

Dr Jennifer O'Reilly, MRIA, FSA (1943–2016)

A memoir, by Dr Diarmuid Scully

The editorial Introductions to the three volumes of Jennifer O'Reilly's collected research essays consider her written legacy and contribution to scholarship on late antique, medieval, and especially Insular text and image.¹ An outline of her academic career may be found in the festschrift published in her honour by Cork University Press: *Listen O Isles Unto Me*.² Contributions to the festschrift indicate the extent of her scholarly influence and the tremendous affection and respect that she inspired. The remarks of Professor Jane Hawkes are representative and may be applied beyond the discipline of art history to encompass Jennifer's research in its entirety: 'The impact of Jennifer O'Reilly's work on the study of Insular art is genuinely incalculable. Without it, and her unstinting encouragement of others working in the field, it is unlikely that at least two generations of scholars, as well as those still to emerge, would have set out on their various ... voyages of exploration and discovery; would have been able to achieve their own objectives; or would have had any impact on their own particular areas of academic study'.³

I

The following is a brief memoir of Jennifer O'Reilly as a teacher. Jennifer joined the Department of Medieval History, University College Cork, in 1975. In those days, there were three independent History Departments in the College, as Cork people often call it: the Department of Medieval History, the Department of Modern History and the Department of Irish History. The Department of Medieval History was located in No.1, Elderwood, College Road, part of a late Victorian terrace that looked directly across to the main campus. The University had been founded in 1845 as

¹ All three volumes of Jennifer O'Reilly's collected research writings are published in Routledge's *Variorum Collected Studies* series. Máirín MacCarron and Diarmuid Scully (eds), *Jennifer O'Reilly, History, Hagiography and Exegesis: Essays on Bede, Adomnán and Thomas Becket* (London and New York, 2019); Carol A. Farr and Elizabeth Mullins (ed.), *Jennifer O'Reilly, Early Medieval Text and Image 1: The Insular Gospel Books* (London and New York, 2019); Carol A. Farr and Elizabeth Mullins (ed.), *Jennifer O'Reilly, Early Medieval Text and Image 2: The Codex Amiatinus, the Book of Kells and Anglo-Saxon Art* (London and New York, 2019).

² Elizabeth Mullins and Diarmuid Scully (eds), *Listen O Isles Unto Me: Studies in Medieval Word and Image in Honour of Jennifer O'Reilly* (Cork, 2011), 'Introduction', xix–xxi.

³ 'The Road to Hell: The Art of Damnation in Anglo-Saxon Sculpture', in Mullins and Scully (eds), *Listen O Isles Unto Me*, 230–42 and 374–79 at 230.

Queen's College Cork. It was a green and lovely place, designed in the Gothic style by Sir Thomas Deane.⁴

Jennifer's first office in Elderwood was located on the top floor. From 1975 to 1991, it gave her a quiet place to read, reflect, write, prepare classes and meet her students. The room was tiny, high up, with a good quality of light; it had the air of a crow's nest on a very civilised sailing ship. There was a poster on the wall by the desk: a Holbein portrait of an English lady, with a small bird. There was always a copy of Bede's *Historia Ecclesiastica* on the desk, and a Lewis chess-piece, the white knight. There was an electric kettle on the floor near the desk, and small, elegant coffee cups, a sugar bowl and a milk jug on a nearby shelf. Jennifer made coffee for students and other visitors who came to talk to her for any length of time. Her books were tidily crowded on the shelves, with slips of paper and postcards sticking out from many of them; she was constantly jotting down notes: ideas, summaries, references and cross-references. There were wonderful, glossy art history books, primary texts, commentaries and other specialist works.

To focus on primary sources, and Bede and his immediate hinterland alone: the *Historia Ecclesiastica* was prominent and talismanic on Jennifer's bookshelves: Plummer's edition, and Colgrave and Mynors' edition and translation, and Shirley-Price's translation for Penguin Classics, which she used for teaching in the 1980s – several copies. This was the first book that I bought in the College bookshop. I met Jennifer as a First Year student in 1983. Coming to UCC, I had no plans to specialise in medieval history. After hearing Jennifer's first lecture, I had no plans to specialise in anything else. Bede stood out. Jennifer's love of Bede and respect for his artistry and intellectual greatness were palpable. The following pages reflect her passion for Bede and his world, which she communicated with such eloquence to her students.

Jennifer never considered either Bede or the *Historia Ecclesiastica* in isolation. Her bookshelves reflected her conviction that Bede emerged from a cultural heritage shared by the peoples of early medieval Britain and Ireland – and her conviction that Bede himself was a prime architect of an early Insular identity embedded in the universal, orthodox Christian community centred on petrine Rome and conscious of its Jewish foundations. Consequently, the *Historia Ecclesiastica* was flanked by its essential companions on Jennifer's shelves. Adomnán's *Life of*

⁴ On its history, see John A. Murphy, *The College: A History of Queen's/University College Cork 1845–1995* (Cork, 1995).

Columba and *De locis sanctis* were there, in the editions and translations by the Andersons and Meehan respectively. Also, Gildas's *De Excidio Britanniae* in Winterbottom's edition. Nearby, for teaching, Alexander's *Beowulf* translation from Penguin Classics, Webb's *Lives of the Saints* and, later, the different versions of Webb and Farmer's *Age of Bede*: again, several copies. In the 1980s, Colgrave's editions and translations of the *Lives* of Gregory the Great, Cuthbert, Wilfrid and Felix joined them in paperback. And in a compact formation, bibles: the Vulgate, Douai and King James versions and a clutch of Jerusalem Bibles for consultation in class, along with Cruden's *Concordance*. From the mid-1980s to 1991, the first English translations of Bede's exegetical works began to appear on Jennifer's office bookshelves: his *Commentary on the Seven Catholic Epistles* (Hurst), *Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles* (Martin) and *Homilies on the Gospels* (Martin and Hurst), all from Cistercian Publications.

In 1991, Jennifer, by then Acting Head of the Department of Medieval History, moved into another, bigger office on the first floor of No. 1 Elderwood, with far more space for her books. This was needed, notably for Bede. Anyone looking at Jennifer's office book shelves at the time of her retirement from the School of History in 2008, and again at her home book shelves in 2016, when she died, would have been struck by the rapid expansion of accessible scholarly English translations (with commentaries) of Bede's exegetical, cosmological, chronological and related works, many of them published in Liverpool University Press's series, 'Translated Texts for Historians'. Jennifer herself made a very significant contribution to this enterprise in her Introduction to Dr Seán Connolly's translation of *De Templo*.⁵ Critical editions of Bede's writings produced in the twentieth century, mostly in Brepols' *Corpus Christianorum Series Latina*, prepared the way for these publications, bringing Bede to a new audience. The translations and their commentaries advanced a process underway for some time, anticipated by Plummer, which understood that Bede the historian and Bede the exegete were one and the same, and that his entire corpus sought to explore and communicate the working out of providence in this world and the next.

⁵ Reprinted in *History, Hagiography and Biblical Exegesis: Essays on Bede, Adomnán and Thomas Becket*.

II

Jennifer herself had a profound and original vision of Bede. Long before she committed her insights to paper, she had been exploring them with her students. Jennifer's students were at the heart of her scholarly life. When she met a class for the first time, she learned and remembered everyone's name. In a hierarchical academic society, she was no respecter of persons and protected her students' interests and well-being with the same zeal that she devoted to the maintenance of professional integrity and high standards. Jennifer had the gift of *discretio* – discernment – recognised by Bede as 'the mother of all virtues' (*HE* 3.5). She was kind, civil, gracious, firm, principled and wise. I recall her remarking on the good manners and calm persistence of Cuthbert in a fractious Lindisfarne, as presented in Bede's prose *Life* of the saint.⁶ No coincidence, perhaps, that she also admired Joan Hickson's interpretation of Miss Marple in the BBC television series of the 1980s and early 90s: courteous, rational, incisive, empathetic, with an unwavering sense of justice and fairness.

Jennifer's most intensive classes – comprised of small groups of undergraduates and postgraduates devoted to reading texts and images, and talking about their reading – took place in the seminar room of No. 1 Elderwood, next to Jennifer's new office. Its fireplace, arrangement of windows, and size suggested that this was once a parlour. Jennifer restored a rather bare, functional academic space to life. She organised the tables and chairs into the collegial shape of a rectangle, where people could see and address one another directly. She punctuated longer classes with tea, coffee and biscuits, with everyone taking turns to help with the preparation and washing up. Jennifer delighted in a quip from her colleague Mr A.F. O'Brien, who taught Medieval economic and social history and frequently stepped aside for passing trays, kettles, cups and supplies: '*nothing* is too good for the working man'.

These may seem small matters, but they counted for much. Think of Fezziwig, as far a physical type from Jennifer as it is possible to imagine: 'He has the power to render us happy or unhappy; to make our service light or burdensome; a pleasure or a toil. Say that his power lies in words and looks; in things so slight and insignificant

⁶ *Vita Sancti Cuthberti* 16, in Bertram Colgrave (ed. and trans.), *Two Lives of St Cuthbert* (Cambridge, 1940; repr. 1985).

that it is impossible to add and count 'em up: what then? The happiness he gives, is quite as great as if it cost a fortune'.⁷

III

When Jennifer came to Cork, she was a woman in an overwhelmingly male-dominated University: no easy situation. But she often remarked that Professor John G. Barry, Head of the Department of Medieval History, gave her the opportunity to teach anything she liked. She designed and taught courses introducing medieval history to the students, and then, in extraordinary depth, exploring Bede, Adomnán and Becket, (the subjects of her essays gathered in *History, Hagiography and Exegesis*), as well as late antique, Insular and medieval art and iconography, which inspired the essays that appear in the other two volumes of her collected research publications: *Early Medieval Text and Image 1: The Insular Gospel Books* and *Early Medieval Text and Image 2: The Codex Amiatinus, the Book of Kells and Anglo-Saxon Art*. It is also noteworthy that Jennifer was a founder-member of the Diploma in the History of Art at UCC in 1998, and later played a vital role in the establishment of a BA programme in the History of Art there. She continued to contribute lectures to that programme until her death.

About 5,000 students, generally from Cork city and county and the province of Munster, attended UCC in Jennifer's early years. That figure is now around 21,000 students. Currently, the teaching year is divided into two semesters, beginning in September and ending in April, with examinations held in December and May. For most of her career, however, the teaching year began in October, was divided into three terms, and concluded in May and June with summer examinations. In the 1970s and 1980s, final year BA candidates took Honours papers in the autumn. From May to August they had the leisure to read books: in effect, an undergraduate sabbatical that further encouraged their progress from a good level of knowledge to a richer understanding, which Jennifer had fostered in class. An ideal teacher, like Bede's Aidan, she led her pupils from 'the milk of simpler teaching' to 'more elaborate instruction' (*HE* 3.5).

⁷ Charles Dickens, *A Christmas Carol* (1843; Puffin Books, 2015) 48–49.

Students of the three separate History Departments attended a common First Year course, entitled 'Medieval History', which Jennifer taught until the creation of a single Department (later School) of History in 1992. Thereafter, she continued to teach its key themes and topics in a single-semester module: 'East and West: The Origins of European Identity'. I emphasise the original course, because it laid the foundations for the development of her specialist lectures, case studies and seminars and, along with them, it provides an insight into her interpretative and methodological approaches to teaching and research.

Jennifer's introductory First Year lecture took place at 9am on the first Monday of term, making her the first member of the History staff to meet the new students. She had stage presence, authority and élan: she was *alive*, with an elegant appearance, a beautiful and clear voice, and an absolute command of her material and audience; she knew how to tell a story. I was reading Muriel Spark when I attended Jennifer's introductory lecture in 1983, and thought: in another life, what a magnificent Abbess of Crewe she would make.⁸

Jennifer taught the original First Year course for two hours a week throughout the teaching year. It ranged chronologically and geographically from the late Roman Mediterranean world to the Crusades and the centralising European monarchies of the thirteenth century. Lectures discussed the later Roman empire, Byzantium, the Church, the papacy, monasticism, Rome's barbarian successor kingdoms in the West – principally, the Anglo-Saxons and Franks, with an emphasis on Anglo-Saxon and Irish links and interactions. The course also introduced the emergence of Islam and the early Islamic Arab conquests, the Carolingian empire and renaissance, feudalism, the rise and fortunes of the French, German and English monarchies and their bureaucracies, and the development of cities and universities.

Above all, Jennifer's lectures captured the imagination and provided a grounding in the changing realities of public and private power and the functioning of great institutions, movements and elites, as well as the importance of individual men, women, books, monuments and works of art. Jennifer's treatment of the Battle of Hastings, as interpreted and narrated by the Bayeux Tapestry, was a favourite among students for its dash and brio, evocation of the excitement, terror and chaos of battle, and account of the English and Norman war-horses. Jennifer had a vast knowledge

⁸ Muriel Spark, *The Abbess of Crewe* (Penguin Books, 1974).

and love of horses. She explored their representation on the Tapestry in detail, explaining their physique, equipment and different gaits, and conveying the sheer exhilaration of horse riding; to accompany the Tapestry's images, she recommended the hunting scene in the 1963 film version of *Tom Jones*.

In the First Year course, Jennifer's lectures on the Anglo-Saxons looked at the conversion process and the impact of Latin Christian culture on a society radically different to the later Roman Mediterranean world. These lectures featured – among many other spectacular images – slides displaying the Sutton Hoo ship and its treasures, early Insular illuminated manuscripts such as the Book of Kells and the Codex Amiatinus, the Ruthwell and Bewcastle crosses, photographs of Iona, Lindisfarne and Skellig Michael, and the sacred buildings of Ravenna and their mosaics: San Vitale, Sant'Appolinare Nuovo and Sant'Apollinare in Classe, the mausoleum of Galla Placida, and the Arian baptistery. The lectures were supported by primary source handouts and maps, distributed in every class. Text, image and Jennifer's commentary conveyed the complexity, splendour and strangeness of this world.

Bede was the fundamental textual source for Jennifer's lectures on Anglo-Saxon England. She read extensively from the *Historia Ecclesiastica* to the class: years later, people could still recall her reading of Augustine's confrontation with the Britons and refusal to stand up when he met them in conference; Æthelfrith ravening like a wolf; Edwin in exile; Redwald's wife despising gold and threats; the story of the sparrow's flight through the hall; Coifi desecrating his own temple; the tall, stooped, austere Paulinus baptising converts in the river Trent, seen from a child's eye and recalled in old age; Columba at Iona and the Irish at Lindisfarne; Aidan's reproach when Oswald protested at his gift of a magnificent royal horse to a poor man; Wilfrid and Colmán at Whitby (Plummer's marginal note – 'Insolence of Wilfrid' – apparently evoked by Jennifer's tone but questioned in her analysis); Egbert's good death on Easter Sunday, the Paschal controversy resolved on Iona and the Columban Irish providentially rewarded for their mission to the English.⁹ This list alone suggests the formidable encounter with Bede that Jennifer undertook with her First Year students, and offers some glimpses of the concerns of her research publications included in *History, Hagiography and Exegesis* in particular.

⁹ C. Plummer (ed.), *Venerabilis Baedae Opera Historica* (Oxford, 1896; repr. 1966), Notes, 191.

Here was a woman to provide ‘serious entertainments’, as Nancy F. Partner characterised the written performances of the great historians of twelfth-century England.¹⁰ Jennifer had a superb sense of timing and a talent for the unexpected, even startling intervention, with a hint of ‘divilment’, the expression of a lightly ironic and never unkind humour (very English and very Cork). I recall one lecture, where she was reading aloud from Augustine’s correspondence with Gregory the Great on pregnancy, childbirth, menstruation and sexual intercourse (*HE* 1.27, VIII). Sensing a ripple of awkwardness, she paused, rested her arm on the podium, leaned forward, looked at the class, lowered her voice a full octave, and said, with a fractional wink: ‘childbirth is a very *leaky* business’.

IV

Students who took Jennifer’s Bede courses in their second or third undergraduate years, then, and studied him as postgraduates, already knew the *Historia Ecclesiastica* well, and had an awareness of the values, ideals and realities of early Anglo-Saxon England and its wider late Roman, Insular, European and Byzantine contexts. This meant that Jennifer could begin her specialist classes on the *HE* without preamble or distraction: with the text itself.

Many of Jennifer’s students also studied English as undergraduates, further enriching their experience when they chewed upon Bede’s text. They read *Beowulf* and other Old English poetry and prose works with Professor Éamonn Ó Carragáin of the School of English, with whom Jennifer worked closely and formed a deep and abiding friendship. Éamonn’s guidance to students on an early 1980s Anglo-Saxon poetry reading list also sums up Jennifer’s approach to Bede. Referring to Hamer’s *Choice of Anglo-Saxon Verse* and Swanton’s edition and translation of *Beowulf*, he wrote: ‘These are the only books which you must study carefully and know well. No other reading should be allowed to distract you from getting to know these two textbooks and making up your mind as to how the poems in them work’. I do not mean to imply that Jennifer and Éamonn ignored the secondary sources. Their reading and knowledge of the theoretical and specialist literature of their disciplines was

¹⁰ Nancy F. Partner, *Serious Entertainments: The Writing of History in Twelfth-Century England* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1977).

prodigious. Direct study of the primary sources, informed by this secondary reading and knowledge, was always their priority.

Jennifer and Éamonn taught joint, interdisciplinary and inter-departmental courses on art, iconography and literature (an unprecedented venture in UCC) that gave joy to many people. In collaboration with other friends and colleagues whose names are connected with several of Jennifer's publications – including Professor Máire Herbert, Professor Elisabeth Okasha, Professor Jane Hawkes, and Aidan MacDonald – they made UCC an informal, learned and hospitable centre of Insular studies, located within the framework of late antique, patristic and early medieval cultural engagement with the classical tradition and Judaeo-Christian scripture.

Jennifer's own teaching provided her students with a unique pedagogical training from the very beginning of their studies. Jane Hawkes's assessment of Jennifer's written work is equally applicable to her teaching and its pedagogical implications: 'Jennifer's work manages to assimilate the intellectual, theological and historical with the visual in a manner entirely integral to the early medieval world she has brought to life, but one so far removed from modern "ways of seeing"'.¹¹ Professor Hawkes's remarks effectively describe a school of thought that Jennifer pioneered in Cork, which, along with her publications, is one of her most important legacies. In many cases, Jennifer's undergraduate students went on to complete doctoral theses under her direction, and to pursue university careers in medieval history. These students have applied Jennifer's 'ways of seeing' to their own teaching and research specialisms, further extending them into new fields of study, and transmitting them to a new generation of undergraduates and postgraduates.

The essays in *Listen O Isles* and the diverse publications by Jennifer's colleagues and students, and others who engage with her work, testify to the impact of her approach to medieval culture. The publication of the three volumes of her collected research writings will further enrich her legacy.

¹¹ Hawkes, J. (2011). The Road to Hell: The Art of Damnation in Anglo-Saxon Sculpture. In E. Mullins, & D. Scully (Eds.), *Listen, O Isles, unto me: Studies in Medieval Word and Image in honour of Jennifer O'Reilly* (p. 230). Cork University Press.

V

As the essays in all three volumes of Jennifer's collected publications demonstrate, she had an intense awareness of sacred scripture and patristic exegesis. Her reading of Origen, especially, shaped her understanding of the multiple levels of meaning possible and present in Bede's scriptural commentaries and exegetically-informed explorations of providential history, hagiography, geography, the natural world and the reckoning of time (and possible and present too in the writings of Adomnán and Thomas Becket's contemporaries and hagiographers). This same insight into the multivalence of text and image guided Jennifer's exploration of medieval art and iconography, as Carol A. Farr and Elizabeth Mullins emphasise in their Introductions to the two volumes of *Early Medieval Text and Image*.

Jennifer observed that one of the privileges of her position in Cork was the freedom to write about anything she chose, at her own pace. We see the fruits of this freedom in her research publications. Her articles are often of very substantial length; for example, 'Islands and idols' and 'The Double Martyrdom of Thomas Becket' reprinted in *History, Hagiography and Exegesis*. All of her work is the result of immense, meditative learning, distilled into allusive and often long, densely packed and refined, delicately crafted sentences. Her writing invites and requires slow reading and comes from her own deep reflection on the texts and images in question. Her approach, and the reward that it brings to the reader, suggests the monastic practice of rumination and emerges from a similar process. Think of Bede on Caedmon, instructed by the Whitby community in the whole course of sacred history at Hild's direction: 'He learned all he could by listening to them, and then, memorising it and ruminating over it, like some clean animal chewing the cud, he turned it into the most melodious verse' (*HE* 4.24).¹²

In *History, Hagiography and Exegesis*, Jennifer's own speaking voice is most evident in 'Bede and the dating of Easter', an essay based on two conference papers not substantially re-written for publication. But she also read 'St Paul and the Sign of Jonah' aloud in St Paul's church at Jarrow, for the 2014 Jarrow lecture. While she spoke, there was complete, attentive silence: no fidgeting, no coughing, no shuffling in seats, no looking around. I suggest that a reader encountering Jennifer's written

¹² Philip J. West, 'Rumination in Bede's account of Caedmon', *Monastic Studies* 12 (1976) 217–26; Gernot Wieland, 'Caedmon, the clean animal', *American Benedictine Review* 35 (1984) 194–203.

work for the first time might begin with these two papers, which encapsulate many of her essential ideas and methods, and convey something of her presence as experienced by friends, students and colleagues. ‘*Lege feliciter*’.¹³

Dr Diarmuid Scully

¹³ Addressed to the reader at the conclusion of *HE 2*'s summary of contents.