



Delineating the Public Space

COLICO Lecture delivered by Dr Marian Fitzgibbon, Head of School, Humanities, Athlone Institute of Technology, at the Annual Joint Conference of the Library Association of Ireland and CILIP in Bloomfield House, Mullingar, on the 14th April, 2011.

National Book Award winner, Colum McCann gives an impassioned account of his experience of research in the New York public library in Charlie McCarthy's excellent programme as part of the RTÉ Arts Lives series, 2010. In McCann's opinion, the internet is relatively skin-deep, compared to a library. Researching his book *Dancer*, he found in the New York Public Library filing system a tiny book called 'Winter Warfare - How the Soviets fought against the Finnish in 1937'. Three days later a man came from the stacks bearing this tiny booklet that had instructions on how to throw a grenade in winter time if you are on skis. If you throw it overhand you are going to fall or at least you'll have to slow down. The Finnish and the Russians learned to lob the grenades underarm so that they could hit and get away at the same time. Only in a library and only with the help of a librarian, according to McCann, could such recondite information be accessed. I shall come back to this later. In this presentation I hope to take stock of the situation in which libraries, arts and culture, and education now find themselves in Ireland. By mapping the terrain we can better establish the role and purpose of the cultural sector generally. I also would like to share with you some dilemmas, thought processes with which I have struggled myself, and the conclusions I have reached. This can sometimes help. The aim is to be clearer about our roles – or if more confused, perhaps on a higher level!

After a brief sally into some underemphasised aspects of libraries, I set the cultural realm in Ireland in a tale of two crises and a structural disadvantage. Taking third level education as a case study, I explore a fundamental dilemma which I think should resonate with you all. I offer a two-fold response to the dilemma, make a plea for engagement and show how libraries with the arts and education must be engines of re-creation in a reconfigured Irish society.

What does a library represent? Let us first afford it its poetic deserts: The poet Craig Raine's Martian, sending a postcard home, characterised them as full of books ("caxtons") or:

... mechanical birds with many wings
and some are treasured for their markings --
they cause the eyes to melt
or the body to shriek without pain.
I have never seen one fly, but
sometimes they perch on the hand.¹

Raine's image of flight captures the essential. More than anything else libraries offer to all and sundry the possibility of freedom, of adventure. The library service is Ireland's largest and most established cultural resource, one which is deeply democratic, egalitarian and freely available to everyone.

When people try to make a case for libraries, they often look to the past rather than the present. While nostalgia is usually pointless, it is important to recognise the affective dimension and heft of books and libraries. Though regularly discounted, this dimension is the hook that catches us more than anything. A man recalled to me recently his memory of his father buying a one volume encyclopaedia – in the late '60s. He described in detail the type of box it came in – like a shoe box, with long sides. He recounted how the letters of the alphabet were gouged in thumb-sized indentations to facilitate word-finding. And he remembered that his Dad had paid for it in instalments. As well as an evocation of the past, this was an eloquent expression of value. In addition, it is doubtful if the emotional aspect of the information work of the library can ever be reproduced by electronic search engines, wonderful as they are. I vividly recall an encounter I witnessed in the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris in the early 80s between a frail old Vietnamese man seeking a particular issue of a magazine and the kind Parisian librarian who explained that the war had interrupted their supply of publications from his region. Maupassant would have done something with that. It is not fashionable to accord value to the emotional work of libraries or of other public services, for that matter, such dimensions not being amenable to any balance sheet recording. But of such experiences, exchanges and conversations are connections made and connections are fundamental to community, a point to which I shall return.

In terms of public policy and a wider social role, libraries are fundamental to literacy, an area where Ireland is now in trouble, as evidenced by the 2010 PISA study. In this fourth such study of the achievement of 15 year olds in reading literacy, Ireland was ranked among the 'average' countries: 17th out of 34 OECD countries. Ten years ago we held 5th place. Thus the current generation of Irish students is the first not to have a better standard of literacy than their parents. How tragic in a country where education was once the only legacy which most parents had to bestow. The negative PISA findings compromise our positioning of ourselves as a knowledge society, a key plank of Irish national economic strategy. As a major resource for lifelong learning, libraries are crucial to the realisation of this knowledge society. Fundamental to success in this domain is the inculcation of a love of reading and learning - not just an understanding of how to learn but a drive to do so. From what I can see among students at third level and as Chair of the Cultural Studies Board of Undergraduate Ireland (which assesses essays from every public Higher Education Institute in the

¹ A Martian sends a Postcard Home. Craig Raine. 1979.

country), student literacy at third level is abysmal. People who do not read cannot write well and people who cannot write well, cannot think well. So much for the knowledge society! On an optimistic note, the Pisa study makes it clear that a country's performance in reading is not set in stone. In both absolute and relative terms, educational results can improve. Despite the national refrain to the contrary, we are *not* where we are: we have both the possibility of agency and responsibility in this and much more.

At this point I would like to stand further back and refocus on the library system with a wider lens: that of its location in the public space. What does this mean in Ireland today? Working in the Arts Council at the time that Michael D Higgins was Minister for the Arts, I remember the bewilderment of the Director at the Minister's regular pronouncements on the "arts space". The Director who was a very pragmatic and practical person, and who would have always tried to do the right thing, one day burst out in frustration: "If I knew where it was", he said, "I'd go there!" I know what he meant! So first, let's locate the library space. The definition of a public good is clear: it is an item or service that is considered to have wide public benefits. Like daylight, it may be consumed without reducing the amount available for others, and cannot be withheld from those who do not pay for it. The public space is often defined by the areas which legitimately attract public funding because they are aimed at public rather than private goods. Another reason why certain areas are regarded as being rightfully in the public space is because their benefits may be apparent only in the *longue durée*. And, not to put a tooth in it, the benefits of these areas have a whiff of danger about them, a touch of risk. Because they are all about the cultivation of freedom. This essential subversion, fundamental to civilised society, cannot be properly accommodated in the market. This is true of the arts. It is true of education. It is true of libraries. These domains work towards high-order long-term objectives, often hard to measure, which are likely to be overlooked or even undermined in the short or medium term, or which will be diminished by a frame that is private or market-oriented. While the definition may be clear, the interpretation of what belongs to the public space is both geographically and historically contingent. The tradition of public culture funding in mainland Europe is underpinned by a history of funding of the arts by princes and wealthy merchant princes – even if it now seems firmly embedded in the mechanisms of state support. Universities as sites of pure learning for learning's sake, started as professional schools to train lawyers and doctors.

Today we are in the throes of a crisis or two related crises. First, public goods and the public space are under unrelenting assault in Ireland and the UK today. The values which underpin the public service, equality, fairness, the idea of public good, are contested by all sorts of creeds. Notions of big government, the demise of value-driven approaches, the ubiquity of neo-liberal models, all serve to undermine the concept of the public space; if not to demolish it, at least to cabin and confine it to a more limited sphere. The situation is exacerbated by the dearth of public funds and the retrofitting of rationales to justify cutbacks in the name of pragmatic realism. Models that introduce the aims and methodologies of the private sector into domains that were traditionally public are hailed as being innovative.

The second arena of crisis is in the domain of education and what has been termed the crisis in the humanities. Opinions vary as to whether this is new or not, but again almost certainly, it has been aggravated by the primacy of short-term economic impact and by insufficient reflection at policy level on the direction of education and society. The humanities constitute a set of values that run counter to the dominant paradigm of the market. They are seen as aspirational rather than

instrumental and as such are rejected as irrelevant luxuries. Engendering critical and independent thought, the humanities pose uncomfortable questions and readily show up the shortcomings of the way the world is currently organised. The American academic, Dr Martha Nussbaum, in her new book, addresses the consequences for democracy of this phenomenon, which she terms “a crisis of massive proportions and grave global significance.”² In Professor Nussbaum’s view, critical thinking is not needed for economic advancement; in fact in her opinion, to this end moral obtuseness may be a positive asset. She proposes that the capacity to deliberate well, the impulse to work for the good of the nation as a whole, and concern for the lives of others, all essential to develop and embed democratic values, are being set aside in favour of economic success. As the consequences of this narrow short-term approach she includes over-deference to authority, undue dependence on peer opinion, the supremacy of aggression and poor capacity for imaginative empathy, all profoundly inimical to democratic society.

In Ireland these two crises are being played out with notable virulence. While the general trends I have just described are worldwide and the crises are manifest to varying degrees, here, in Ireland in particular, the profit motive reigns supreme. In this country, in the US and the UK the hegemony of the market has been paramount. At this point I acknowledge my indebtedness to Tony Judt’s masterful sweep through the recent economic history of the western world in his inspiring book, *Ill Fares the Land*. To me it was revealing and somewhat shocking to realise the extent to which Ireland along with the UK and US are out of kilter with the rest of the first world. According to Judt, this club of three countries are those “in which the dogma of unregulated self-interest was most assiduously applied to public policy”³. We bought the profit motive hook, line and sinker. The results are plain to see: relative to the rest of the western world, we are now in a highly unequal country. This has pervasive consequences - for health, education, social justice, life chances, intergenerational mobility, length of life, school drop-out rates, mental illness, literacy, criminality, public transport, obesity. Why indeed should this be so shocking? We have all witnessed the disintegration of Irish society in the last years and will live for a long time with its consequences. As Judt unforgettably puts it, “the years from 1989 to 2009 were consumed by locusts”⁴. Perhaps most seriously of all, trust has been abused in Ireland - in the state, in politics, in the church, in the banks.

Turning to the crisis of the humanities generally, Prof Nussbaum is especially critical of the UK system, from which we have long taken our note here. Indeed, if one thinks about it, there is evidence of the weakening of democracy to which she points. At any rate the quality of our democracy has been questioned, sometimes from very surprising sources. The Former Director of the National Treasury Management Agency, Michael Somers, in a recent *Newstalk* interview described Ireland as a semi-elected dictatorship.

Thus on these two fronts, Ireland is poorly placed. It is in relation to public goods like the arts, education and libraries that the drama will play out most obviously. In addition, we must cope with a long-standing structural disadvantage, the source of which also lies in ideology. The fact that the Irish state has long been one of the most centralised in Europe, that local government has been

² Martha Nussbaum, *Not For Profit. Why Democracy needs the Humanities*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010, p.1.

³ Tony Judt, *Ill Fares the Land*, London: Allen Lane (Penguin), 2010, p.16.

⁴ Tony Judt, *op. cit.*, p.138.

steadily starved of funds and systematically degraded, has grave implications for the quality of life of all citizens.

To summarise, libraries, the arts and education as part of the public realm in Ireland are, by this analysis, very poorly placed if we consider these three things: an overall climate that is inimical to the public realm, particularly so in the US/ UK sphere of influence; a site where Humanities values are struggling – again particularly acute in the realm of influence of the UK; a place where the managerial and administrative environment for these domains is notably weak. All this is of course heightened by the fact that the country has been pauperised. So what now?

How do we who work in libraries, education and the arts respond to these crises? We are faced with a real dilemma. First, we must bear in mind that in its original and calmer Greek usage, crisis means simply a point of decision. So we must position ourselves to have the greatest chance of making the right decision, in the now and in the long term. I shall try to trace for you my own thought processes in relation to a live case which touches on all the issues I have relayed here. I work in third level education, for which a national strategy was launched in the dying days of the last government. The Hunt report, as it is known, does not waste much breath on value-based or visionary discourse. It cuts to the chase fairly quickly, along these lines: education must have public funding. To merit public funding, education must be aligned to the national priorities. The national priorities are innovation and enterprise. Therefore the main agenda for third-level education is the development of innovation and enterprise. (I think you will agree that these same concepts proliferate in the literature and thinking on libraries today.) The report is unashamedly instrumentalist. Is this reasonable? Hard perhaps to say 'no' in the here and now. The country is in crisis; every public penny must be well spent and made to work towards recovery; recovery depends on people coming up with new ideas and having the skills to realise them i.e. innovation and enterprise. OK. So education must engage with the innovation and enterprise agendas. And yet? For education, substitute arts, libraries and you too may feel a shiver of unease with this language. It is not that of our domain. But maybe we need to get over this? Times are tough and reality bites. And does it really matter anyway? Can the humanities disciplines not accommodate virtually everything? Are apparent conflicts only in the short term? The true values that inform education relate to the development of the person, teaching people to think, to be independent and critical and confident. These are also fundamental to an ability to innovate and be enterprising. No huge contradiction there, so should we continue much as before. And yet... that language... Language is powerful. Words go deep. The unease persists. Is this the language that should chart the future of third level education for the next 20 years? Is it broad enough? What is the intention behind it – to encompass or to delimit? How will it be interpreted? How will it play out? How will it be implemented? Will it lead to new legislation, to new arrangements? The development of the Institute of Technology sector in Ireland, which has exponentially expanded equity of access to third level education in Ireland in the last 40 years was practically enabled by the broad educational vision embodied in its founding legislation, a vision that, for example, allowed for the development of arts and humanities programmes, despite the practical orientation of the Regional Technical Colleges as they were first called.

Is the language of innovation and enterprise, the language of IBEC, a fitting substitute for the visions of Newman or Humboldt? We see little that is inspirational, nothing about the direction of Irish society, the imperative to rethink and rebuild it, about critical thinking, about the nurturing of

freedom, about the forging of a new Irish identity, the enrichment of the inner life of the individual, the development of imaginative understanding and empathy, about social justice, and the fostering of community. Furthermore words like innovation and enterprise are curiously – even suspiciously – value free, neutral, devoid of any hint of history. At this, our antennae should wave. Because language matters. Let me return to Tony Judt.

The wealth of words in which I was raised were a public space in their own right – and properly preserved public spaces are what we so lack today. If words fall into disrepair, what will substitute? They are all we have.⁵

So concludes Judt in his superb essay, *Words*. His linkage of words and the public space is an intuitive touch of genius.

Well, words have fallen into disrepair. Here permit me a brief detour. We are all familiar with the epidemic of managerialist language, the way in which the words of business, many of them deriving from the military domain, have insinuated themselves into the public discourse, have invaded the worlds of education and culture. This language is treacherous and insidious, full of double-speak and *faux amis*. It allows the advocates of opposing positions to seem to be promoting the same values – when have we heard a politician or policy maker declare themselves against equality or libraries or the arts? Even as their policies choke these sectors, they proclaim their dedication to their preservation. The current Minister in the UK declares himself a great fan of libraries as he presides over their dismantling. In many cases the divorce of language and meaning is total. Words are both powerful and mysterious: language represents a distinctive mode of thinking, a particular way of seeing the world. If discourse is only within the dominant paradigm of the market we are ill-equipped to counter it. To adopt the same language of warfare, terrain is crucial and positioning determines outcomes.

So what do we do? Do we reject such concepts and rail, Canute-like, at the incoming tide? Where will this leave us as we try to negotiate our jobs and roles? A failure to engage often entails marginalisation.

In my view, it would be a mistake to buy the central premise of Hunt. Innovation and enterprise do not substitute for the values which should underpin a third-level education policy for Ireland. They represent more of what we already have had too much. So how do we negotiate the dilemma?

Our options are two-fold. The ivory tower position, refusing to change and adapt to different worlds, is simply not tenable. In the words of di Lampedusa: “For things to remain the same everything must change”. I believe we must engage, but on our terms. Having seen where we are, it is critical that the education and cultural sector holds to the strong core and timeless values of the public sector, essential to its effective operation. The first step is to see the way, to distinguish between the right and the wrong directions, to have a clear lodestar. We must determine what kind of society we want and then, what kind of economy and culture do we need to bolster this aim. Culture must be reinserted at the centre and not relegated to a peripheral or instrumental role. Our position must be clear, well articulated and thoroughly advocated. Enough of equivocation: leadership demands a strong, clear and confident declaration of the importance of the core values and institutions which

⁵Tony Judt, *The Memory Chalet*, London: Heinemann, 2010, p. 154.

are crucial to the future of Irish society. We must proclaim the primacy of public goods and defend them staunchly and relentlessly as fundamental to an equal society. We must engage without selling these core values short. We must be alive to the dangers. We must show ingenuity. And we must be willing to fight hard for what is important. Above all we must know our mission. I cannot conceive of a more eloquent statement of the position of the public library than that provided by Phil Scanlan:

The most fundamental role of the public library is to nurture freedom of thought and expression. We must remain conscious of this primary function because it will determine the nature of the service we provide.⁶

You need no more. That really says it all.

Second, what if, holding to our position, we seek common ground. It is sometimes helpful to force oneself to reject or reconsider polarities in order to make a space for new ideas and approaches. Because there is common ground if we explore what is meant by enterprise and innovation. I have already shown this. What if rather than resisting notions of enterprise and innovation, we let them in, we conceive of using these skills to further our passions whether that is education, the love of books, the love of the arts. Adherence to one's core values means being alive to the key issues and holding firm when it matters. To me the Harvard University Library Director, Robert Darnton, is a good model. This librarian is somebody who engages fully and creatively with the live issues facing librarians today. He adopts whatever tools fit (business, technological etc.) to solve problems and come up with creative solutions. But his solutions hold to the big picture, as do his objectives. He is animated by a big idea – that of a digital library composed of all the books in the research libraries of the world, available free of charge to everybody in the world. He calls for “a new ecology, one based on the public good instead of private gain.”⁷ His voice is clear and important. We must all crack this nut for ourselves in our own settings – because one way or another, we all face this key dilemma.

But the imperative to change holds. If we are to make a valuable contribution we must all learn new and deeper forms of engagement across boundaries to meet the very real challenges facing Irish society and to respond to global environmental challenges. The Internet does not render libraries redundant. Far from it. But it does force them to rethink and reinvent themselves. Similarly, if the arts are to take a central place as part of an open and creative and civilised society, they must be able to converse with other sectors and develop their public, civil, social and economic contributions. In the words of EM Forster, we must “only connect”. This is not easy or uncomplicated and is fraught with many paradoxes and intractable issues, not least the transgressive and subversive dimension of the arts and libraries which must be accommodated. But serious effort is needed to generate relevance to today and engagement is indispensable to the survival of our sectors. And, just in case it needs to be said, in spite of the constraints under which they have been labouring, libraries have already engaged and changed, have already recast

⁶ Phil Scanlan, “Idiosyncratic Intelligence: Information and the Public Library”, *An Leabharlann*, Vol. 15, No. 1, 1999/2000.

⁷ Robert Darnton, “The Library: Three Jeremiads”, in *The New York Review of Books*, 23 December, 2010, page 3; online edition, <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2010/dec/23/library-three-jeremiads/?page=3> – accessed 19 April, 2011.

themselves – in their locations, in their activities, in the extent of outreach, in their responses to technology. You all know this. And such is proof positive of their capacity to engage successfully in the future.

And the good news, if I may return to Tony Judt, is that things can change – they are not immutable. As evidence of this he points to the past, the post-war world – from the 40s to the 70s when “The market was kept in its place, the state accorded a central role to people’s lives and social services given precedence over other government expenditure.”⁸ resulting in a period of security, prosperity, social services and greater equality.

Because it is certainly the argument that will be most frequently adduced, let me deal for a moment with the contention that the scarcity of public funds entails an imperative to turn to the market. Let us not be diverted from our course by this. Remember that we are advocating a long-term approach to rebuilding the country and that our compass must be firmly fixed on this. Examples abound of important cultural developments that took root in other periods of recession and depression. It was in the recession of the ‘80s that key decisions were made on cultural policy and vital pieces of the Irish cultural infrastructure were put in place: the decision to establish Aosdána, to set up the Irish Museum of Modern Arts, to designate Temple Bar as a cultural quarter. The work to establish the arts as a key domain of local government in Ireland commenced in the 1980s when there wasn’t a penny in council coffers – or in the arts. (And by the way, much credit for this goes to that same Arts Council Director to whom I referred earlier.) The recent Moderns exhibition in IMMA demonstrated the wide and impressive range of arts activity and the sway of the modernist impulse in the 30s – and all because some artists and thinkers maintained an outward orientation. Resources follow values and ideas.

At the beginning, I touched on many of the key attributes of the public library system that can contribute to a reconfigured society - the literacy mission, the centrality of the principle of free and equal provision, the space libraries provide for conversation and community, the way the library service upholds and fosters lively things like curiosity, humble things like respect for knowledge and for the opinions and learning of others, and glorious things like the love of books and learning. Furthermore the localness of the library system and its untarnished record in the midst of so much public squalor should make of it a leading element of the necessary reinvigoration of local government, vital to a vision for a new Ireland. Finally, I would like to return briefly to one aspect of the new society which I regard as essential and which is intimately related to the role of local arts and the library service: the development of civic life and the cultivation of community. By community I mean an alliance of the thoughtful and the informed. I have already shown that any new vision for Ireland must re-evaluate and rebalance the importance given to private over social objectives. The goals of the private consumer must be subordinated to those of the public citizen. Arguably the only hope for Ireland lies in the setting aside of individualistic approaches in favour of the wish to create a better society for all.

There is a sense in which we have already embarked on this route. Many of the good people of Ireland have accepted a considerable reining in of lifestyle and have responded generously, recognising the importance of the greater good. But there is a way to go between this stage, largely

⁸ Tony Judt, *Ill Fares the Land*, London: Allen Lane (Penguin), 2010, p.62.

forced upon us, and the rebuilding of a true sense of citizenship and community. Such a task can best be embarked upon at the local level because it is at this level that meaning is real, practical and demonstrable. At local level we can see and feel the difference. In this regard the structural weakness of local government is a serious drawback. While the task has become even larger - how much more difficult it is to build civil society in the heterogeneity and dislocation – cultural, social, economic, religious - of Irish life today. Local government and within that its arts, culture, and library service have an incredible mission in turning this around. They are sophisticated agents for the development of parochialism in the best sense - as Patrick Kavanagh conceived it. That is, linked in to the universal and in opposition to provincialism. A sense of community that allows ordinary people to commune freely with the gods – the sort of thing, albeit romanticised, that delighted us all in the hedge school of Brian Friel's Translations.

There is such a lot at stake. The dearth of resources today demands a concentration of focused effort if Irish society is to untap the riches of diversity instead of suffering the ravages of racism, if children are to enjoy the confidence that is a prerequisite for creativity and if they are assisted in becoming fully literate members of Irish society with the capacity for imaginative understanding of their own background and that of others. I hope you apprehend the importance of your role as librarians in the larger mission. Arguably we have all have been modest for far too long.

To return to where I began, if you remember our skiing soldier, the trick is to make a hit, to have impact without destabilising oneself. Phil Scanlan has provided the grenade! There is a way. I hope you agree.