

*In Memoriam*

# Noel O'Connell

1929-1991

IT IS WITH a deep sense of sadness and grievous loss that we mark the passing away on 4 May 1991 of Noel O'Connell who had served the Irish Texts Society with great devotion for so many years. His passing has left us in great sorrow, as it has so many other circles and groups of people who had benefited from his great spirit, his remarkable wisdom and kindness, and his utter commitment to the great number of people and causes which he considered to be significant in his life.

Born in Turner's Cross, Cork City, in 1929, Noel O'Connell was educated by the Christian Brothers at the North Monastery, Cork, and at University College Cork. He graduated in 1949 with a BE degree in engineering, with First Class Honours and in first place. He qualified for both the Bursary in Civil Engineering and the Pierce Malone Scholarship in Engineering (because the regulations did not permit his being granted both awards he opted for the latter). In 1949-50 he was a Junior Lecturer at University College Cork. He then came to London to work with Leslie Turner and Partners, Consulting Civil Engineers, and to undertake further study at Imperial College. He returned for a short while, in 1954-55, to Dublin to work as a design engineer for the Electricity Board. Thereafter he followed a career as a consultant civil engineer in London. From 1960 onwards he ran his own practice as sole principal. In later years he combined teaching at South Bank Polytechnic, Thames Polytechnic and North East Surrey College of Technology with consultancy. His passionate interest throughout his life in the history and culture of Ireland made him an enthusiastic teacher in his spare time of many students who wanted to learn about Ireland. He made a particular contribution to the development of courses in Irish Studies at Kilburn Polytechnic. He was an academic by nature but may have enjoyed academic pursuits all the more for not having been professionally caught up in them. His heart, I am sure, was in Ireland.

A great deal could be said of Noel's work in London on behalf of so many organisations, particularly those connected with the Irish people. He was always especially concerned about the welfare of young people who had come to London from Ireland. He spoke of this on several occasions in recent months and would allude to some of his own experiences, most notably stressing the help he had received himself when he first came to London from fellow-countrymen such as his great friend, the late Seán Barry. He cared greatly about the neglect or rejection and the demoralising suffering of some young Irish men and women in an alien, even hostile, environment. He was active in the London Gaelic League (he always stressed that the Gaelic League had its real first origins in London).

He served the Irish Centre in Camden Town as that organisation set about promoting the welfare and dignity of the Irish in London. His concern for other people extended far beyond the Irish communities. One notable indication of that



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is the fact that he was a founder member of The Threshold Housing Association, which became one of the biggest Housing Associations in London, still retaining its central objective of housing people with special needs.

As a fluent speaker of Irish Noel was called on to contribute to broadcasts by the BBC, Radio and Telefís Éireann and Radio na Gaeltachta. He was both Treasurer and (on two occasions) Chairman of the Irish Club in Eaton Square and was much concerned about its future. He was one of the leaders of *Cuideachta*, which for more than ten years organised monthly social sessions through the medium of Irish at the Irish Club.

But his main commitment was to the Irish Literary Society and the Irish Texts Society, two important and resilient London organisations which have so far survived the many changes and convulsions of the last hundred years. Noel had, for many years, been President of the Irish Literary Society, the origins of which take us back to 1891. He had in fact kept it going well-nigh single-handedly, arranging himself a regular and stimulating programme of lectures delivered at the Irish Club by speakers of the highest calibre. He had the great satisfaction of keeping the Society alive into its centenary year. A recent very successful joint meeting of the Irish Literary Society and the Irish Texts Society, addressed by Professor Seán Ó Tuama on Egan O'Rahilly, reflected the fact that both societies were active, buoyant and in good heart.

The Irish Texts Society, founded in London in 1898, was fathered by the Irish Literary Society. Noel O'Connell joined the Irish Texts Society in 1958 and very soon he became a Council member. He became Honorary Treasurer in 1962 and Honorary Secretary in 1967. Discerning members of the Society, and especially members of its Council, will know how much he cared for the Society and how he strived at all times, with the vital and very active support of his family, to serve its best interests. He knew all the while that it was a privilege and a considerable responsibility to further the declared aims of the Society and to secure the continuation of its activities into the future according to the best traditions maintained by many people who had served the Society well, as editors and officers, before him.

The day-to-day running of the secretarial part of the work of the Society entailed a great deal of detailed work, lightened in recent years only by the most valuable support of ÁIS (the Book Distribution Centre) in Dublin. This work brought Noel into contact with scholars and printers (chiefly in Ireland), with members and potential members not only from many walks of life but also from many countries. The Council of the Society, firmly based in London (and long may it retain that supportive base), has always had in its membership a good blend of university teachers and of workers in a wide range of other professions. Noel always took good care to keep members of Council well informed about developments in the Society, especially those members who for a variety of good reasons could not attend meetings as regularly as they would like. But most of all Noel enjoyed his contact with members at large, the real backbone of the Society. He knew so much about them, their work and interests, also for sure their relationships and ancestry.

Noel O'Connell was a man blessed with a remarkable range of qualities, not least friendship, great kindness and gentleness, and a most memorable and mischievous sense of humour. In conversation, which was normally quiet and never hurried, his good nature, his enlightened attitude and his erudition always

shone through. Meeting him or conversing with him always gave me a lift and he would unfailingly end with a joke or wry comment on all manner of subjects, the weaknesses of human nature, the ways of priests and poets and politicians, the hopes and failures of the Welsh at rugby football, the various colours of postboxes, and especially the misfortune of not belonging to one of the 'Celtic' peoples.

Seven years ago Noel relished delivering a most sensitive and discerning lecture to a large audience at an open meeting of the Irish Texts Society in the Irish Club in Eaton Square. He had chosen to speak on 'Father Dinneen: his Dictionary and the Gaelic Revival', in order that the Society should rightly commemorate some of Dinneen's achievements on the fiftieth anniversary of his death. It will be recalled that Dinneen himself had said in 1927 of the Irish Texts Society, 'I sometimes think of that Society as a distinctive university unchartered and unendowed, in which, though unworthy, I have been filling a "Chair" since the year 1900 when they published my *editio princeps* of O'Rahilly, in which I had kind assistance from Prof. Bergin.' The Society published Noel's thoughtful lecture and will, I hope, keep it in print. In recent years Noel would respectfully consider that a Council meeting of the Irish Texts Society should not be called to order until a copy of Dinneen's fine Dictionary was resting on the table before us.

We had fondly imagined that Noel had many years more to be among us, to allow him among other things to see the Society celebrate the centenary of its foundation. That centenary should be well celebrated and I am sure that Noel O'Connell's important contribution to its work will then be more fully recognised. For his gentle wit and wisdom and good humour, for his tactful and intelligent control of so much of the work of the Irish Texts Society, we are truly grateful.

It is right that we should record here that it was Noel O'Connell who accepted the awards made on different occasions in the nineteen seventies by *The Irish Post* ('The Voice of the Irish in Britain') to the Irish Literary Society and the Irish Texts Society, the two societies he had served so conscientiously.

We extend to his widow Pat, who comes from Derry, and whom Noel first met in London, and to his four children, Deirdre, Emer, Nuala and Rory, our heartfelt sympathy.

He would want us to concentrate on the work in hand, however difficult it might appear to us; he would urge us to stand our ground firmly and to plan cheerfully for the future, not to grieve but rather to 'put out our brightest flags', as Shaw said on a similar occasion. We treasure the memory of an extraordinarily generous and kindly friend, one who cared so much for that which is good in life, serving a host of people and organisations, especially the people of the Ireland he loved and the best in Irish cultural life in London for so many years.

*Go dtuga Dia suaimhneas síoraí dá anam.*

*Bendith raslon y nef ar ei enaid.*



D. Ellis Evans,  
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