

Routledge book launch 22nd November 2019: speech by Dr Elizabeth Mullins
The Staff Common Room, UCC

Good evening, everyone. Thank you to Diarmuid for his introduction and to Mervyn and the History Department here in UCC for their support for this event. Thanks to you all also for coming along this evening to mark the publication of the three volumes of the collected works of Jennifer O'Reilly. On behalf of myself, Carol, Máirín, and Diarmuid, I would like to acknowledge the help that this project has got from many different quarters. This has been firstly practical support in terms of funding from the NUI and the Colleges of Arts in UCC and in UCD. This support also came in tangible ways from a number of scholars and friends who helped the project on its way – people like Jane Hawkes, who is here with us tonight, but also Jo Storey, Rachel Moss, Bernard Hamilton and many others. In relation to the two art volumes I want to pay a special tribute to Carol Farr, my co-editor. Unlike Máirín, Diarmuid and I, Carol involved herself in this project on the basis of her close friendship with Jennifer over many years. I want to thank her now, not just for her scholarly contribution but for her personal qualities, her dedication and loyalty, which made our work together possible. On a more personal note, I particularly want to thank my husband, Dermot, who spent a fair amount of last Christmas helping to edit the essays in the second of the two art volumes. Thank you, Dermot, for this. Thanks also to Jacob and Leo, my two sons who are also here this evening, who provided us with lots of distraction and light relief in this period!

In addition to the practical and moral support required to get this kind of project finished, there needed to be a fair amount of management of the editorial team. There were two people who were at the heart of this process. The first of these is Terry. Before the books' publication he had worked to complete some of the pieces that had been left unfinished at the time of Jennifer's death. When it came putting these pieces with the already published material, he was the person who had the vision of the work as a whole. During the process Terry had a sense of how to bring out the strengths of the editors at different times. This is something which came to the fore in particular in relation to the introductions to the three books, where Terry's reassurance and sound judgement were vital.

In addition to Terry's work with us in relation to the intellectual framing of the books, these volumes owe their greatest practical debt to Tom. When a number of us met in Cambridge in September of 2018, it was clear that Tom was committed to getting the books finished in a

timely fashion. It was also clear that he had the abilities to plan the project and organize myself, Carol, Máirín and Diarmuid in such a way that we got what we needed to do done, not always exactly when we promised, but near enough to this. Tom's organizational gifts and people skills shone in particular in relation to procuring the images and permissions for the illustrations in the two art volumes. His exacting approach with Routledge, our publisher, meant that all of these images appeared in colour. It also meant that the presentation of every aspect of the books is of the highest standard. Thank you, Tom, for all your hard work and dedication.

The three volumes that Damian will launch in a moment contain all of Jennifer's published essays over a period of 40 or so years, as well as a small number of writings that, as mentioned, were left unfinished at the time of her death. The nice thing about being in Cork this evening is that all of the essays in the volumes were written here in the studies of either 'Rivendell', the O'Reilly's first house on the Lee Road, or in 'Dunowen' on Glasheen Road, or else in moments snatched between lecture preparation in various offices in 'Elderwood', the History Department Building on College Road. The essays fall into three broad categories reflecting the gradual shift in Jennifer's interests from an early focus on European art and iconography in the later medieval period to an increasing preoccupation with the creative output of the monastic culture of the British Isles in the Insular period – between around 400 and 800. The essays which form the bulk of the contents of the volumes attend to all the great creative achievements of this era; so there is discussion of gospel books, like Durrow, Kells and Lindisfarne, hagiographical works, such as Adomnan's *Life of Columba* and exegetical texts, like the Hiberno Latin *Reference Bible* and Bede's *Commentary on the Temple*. In the final decade or so of her life, Jennifer's work focused increasingly on the intellectual and spiritual life of one monastery, Wearmouth-Jarrow, and on the writings of Bede, its most famous inhabitant. These later contributions are remarkable in their complexity and bear witness to Jennifer's total understanding of this particular monastic environment.

While the subjects of the essays are relatively wide-ranging, they gain coherence from their shared methodology. Developed first in the context of Jennifer's doctoral work, her method focused on how scriptural images are understood and expressed visually and verbally over time. Jennifer was interested in seeing how the meaning and interpretation of images changed both because of the form in which they were being expressed, whether this was in a manuscript, tapestry, history or sermon, but also because of their encounter with a new

cultural context. Her reading of the Fathers of the Early Church afforded her a sophisticated appreciation of how the Insular Church both continued the traditions of reading and seeing images which they inherited from the world of Late Antiquity but also how they changed them.

One of the things which occurred to me over the course of the last week when I was thinking about what to say this evening is that most of us here knew Jennifer as a person, and so our memories of her as a student, colleague and friend are very much part of how we read these books. I wondered what these volumes would tell the reader who didn't get a chance to know Jennifer while she was with us.

One of the first things that struck me which might seem superficial, but which isn't, I think, is just how elegant the books are physically. This seems appropriate for someone who dressed with such style and grace, but who made this seem about more than the superficial. I think that Jennifer knew somehow that choosing to wear a beautiful suit for her 9 o'clock lecture to first year history students on a Monday morning was showing a respectful way of living a life in relation to them as her students and in relation to the artefacts of the past that she was so involved with.

The second thing which I thought would strike any reader of these essays is the sheer intensity of Jennifer's engagement with the material. This rested on her profound learning but seemed somehow also intimately connected with the depth of her own spiritual life, even though this was something always only obliquely present. Her passion for the material she was speaking about translated most forcibly into her teaching. I have strong memories of sitting in the dark in the seminar room in Q-1 and hearing her speak about the *Book of Kells* in such a way that I literally felt after the class that I had visited the monastery at Iona in the eighth century. Jennifer's ability to imaginatively engage us with the world which she studied had a very human side – the fact that her methodology moved so fluidly between looking at studies on liturgy, art, exegesis and history taught us about the life of the monk who would encounter all the images and ideas that were being discussed in multiple forms in the course of one day – from the early morning prayers in the chapel, to the images on the walls, to the texts read out at mealtimes, the work carried out in the scriptorium and even in the natural landscape surrounding the monastery.

Another part of Jennifer's personality that comes through in her essays is how much she loved a good puzzle or mystery. Within the couple of minutes of watching a detective series with Jennifer she would have figured out who the culprit of the crime was! On a more serious note, Jennifer loved to try to figure out things in a scholarly context, to look for clues that others had overlooked and to see how the medieval writers and, particularly, artists she studied were playing with ideas, putting contradictory images alongside each other and challenging the person with eyes to see to attain a greater understanding. Connected to this, I think, it is fair to say that something which no reader of these volumes would fail to miss is the difficulty of some of these essays. Jennifer knew that part of the intellectual journey for her students, particularly her postgrads, was about getting to grips with the complexity of the images and ideas present in the texts. The reader of these essays is given all the signposts to help them understand, but it may take some time for them to realize that the signposts are there!

One of the strongest memories I have of my time as a postgraduate with Jennifer is spending an afternoon together in the Reading Room of the Abbey Library at St Gallen in Switzerland. I was studying nearby at the time and we had been given the opportunity to look at the original manuscript of the St Gall Gospels. This is an eighth- or ninth-century illuminated gospel book produced in Ireland that is the subject of one of the longer essays in the first of the art volumes here. This was an extraordinary afternoon in the context of my research as we sat together as the only people in the reading room and Jennifer went through the manuscript, a bit like she does in the article in the volume, speaking about each of the features of the text and the images which accompany it. All I had to do was to listen.

For those of us who knew Jennifer and for the readers of the volumes who don't, Jennifer's collected works allow us to listen and to learn from her distinctive voice for as long as we wish. It is a genuine pleasure for me, Carol, Máirín and Diarmuid to be able to celebrate the launch of the volumes here in UCC among so many of Jennifer's friends, and especially with her family, Terry, Michael and Tom. Thank you.