

Report on our Big Questions Event (2009)

Compiled on the basis of the observations of Committee Members, and with the help also of newspaper reports.

Edited by George Eaton.

Scroll down for Photographs and a Report on one speaker's controversial non-invitation.

Niall Crowley

Siobhan Bigley introduced the former Chief Executive of the Equality Authority, who spoke to a Friday afternoon audience on his book, *An Ambition for Equality*. During his address, the author explored the different means by which we in Ireland promote equality and combat discrimination. He also cast a critical eye on equality in Ireland and afterwards participated in a question and answer session. Since our event, the author had a further book published on this subject in which he outlined the reasons for his resignation and gave details of the effective annihilation of the Equality Authority by means of a massive reduction in its budget.

Official Opening

Our Chairman Jarlath Duffy introduced Caroline Walsh, Literary Editor of *The Irish Times*, a one time friend of John Broderick, who officially opened our Festival. In the course of her address, she praised the work of the organisers of Literary Festivals all over Ireland and made particular reference to Athlone Literary Festival and to its origin, the John Broderick Week-end of 1999 which was the tenth anniversary of the author's death.

John Broderick had been a novelist, a prolific non-fiction writer and a frequent book reviewer for *The Irish Times* and other publications. There were a number of significant and serious comments made on the author and his work, while on the human interest side; she recalled her visits to Connaught Street and to The Moorings on Ballymahon Road, Athlone as a child when she accompanied her mother, the famous writer Mary Lavin.

The Big Questions

We had a Great Debate as part of the program which was not billed as a debate but as a discussion on the topics which the panellists themselves selected as being their Big Questions.

This forum was chaired by Donnacha O'Connell of NUI Galway, who steered us through a lively session of moral and ethical subjects, both controversial and contrasting.

The panellists were Mary Davis of Special Olympics fame, Dr. Steven King, Irish Examiner Columnist and former adviser to David Trimble, First Minister of Northern Ireland, Colm O'Gorman Executive Director in Ireland of Amnesty International and author of *Beyond Belief*, and Brendan Keenan Group Business Editor of *The Irish Independent* Group.

Mary Davis focussed on the value of community spirit and how it can and will lead to hope for a better future in Ireland. Dr. King discussed the role of the USA in the world, and its enormous economic power and political influence, but raised the question as to whether it might become a spent force.

Colm O’Gorman used the potholes in our roads to illustrate the supremacy of short term and petty local considerations over long term policy issues, while Brendan Keenan gave a learned discourse on the state of the Irish economy and the need for realism.

These keynote addresses were rewarded with the spirited audience participation they deserved and Donnacha O’Connell successfully brought the evening to a pleasant conclusion.

Memoir Writing

Jarlath Duffy introduced Irene Graham, who presented a Memoir Writing Bookshop which was limited to sixteen places and each participant was given a copy of her Memoir Writing Workbook. It was a much appreciated Workshop during which Irene took the participants on a stimulating journey from memory to memoir introducing them en route to a range of challenging techniques.

Piano and Poetry

Fionnuala O’Connell introduced Martin Dyar and Conor Walsh, who collaborated with each other to bring us an enchanting presentation focussed with the help of piano and poetry on themes of rural experience, and horse breeding and wildlife.

Broderick’s French Connection

Dr. Harman Murtagh chaired the Broderick session which, as it happened, was the only event in Athlone to mark the twentieth anniversary of the author’s death.

Dr.Eamon Maher had written and spoken many times about John Broderick and his book Cross Currents & Confluences contained a chapter entitled John Broderick: Irish Novelist in the European Tradition.

France and the French were of enormous importance to Broderick who lived for about eighteen months in Paris and who admitted that Nobel Laureate Francois Mauriac was the only person who influenced him as a writer.

Poetry Open Forum

Grace Brennan chaired this segment of our programme which was a first for us - a group poetry reading for published and emerging poets who were given the opportunity to read to one another from their own works.

The poets featured included Mary Melvin Geoghegan and Kieran Furey.

Dermot Bolger

Tadhg Carey introduced novelist, playwright and poet Dermot Bolger who was paying a very welcome return visit and spoke on the business of publishing and writing.

Dermot had a great inter-action with his audience and the question and answer was particularly lively. Before his journey to Athlone he spoke to the Westmeath Independent who quoted some of his memories of Athlone as including Athlone Town playing against Milan, the writings of John Broderick and another Athlonian writer, Declan Lynch on the occasion when he officially opened the All Ireland Amateur Drama Festival, which was memorable apart from anything else for the fact that he was mistaken for a priest!!!

Beyond Belief

Fionnuala O'Connell introduced Colm O'Gorman who read from his memoir, Beyond Belief, which is the story of how he challenged the Roman Catholic Church in the Diocese of Ferns after he suffered sexual abuse as a boy.

His presentation, which was extremely well received, was based on his story of a young mans shame turning to outrage, while demonstrating also that – whatever hurt was in the past – there still remained hope for the future.

Bookmaking for Children

A small workshop, limited to twelve children, was organised in Reeves Art Studio in the Rothwell Gallery. This was a great success and much appreciated by the children who attended, and by their parents. The workshop was presented by the National Print Museum and taught children how a hardback book is made in the traditional manner.

An Athlone Walk

A literary and cultural Athlone walk took place on the morning of Sunday 27th. This new walk was especially designed for the Festival by local historian and author Gearoid O'Brien and included authors as diverse as T.P. O'Connor, John Broderick, Desmond Egan and Hannah Grealy as well as imparting information on other writers, musicians, artists and composers.

In our billing of this Event we made challenge to anyone who ever thought that Athlone was an oasis of culture to participate and be convinced otherwise! Gearoid O'Brien, a former member of the John Broderick Committee, is senior Executive Librarian at the Aidan Heavey Public Library in Athlone.

Festival Dinner

After imbibing much from the pool of literary knowledge, and digesting the great debating of the big questions of the day, committee members and festival participants joined forces in The Olive Grove Restaurant where they relaxed and enjoyed good company, good conversation and impromptu performances by Chairman Jarlath Duffy and our stalwart supporter Jean Farrell.

Colm O’Gorman’s Controversary

(Re-printed from The Westmeath Independent by permission of the Editor)

Those attending the Athlone Literary Festival may have heard One In Four founder Colm O’Gorman speak. O’Gorman, who is now executive director of the Irish section of Amnesty International, took part in a debate session on Friday night in the Prince of Wales Hotel, addressing the topic of whether the dream of an Irish Republic was finished.

He touched on themes of active citizenship, of participatory democracy, of leadership and of the need for all in Ireland to take control of our own destinies.

He came across to most audience members as a passionate, thoughtful and insightful man, whose contribution to Irish civic life in recent years cannot be underestimated. Of course, he came to national prominence initially after blowing open the sexual abuse scandal in the Diocese of Ferns.

And if O’Gorman represented an Ireland of the present and of the future, an Ireland that’s willing to deal with its past and build a brighter future, then unfortunately, last weekend, at the same time as O’Gorman was in Athlone, the Catholic Church showed how it continues to exemplify the past.

The decision by the church to withdraw an invite to O’Gorman represented yet another example of the church’s utter inability to change.

O’Gorman had been invited to take part in a Mass of healing and reconciliation planned by Fr Iggy O’Donovan at the Augustinian Church in Drogheda on Sunday last. The Mass was designed to coincide with the 30th anniversary of the visit of Pope John Paul II to Ireland.

It appears that the Archdiocese of Armagh instructed Fr O’Donovan to withdraw the invitation.

It was "a shame that senior church leaders have chosen to close their hearts, their minds and their ears to words offered in a true spirit of hope. Hope informed by an absolute belief in the endless possibilities to be found in our human capacity to transcend terrible trauma and find a way forward together", O’Gorman was quoted in the Irish Times.

Instead they had "used their power to prevent such a process from finding even more powerful expression by locating it in church". In his planned address he had "no intention of raking over old, now established hurts".

Those who have heard O’Gorman speak will know that his focus now is to help chart a way forward for Ireland and its institutions, religious and secular alike.

That this man should be seen as unsuitable to speak at Mass of Reconciliation by the same church which has shown, at best, unforgivable tardiness in dealing with abusers in its own midst speaks volume for the mindset of the Catholic Church today.

We need the Catholic Church to change and to grow - but it can only do so by embracing the assistance of those like O’Gorman, whom it has failed so badly.

Photo Gallery



Our four Big Questions panellists were l to r Mary Davis, Colm O'Gorman, Brendan Keenan and Dr Stephen King



Donnacha O'Connell who chaired our Big Questions discussion with Colm O'Gorman Mary O'Rourke TD, and Dr Stephen King



George Eaton, Athlone Literary Festival with Caroline Walsh, Literary Editor Irish Times and James English



(L to R) Tadhg Carey, Committee Member, with Noel Heavey



(L to R) Jarlath Duffy, Chairman Athlone Literary Festival, with Irene Graham, Author



Margaret Heavey with Siobhan Bigley, committee member



Book Making Making Workshop in Rothwell Gallery



Dr Harmon Murtagh, with Dr Eamon Maher



Piano and Poetry duo Martin Dyar and Colm Walsh



Jackie O'Shea with Fionnuala O'Connell, Committee Member



Author Dermot Bolger relaxing near the Aidan Heavey Public Library



Gearoid O'Brien lead the Athlone Literary and Cultural Walk