

Final Address: some reflections

Thank you for this opportunity to record my appreciation to the entire organisation and its wide family of friends and associates who have remained steadfast and true to the heritage of Ireland, to a public that keeps its heritage close to its heart, and to this amazing organisation over an eight-year long winter of recession that is, only now, beginning to loosen its icy grip.

Unevenly, it has to be said: there are legacy issues that will haunt Irish society for a long time yet, but we can take heart from the fact that when the backs were against the wall; and in sharp contrast to how the government called it; the demand for what the Heritage Council offers probably doubled during these eight years as people sought out and reasserted their ownership of and deep attachment to things that really matter, that have real, lasting value, things that anchor us to what counts when the seas turn nasty. Calling these things by the name 'heritage' is an act of evocation; by calling something 'heritage' we call it forth, from the past into the present, as the ancient poets once incanted places into being by the sacred power of the spoken word..

The Strengths of the Heritage Council

The Heritage Council is twenty-one years old, counting back from the Heritage Act; twenty-eight if you go all the way back to the founding of the National Heritage Council in 1988, when it was the brain-child of one Charles J. Haughey and under the chairmanship of Michael Morris, better known to us as Lord Killanin, erstwhile President of International Olympic Committee. He was, in fact, the founder of An Taisce and chaired the National Monuments Advisory Council, so his appointment was not accidental. As the first and only member of staff for a couple of years, Beatrice Kelly is the guardian of that chapter in the history of Council.

While the Heritage Act is the very foundation stone of the Council, it is important not to forget the five years leading up to it, nor the seeds that were then sown. Also, there is a difference between a twenty-one year old and a twenty-eight year old in respect of experience and authority: the Heritage Council will sooner be thirty than twenty-five, and its thirtieth birthday will coincide with the European Year of Cultural Heritage.

I won't dwell on the transformation of the Heritage Council and the heritage sector in the years following its establishment as a statutory body, the appointment of its CEO, and the building up of the executive and networks that followed. You are all familiar with that story. In fact you are all part of it. I would merely point to the fact that when measured against the yard-stick of international literature and the ideals of best practice that recommend focusing on values, places and people—that is, the *context* and *substance* of the heritage—the Heritage Council is bang on the money. We are doing exactly what the international jurors are saying we ought to be doing, our mantra of “public authorship—public ownership—public benefit” is what is being preached from every heritage pulpit.

Moreover, how the Heritage Council has achieved these lofty targets is of interest internationally. And increasingly so. The Heritage Council is being held up as an exemplar of good practice at the Council of Europe, and has a cabinet of trophies to prove that its achievements are recognised the world over. I am thinking here of the silver medal awarded to the Julianstown Village Design Statement project at the International Awards for Liveable Communities

(Category A, populations up to 20,000) at a ceremony in Xiamen, in the Fujian province in Southeast China, and, also in 2013, the European Union Prize for Cultural Heritage / Europa Nostra awarded to the Irish Walled Towns Network in the category of Education, Training and Awareness-raising. That ceremony took place at the Odeon of Herodes Atticus, in Athens.

Twenty-something years ago heritage in Ireland needed instruments and mechanisms to save, harness and build on the massive storehouse of heritage that exists at grass-roots level; stuff that slips past the reach of the big cultural institutions who serve a quite different but no less vital role in Irish cultural life. The living museum of 'ordinary' heritage needed looking after; the people, who already of their own volition were shouldering that burden, needed help, support, advice, encouragement and acknowledgement. They needed their heritage to count. *They* needed to count.

The Heritage Council stepped into that space, developed the networks and the instruments to save and champion the heritage. It developed close relations with such interest groups all over the country, it listened to them, befriended them, supported, and became a strong champion on their behalf. In an unobtrusive way, the Heritage Council also shaped their ambitions and, so doing, it built a very important component of the heritage sector.

Addressing sustainability issues

Success breeds success, and the demand for what the Heritage Council offers is growing well-nigh exponentially with the result that it is committed well beyond sustainable capacity. There is a couple of things that might be done in this regard. A good place to start is to acknowledge that refining, growing and resourcing our public work is a specialist, and highly rewarding job of work in and of itself.

The Heritage Council operates in unique landscape that stretches all the way from community groups, of regularly less than half-a-dozen active citizens, all the way to Central Government. As the public demand grows, however, our capacity to service our relationship with government shrinks, and we cannot afford to let that happen.

The Heritage Council needs to fix this, which means, inevitably I think, growing the resource *and* re-situating itself by re-thinking its role and location in that landscape. The Heritage Act is roomy enough to accommodate this.

There is not a lot we can do about the resource side; personnel and grants cost money, which, like our ability to secure it, is limited and mostly outside of our control: there are other, pressing demands on the public purse. Thus it has always been.

So much for what we cannot control. What *is* within our grasp is the freedom and ability to re-position the organisation relative to the sector. Can it be achieved with current staff numbers? I am not sure but my guess is no. So this is where we have to work as an *advisory* board with the emphasis on advisory.

The scope for direct, board-to-minister advice was very limited throughout the recession because frankly the minister's hands were tied by the financial crisis and priorities set by Finance and DEPAR. And typically, when it comes to heritage matters, it would seem that successive

ministers felt they were getting all the advice they need about heritage from within the department. This too needs remedying. There is a level of expertise at the Heritage Council that is unique.

The announcement of Creative Ireland, has given us a platform on which to align explicitly with a project of this minister's making and is compatible with the Heritage Council's agenda, and we should take this opportunity, and any others that arise, to get the current and successive ministers accustomed to receiving advisory delegations, greater in number than just the customary Chair + CEO. Also, the new *Guidelines for Corporate Governance for State Bodies* mandate more formal advisory functions that have heretofore been, shall we say, sought. The chairperson, on behalf of the board, is now required to report annually to the minister, and I think that we should assume/insist that this includes a person-to-person, in camera, discussion of the needs of the sector.

My message is that whatever age it is, the time is now for the Heritage Council to analyse its relationship with the actors who shape the sector and, so doing, re-situate itself relative to them for the sake of safe-guarding and guaranteeing its effectiveness into the future. In fact we have known this for some time, it is just that the prospect, which seems unavoidable in such a scenario, of distancing ourselves from our beloved grantees and communities-of-interest seems too big a price to pay. We love them like family, we are energised by them, and they are our shop-window and most loyal fans. But distancing is not abandonment.

The Heritage Officer Network

Central to any such re-wiring is the Heritage Officer network. I can't adequately express my admiration for the Heritage Officers. It is my belief that not only has heritage per se evolved into a discipline over the last twenty years but that the job or skill-set of the heritage office has become, to borrow Loreto Guinan's term, 'an embedded discipline' in local government. While the Heritage Officers come from a brilliantly diverse range of professional backgrounds, they have collectively evolved into something quite different. A new profession has been born, it's called 'heritage officer', and no home should be without one! We should not assume that our high regard and financial support, and that of the local authorities, who all speak so highly of their heritage officers, are enough to secure the future of the programme, the future of this new profession. Only national policy or policies will achieve that. And between us, that is also our job.

The Heritage Officer Programme is comparatively young—you wouldn't think so by looking at their collective output, by the way—and we have yet to experience a superannuation and the cycle associated with that. I know it is a long way off but we need to be planning for succession, anticipating it and guaranteeing it. I think there are a few things we can do, as I mentioned, in that regard, including developing a language around the function and role of the Heritage Officers, and creating opportunities that highlight, normalise, and perhaps even certify the professional identity of a Heritage Officer.

In the years that I have been here I have seen an increase in the collaborative ventures of the Heritage Officers across county boundaries. I think there needs to be more of this, aiming towards national-scale, properly-resourced projects. There is, I believe a golden opportunity in

the shape of the Creative Ireland initiative. Perhaps a co-ordinated, bespoke project between Council and its Heritage Officers is an option. Bespoke is the key word here: we/you collectively need to respond to the opportunity that is Creative Ireland with a bright new idea. I'll talk more about this in a moment. In any case I think that together the Heritage Officers and the Heritage Council form a formidable team and I expect that whoever replaces Liam Scott in the role of co-ordinator and chief bottle-washer will want to find ways to amplify the visibility and purchase of the collective strength.

Also, and I know this is the subject matter of Shirley Clerkin's thesis, the job of the heritage officer has been spontaneously transformed by the social context and expectations in which it now occurs. Communities have awoken, like never before, to the importance of social capital, of cohesion, inclusivity and belongingness, and they view heritage projects as a way of achieving those ends (see also Three Cities Project, ILAS, NUIG). So, heritage has moved from being something of an end in itself to being a means to an end, and the skill set of the heritage officers has had to expand accordingly. We need to help them with this and we need to learn from them about how to do it because they are all actually doing it. This dimension of the work has got to be profiled more publically, for a variety of reasons that I need not expand on because I think you all know what I am talking about.

Heritage Policy

There is, as we all know, more to policy than plugging gaps. Policy creates stability, a steady, lasting platform from which to push off, a covenant and a contract. That is why policy is so valuable. The Heritage Council has generated an impressive raft of policy proposals about the heritage, many of which were taken up by government. While there are still gaps, there now exists a sort of policy infrastructure around heritage assets, ones that might be referred to as natural and others that are cultural (though, in fact, they are all cultural when refracted through the lens of heritage). Thus, in addition to grant-supporting heritage projects, the Heritage Council has responded to needs that exist at a national scale, things that transcend the local, like our inland waterways, the museum sector, national biological records, vernacular farm buildings, forestry, architectural heritage, and so on. This too is a job of work in and of itself and might benefit from being regarded, profiled and packaged as such.

And while in exercising this function the Heritage Council has benefited from having its ear to the ground, so to speak, its telephone line to the public, the engine-room of this work was, in fact, the Standing Committees. They brought collective, sectoral expertise and weight to the higher level thinking that is required to identify issues and develop solutions, including developing policy proposals, on a national level.

We should not worry about a possible disconnect between this higher level thinking and communities-of-interest: typically such experts *have* eyes and ears on the ground, and spend at least some of their working lives at the coal face of heritage protection and promotion. In any case, between the networks that the Heritage Council has created, including, and in conjunction with, the Heritage Officers, there is no fear of Council, as it were, tuning-out public demands and ignoring trends. In short, the connection between this type of activity and the public is in good shape. As I said, I believe there would be merit in the Heritage Council packaging its work

in this area in a way that makes it more visible and more identifiable, and that should perhaps extend beyond mere optics and become a structural element of its operation.

Proposed amendments to the Heritage Act notwithstanding, the reason we began standing down the Standing Committees was because it was becoming too difficult for the executive to service them and do the rest of the day-job as well. That and the fact that sectoralizing along disciplinary lines the think-tanks of the Heritage Council flies, somewhat, in the face of the principle of cross-pollination and permeability operating in the complexus that is the heritage, and is potentially at odds with a core strength of the Heritage Council which is its cross- and trans-disciplinary perspective. Workgroups now fill that space and, resources permitting, we should be using them more.

The Intellectual High Ground

Between policy proposals and commissioned research, the Heritage Council has developed quite a collection of important, informed, expert-led literature on aspects of heritage in Ireland, though perhaps less on the heritage sector or on heritage per se. The corpus is dissipated and in fact somewhat hidden. Also, the Heritage Council has a very strong track-record of paring things back to simple synopses and pamphlet-size, easy-to-read booklets aimed at decision-makers who have to read things on the hoof. These serve a very important purpose but as long as they exist the temptation is not to go beyond them to the detailed analyses. An unintended consequence is that the Heritage Council does not command the intellectual high ground when it comes to the bibliometrics of thinking about, theorizing and critiquing heritage in Ireland. If we are at least up-with-the-curve if not, at times, ahead of it, why have we not created a canon of high-level literature on heritage in Ireland? Indeed, is there a *national* literature on the subject? Is there a panoptic?

This may sound like an academic's concern. Maybe it is. But my principle motive here is political (with a lower case 'p'). To paraphrase Michelle Obama: 'when they go low, you go deep'. The point is, we live in a world where the printed word still commands respect because it is authoritative and therefore has to be taken into consideration. As Oscar Wilde put it, in a completely different but nonetheless comparable context, 'the only thing worse than being talked about is not being talked about': the authoritative written word is like a stone in the shoe of those who have not contributed in equivalent fashion and measure to the canon.

Creating a canon of authoritative literature on heritage is comparatively easy because we have the skill and the expertise to do it. I have proposed kick-starting the journey to the high intellectual ground with an edited volume entitled something like *Heritage In Ireland For The 21st Century*, comprising essays from within this extended family and others commissioned from the third level and equivalent professionals on the trends, challenges, opportunities, socio-economic context(s) and infrastructural needs and future-proofing of heritage in Ireland now and over the next century. Not a picture-book on the best of Irish heritage; there are plenty of those already; but a critical appraisal of heritage theory and the challenge of managing Irish heritage, one that anyone seriously interested in and responsible for the delivery of heritage policy in Ireland will have to read, digest, act on or react against. I suggest we should spend 2017 assembling it, running workshops and so on, with a view to publishing in 2018, during the European Year of

Cultural Heritage. NUI Galway is happy to partner the Heritage Council as co-commissioners and co-editors.

An Ear to Europe

There is another thing we can do, and so as not to paraphrase the First Lady twice I'll just let you join the dots, and that is 'go wide'. There is an on-going international conversation participation in which would allow us to command a different theatre of action. I am speaking here of the Council of Europe's Steering Committee for Culture, Heritage and Landscape, that also goes by the acronym CDCPP (Comité directeur de la Culture, de Patrimoine et du Paysage). Several of us here have attended their meetings. The Irish desk, reserved for member of the department, is invariably empty. That is not good enough. Rightly or wrongly, it is perceived to be rude, arrogant and not a little ignorant. And reading the notes and minutes ain't good enough either, because, as you all know, the real learning, synergies, and drilling into issues occurs off-stage. And while what happens at CDCPP may trickle down to the European Heads of Heritage Forum, what is learnt at those meetings never seems to get translated into attitude, action, policy or public discourse: the mood music from Strasbourg still sounds a little different from that from the department. We need a sound-box or echo-chamber of the CDCPP in Ireland, otherwise, how will anyone in the outside world or in the body politic get to hear about the latest thinking on heritage in Europe?

There are different ways of achieving this. As is my thesis in respect of the value of a canon of high-level literature, the Heritage Council should be flagging more how its work and approach matches the bar being set in European because that too will raise the profile and raise the game. And the Heritage Council should be contributing more directly to the European discussion, even if that involves a slightly indirect route, ie contributing to the *international* literature on heritage.

Creative Ireland and the Heritage Council

I would like finish up by reverting to the Creative Ireland project, launched yesterday morning. I think this is a wonderful opportunity and that the Heritage Council should grab it. The budget may be pretty modest and the five-year life-span puny but... sorry about this but here I go again with yet another First Lady paraphrase (somehow or other the president-elect has yet to provide us with a repeatable sound-bite)... 'when they ..., you go big'.

In other words, it is up to us and our first cousins in the arts and humanities to make it into something really big and long-lasting, and inspiring. In fact I prepared a letter, hand-delivered to the Minister yesterday morning, which contained the following message about Creative Ireland (if you will pardon me for quoting from my own letter):

My hope and indeed expectation is that [Creative Ireland] will become a permanent dimension of Irish life, serving Irish society throughout this century, so that when the history of the bicentenary of 1916 comes around the legacy project will be seen to have been every bit as transformative a phenomenon as the Rising itself.

Yesterday's launch in the National Gallery of Ireland was exceptionally important for the positive message it sent out. However, it was quite clear, to me at least, that in the minds of many people the terms 'creativity' and 'heritage' do not make for natural bedfellows—which is ironic, given that the stuff of heritage is nothing other than yesteryear's creativity. Ex nihilo nihil

est, out of nothing comes nothing; what makes today's Irish art *Irish* is that the inspiration behind so much of it draws from the well of our heritage. We have to make that link and we have to work with people who will make that link.

On Wednesday evening I sat with my daughter Beatrice in the kitchen of our beloved friend Máirtín O'Connor while he played for us a piece he had just composed (in fact it was broadcast live around the world this very morning with the Irish Youth Choir, Glór na nÓg). The piece, he told us, was inspired by the monastic ruins beside his house, there on the shores of Lough Corrib, a processional movement in the middle of it inspired by and reflecting his image of a procession of monks in the Middle Ages. A musician's response to heritage. A rare and wonderful talent, but Máirtín would be the first to argue that there is as much creative alchemy in exploring and explaining an aspect of our heritage through archaeology, history, botany, zoology, as there is in heritage-inspired musical composition. Tim Collins, whom many of you know, did the same thing when he composed a musical response to the Tim Robinson Archive in NUIG, the inaugural performance of which took place during our conference in June.

If people struggle to see that an encounter with heritage can be every bit as creative and as transformative a moment as an encounter with art, if they struggle to see that there is artistry and imagination in drawing out the meaning and value of heritage, and above all in the sharing of it, then it is our job to reveal that to them.

It is our job to reveal to them that, when it comes to heritage, the Holy Grail they seek, this elusive thing we call 'creative imagination', appears momentarily, as is its wont, when past and present collide and fuse. And in that fusion something new is born, matched by a new synapse in the brain. That way, both the present and the future are changed. As fleeting and as brilliant as the sparks that fly when the hammer strikes the anvil, creativity seers the mind and illuminates a different path, one we might choose to take on our journey into the future.

If art is a high-wire act; which in fact it absolutely must be; contrarian, irreverent, unflinching, truthful, experimental, trail-blazing, a blind-folded step out over the precipice of the unknown, then heritage is the inner gyroscope that stops the tightrope walker from falling into a meaningless, placeless, ahistorical, unpopulated abyss.

Our collective response to the gauntlet that is Creative Ireland really has to be a bespoke project that alloys heritage with all of the other creative arts (note my phraseology: with all of the other creative arts). We need to have this ready to sell by mid-February.

Art, dance, music, film, poetry and so on are just some of the windows unto the world of heritage, and vice versa. A bespoke project may impact on some other plans, it may curb or stall them, but in the long run it will have been worth it because Creative Ireland offers us a new audience, a new platform and the opportunity to put to bed, finally, the notion that heritage is a past-tense preoccupation. This is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, as has been my time with you.