

REPORT ON JAMES T. FARRELL EVENT 2007

Our 2007 Event turned out to be a very memorable one centred on brilliant talks on the American author James T Farrell (1904-79), who had strong Westmeath connections in that he was brought up in the USA by his Athlone grandmother and Mullingar grandfather. We also had a lively debate involving some of the best-known debaters in the country; a poetry workshop by Kevin Higgins and an excellent launch of a book of mainly non-fiction writings by John Broderick.

On Saturday morning the keynote speech was given by one of the leading experts on the work of James T Farrell, namely Professor Charles Fanning, Professor of English and History at Southern Illinois University, Chicago. He was introduced by Dr Patrick Murray of Athlone Literary Festival Committee who chaired this segment.

The Professor noted that the press of his University was involved in the re-launch of a major part of the work of James T Farrell, and that Farrell and John Broderick were “similar in that they had a fierce commitment to writing through thick and thin”.

He pointed out that Farrell is best known for the trilogy that involved the character Studs Lonigan, as well as the O’Neill/O’Flaherty pentalogy. The stories are based on the Southside of Chicago, perhaps from the 1890s to the 1930s.

Farrell told the story of Studs Lonigan first, he pointed out, a story about a character who was in some respects a corner boy, weak-willed and easily led, for whom life was always going to be difficult because of this passivity.

This contrasts with the character of Danny O’Neill in the pentalogy, one who hails from the same background and yet manages to become a writer – and perhaps this character reflects something of the author himself.

The author was educated in Catholic schools and, after spending some time at University, “began writing fulltime with relentless energy”. He had read widely and this informed much of what he wrote, and his first book was published in April 1932.

The Professor pointed out that in one 11 year period, James T Farrell published 11 novels as well as a whole range of other literary work. The books were generally based on the lives of ordinary people among whom he had grown up. Given Farrell’s working class and Catholic background, the work was particularly innovative.

Farrell went with a left-wing ideology but was to be frustrated when he saw its culmination in the rise of Stalin in Russia, becoming a leading advocate of the anti-communist left. After the war he, at one stage, helped to provide protection to left wing people who were critical of Stalin and for whom the KGB were looking.

The Professor drew comparisons and showed differences between Farrell's writings and those of Joyce and Proust. He pointed out that Farrell was far from overawed by the work of Joyce, describing "Finnegan's Wake" as being the work of a genius but being the result of a great ego as well!

Farrell's grandmother (Julia Browne from Athlone, who married Tom Daly from Mullingar) was the most important person in his upbringing. He moved in with them when he was two years old, as his parents had so many children they couldn't support them all so they sent him to live with them (in Chicago).

Julia and Tom went out from Westmeath to the States in their late teens. They met and later married in Brooklyn, New York, and eventually went to Greenbay, Wisconsin and then to Chicago, and that was where they reared their children, including James T. Farrell's mother.

He was very close to his grandmother and he heard her talk about Athlone and the surrounding fields and the Mullingar Fair and, of course, the steeple (in Athlone) which was the shining memory for her. When he writes about an old woman in one of his works he incorporates clearly in the fictional character those memories of his grandmother.

He was a powerful writer. One that deserves credit in a lot of ways that he hasn't got because people latched on to "Studs Lonigan" – and didn't read much beyond that.

In an interview with Sean O'Domhnaill of the Athlone Voice, Professor Fanning said that Farrell's was a powerful sustained literary performance, one of the most important in 20th century writings. "I feel, you get that sense in the fact that he's been so influential for so many other writers – dozens of them.

His writing is so close to real experience, it seems to me. Especially that of working class people."

"He didn't visit Athlone in the 1938 trip (Farrell wrote about this trip and his thoughts have been published in book form) because he wasn't able to get her, but I think it was in 1974 he came back and went to Athlone then. It meant Ireland to him because it was the place his grandmother had told him about".

On the Literary Festival he said "I've very much enjoyed this weekend at the Literary Festival. It's a lovely town. The weather's been lovely but, most importantly, there's this community of people interested in art, people of all ages, from young to old. There have been big audiences, and great engagement with the material. I think it's been terrific", he added.

Also at the Festival was Dr Kevin Farrell, son of James T Farrell, who gave a lot of insights in his speech into the human side of the writer.

He firstly remarked that one of the things his father had done was convince him not to be a writer himself. He saw that his father could work from home, set his own hours, that the family wasn't poor, that he was happy generally, and got a good deal of attention so it occurred to him to ask his father if he shouldn't be a writer as well.

He outlined that, over a few minutes, his father told him that if he had to ask that question, then the answer was in the negative. If one had to ask the question then one didn't really want to enter that profession – to be a writer one had to be very driven. Farrell told his son that writing is very hard work and that a lifetime isn't long enough to become one at times. Some people wasted a lot of time trying to become writers, but they ended up with futile efforts.

His father spent a good deal of time with him, Kevin Farrell said, but the greatest influence on his son was the way he lived his life. His father wasn't interested in money, but was focused on writing. He had integrity and was a passionate advocate for social justice. He was a long-time activist for human rights, such as the rights of black people in America, as well as being a strong supporter of the labour movement. He was active politically and was influenced by the writings of Trotsky.

Seeing how matters developed and the rule of Stalin in Russia, he was later to become a leading intellectual voice of the anti communist left in the 30s, and helped to provide protection for people who were trying to avoid the clutches of the KGB.

His father had also been very impressed by James Larkin. On Dr. Farrell's own visit to Ireland, he had made sure to visit the grave of James Larkin and see his statue, as well as visiting the grave of Veronica Guerin. He had also visited the famine memorial in Louisburgh, County Mayo, as he recalled that his father never forgot his ancestral land, and the sufferings it had endured.

He mentioned that his father also loved to visit France generally and Paris in particular that he read very widely, and was frequently visited by politicians, journalists and writers.

Noting again his affection for his father, he said he had been honoured to be asked to come to Athlone for the event. He thanked the organisers, in particular George Eaton, for the invitation.

BRODERICK BOOK LAUNCH

The selected writings of John Broderick (1924-89), edited by Madeline Kingston and entitled "Stimulus of Sin," were wonderful, said Desmond Green at the Athlone Literary Festival.

The writings express the dilemmas of the time, and made one realise the wide range of Broderick's reading and knowledge.

The book consists of impressive essays and reviews, and other journalistic work published by Broderick over the years, as well as four previously unpublished short stories.

Mr. Green said that in some respects, Broderick revealed more about himself in his essays and reviews than in his novels.

Instrumental in ensuring that the writings were published, he said that he met Broderick by chance at a London restaurant and they got to talking as they were both from Athlone. Broderick was very humorous company for the evening, and very perceptive about issues as well.

He thanked Madeline Kingston for editing the book, Gearóid O'Brien for his help in the provision of the short stories, Antony Farrell of Lilliput Press who had published the book, and Colm Tóibín who had written the foreword.

There was a parallel between James T Farrell and Broderick at times in terms of the realism of their writing, he said.

Among the writings he referred to in his talk, was one piece about Pope John XXIII with whom Broderick was clearly very impressed when he got the opportunity to meet him, commenting; "What flowed from him was the force of a supremely warm personality. He radiated goodwill, confidence and hope. I could feel the impact of that personality in a purely physical way; it flashed out like an electric current".

While other writers might distinguish between appearance and reality in many ways, Broderick essentially considered them one and the same thing, according to Green. He also considered himself a storyteller as well as being an artist in search of certainties.

Madeline Kingston, a native of Fermanagh who now lives in Scotland, noted that the book had arrived very recently from the printer and she was delighted with the finished product.

She had taken the opportunity to take a walk around Athlone and found that she looked at it "through the prism of John Broderick's writings." When working on his biography (her first book) she became aware of the great amount of reviews and journalistic work he had published.

In his reviews he demonstrated passionate admiration for some authors and passionate contempt for others, with the contemptuous reviews sometimes being the most entertaining.

Overall his writings revealed a very human person and a lot of craftsmanship. The content of the book was very impressive.

She thanked everyone involved, including Lilliput Press and Desmond Green, who had shown great enthusiasm for the publication of the book. Summing up the occasion, George Eaton, Chairman of the Festival, said the two talks had revealed “a feast of thought about the work of Broderick”. He praised Desmond Green for being so focussed in ensuring the book was published, and wished everyone involved the best of luck with it.

THE GREAT DEBATE

The speakers were Kevin Myers, the controversial columnist of The Irish Independent, Eamon Delaney, editor of Magill magazine and author of An Accidental Diplomat; Joe Higgins of the Socialist Party, and Emer O’Kelly, columnist with The Sunday Independent. The chairman was Tom Maguire, regional editor with RTE Radio One.

There was a welcome for Dr Kevin Farrell, son of the writer James T Farrell, whose work was the primary focus of the Literary Festival’s weekend.

The motion for debate was that we are now an economy and not a society.

In typically colourful style, Joe Higgins said a lot of material in the Mahon Tribunal was similar in many ways to Grimms Fairy Tales. He argued that, in today’s society, the search for profit maximisation by big players takes precedence over social solidarity and the care of the vulnerable. In terms of property the Government had handed control to land speculators and greed driven developers, he said. Investment had in some cases involved the cream of society such as doctors and lawyers. As a further argument he referred to Aer Lingus moving their London flights from Shannon to Dublin in order to get workers to whom they would have to pay less. He commented that while he believed James T Farrell had “moved to the right” in terms of his ideology after World War II, mainly due to his abhorrence of Stalin, nevertheless his literature stood the test of time.

Kevin Myers surprisingly began his talk by saying he was genuinely sorry to see Joe Higgins lose his seat in the Dáil. He didn’t agree with a lot of what Higgins said, but the socialist deputy added to the diversity of the Houses of the Oireachtas. Overall he acknowledged that we all think we’re right all the time, but often a person you’re certain was wrong can be proved to have been in fact, right. For all the accumulation of profit by people who it is argued seem to do nothing, nevertheless the country had attracted half a million immigrants from Eastern Europe, countries where they had experienced 50 years of economic decay due to state socialism. “The reality is that you cannot enforce socialism in any meaningful way”, he commented. He said that, in 1912, our country was in fact the tenth richest country in the world. There was poverty but we were far richer than any Scandinavian country, he argued. However, after achieving independence we had adopted a protected economy and that had been damaging so that, by 1966, we were the 56th richest country in the world and many people were forced to emigrate.

A big reason for this was that there had been excessive control of the economy by the state. It wasn’t a society but a country plunging to disaster and so the reforms of Seán Lemass and civil servant Kenneth Whittaker were much needed. Only in the past 15 years had it become laudable to make profit. In relation to the property question, the

authorities in Dublin should be prepared to allow higher buildings, and more land should be made available for building. “It’s better for people to be rich rather than poor and every society that has tried socialism has failed,” he said. Referring to immigration, he added that he was in favour of immigration but, over the next generation and a half or so, it could cause a lot of difficulties and there had to be integration. “We have to have controlled immigration and deal with it legally.”

Eamon Delaney acknowledged that “I talked up the boom.... but I now think I’m wrong and I’m frightened by some of the changes.” He was interested in art, culture, heritage, lifestyle, and so on, but “we have gone wholesale for market economics and consumerism,” and we had forgotten that “we don’t live to work but we work to live.” There had been many changes in society, and many developments that weren’t good, even if one looked at the very excessive traffic as a small example, or the putting in place of housing developments without the necessary infrastructure. We were increasingly looking at a “dumbed down” culture, typified by shopping malls and anglo-american influences. A previous boom had been better handled in the country. “I don’t think we’ve managed this boom well,” he commented. “I think we’ve become more of an economy and less of a society.”

Emer O’Kelly commented that for society to exist there must be a basic level of agreement between the vast majority of parties involved. Going by that standard society didn’t really exist in Ireland. Looking to Britain, she commented that Thatcher had ended any decency in the Conservative Party and thus lessened “society,” while Tony Blair did the same as leader of Labour and Prime Minister. She was critical of the role of religion in Irish society over the years but acknowledged that society was “at sea” as a result of the decline of the influence of the Church. Someone had asked her “what was wrong with being an economy and a society?” That seemed a fair point.

Speaking from the floor, Dr. Kevin Farrell said that speaking in a personal capacity, his visit suggested to him that Ireland “had it together” in many respects. People generally seemed quite happy, and surely laws could be put in place to help with the housing situation and so on. Speaking during a general discussion afterwards, Joe Higgins commented that the national media reflected the interests of big business, and wanted to keep society the same. As part of that, the media was gaining brilliant financial rewards from property advertising. The Irish Times had epitomised this recently when it bought the website myhome.ie.

Summing up, Dr. Patrick Murray of the Athlone Literary Festival committee thanked all the speakers, whom he said were very interesting. With reference to Emer O’Kelly’s comments about religion, he said that he had attended the Marist College in Athlone, and only later realised that the priests there donated their wages so that poorer children could attend the school – it was a good example of social cohesion at work he said.

POETRY WORKSHOP AND READING

Kevin Higgins was born in London in 1967 and grew up in Galway City where he lives. He has worked in the UK and the US. His poetry has appeared widely in literary journals in Ireland, Britain, The United States, Canada, Europe and New Zealand. His work also features in the anthologies Short Fuse, Breaking The Skin; New Irish Poetry, 100 Poets Against The War and Irish Writers Against War. He was a founding co-editor of The Burning Bush literary magazine and is the poetry critic of The Galway Advertiser.

It was a great pleasure to welcome Kevin to Athlone on the occasion of his first participation in our Festival. Hopefully it will not be his last. There was some elasticity about his presentation – it depended on the numbers attending as to whether it would be a workshop or a reading, or more precisely on the numbers of those attending who had written poetry themselves – the greater the number who had done so the greater the extent of workshop there was to be in his presentation. In the end, few of those present had written any poetry at all, or at any rate, few were willing to declare that they had done so. His presentation was excellent, very lively, and delivered in an animated style. He was much appreciated and finished with an invitation to all present to send him by email, within the following seven days, a poem the first line of which would read *Welcome to My Country*. He undertook to respond with helpful criticism to each submission.

DINNER AT TOP DECK BISTRO

Donie Hynes and his team served fine fare to those participants in the Festival who congregated in his Bistro on Saturday night, accompanied by spouses and friends. A memorable feature of the evening was provided by Sweet Auburn, the all-female barber shop group based in Athlone.