

PRESENTATION SPEECH BY SEAMUS HEANEY, 1984

Literary prizes fulfil various and salutary functions. The first is to reward the author with cash and praise, both of which commodities, in spite of the begrudgers, are good for the spirit and for the quality of life in general. Another of the functions is to ratify, formally and publicly, the covenant we assume between writer and audience: the awarding body stands in the place of the reading public rather like the sponsor at the christening font and accepts the writer into the true church of good readers. All book prizes do these two things and by the universally interesting phenomenon of money changing hands, they testify to reality of the writing enterprise in the world of money and violence.

Other prizes, like the Christopher Ewart-Biggs Memorial Prize, have a commemorative function and an ameliorating intent. They imply that the chosen work has not only intrinsic excellence but a certain kinetic effect, that it is likely to move an audience in generally desirable directions. And the directions exposed by the Ewart-Biggs Prize are towards ideals of peace; towards strengthening the links between the peoples of Ireland and Britain; and towards cooperation between the partners of the European community.

One of the important ways in which ideals of peace are helped, of course, is by an understanding of the springs of discord, a clarification of the causes of enmity; and one of the ways in which links of friendship between the peoples of Britain and Ireland at this stage are likely to be assisted is by a better understanding of the classic republican drive to "break the link" and the opposite and consequent drive to maintain it.

The book which the judges have chosen this year is admirably suited to fulfil these requirements. Its subject was and is a figure in the dream life of Ireland and Britain, a man who was both hero and bugbear, a dreamer of destinies, a realist of politics, a focus of the whole historical drama of modern Ireland. John Bowman's *De Valera and the Ulster Question 1917-1973*, is a meticulously researched account of what was fluctuating and what was constant in De Valera's attitude to partition and reveals him at the beginning of his career and at the end as more deeply pragmatic and capable of conciliatory gestures to the Ulster Unionists than might have been generally supposed. But it also reveals de Valera pursuing policies which were the natural results of his dream of an Irish-speaking separatist republic and these policies, so deeply espoused by his party, placed him in an ambivalent position for his whole career. John Bowman's book is sensitive to this ambivalence and analytic of it, by revealing de Valera as a spirit attempting, however unsuccessfully and tentatively, to awaken from the nightmare of history. By doing this, John Bowman has offered those loyal to the memory of the Long Fellow a way of not being hidebound by his pieties, and to those antipathetic to his spirit he has offered a chance to rethink their attitudes. John A. Murphy, an authority in the field of Irish history but also a man brought up in a house where the figure of Dev had the status of an Ayatollah, has described the book as "a major work... easily the most

significant publication of the Valera centenary” and it gives me great pleasure to announce how the judges for this Prize concur.

I must also say how great a personal pleasure it is for me to present the Prize to John Bowman whom I have admired for years for his swiftness of mind, his courage and insight and courtesy, his overall concern for the common good, while he has worked professionally but never just routinely, as a broadcaster with the current affairs department of RTE in Dublin. As an oblique tribute to him and as an indication of what his book fundamentally achieves I would like to end by reading a short extract from page 330:

In de Valera’s last meeting with him, at which he persuaded him to abandon military resistance to the Free State, Liam Lynch was concerned lest the decision reached fell short of fundamental republicanism. Years later, Gallagher recorded de Valera’s account of the exchange:

When the meeting broke up, the Chief of Staff, Liam Lynch and de Valera were walking together down from the farm-house where they had come to the agreement when Lynch said: ‘I wonder what Tom Clarke [1916 leader] would think of this decision’. De Valera stopped in his tracks. ‘Tom Clarke is dead’, he said, ‘He has not our responsibilities. Nobody will ever know what he would do for this situation did not arise for him. But it has arisen for us and we must face it with our intelligence and conscious of our responsibility.’

On this occasion, at least, de Valera sided with Thomas Paine that ‘the most ridiculous and insolent of tyrannies’ was the ‘vanity and presumption of governing beyond the grave.’

John Bowman’s book is a timely aid to help us face the heritage of partition “with our intelligence and conscious of our responsibilities”.