

## Professor Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin

Ireland Professor of Poetry

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“It’s a little unusual because I’m in Trinity anyway. I’m retired from teaching but as a Fellow I’m entitled to have some space as long as I’m doing work, and the Oscar Wilde Centre gave me an office at the top of Westland Row, which I use. So I’ll be coming back in a new role, but it won’t all be new to me.”

Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin is talking about her ‘return’ to Trinity in early 2018, when as Ireland Professor of Poetry she will spend the Hilary term in college, working with students and giving informal readings and seminars, as well as a formal lecture.

She is the seventh Ireland Professor of Poetry since the chair was set up in 1998. It is jointly held between Queen’s University Belfast, Trinity College Dublin, University College Dublin, the Arts Council of Northern Ireland and the Arts Council/An Chomhairle Ealaíon.

The chair is held for three years with the incumbent spending a year attached to each of the universities and residing for a period of approximately eight weeks at each.

Professor Ní Chuilleanáin, who was appointed in May 2016, spent last academic year attached to Queen’s University Belfast; now it’s Trinity’s turn and from January to April she will be poet-in-residence on campus.

As she says, this makes for a somewhat unusual situation because unlike the previous six Ireland Professors of Poetry—including Michael Longley, Paul Durcan and

Paula Meehan—hers is already a familiar presence on campus. She was a member of Trinity’s faculty in the School of English for half a century, having been appointed to a junior lectureship in 1965, at the precocious age of 23.

She brings great distinction to the Ireland Chair—as a poet, scholar, editor and advocate for poetry. On her appointment the *Irish Times* noted: “Her sometimes elusive poems have an unmistakable beauty, elegance and grace that carries readers into their own special world of image and feeling. She moves at ease between Irish and European landscapes, between the material and the spiritual realms, unifying them by the force of her compelling imagination.

“She has been an important advocate and spokesperson for poetry, both as an editor of the long-running journal, *Cyphers*, which she helped to found, and in her outreach activities.”

As an award-winning poet and distinguished academic, she is well-prepared for many of the responsibilities of the Ireland Chair but interestingly, the one area that is relatively new to her is mentoring students of creative writing.

“I went through almost fifty years in academia without teaching creative writing. I’ve occasionally tried to give workshops when I was asked and I came to the conclusion that I was not good at it, because I’m very critical and that is not what you need starting out.”

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She makes a nice distinction: “I’m not sure it’s possible to *teach* writing, but I am quite sure it’s possible to *learn* it... I’m sure students who take these courses learn as much from each other as from the teachers. Being part of a group of people who are all writing is terribly useful, and having a few strange, elderly people dotted around the place is probably quite useful also.”

This is amusingly self-deprecating, but there’s no doubt that her dedication to poetry and attention to the craft must inspire students.

She knew she wanted to be a poet from an early age. Her background was scholarly and literary—her father, Cormac Ó Cuilleain was professor of Irish in UCC; her mother Eilis Dillon was a writer of children’s books; her great-uncle was the 1916 signatory, Joseph Mary Plunkett. She says that Irish “was probably chronologically my first language. My mother wrote three books in Irish, then started writing in English.” She herself writes mainly in English, but has always written a little in Irish.

Aged 23, not having yet finished her B.Litt in Oxford, she was recruited by Trinity. She was, she says, lucky—“Trinity was then expanding rapidly, as indeed were universities in Britain like Keele and Sussex, and it was a good time for getting a job.”

Trinity was impressed by her academic record in UCC and Oxford, but also by her creative writing. “I had just won the *Irish Times* prize for poetry. You had to submit pseudonymously to that Prize and for the first and last time in my life, I used a male pseudonym.”

In Trinity she became an expert on Renaissance literature and continued developing as a poet by ploughing her own furrow: “When I was starting out, there was a feeling that women weren’t able to write big, intellectual subjects. That was Phase One. And then with the women’s movement, it turned the other way—they *only* wanted women to write about personal subjects. I was a bit resistant to that—someone said that when everyone else was writing about gynaecology, I was writing about nuns. At one point I was thought to be very obscure but then along came Medbh McGuckian, and all of a sudden people found that I wasn’t that obscure!”

There were no creative writing classes when she was starting out, and like many of her generation “I learnt my trade in the pub.” She was part of a dynamic generation of writers including Michael Hartnett and Macdara Woods, who became her husband, and she speaks fondly of the older writers who became friends and mentors, especially Leland Bardwell and Pearse Hutchinson.

“Pearse Hutchinson was fifteen years older than me and he was interested in younger writers. He spoke many languages and was a great translator. I never tried to write like him but somehow his presence, I later saw, was very important to me. He was very well read in the literature of European languages. I *thought* I was well read.”

It was perhaps Hutchinson’s influence that encouraged her own work in translation—she translates from Irish, Italian and Romanian and in 2005 she co-founded the Masters in Literary Translation, which is now run from Trinity’s Centre of Literary Translation, CLT. Last year, as Ireland Professor of Poetry in Queen’s University Belfast, she gave a seminar on translation.

At 74, she retains a radiant energy, a deep interest in other cultures, and a belief in language. She gives a brilliant justification for the study of literature: “A really serious use of language is a public good. Not using language in foolish and inappropriate and inaccurate ways is something that everyone should learn. We need to know the things that language can do and studying literature is one of the ways to find that out.”

For younger poets she has simple advice: “Keep writing, keep reading. The big difference between poets who are going to have some kind of impact and the rest in the next ten years or twenty years is how much they’re reading. I gave a lecture on Seamus Heaney in Hungary and I was reading the *Stepping Stones* interviews—and the breadth and ease of reference there; here’s someone who was always reading and was always reading the way a poet reads—for interest, for markers, for how could you do that differently, for technique, for all those things.”



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