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## Seamus Deane

By Siân White

In March 2022, nearly one year after Seamus Deane's passing, a small group of his former University of Notre Dame doctoral students, most affiliated with the Keough-Naughton Institute for Irish Studies, descended on South Bend, Indiana for a two-day conference. Predictably enough, "the snow was falling faintly through the univers[ity] and faintly falling, like the descent of our last end." The Seamus Deane Legacy Conference, conceived and executed by Sara Maurer, Susan Harris, and postdoctoral fellow, Breandán Dean, featured a program of research papers, roundtables, and reflections full of lament and laughter to honor Seamus. During my affiliation with "Keough," the Institute offered an array of programming and other opportunities for scholars at all career stages, including a robust lecture series on Fridays throughout the academic year; competitive yearlong NEH Fellowships; a Visiting Scholars program, which included masters students from Ireland; and the Summer Seminar – a sort of Irish Studies bootcamp – almost always held in Dublin. All affiliated Ph.D. students studied Irish, and the Institute funded fellowships for immersion experiences in the Gaeltacht. The program also boasted over 800 undergraduate Irish language learners.

The Legacy Conference celebrated this intensely rich, interdisciplinary institute, which brought together librarians and archivists with scholars of literature, history, archeology, economics, art, geography, and, of course, Irish. Some of the conference presentations were scholarly, others pedagogical, and most, in some way, personal. Much of this tribute draws on stories from that event, one that now leaves its own legacy as I reflect on a weekend two years ago spent reminiscing about the experience more than two decades ago of being Seamus' student and part of something great.

The idea for an Irish Studies program at Notre Dame originated with Jonathan Swift scholar Chris Fox, known for his vision, his gift at cultivating relationships, and his distinctive, infectious laugh. When searching for someone to build the program, enough of the recommended scholars were Seamus' former students that Chris hired the man himself; as he put it, "Why hire the student when I could hire the master?" Seamus was already an important writer, critic, and central figure in the postcolonial turn in Irish Studies. His affiliation with the Field Day Theatre Company established in 1980s Derry and his leadership of Field Day's subsequent publishing ventures (with the *Field Day Pamphlets* series, the five-volume *Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing*, the *Critical Conditions* series, and the *Field Day Review* journal) established him as an international critic and public intellectual. This work framed the particularities of Ireland in a global context. Literary scholars were meanwhile reclaiming as Irish many nineteenth- and twentieth-century writers of "English" literature. As recently as the 1980s, for example, Seamus wrote about Joyce as a figure primarily of European modernism, but by his appointment as Penguin's Joyce editor in the 1990s, he and others were explicitly reading Joyce's work through an Irish and postcolonial lens.

Joyce himself spoke with typical irony about the colonial practice of claiming indigenous literature for the colonizer's tradition: "Ireland [...] is still the brain of the United Kingdom. The foresighted and ponderous English provide humanity's swollen belly with the perfect instrument of comfort: the Water Closet. The Irish, doomed to express themselves in a language that is not their own, have stamped it with their genius and compete for glory with other civilized countries. This is called 'English Literature'" (Joyce 28). Seamus, Professor of English, likewise recognized how the colonial eradication of the native language affected literature and culture. Convinced that any good Irish Studies program must be anchored in the Irish language, he recruited Peter McQuillan, scholar of Celtic language and literatures, to be his first faculty hire. In a twist of administrative irony that

Joyce would surely appreciate, McQuillan joined the Notre Dame English Department and taught his Irish language course under the title “Eng 101.”

Such mundane absurdities extended to the practical, lived experience of being a Keough student or faculty member. The flatness, lake-effect snow, and relentless greyness in northern Indiana couldn’t be more different from Ireland, especially for those who, like Seamus, spent their one semester a year in university housing without a car. Graduate students likewise lived in dorms during the multi-week Dublin seminars. We met in the surprisingly bright and sweltering top floor of the eighteenth-century Newman House on St. Stephen’s Green, a building with a distinguished history: named after Cardinal Newman, it was once home to James Joyce and Gerard Manley Hopkins, and ultimately became part of University College Dublin, with offices for Seamus Deane, Luke Gibbons, and Kevin Whalen. The full and varied seminar program included daytime lectures and interviews punctuated by quick breaks for tea, cookies, and a smoke; then a book launch in Kilmainham Gaol, a refreshing hot tea after a three-hour historical walking tour, or an evening public lecture followed by intense discussion and revelry in The Bleeding Horse pub. A hike in the Wicklow mountains once brought us, seemingly by accident, to Seamus Heaney’s writing cottage where the poet himself stood on the lane kindly chatting with sneaker-clad graduate students and other seminar attendees. Small world.

Seamus Deane had an extraordinary ability to speak with eloquence extemporaneously, at length and at any hour. Joe Cleary has called his public speaking style “unscripted brilliance”<sup>1</sup>: threads carefully woven but delivered with force, both torrent and tapestry. He brought that forceful beauty even to class lectures, and many at the conference recalled with amused fondness experiencing the ordinary business of graduate education administered by a thinker of Seamus’ caliber. He only loosely observed the norms of an American graduate course, like keeping classes to the scheduled 2.5-hours, offering bathroom or snack breaks, or following a carefully crafted syllabus spelling out expectations, assignments, and grading breakdown. Reading lists did not distinguish between “required reading for each class session in the semester” from “all the texts whose ideas one would want to have absorbed on a topic, ever.” Taking notes during his lectures was like trying to absorb a complex theory while simultaneously learning the language in which it was expressed. Like others’, apparently, my notes often amounted to phonetic scribbling to be deciphered and researched later. It was partly his northern accent and how little I knew, but mostly the sheer scope and scale of his knowledge and interests. His references covered a long intellectual and literary history – from Edmund Burke to Anna Burns – with a broad disciplinary range and reverence for historical and textual specificity. The pace and immersion, though intimidating, were welcoming to students who loved the material, read a lot, and kept striving, even when a bit lost. Sustained exposure made the connections between names, texts, and ideas increasingly visible.

Visible under the tutelage of engaged faculty. For all his breadth of vision, Seamus still devoted time and care to the single idea, text, and student. In his Fall 2004 course on modernism, each class period he very closely read the novel’s first page – in Ford Madox Ford’s *The Good Soldier*, Joyce’s *Portrait*, or Virginia Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse* – to seed the entire lecture. Most humbling was finding my ideas and written work the objects of his intense focus. Submitting my graduate seminar essay felt like a brave act; as commentary, he returned a lyrical essay. To convey, “Don’t describe the essay’s structure – use it to frame the ideas,” he wrote, “We want the sound of your feet on the stairs, not a photo of the still staircase.” During my dissertation defense, I tempered my nervousness by imagining Seamus wearing a bathrobe and slippers while delivering his remarks over speakerphone. His friendly demeanor and readiness to laugh made it possible to see him as an

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<sup>1</sup> Joseph Cleary, Tribute to Seamus Deane, *The Irish Times* 13 May 2021.  
<https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/books/president-leads-tributes-to-seamus-deane-1.4564086>

ordinary person, despite his greatness. Many conference attendees remarked on his humanity – for instance, when wearing his 9-year-old daughter’s SpongeBob backpack around Paris during the 2006 seminar – and his humility, as when confronted with the glaring omission of most women writers and critics from the *Field Day Anthology* volumes I-III. He was not immune to error or blind spots, and responded by acknowledging the omission with regret and funding the publication of volumes IV and V. One presenter characterized that response as constructive rather than destructive criticism – listening, adjusting, evolving.

In her Legacy Conference keynote, Maud Ellmann contextualized Seamus’ work with Field Day and Notre Dame in an evolving field, where the next generation of Irish Studies scholars and teachers continues the important work. We embody his legacy, sharing his ideas and influence globally. An especially personal and moving talk came by Zoom from one of the inaugural Field Day Review Fellows now living in Australia. Another participant (also on Zoom, from the Middle East) described teaching Brian Friel’s *Translations* to Palestinian students in the West Bank, where postcolonial literature meets contemporary lived experience. She urged making Deane’s written work widely available and accessible through translation. Two other panelists addressed the economics of higher education by sharing their personal experience with the inequities – and often indignities – of working in academia. Those stories illuminated a stark contrast with the privileged opportunity of graduate school, the generative and heady Keough experience unique among others. The program wasn’t perfect: as with Irish Studies broadly, it had much to gain from inviting and cultivating greater diversity in scholars’ experiences, backgrounds, and lenses. But the Legacy Conference affirmed we had been part of something important, which Seamus helped build.

How much of its greatness comes down to a confluence of people and possibility, or to the historical period around the Good Friday Agreement? To a time when people still connected primarily in person – for talks, receptions, writing groups, drinks? Would a program like Keough, or a public intellectual like Seamus, emerge in today’s climate? For Edward Said, a public intellectual is “skeptical, engaged, unremittingly devoted to rational investigation and moral judgment; [...] unwilling to accept easy formulas, or ready-made clichés [...] whose place it is publicly to raise embarrassing questions, to confront orthodoxy and dogma (rather than to produce them), [to put oneself] on record and on the line” (20). An Orwellian posture, in the best sense. But unremitting devotion? When facing events we thought we’d never see, how easy to settle into one’s own rightness, to produce and reproduce one’s own dogma. How hard to train a skeptical eye on one’s own conclusions.

In his final essay in *Small World*, following comments about Irish history and Joyce’s later novels, Seamus writes, “Ireland, its literature and its troubles, became part of a new global imaginary” ... “the small world that was a microcosm of all” (235). The inverse also holds true: so often in Irish intellectual circles, the global distills into a small world. My co-editors, Maud Ellmann and Vicki Mahaffey, and I dedicated our volume *The Edinburgh Companion to Irish Modernism* to Seamus. Three words – “For Seamus Deane” – on an otherwise blank page. More than a third of the volume’s contributors had been at Notre Dame or part of its Summer Seminar during the 2000s. That exact volume would not have existed if not for him. By a stroke of luck (or genius), Luke Gibbons told Seamus about the dedication immediately on seeing the proofs. Seamus would not otherwise have known; by the book’s launch in May 2021, he was gone. Of course, Luke’s gesture was more personal than professional, an intimate act in Ireland’s small world.

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