He married young and worked as a landlord’s bailiff and as a farmer. He read Goethe and Homer in the evenings, he received private lessons in Latin and Greek, and he developed a lifelong interest in modern European languages. He was (as his biographer says) “an uncommon farmer”.

In 1874, barely 21, he left his young wife in charge of the farm (and of his parents) and he went to Dublin to study in the Royal College of Surgeons. He had a stellar career as a student but, despite his ability and qualifications, not belonging to the medical establishment of the day, he never attained an appointment in a teaching hospital. Instead, among other things, he taught anatomy in the College of Surgeons, he gave private lessons to medical

students preparing for examinations and he took up his pen. He wrote an impressive number of articles for international medical journals and contributed regularly on medical topics to newspapers like *The Freeman's Journal*. His biographer estimates that he wrote over 2,000 items.

Her father can only have been a huge influence on Eleanor. For instance, his great interest and ability in languages must certainly have had an impact on hers. He may also have been a source of the scholarly, scientific outlook she brought with her to Irish language studies, and it is to be presumed that his example is what led her into journalism in her teenage years. One thing that is certain is that Eleanor was brought up in a house overflowing with books, as is clear from this vignette from the *Irish Times*, written more than twenty years after her father's death (which gives a flavour of the man and his times):

Dr. Knott, fine scholar and insatiable collector of those items which the booksellers catalogue as *curiosae*, was also well known to me, as he moved slowly down the bookcarts – tall-hatted, and with the inseparable handbag which never went home empty.

A similarity between father and daughter, perhaps, is that the affectionate esteem with which they are generally remembered is often seasoned with a hint of humour, or even of mockery. This is true of the following account (by another medical historian, Widdess) of the small part played by Eleanor's father in the high drama of the Easter Rising in 1916:

On that memorable Easter Monday morning [...] Sergeant Frank Robbins was sent with a small party to occupy the College of Surgeons, which faced the park. At the same time Dr John Knott, an elderly, erudite, and eccentric Fellow of the College [of Surgeons], whose daughter Eleanor became a noted Celtic scholar [... was arriving after walking in from his home in Ranelagh]. Ignoring the sounds of battle, unscathed by flying bullets, he arrived at the front door of his College, in the Library of which he was accustomed to spend his day in study, composing learned communications on subjects ranging from female circumcision to spontaneous combustion. The bedel, who had observed from a window his approach through York Street, answered the doctor's knock. Frank Robbins and his party seized the opportunity. The door was opened slightly to tell Dr Knott that the College had been closed by order of the Registrar [...]

We also have a rebel perspective on Eleanor's father's claim to fame as the man who let the rebels into the College of Surgeons. It is given by Frank Robbins himself, the leader of the rebel party. Instead of "The door was opened slightly to tell Dr Knott that the College had been closed", he gives Eleanor's father a rather less dignified exit from the stage:

When we approached the gate of the Green we saw the caretaker of the College engaged in animated conversation with another man in the doorway. When we were half-way across the road, the man in conversation with the caretaker seemed to be having trouble. In fact, the caretaker was using some force to get him out of the doorway and was succeeding fairly well [...] I [...] dashed across the road and shouted

to the others to follow. The caretaker gave his companion a push and slammed the door [...] he failed to shoot the lock home [...]

John Knott's first wife died in 1879 and, two years later, he married the woman who was to be Eleanor's mother. This was Philippa Annie Balcombe. She was born in Hull in Yorkshire, but her father (a retired British army lieutenant-colonel) was secretary to Clontarf Township Commissioners and she was brought up in Dublin – in the Crescent, Marino.

Her sister, Florence (Eleanor's aunt), is well known to lovers of Irish literature in English for her romantic involvement with Oscar Wilde and for her marriage to another Trinity graduate, Bram Stoker, a neighbour from the Crescent. (Most recently, Florence is also a character in a novel published last year, *Shadowplay* by Joseph O'Connor.)

Unfortunately, there is not much information to be found on Philippa herself (Eleanor's mother). We are told that she was of Cornish descent and that she encouraged her daughter's early interest in Irish out of "a strong bond of sympathy with her fellow-Celts". The family papers give an incomplete picture of her, but indicate at least that she had a busy social life ("Dear Mrs Knott, May we call on Monday afternoon, as I know it is your 'at home' day"). And we know too that she was active in amateur dramatic circles in the city ("Mrs Knott is too well known to lovers of the drama in Dublin to need any introduction").

There is a similar dearth of information on Eleanor's brother, Billie, who was born in 1884, though there are one or two gems associated with him in the family correspondence. (If you want history brought to life, you could do worse than read the Knott papers in the College Library and in the Royal Irish Academy.) For instance, this is from a letter Billie Knott wrote when Queen Victoria visited Dublin in 1900:

10[th] of April 1900. My dear Jack, I hope you are very well, and I hope you had a good view of the Queen, I was a[t] Mrs Ryan's 13 Clyde Road[.] I arrived there about 5 past ten, and I had to wait till half past one, I was very dreary waiting but at last she came, but just as she was coming she put up her umberela and I could not see her [...]

We also have a letter, sent many years later to Noel Stoker (son of Florence Balcombe and Bram Stoker), asking about Eleanor and her brother:

your cousins, children of Dr and Mrs Knott of 5 York Street Dublin[.] They were friends of mine years ago and [I] often visited at their house in Dublin – when Billie and Nellie were growing up [...] They were so attractive and brilliant [...] I often wondered if they made a name for themselves or what they were doing in the world [...]

Well, we know about Eleanor! Billie seems to have gone to university in England. He married and settled down there but died young, in 1932.

Eleanor herself was born on 18 November 1886 and baptized on 30 January 1887 in St Peter's (Church of Ireland) on Aungier Street, around the corner from the family home on York Street. She received at least some of her schooling in the Abercorn College on nearby Harcourt Street, and she spent all of her working life within walking distance of her childhood home – in the National Library on Kildare Street, in the Royal Irish Academy on Dawson Street and here in Trinity.

In 1910, at a time when York Street was fast becoming a tenement district, the Knotts moved a few kilometres out of the city centre to Sallymount Terrace in Ranelagh. This is where

Eleanor lived until she went into the Molyneux care home for blind women (in Leeson Park, Ranelagh) in her twilight years.

She never married and had no children. However, Bobby Barden, a young neighbour in Ranelagh orphaned in his teens, was like a son to her, and he remembers his “Aunt Nellie” with great warmth and affection. This is how another acquaintance, Archbishop Donald Caird, described her:

Ba dhuine carthanach agus mórchroíoch í i rith a saoil [...] ní ligfeadh sí a cnámh le gach madra acht bhí rud éigin den naomh ag baint léi. [That is, “She was a charitable and big-hearted person throughout her life. She was well able to stand up for herself but she was something of a saint.”]

Were it not for memories such as these (and the memories of the Trinity community which I mentioned earlier), we would be left only with the rather severe “Miss Knott”. Máire Mhac an tSaoi (now a well-known Irish poet, then a postgraduate student) says in her autobiography that, in the 1940s, she was “becoming afraid that I might ‘grow up’ to be like Miss Knott of Trinity, a distinguished Celticist and spinster”, and she speaks later of “Miss Eleanor Knott, whose footsteps I had feared I was destined to follow into scholarly old maidenhood”.

It hardly needs stating that caricatures of old maids remind us of the high price to be paid at the time by women who had the audacity to prioritise working over wedding. However, particularly damning of the times is that Knott herself advised Máire Ní Éigeartaigh (an undergraduate student in the 1940s) against pursuing an academic career (*and this is from Susan Parkes’ book*):

It was Miss Knott who influenced me the most at the end, for when I consulted her about doing postgraduate research, she said that if she had a daughter, she would have preferred her to do anything else but academic work.

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I’ll look now at how she became involved in Irish language studies

When she was born in 1886, few who were aware of her background would have imagined that she would end up as an Irish language scholar. However, she always had an independent outlook, she was raised in an extraordinary home and she came of age in a revolutionary era. She herself tells us (in a letter she wrote but, luckily, never sent) of her first encounters with our language in a very different Ireland:

My Irish studies began in isolation & so continued for many years. I do not remember the time when I was not deeply interested in everything Irish. I don’t think I was quite 7 when I first heard that there was an Irish language & I remember my pleasure in learning that my country possessed this irrefutable mark of individuality.

She was clearly going against the grain, however, and she was a lonely patriot:

The first and only person I knew who showed any patriotic feeling was one of my teachers at the Abercorn College, Elizabeth Young [...]. When Irish history was

introduced into the secondary schools she gave the class a short address on the propriety of studying the history of our own country & how shameful it was to be ignorant of it. I do not know if any of my classmates were impressed (I was already “saved”!). To me it was water in a parched land.

She was also alone in her first steps towards learning Irish, when she bought a beginners’ series published by Conradh na Gaeilge (the Gaelic League):

When I was 14 I bought the O’Growney books [*Simple Lessons in Irish*] in a little shop in Aungier St. & was astonished to find how easy (as it seemed!) it was to learn Irish. I did not join the Gaelic League. I had no money to speak of & there were other barriers.

It’s a great pity that she doesn’t specify what these “other barriers” were to her joining the Gaelic League. We can only guess.

Her interest in Irish continued on-and-off throughout her teenage years. She tells us that:

after an interregnum during which I had neglected Irish for more practical studies I attended a few of the classes started in the Sch[ool] of Art by W[illie] Pearse.

The “more practical studies” she mentions may well have been preparations for end-of-school examinations, but it would seem that she never completed any of the usual public examinations for schoolchildren. We know also that she was never a university student. The doctorate awarded to her by the National University of Ireland in 1938 was an honorary one, and the masters awarded to her by Trinity in 1932 was an M.A. *jure officii* (involving no study, no examinations and no thesis). As she herself tells us in a letter she wrote at the time:

Thank you for your kind congratulations. I am not however receiving an “honorary” degree in the usual sense, but a M.A. *jure officii*. In my case it is of course an honor for me as I have not had the advantage (or disadvantage) of being brought up at a university. Thus while in the case of most lecturers it is simply *ad eundem* in this case there is no *eundem* to add it to (pardon the unsolicited pun).

She became quite a prolific journalist in her late teens and early twenties. A large part of her journalistic output is on uncontroversial topics such as folklore and ancient history, and it was published in magazines like *Ireland’s Own* and the similarly innocuous *Irish Packet*. However, she also wrote for two overtly political newspapers – *Sinn Féin* and *The Irish Peasant* – on an almost weekly basis in 1907. Even here, though, it must be said that there was no great virulence in the brand of nationalism she peddled:

It stands to reason that no country can be well governed by another “through the post” as Ireland largely has been. And it is a moral impossibility that, from a people so unsympathetic to Ireland as the British [...] good healthy government can be derived.

Her columns are often like sermons:

A drunkard is no honour to his country, therefore let the individual be sober. An idle man is no honour to his country, therefore let him be industrious. A dishonest man is a dishonour to his country, therefore let him be honest. With the individual Irishman sober, honest and industrious and bringing up the coming generation to be the same we may safely postpone Erin's funeral arrangements and rejoice in "Ireland a Nation."

She was definitely no socialist either. You will notice a distinct absence of sympathy for the poor of Dublin in this piece she wrote in autumn 1907:

Enter an average tenement room in a Dublin back street, you find the windows tightly closed, the air nauseating, a redundancy of needless furniture and inartistic ornaments. The room will be clean, but the inhabitants will be dirty and slovenly in attire, and idle or unmethodical in habits of work. Go out into the street, and you see young children playing in the gutter [...]. It is not poverty that is at the root of most of the misery in Dublin. There is a comparatively small amount of real poverty in Dublin. But there is an inordinately large amount of laziness, of dishonesty, of lack of method in life.

It was around this time that her life changed direction (perhaps thankfully!) when, one day in 1907 in the National Library of Ireland, she overcame her shyness to ask one of the staff there, the scholar Richard Best, for advice. As she herself tells us:

I conceived the plan of compiling an Irish Lemprière (ignorance was no hindrance to my ambition!) & after having noted down on scraps of paper the names of the kings & heroes in most of these tales, I decided to seek the advice of Mr. Best whom I did not know. That was the turning point of my career. He advised me, wisely & kindly, to abandon my projected magnum opus until I should be able to read the original texts. To attend the Sch[ool] of Ir[ish] L[earning] classes, which were about to start in [a] few weeks (Oct. 1907). I was given a kind of scholarship, that is, I had no fees to pay.

This was certainly a "turning point" for her, as the School of Irish Learning is where she came into her own as a scholar of Irish. Her brilliance was recognised immediately and Best said later that his own greatest contribution to the study of Irish was "the recruitment of Miss Knott".

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The word "recruitment" is apposite. However, rather than being recruited to the mainstream Irish language revival movement, she was being recruited to an offshoot of that movement – an offshoot with an agenda of its own. The School of Irish Learning had such a major impact on the study of Irish that it is difficult to believe now that it was founded as a voluntary organisation to run night classes and summer courses. This is how David Greene (a student of Knott's and later himself Professor of Irish here) describes the School of Irish Learning:

that great nursery of scholars, the School of Irish Learning, which Douglas Hyde and Kuno Meyer had founded in 1903. Hyde had hoped that the new school would provide the revival movement with linguistically sophisticated leaders, but, in the event, it was

the spirit of Meyer which prevailed, and the most exacting standards of German scholarship were applied to the study of the earlier periods of the language.

The School of Irish Learning was the foundation stone on which Knott built her academic career. She sat there at the feet of some of the foremost Irish scholars of that era – Carl Marstrander, Kuno Meyer, Holger Pedersen, Rudolf Thurneysen, and especially Osborn Bergin. She tells us:

I was very dubious of my ability to master a language of whose difficulty I had been warned by several writers on the subject. I [...] found it utterly incomprehensible [...]. However, Professor Bergin's lectures were a revelation. Everything was explained lucidly & interestingly & I began to feel hopeful.

The School of Irish Learning journal, *Ériu*, is where she published her first edition of a bardic poem in 1910, and the School is where she got to know the people who would form the core of her scholarly network – not only Bergin and Best but also the likes of T.F. O'Rahilly and J.G. O'Keefe – and it is difficult to think of her now without thinking also of them.

At a practical level, most of the paid work which sustained her until she came to work here in the late 1920s was found through contacts first developed in the School of Irish Learning. For example, she was doing paid clerical work for the School itself from 1910 at the latest; her employment as an assistant on the Royal Irish Academy's dictionary project in 1911 also came to her through School contacts; and it was Bergin who recommended her to edit works by An tAthair Peadar Ó Laoghaire (which she worked on into the 1920s).

She was especially indebted to the School for the scholarly values which guided her in her academic life. As early as 1908 (when she was just starting to take their classes), she had this to say in a magazine article:

Not till the foundation of the School of Irish Learning in 1903 [...] can Irish studies in Ireland, or indeed anywhere, be said to have been placed on a really scientific basis.

She was quick to make these values her own and always applied them in her work. For instance, her edition of *The bardic poems of Tadhg Dall Ó hUiginn* was an exemplar for the scholars of her own time and of succeeding generations, and it still is today. She may have embarked on her career at a time when (as David Greene says) "the Irish universities were, at best, indifferent and, at worst, hostile, to the scientific study of Irish", but she was in the van of the campaign to convert Irish scholars to the scientific approach.

She was not content simply to lead by example, and she took every opportunity to promote the academic values she learned and developed in the School of Irish Learning. For instance, in an obituary she wrote in 1919 on the German scholar Ernst Windisch, she praises him for the "exactitude and caution" of his scholarship, she speaks of his "life of earnest and conscientious endeavour in scientific scholarship" and she credits him with laying "the foundations of a strictly scientific study of the language [...]". Indeed, it is instructive to compare what she said about other people's scholarship in the many obituaries she wrote with the things said about her scholarship in the many obituaries written about her after her death in 1975. These make clear that she practised what she preached – as David Greene says, she not only advocated but also displayed the scholarly virtues of "unremitting industry, sobriety of judgment and lucid exposition". (And these are still our values today.)

Of course, these values did not enjoy universal acceptance. For instance, the editor of the journal *Studies* had this to say to her after receiving an admittedly negative book review from her. He said:

I heard recently that Irish scholars were paralysed into inactivity by the exacting methods and high ideals of what they call “The Bergin School” – you were named as a disciple of that School.

Whatever about other aspects of his views, he is undoubtedly right about Knott’s dedication to what she would call scientific scholarship.

The application of scientific principles to textual scholarship still has its critics. Take for example this grandiloquent assessment (from the late 1990s) of Irish language scholarship in the 1940s and 1950s:

an ethic, bordering on a cult, of professionalism had become dominant among practitioners. A number of prominent individuals – Osborn Bergin, Daniel A. Binchy, T.F. O’Rahilly, Eleanor Knott, [...] and others – patrolled the borders of Celtic Studies, becoming a clique of “textperts” with the institutional power to pronounce on the value of interventions into the discourse.

We are told also that this “knowledge-élite made a fetish out of method”. We are told that they were engaging in “textual fetishism”! It seems strange indeed that textual scholars would be criticised for being textual scholars, but the commentator just quoted is right that Knott and her co-workers prioritised textual scholarship and the scientific approach.

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There is no doubt but that she and her co-workers succeeded in bringing these values to the heart of Irish language studies. Her contribution to this lasting achievement is an important part of her valuable legacy to us.

So too her pioneering role as one of the first women to lecture in an Irish university, as one of the first women to hold a chair here in Trinity, as one of the first group of women to be admitted to membership of the Royal Irish Academy.

So too are seminal publications of hers like *The bardic poems of Tadhg Dall Ó hUiginn*, like *Toghail Bruíne Dá Dearga*, like *Irish Syllabic Poetry*, like her editorship of the journal *Ériu* and the many many articles she wrote.

Another major part of her legacy is her fifty years’ work on the Royal Irish Academy’s monumental *Dictionary of the Irish Language*. As we are told in an obituary on her:

to those who worked on that great project during the last half-century, she was its living embodiment.

And, of course, a major part of her legacy is her service, from 1928 to 1955, as an educator here in Trinity College Dublin.

I would like to finish today with her at the front gate, so to speak – on the threshold of her lecturing years, writing in 1928 to her mentor, Osborn Bergin, to tell him that she is to begin teaching in Trinity in a few days’ time. She does so with an uncertainty and a lack of

self-confidence which, in a funny way, is an inspiration in itself to us all – to know that even Eleanor Knott could lack confidence in her abilities. She writes:

I hope you will not be scandalized to hear that I have undertaken to take some O[Id] Ir[ish] classes in TCD. I was astonished at the proposal & do not indeed feel sure that I was right in agreeing. It remains to be seen if the arrangement will be successful [...] There is to be an opening performance in the small hours of Wednesday morning. I shall need prayers.

THANK YOU

\* A version of this talk is to be published in 2020 in a book on women in academia in ALLEA's Discourses on Intellectual Europe series (De Gruyter).