

## Emeritus Professor Dermot Keogh



School of History Annual Prize-giving Ceremony,

Aula Maxima, UCC, 3 February 2020

Text of speech:

Thank you, Dr O’Driscoll for the invitation to participate in this celebration, a fitting occasion to acknowledge the scholarship and research excellence of a new generation of historians who have worked under the professional supervision of a dedicated staff here at UCC.

Congratulations to all the History, Art History and European Studies students for your outstanding and original research on such a wide range of topics. With the support of staff, siblings, partners, parents and

grandparents you have taken a major step on the road to being historians for life.

Not everyone becomes a professional historian, but all of you, the prize-winners, know and value the importance of history. That is a mind-set which will influence your work in whatever profession or vocation you choose to follow in the years to come. Irrespective of what global changes take place in the coming decades, you have the intellectual tools to evaluate and analyse those historical trends. At a time when populism is on the rise, knowing the tools of historical research is to possess skills for all seasons.

In writing your prize-winning essay, you have struggled to find the evidence and supporting arguments for your theses. That takes time, application and historical imagination. Let me give an example based on the experience of Robert A. Caro, the Biographer of President Lyndon Johnson.<sup>1</sup> In his memoir, *Working*, he sets out what a lifetime in research has taught him about historical method. As a young reporter, he was told by a seasoned, senior colleague: ‘Just remember,’ he said, ‘Turn every page. Never assume anything. Turn every goddamned page.’<sup>2</sup> Now, when Caro entered the Lyndon Johnson Presidential library and saw the hundreds of boxes of documents he needed to consult, that advice proved to be challenging. But the sage advice, ‘never assume anything’ is for all seasons in our profession.

Put simply, when tackling a new subject Caro followed a set research pattern – first you read the books on the subject, then you get the big

newspapers and the magazines, then the next thing you do is the documents: ‘You hope you’re seeing everything that really matters, but you always have this feeling, What’s in the rest.’ He explained that, after reviewing all the primary sources, he embarked on a round of interviews, stating that he interviewed Johnson’s speech writer twenty-two times plus a lot of informal telephone chats.

Caro is no admirer of historians who repeat the facts discovered by other historians: ‘You look at so many books, and it seems like all the writer cares about is getting the facts in. But facts alone aren’t enough.’ But even being that thorough – secondary literature, primary sources, interviews – left in his view a great deal more work to do: ‘But none of this is enough. You have to ask yourself, Are you making the reader *see* the scene. Can *you* see the scene?’<sup>3</sup> Here he gives the following example, He was told that Johnson, when he was being driving around on the stump, rested between speeches in the back seat of the car. He had read that *fact* in earlier histories. But Caro thought that was not the full story. Asking his close aides what Johnson did while resting in the back seat, Caro learned that he used to talk out loud to himself, criticising himself and urging himself to do better in the next speech. Here, of course, was an overlooked but important *fact* – Johnson’s self-doubt and his determination to communicate better with the next audience.

The researchers who are being awarded prizes here today know well about those moments of discovery – when hard work and the use of

historical imagination has paid off.<sup>4</sup> Like Caro, you will continue your apprenticeship, and I use that word deliberately because we never stop learning our craft, a craft rooted in curiosity and humility. As Caro wrote: ‘But facts alone aren’t enough’ meaning it is not sufficient to reproduce ‘the facts.’ He had, through meticulous research, constructed a new scholarly framework in which Lyndon Johnson could be understood based on *new* facts. Historical method is a combination of perspiration and inspiration which ought to leave no surplus energy for participation in the phoney ‘history wars.’

Looking back over my thirty years teaching in UCC, a privileged way to spend my professional life, I was in the company of many outstanding colleagues and generations of great students. During that busy time, I had the opportunity to research in a range of different fields. It was particularly rewarding to meet many people who made history and who made this country – be they political leaders or rank and file trade unionists, farm labourers or others who helped bring the state into existence. I first began to have conversations with political leaders in the late 1960s – member of the Irish revolutionary generation. At that time, the history profession in Ireland had yet to consider that period as part of the official canon of Irish history. My big regret now is that I did not spend more time in their company as they were only too delighted to talk and grant follow-up interviews. As they were men and women who had spent a lifetime politics, retirement did not suit their activist temperments and most were prepared to speak frankly about their respective roles in Irish public life.

I recall learning a great deal talking in Rome in 1978 to Kathleen McKenna Napoli, a member of the Treaty secretariat in 1921.<sup>5</sup> She told me that she had typed every issue of the Irish Bulletin – official Irish government gazette during the War of Independence between 1919 and 1921.<sup>6</sup> She had a great deal to say about the different political figures. Kathleen McKenna Napoli talked in a very self-deprecating way about having to shift from house to house to avoid capture by British Crown forces.<sup>7</sup>

Unfortunately, an oral history of that generation has been substantially lost, in large part, due to the conservatism of an earlier generation of the Irish historical profession. Fortunately, that era of seeing Irish history as ending before 1916 is over. This is due, in great measure, to the pioneering work of Professor John A. Murphy, whose book, *Ireland in the Twentieth Century*, came as a breath of fresh air to me when published in 1975.<sup>8</sup> Joseph J. Lee's *Ireland, 1912-1985 – Politics and Society* must also be cited as yet another pioneering volume which has come from the School of History, at UCC.<sup>9</sup>

I have been fortunate to work in archives in different countries and to meet Irish people who have made historical contributions abroad. I have also met many people who have made Ireland their home, refugees in the twentieth century fleeing political and religious repression and persecution. In 1998, I published a book entitled: *Jews in Twentieth Century Ireland – Refugees, Anti-Semitism and the Holocaust*. [I realise that 1998 was before many of the students here

were born.] Ireland was fortunate to receive a small number of refugees in the 1930s and 1940s from fascist and Nazi-dominated Europe. In the course of researching that book, I met Helen Lewis at her home in Belfast where she had lived since 1947. A trained classical dancer from Czechoslovakia, she had survived Auschwitz/Birkenau and a death march – experiences which she had reluctantly written about towards the end of her life in *A Time to Speak*.<sup>10</sup> Her book was written for her children and for future generations – lest anyone forgets what happened in the Holocaust during World War II. I mention my meeting with her to stress how fortunate a historian is to practice a profession which brings her/him frequently into contact with a wide range of extraordinary people, eyewitnesses to history and the makers of history.

There were commemorations around the world last week to mark the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz-Birkenau – a camp in which hundreds of thousands of human beings were exterminated in the gas chambers or were hanged, shot or died from disease or malnutrition. Helen Lewis was a survivor. In 1996, I sat in her home in Belfast trying to practice what Caro – who I quoted earlier – has recommended, listen, observe as ‘facts alone aren’t enough.’

Here is what I wrote in the introduction to *Jews in Twentieth Century Ireland*: ‘At a glance it looked like an ink smudge on her arm. But it wasn’t. A survivor of Auschwitz, Helen Lewis was pouring a cup of tea in her house in Belfast and what I had glimpsed was her concentration camp number, BA677 to be precise.’<sup>11</sup> Helen Lewis, and

most of the survivors, are no longer alive to continue testifying to what they experienced and to the events to which they were eye witnesses. She died on 31 December 2009 at her home in Belfast. But her book, *A Time to Speak*, is an enduring testimony both to barbarity and to the indomitable spirit of human endurance. In parenthesis, it is my view that Ireland lost the services of so many talented people by not allowing more refugees in during those decades of dictatorship and, I regret to say, the country's contemporary record in this area could be much better.

While I am not an oral historian, I have, nevertheless, tried – where possible – to have conversations with the actors/participants in history from *above* or *below*. When writing *Jews in Twentieth Century Ireland*, I met the journalist and playwright, Denis Johnston, who, reporting for the BBC, was one of the first to enter Buchenwald and has left the most vivid word pictures of what he witnessed. I also met the Dutch nurse, Han Horgezeil. Speaking five languages, she had worked alongside, Dr Robert Collis, when Bergen Belsen was liberated.<sup>12</sup> She told me of her vivid memories of the day when the huts in Belsen were burned – the thick black smoke for her symbolising the evil that had once inhabited the place. She also recalled: ‘There was an awful lot of love in Belsen. I remember more about love and devotion than I do about hatred.’<sup>13</sup>

I have yet another reason for bringing up the Holocaust in my talk here today. Last Friday, was the day when Britain left the European Union and Brexit ‘triumphed.’ Now, here is where the exercise of your

profession as historians – I am speaking directly now to the prize-winners – will count in the difficult decades to come. Is it not paradoxical that Brexit has occurred in the week when the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz-Birkenau is remembered? Further commemorations will take place to mark the liberation of the other death camps in the weeks to follow. On 8 May 2020, Victory in Europe (VE) will be celebrated.

Out of those terrible events of World War Two, sprang the movement which today is called the European Union. I taught the history of European integration here for over twenty years and now Katherine McGarry, who directs the schools outstanding European Studies programme, has that responsibility. I hope her lectures are on-line. They could be read with profit by the British Prime Minister, Boris Johnson. Paradoxically, Mr. Johnson's great hero, Winston Churchill,<sup>14</sup> was a leading advocate of European integration in the post war period and a leading designer of the architecture on which peace in Europe was constructed.

Successive leaders of the Winston Churchill's Conservative Party brought Britain closer to Europe. In the early 1960s, Harold Macmillan applied unsuccessfully for membership of the EEC for Britain and Northern Ireland. Another Conservative Prime Minister, Ted Heath, succeeded in gaining entry in 1973 at the same time as Ireland and Denmark. During its nearly 50 years of membership, Britain was a very constructive and active member of the EEC/EU, playing a full role in



the shaping of community institutions and fighting its corner in the 1980s – as Margaret Thatcher did with spectacular success – to defend her country's national interest – as she saw it.

All member states have derived great benefit from a unique international system based on interdependence and pooled sovereignty. Alas, English nationalism has enjoyed what may be a temporary victory. But, for now, Britain is no longer an EU member – a situation which will greatly weaken both the country leaving and the institution which bind the remaining 27 member states together. It is distressing to witness the British government take an action which is a self-inflicted wound, and against the majority of those who voted in Scotland and Northern Ireland to remain in the EU.

We live in interesting and dangerous times. Let me be clear. I don't think that the continent of Europe faces the 1920s and 1930s over again. History does not repeat itself. It is a grave mistake to think so. But, as has been illustrated many times in twentieth-century Europe, there is only a membrane separating civilisation and barbarism, democracy and authoritarianism. The resurgence of nationalism and populism in Europe, the United States and elsewhere presents a challenge for your generation and what's left of mine. It is not inevitable that the rise of populism will lead to the triumph of extremist nationalist governments in other European countries. But it is now a time of great political and economic volatility on a continent that has enjoyed a long spell of peace. But this is not the moment to be deterministic about the future.

You will observe that the *modus operandi* of populist leaders is to appeal to raw emotion and to seek refuge behind national frontiers. History as a discipline, based on empirical investigation and a discovery of facts, is subversive of populism and authoritarianism. For that reason, don't be surprised if history is under attack today in different and most unlikely ways. Your generation of historians, or at least some of you working in public life, will have to confront pressures to write 'palace history' to serve *the cause*. I am sure you will resist succumbing to the temptation of writing 'palace history.'

In conclusion, facing the coming decades, historians will not be rewarded for challenging populism or, for that matter, the received view of history during a time of commemoration. Being an historian is to be part of a dangerous profession, a profession in this country which has challenged emotionally charged myths. Your training as an historian challenges the world in which a good slogan is now a substitute for fact, 'Get Brexit done' 'Make America Great Again' and so on. Make no mistake. This is an important time to be an historian. It is the era of 'fake news' and of the manipulation and massaging of 'facts.' This is also a time of unprecedented technological breakthrough in your profession. You have in your hands the same powerful cyber tools to conduct your research as are used to such effect by the opponents of our profession. Use those new tools professionally, prudently and with courage and fortitude in the coming decades.

Thank you.



<sup>1</sup> Robert Caro, *The Years of Lyndon Johnson* (Vintage Books, New York, 1983-91), 4 vols.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 11

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 195

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.195-6

<sup>5</sup> Her name was sometimes written as Kathleen Napoli McKenna, see Patrick Maume's entry in *Dictionary of Irish Biography*, <https://dib-cambridge-org.proxy.bc.edu/quicksearch.do> consulted on 3 March 2020

<sup>6</sup> Patrick Maume, 'Irish Bulletin a full reprint of the official newspaper of Dáil Éireann, giving news and war reports – Vo. 1 12 July 1919 to 1 May 1920, *History Ireland*, <https://www.historyireland.com/20th-century-contemporary-history/irish-bulletin-a-full-reprint-of-the-official-newspaper-of-dail-eireann-giving-news-and-war-reports-volume-i-12th-july-1919-to-1st-may-1920/> consulted 3 March 2020

<sup>7</sup> Kathleen McKenna Napoli Papers are in the National Library of Ireland, MS 22,736-22,814 <http://catalogue.nli.ie/Collection/vtls000629401>

<sup>8</sup> John A. Murphy, *Ireland in the Twentieth Century* (Gill and Company, Dublin 1975)

<sup>9</sup> Joseph J. Lee, *Ireland, 1912-1985: Politics and Society* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1989)

<sup>10</sup> Helen Lewis, *A Time to Speak* (The Blackstaff Press, Belfast, 1992) [Foreword by Jennifer Johnston]

<sup>11</sup> Dermot Keogh, *Jews in Twentieth Century Ireland – Refugees, anti-Semitism and the Holocaust* (Cork University Press, Cork, 1998), see p.1

<sup>12</sup> Robert Collis and Han Hogerzeil, *Straight on* (Methuen, London, 1947)

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 193

<sup>14</sup> Boris Johnson, *The Churchill Factor: How One Man made History* (Hodder and Stoughton, London, 2014)