

**'Because a fire was in my head':  
Stories to fire the imagination.**

Dr Pat Donlon  
Arnold Graves Scholar  
Dublin Institute of Technology

Human nature remains unaltered, unchanging, a constant in a world of shifting sands, different times. We are born, we grow up, and we go to school, to college and eventually to work. We strive to make sense of our world, to make our mark, to move on, to start our own families, to pass on our stories, our heritage - and eventually we die. Since time immemorial, another constant in all our lives, whether we grow up in the 21st century or the fifth century, is the need to nurture our spirits and nourish our souls, to feed our imaginations so that we are truly alive and not just merely existing - and we have used story as a vital staple ingredient in the recipe for soulful survival.

Thus it was when Aesop's fables were first told and so it is today with Artemis Fowl. The medium has changed - from the storyteller around the fire, through the lure of the chapman's little woodcuts, on through the golden age of colour printing and chromolithography and the restrictions of two world wars, to the paperback revolution and finally to the e-Book of today. But this is the medium - not the message - a book is only a sheaf of paper, or a blank screen until the storytellers put their marks upon it- until their imaginations have been stoked and fired -until story is created and then something magical happens.

Children have instinctively understood this - as they crept closer to the fire, hidden in the adults' shadows. And when good people started to produce books just for them, sometimes with the very best of wrong reasons, these clever, canny creatures ate the sugar coating and politely spat back the moral pill, or excavated beneath the satirical carapace until they had found the nugget of gold, the story itself. If today anyone doubts the power of story - even in this age of multi-media stimulation, just take a look at any one days' advertising on television, cinema or radio - whether the product is soap powder or sinus remedies and you will find increasingly that we are witnessing miniature dramas, tiny stories - to catch our attention, to help us remember, to persuade us that the magic in these screen lives can be ours if only we brush with the right toothpaste or own the right make of car.

Everyone recognises and responds to the magic formula - 'once upon a time' and longs for that special place 'over the rainbow', or 'over the hills and far away' - Babylon, Tír na nóg, Narnia, 'the deep, dark wood', 'the fairy boat', wherever or whatever it may be. When we travel to these lands, we forget who we are, what our race or creed is, if we are rich or poor, misunderstood or maltreated, for there in storyland we are all equal. Through the power of story and imagination we can become so tiny that we can join Ariel, singing in his cowslip bell, or stretch as large as giants so that we can stand shoulder to shoulder to Fionn MacCumhail, enter the garden of the Selfish Giant, join in with the fun with the Big Friendly Giant, or make the beanstalk tremble as we touch the skies. We too can journey to 'far distant Oxis', fly away on an old carpet with a phoenix for a guide, or float on the wings of a bird; walk through a wardrobe door into another land, or fall down a rabbit hole or through a

looking glass - no passports needed, language not a problem, no need to pack. Through story we can become as brave and adventurous as pioneers in the old West, hitching our wagons to a star. It isn't always total happiness in these far distant lands, but there we learn to weep at injustice, to believe in tiny everyday miracles in the company of red-headed orphan girls, and brave refugee boys - and always and ever there is a little bit of us in these story people and by the time we have journeyed with them to the last page and the final full stop -there is a little bit of their stories, their lives, their experiences which is forever ours. Books - the great vehicle for story - are the superhighway - to magic, enchantment, enlightenment, understanding, mystery, and fun. On this journey though you may travel far beyond the rainbow, or over the moon, back in time or to the centre of the earth, all you need is a little time and lots of imagination.

Story has many routes through which to reach our hearts and minds. I recall and pay tribute to the influence and importance of being read aloud to and of radio in those times past during my formative years. We should never underestimate the influence of listening to stories on our imaginations, language skills and understanding of human nature in all its guises. I was blessed with a patient older sister who read to me often and on demand and later to a gentle introduction to school in the shape of 'Miss Maguire's Primary School' - a two-roomed school - in spirit a village school - though physically located in inner city Dublin. There the emphasis was not on things academic but on drawing out the best in us through reading and art. Saturday mornings were best - and there was school on Saturday mornings then - when completely untrammelled we were let loose with paints and pencils, whilst our kindly teacher read aloud to us. And then there was radio - both Children's Hour on BBC and our own Radio Éireann. Through radio I was introduced to books which I only eventually read in print format as an adult and to a cast of characters - the wonderful animals in *The Wind in the Willows*, or Noel Streatfield's *Vicarage Family*, to Brer Rabbit and *Huckleberry Finn*, to Biggles and the stories of the Ballets. The pleasure was sometimes leavened with frustration, as this was long before the days of satellite dishes and communal aerials, not to mention digital radio - and the reception was erratic. At a relatively tender age, I was frequently found stamping my foot and bemoaning those dreadful 'atmospherics' - or 'feries' as I thought they were called. And I was not alone in sharing the thrill of lives lived vicariously through the radio. Seamus Heaney in his Nobel Lecture recalls his childhood in rural County Derry. And he explains

*I would climb up on an arm of our big sofa to get my ear closer to the wireless speaker. But it was still not the news that interested me; what I was after was the thrill of a story, such as Barton or perhaps a radio adaptation of Capt. W.E. John's adventure tales about an RAF flying ace called Biggles. Now that the other children were older and there was so much going on in the kitchen, I had to get close to the actual set in order to concentrate my hearing, and in that intent proximity to the dial I grew familiar with the names of foreign stations, with Leipzig and Oslo and Stuttgart and Warsaw and, of course, with Stockholm.<sup>1</sup>*

There are some themes or motifs that have become universal and international: the world in miniature, the other world - be it fairyland or outer space, the journey to different times and places, and the journey within to a degree of self discovery. Some of the greatest of our storytellers have tackled these themes - and made them memorable. Some of our greatest writers, statesmen and historians have paid tribute to the power these stories have had in their lives and on their work. Today as we stand in this ancient place of learning which houses one of our great treasures - the *Book of Kells* - a book from the dark ages which has been shining

its light for centuries, I want to share with you some of my personal treasures from the magic world of story - and some of my favourite testimonies to the power of story - 'because a fire was in my head'. As this conference is taking place in Ireland, and as we are inordinately proud of our tradition of bookmaking and learning, of poetry and story, of art and music I hope you will forgive and understand if some of my witnesses to the power of story are themselves Irish.

Where better place to start than right here in Dublin, only a stone's throw from where we are today, in St. Patrick's Cathedral and with its famed Dean, Jonathon Swift, who of course is the author of *Gulliver's Travels*, an ancient 'bestseller.'<sup>2</sup> It was not written with children in mind, being a satire - a scathing commentary on the littleness of man. However in a world then devoid of entertaining stories for children, the canny creatures adopted it as their own. Before long it was being produced in chapbook versions with crude woodcuts, and it began its travels into other languages and different cultures and different centuries. It is not difficult to understand its immediate appeal - tiny people, big people, and floating islands, talking horses. Apart from its story, it also gave several new words to the English language - chief amongst them the word that sums up the charm of many children's stories - 'Lilliput' and the 'Lilliputians'. Up to recently, the web address of a digital storytelling circle was Lilliput!<sup>3</sup> Next time you surf the web using Yahoo remember it was Jonathon Swift created the name and the characters. Like all great stories, it has been both a magnet and a challenge for illustrators since its first publication. Countless illustrators have interpreted it - Granville, Theaker, Robin Jacques, Victor Ambrus and of course Walter Rackham. My favourite version is that produced by Irish poet and children's author Padraic Colum at beginning of 20th century with advice and encouragement from Ann Carroll Moore, doyenne of the New York Public Library. It was published with remarkable illustrations being provided by Willy Pogany. In the introduction Colum comments on its popularity:

*No book in the history of literature has had such good fortune as "Gulliver's Travels." It has gone into the world and the world has received it as its own, and it has gone into the nursery and the nursery has given it the immortality of "Jack and the Beanstalk." It has been read by children as a wonder-tale and by statesmen in exile as a piece of secret history.*<sup>4</sup>

As Padraic Colum has said, it does indeed have an extraordinary life of its own and one of my favourite stories about it is told in Jella Lepman's *Bridge of Children's Books*. Those of you who know the book will realise that it recounts the superhuman efforts made by this amazing woman to better the lives of children in post war Europe. It tells, amongst other things, of her idea and efforts which resulted in the International Exhibition of Children's Books held in Munich's Haus der Kunst. This was July 1946 and Europe was in tatters, people were demoralised and the children had little to light up their lives. This was nowhere as true as in post-war Germany. All their books had disappeared under the Nazi regime. Food and clothing were in short supply, so it is hardly surprising that children's books should be low down the list of priorities. Then along came Jella Lepman and her vision of a 'bridge of books'. By coaxing and coercion she persuaded countries - even those who has suffered most at the hands of the Nazis to send books to Germany and then... but let me tell you the story in her own words:

*It was a beautiful, never-to-be-forgotten day, that July 3, 1946, especially in the afternoon when the doors opened wide to admit the children. In they streamed, in happy packs, their faces radiant as though they were entering the*

*magic ring. Many came alone, others in the hands of adults. Their shoes were covered with dust, for they had come a long way.*<sup>5</sup>

When the exhibition ended the children voted on their six favourite books - and there was *Gulliver*, standing tall amongst others alongside *Huckleberry Finn*, *Heidi* and *Pinnocchio*. What the exhibition proved, if there ever had been any doubt, is that story has restorative powers, powers to console, to engender courage and to contribute to understanding among peoples. In the mid eighties in Northern Ireland when the euphemistically named 'Troubles' were at their worst, a group of librarians began story sessions with some toughened Belfast boys. This too was the period of realism in fiction for children, when hitherto taboo topics became fashionably current. However, to their surprise the librarians discovered that what these boys wanted was not a slice of life, not a mirror image, but a journey elsewhere to magic, enchantment, fairytale and fantasy - as T.S. Eliot puts it 'Human kind cannot bear very much reality'<sup>6</sup>

*Gulliver* is still part of life and lore in Ireland. A good example of how story 'escapes' the page and penetrates into all areas of life is Gulliver's appearance in recent years through the street theatre of Macnas - a giant sized figure floating down the Liffey, being tied down on Sandymount Strand where Sunday strollers become the Lilliputians - and travelling farther afield to Seville during the Expo - giving rise to wonderful newspaper headlines about 'Gulliver on the Guadalquivir.' Scenes from Gulliver appear in roundels on the walls of a public housing complex close to St Patrick's cathedral. Recently it has been adapted for television by Channel 4. However, its greatest legacy, in my opinion, is that it has inspired those countless other stories in the intervening centuries where we meet little people pitting their wits against 'giants'. My favourite is that modern classic by Mary Norton - *The Borrowers*<sup>7</sup> - those six inch high people who live under the floorboards, or in the clocks of houses, 'borrowing' so they can survive - hence all those missing safety pins, and paper clips. Similarities are there - neither the Lilliputians nor the Clock Family use magic to advance their struggles or solve their problems. They use logic, initiative and sheer physical energy. Mary Norton lived for a brief period in West Cork, and I had the privilege of hearing her speak on Irish Radio - where she explained that the origins of *The Borrowers* came from her short-sightedness and her need to peer closely at the world about her.

*When others saw far hills, the distant woods, the soaring pheasant, I as a child would turn sideways to the close bank, the tree roots and the tangled grasses...*

What sets these books apart and gives them the status as a 'classic' is the skill and imagination with which Norton develops both plot and character. There is no one hero or heroine, rather the Clocks and their strength as a family - their resourcefulness and unity in times of crisis - is what propels and compels throughout the books. These are no fairytales with magical interventions to add excitement. If a borrower needs to 'borrow' from a table top - then they have to find ways and means of making it happen, with brain and brawn and bravery - and climbing curtains or table-runners. Neither is there a fairytale ending, just survival and a faint hint of unease, no more than any of us face in our day to day lives. Here is story helping us look at the world with a different perspective - through the wrong end of the telescope.

The term 'little people' has a special meaning in Ireland - as the collective of a group of fairies, elves, or leprechauns. Leprechauns are touchy topic in these parts, most of us feeling about them the way I understand many Canadians feel about the Mounties - they are distinctive national symbols, but they are not all that we are about. In the world of children's stories, it would be callous of me to ignore those noble examples of the genus which have

jumped from the pages of our books. Chief amongst them is an endearing character Brogeen, created in the forties by Patricia Lynch - one of our finest storytellers.<sup>8</sup> Irish fairies are very different from those airy creatures with butterfly wings and starry wands. Irish fairies are close to the earth and have more human characteristics - being mischievous, jealous and fond of playing tricks. Brogeen personifies all of these characteristics. As leprechaun he is shoemaker to the fairies and lives in the Fort of Sheen. On those occasions when Patricia Lynch allows Brogeen to journey from the fort to wander in the world of men, the fun is fast and furious. Lynch learned her skill as a storyteller from Mrs Hennessy - a Shanachie or traditional storyteller, and she tells her tales with a storyteller's voice full of the rhythm and lilt of the language and the old ways with friendly asides to the reader and lots of humour. Patricia Lynch was left with Mrs Hennessy when she was just six years old. In her autobiography, *A Storyteller Childhood*<sup>9</sup>, Lynch gives us some indication of the power and position held by those who had the gift:

*She was a Shanachie, one of the real old story-tellers. Her father had the gift before her. She knew more about Finn MacCool and the Red Branch Knights, Oisín and the Three Sorrow of Story-telling than could be found in the books. The people who lived in Ireland before the days of history were as well known to Mrs Hennessy as the neighbours in her village. Only she wouldn't tell her stories in every house.*

Wryly voicing the dilemma that most leprechauns have experienced since the days when Brogeen wielded his tiny hammer, writer Siobhan Parkinson gives us a late twentieth century model in her delightful book *The Leprechaun who wished he wasn't*.<sup>10</sup> Laurence - as the leprechaun is called - has been 'little' for over one hundred years and he's had enough - he wants to be tall - so with the help of Phoebe - a large girl who wants to be small, he starts by abandoning his 'green jacket, red cap and white owl's feather' in favour of jeans and denim jacket. I will leave it to your imagination as to what the consequences of that are - or better still leave you to read it for yourselves. There's another spirit from the fairy world that I hold in high regard and just for today I want to rescue him from the shelves of antiquarian books where he lives these days. He is Moira O' Neill's *The Elf Errant*, published in 1894. Let me read you the first paragraph - an important hook for any reader:

*He came over to Ireland between the leaves of a Shakespeare, and to this day nobody knows whether his coming was a mistake or not. The place, however, was in "The Tempest", just at Ariel's song: Where the bee sucks, there suck I.*

*It was a very good place, and he felt quite comfortable. In any other book he might have been crushed; but Shakespeare never crushes any living thing, and besides, he has a peculiar tenderness for little elves.*

There follows his encounters with Irish elves - and some funny and pertinent misunderstandings which acutely highlight cultural difference between the two islands. There is the moment when the English Elf berates his new Irish friend, Trefoil, for wasting time - and gets his answer:

*'Listen to him', shouted Trefoil to the world at large. 'A waste of time!' Why you've come to a country where there's no such thing as a waste of time. We have no value for time here. There's lashings of it, more than anybody knows what to do with. You couldn't waste your time in Ireland, if you were trying at it all day and night.'*<sup>11</sup>

Story as a catalyst for imagination and creativity is something that no one can deny. Story can also be a very powerful agent in our lives as inspiration and solace. One of the most moving testimonies of the book as solace and companion is that told by acclaimed children's writer Rosemary Sutcliff. An only child, she was a victim of Still's Disease, a rare form of juvenile arthritis that made it impossible for her to walk. In her autobiography *The Blue Remembered Hills* she recalls a particular book that she read whilst in hospital. Listen to what she says:

*It was a book called Emily of New Moon, about a little girl whose father died of consumption...what made it so different from other books of its kind I did not know, and I do not know even now. But for me it was magic. I carried it off and kept it under my pillow or clutched to my bosom at bed-making time...On fine summer nights the beds remained out on the concrete strip all night, and I used to read, half under the bedclothes to evade Night Nurse's eagle eye, until the last dregs of the light had drained away...It was just magic, and magic is an unaccountable thing.*

However in the excitement of growing up and leaving hospital the book gets left behind. Books loved in childhood have a way of lodging in the memory and years later a friend in correspondence casually mentions 'Emily' - and here I let Rosemary take up the story again:

*I wrote off to my friend 'Please, please is the Emily you mention by any chance Emily of New Moon?'...It was, it is. A few weeks later it arrived...And now I had it, I was almost afraid to open it and begin reading... Would the specialness, the magic still be there?... I took the book to bed with me that night, opened it and started reading. And the magic was still there!... and a small fragment of my childhood [had] been given back to me.<sup>12</sup>*

An interesting contemporary example and one of my favourite scenes from the last decade of European film is from that wonderful Czech film *Kolya* which movingly demonstrates the healing power of story on a small lost boy. The story is set against the background to the 'Velvet Revolution' of late 1989 - and it focuses on the dilemma facing Louka - a financially strapped, crusty bachelor cellist - who gets pressurised into a paper marriage with a Russian woman for money in order to buy an old car. When she disappears, her five year old son Kolya arrives on Louka's doorstep. Neither speaks the other's language. Neither wants to be with the other. Following several miserable days of the boy crying himself to sleep, Louka phones an old flame of his who is a teacher of Russian. Louka hands Kolya the telephone and we see his misery visibly lift as he listens to a fairytale read to him in his own familiar language. Of course this one incident does not create a miracle, but is a tiny beam of light as you witness the delight and joy on Kolya's face as he hears the familiar words of a well-loved fairy story and it is the beginning of real empathy between the two.<sup>13</sup>

Books were my solace and companions too - during a long hospital stay, and throughout my childhood which was a solitary one. Growing up as I did, in inner city Dublin towards the end and in the aftermath of World War II, which in neutral Ireland became known as 'The Emergency' - life was grey. Ours was a house that respected books - although we owned very few. Still, Christmas and birthdays always brought a book for me - even when I couldn't read them by myself. Ireland was completely isolated during the war years and the supply of books and magazines from England ceased entirely. In a curious way this very isolation forced upon the fledgling state a degree of self-sufficiency. During those years Irish publishing houses printed a rake of fine books - in modest editions, and occasionally with

illustration in two colours, or rarely full colour. For three wonderful years my annual gift was each of a trilogy of works from a country schoolteacher, Mary Flynn, on the extraordinarily ordinary life of a rabbit Cornelius Rabbit of Tang.<sup>14</sup> And I just knew from the very first sentence 'Tang is a town in the middle of a wide, wide bog' - that this had to be real, this was home, this was Ireland. Never mind the fact that it was peopled by rabbits, owls, elephants, and lambs - all good friends, and all the same size, wearing clothes that looked a little like what I was wearing. They had adventures that were just a tiny bit out of the ordinary - the sort of thing that might have happened to you and me, only it never did. The sentences, the cadences of the language rang in my head - and no doubt rang in my poor elder sister's head, whose task it was to 'read it again.'

We all need story - to help us get by in the everyday, to open windows into other worlds, to connect us with the world of the spirit, and the spirit of the past. I spoke earlier about the blank pages of a book without a story - but we should also remember that there is no story without words. Words are the bricks and mortar of story - and it doesn't matter if they build a short poem, or a multi-volume series. Children are such natural word hoarders and seekers. You have only to listen to a small baby not yet speaking but learning to communicate, babbling away in a wonderful mimicry of our language, complete with punctuation and emphasis. Long after children learn to speak they often create their own secret, nonsense language. One of my granddaughters when she was about two years old had a favourite song which was aired in moments of stress. The only two words I could recognise as 'English' were 'miserable seek' - and to this day I really wish I knew the rest, especially if I feel the need for consolation or indeed lamentation.

Some two decades ago I was one of the organisers of a conference on children's literature being hosted in Dublin - probably the first children's literature conference that the capital had seen. We hosted many eminent writers and illustrators - such as you will be meeting in Trinity College over the next few days. One of these was the small, indomitable Dorothy Edwards - best remembered as the author of *My Naughty Little Sister* books. She spoke with great good sense and much humour of her experiences with books and children and reading. She told us stories and kept us enthralled. One of the stories she told I have never forgotten. She lived in a terraced house in a busy Northern town in England and shared the communal life of such small towns. On one occasion her next-door neighbour was taken to hospital leaving her husband and a clutch of children in a fix. Neighbours rallied to take care of the practicalities, but still the husband fretted and looked lost. 'What'll I do?' he wailed. 'Oh, for goodness sake', was Dorothy's frustrated response, 'just go and read to the children'. Some time later she came to fetch them all for tea, and there they were - all sitting on the steps of the stairs in rapt attention as their father read aloud:

*Forbidden time - eleven to four*

*Potato man - four to one*

*Palace of Gold - seven to one*

He was, of course, reading to them from the list of runners in the local horse race - a subject which was dear to his heart and so he read with feeling. Here then, was the perfect formula - the children had the personal, undivided attention of an adult important in their lives who was reading something that interested him, but also reading to them in a language full of music, magic and sheer poetry - a language familiar to them from nursery rhymes and nonsense verse.

Closely allied to this joy in language and words is the path to fantasy lands - and as we realise the very best fantasy and magic can happen right under our very own noses. Whilst I'm talking about Dorothy Edwards I would like to pay tribute to what I hold as one of the finest works of fantasy - although it is now forgotten and no longer in print. This is Edwards's dark and challenging work of fantasy *The Witches and the Grinnygog*, published in 1981.<sup>15</sup> The mystery begins when an old church is dismantled and moved brick by brick. Three strange women arrive in the small town near the church of St Cuthbert's - and even stranger happenings occur. All these odd happenings are meticulously documented by a group of children - and presented to us the readers in a documentary format. The spirit and essence of the story is thrilling and at the same time mystical and beautiful. I first read it when it was published back in 1981 and only recently came to re-read it in preparation for this conference. The intervening years had not dimmed nor diminished the particular thrill that this story produced - nor lessened the impact of the everyday being turned to proper use in the realms of 'good' magic. That for me - the least domesticated woman I know - the most memorable magical moment of the story takes place in a launderette is in itself tribute to the storyteller. One of the strange women - the witches of the title - has been spotted in there by the locals, seated before a washing machine, muttering darkly while watching through the machine's round window at the spinning pile of weeds, ferns and grasses she has placed there - until finally what emerges is a stunning hat of chiffon and feathers - and she is left gasping aloud:

*'What spells! WHAT spells we could have made in the old days given machines like these!' cried the happy witch. 'Only the double doubling. No toils and troublings! That's all done for you.'*

An author who has also played with language and stretched it to its limits is our own James Joyce. That this conference coincides with the one hundredth anniversary of Bloomsday in 1904 is something which can hardly have escaped you as you travel around Dublin. I think it fitting to mark that anniversary by remembering Joyce's story which he wrote in letter form to his grandson Stephen Joyce in 1936 and which was published for the first time in 1965. It begins 'My dear Stevie, I sent you a little cat filled with sweets, but perhaps you do not know the story about the cat of Beaugency?' Immediately we are transported to a mediaeval village in France - Beaugency - one with an interesting problem. It is a town divided by a wide, wide river with no bridge and no money to build one. It has a devil who reads the daily paper - and a somewhat pompous Lord Mayor with the unusual name - that is for a French Mayor - of Monsieur Alfred Byrne. The in-joke for the cognoscenti at the time is that there was indeed a very famous Lord Mayor of Dublin - called Alfie Byrne who was the longest serving Lord Mayor in the history of the city and who endeared himself to the city's street urchins by always carrying some sweets in his pocket. The two meet and a pact is made. The story is full of verbal somersaults which can be enjoyed by the adult reader over the child's shoulder. *The Cat and the Devil* is a tour-de-force of storytelling told with great simplicity and pace - and like all the best children's stories is multi-layered, and can be read as both satire and local comment. And the ending is just perfect: like the best letters there is a P.S.

*The devil mostly speaks a language of his own called Bellsybabble which he makes up as he goes along but when he is very angry he can speak quite bad French very well though some who have heard him say that he has a strong Dublin accent.*<sup>16</sup>

Language and the love of words and story is one of the greatest gifts we can give to young people today. Growing up in the twenty first century is hard work - and childhood as a



time frame is shrinking. It is important for all of the children that we make time for fun and nonsense, for poetry and the power of story. So to finish the paean of praise to the power of story to enrich our lives, to stretch our imaginations, to sooth our souls, I want to finish with some lines of poetry. Three poems in particular, one by English poet Roger McGough, and two by Irish poets, Seamus Heaney and William B. Yeats - both Nobel Prize winners.

The first poem is called Poem for a Dead Poet by Roger McGough:

*He was a poet he was.  
A proper poet.  
He said things  
That made you think  
And said them nicely.  
He saw things  
That you or I  
Could never see  
And saw them clearly.  
He had a way  
With language.  
Images flocked around  
Him like birds,  
St Francis he was,  
Of the words. Words?  
Why he could almost make 'em talk.<sup>17</sup>*

Now what links that poem to my next one is this image of 'St Francis of the words' because Seamus Heaney has written a poem not about a dead poet but about St Francis.

*When Francis preached love to the birds  
They listened, fluttered, throttled up  
Into the blue like a flock of words  
  
Released for fun from his holy lips.  
Then wheeled back, whirred about his head,  
Pirouetted on brothers' capes,  
  
Danced on the wings, for sheer joy played  
And sang, like images took flight.  
Which was the best poem Francis made,  
His argument true, his tone light.<sup>18</sup>*

My wish for this conference, for all the speakers and listeners, for the practitioners and visitors alike is that Trinity College will resound with flocks of words, and that words of a feather will flock together and travel on to wider shores under a canopy of stories from Aesop to e-Books. Yours is an important role, to place books and story in the hands of new children - like the wise men and women of old who passed on their stories to the young of the tribe. You are their guides on that superhighway to books and reading and it behoves all of us to resist any roadblocks on the way, any attempt to dilute the impact of reading and story and booklore. And there will be roadblocks, there are always roadblocks - lack of adequate funding for libraries, for teaching colleges, for expert specialists who aid those struggling to decode the symbols that so many of us take for granted, for the battle against ignorance and condescension, that dismissive 'kid's stuff' epithet. Remember the poet Randall Jarrell when he wrote

*Read meanwhile...hunt among the shelves, as dogs do grasses,  
And find one cure for Everychild's diseases  
Beginning: One upon a time there was...*<sup>19</sup>

Story in all its phases and all its format is silver and gold, bronze and pewter - distinct and different forms of treasure to be sought and saved for times of difficulties and stress. I called this talk 'Because a fire was in my head' - which as most of you know is a quote from a W. B. Yeats poem 'The Song of Wandering Aengus' - and Aengus was known in Celtic mythology as the god of love, whose kisses turned into birds, and who was always accompanied by three wonderful birds - so I cannot seem to get away from our feathered friends! This mystical poem end with the poet's vow that is also my wish for you that refreshed by the contacts and companionship, the stimulation and the glory of story that you too may

*... walk among long dappled grass,  
And pluck till time and times are done  
The silver apples of the moon,  
the golden apples of the sun.*<sup>20</sup>

### Endnotes

1. Seamus Heaney, *Crediting Poetry*. Loughcrew: Gallery Press, 1995.
2. First published anonymously by Swift as *Travels into several remote Nations of the World. In four Parts. By Lemuel Gulliver, first a surgeon and then a Captain of several ships*. London: printed for Benjamin Motte, 1726. <http://www.lilliput.co.uk>
3. *Gulliver's Travels* by Jonathan Swift, edited by Padraic Colum. Presented by Willy Pogany. London: Harrap, 1919.
4. Jella Lepman, *A bridge of children's books*. Translated from the German by Edith McCormick. Leicester: Brockhampton Press, 1969. A new edition was published by O'Brien Press, Dublin in 2003.
5. From 'Burnt Norton' in T.S. Eliot, *The Four Quartets*. New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1943.
6. Mary Norton, *The Borrowers*. London: Dent, 1952.
7. Between 1947 and 1964 Patricia Lynch published ten Brogeen books - the first *Brogeen of the Stepping Stones* (1947) and the last *Guests at the Beech Tree: a Brogeen Story* (1964).
8. Patricia Lynch *A Storyteller's Childhood*. Drawings by Harry Kernoff. London: Dent, 1947.
9. Siobhán Parkinson, *The Leprechaun who wished he wasn't*. Illustrated by Donald Teskey. Dublin: O'Brien, 1993.
11. Moira O'Neill, *The Elf-Errant: a Story for Children*. Illustrated by W.E.F. Britten. London: Sidgwick & Jackson Ltd., 1894.
12. Rosemary Sutcliff, *Blue remembered hills: a recollection*. London: Bodley Head, 1983
13. *Koyla*, Written by Zdenek Sverak, directed by Jan Sverak. Miramax, 1997
14. Mary Flynn, *Cornelius Rabbit of Tang*. Illustrated by Eileen Coghlan. Dublin: Talbot Press, 1944.
15. Dorothy Edwards, *The Witches and the Grinnygog*. London: Faber and Faber, 1981.
16. There have been several editions - both an American and English 'first' edition of 1965. The edition from Moonlight Publishing in London in 1990 has an 'after' letter from Stephen Joyce, the 'Stevie' of the story.

- 17 In *You Tell Me*. Poems by Roger McGough and Michael Rosen. Harmondsworth: Puffin, 1981.
- 18 In Seamus Heaney, *Death of a Naturalist*. London: Faber & Faber, 1966.
- 19 In Randall Jarrell, *The Complete Poems*. London: Faber & Faber, 1971.
- 20 In *The Collected Poems* of W. B. Yeats. New York: Macmillan, 1959.

### *Author Note*

Dr Pat Donlon was the Director National Library of Ireland from 1989 to 1997. Pat is currently Arnold Graves Scholar at Dublin Institute of Technology where she is researching Irish children's illustrators. Lecturer in Children's Literature at University College Dublin 1979-1989, Pat is also a member of Royal Irish Academy, the European Cultural Foundation, and is a Patron of Children's Books Ireland. Pat was the 1997 recipient of the Children's Books Ireland award for distinguished services to Irish children's literature and Sanders Bibliography Reader at University of Cambridge in 1998/99. She has published and broadcast widely on Ireland's contribution to children's literature.