

Marianne Elliott

President, Master, Graduates and Graduands, Guests, and Colleagues:

Today it is my great honour to welcome Professor Marianne Elliott to a Fellowship at Birkbeck. Elliott is one of the greatest living historians of Ireland, with books that have changed the way we think about revolution and religion, politics and place. She is also a public intellectual, who has played a major role in bringing together the two traditions of Northern Ireland, in a way that, eventually, led to the Good Friday Agreement.

In the past few weeks, as I was reading her works and thinking about her contributions, my mind kept returning to a great poem, written at the time of the IRA ceasefire of 1994. The poem is by Belfast poet Michael Longley. Its plot is from the Iliad. As some of you may recall: in the Iliad, King Priam meets with Achilles, who had killed his son Hector in combat. The old King begs to be allowed to take his son's body back to Troy. Seeing the old King's tears, Achilles is reminded of his own father, and he also weeps. Here is part of Longley's poem: "Ceasefire":

Put in mind of his own father and moved to tears  
Achilles took him [Priam] by the hand and pushed the old king  
Gently away, but Priam curled up at his feet and  
Wept with him until their sadness filled the building.

... When they had eaten together, it pleased them both  
To stare at each other's beauty as lovers might –  
Achilles built like a God, Priam good-looking still  
And full of conversation, who earlier had sighed:

"I get down on my knees and do what must be done  
And kiss Achilles' hand, the killer of my son".

Reconciliation despite bloodshed; breaking bread together; weeping for all that is lost; a face-to-face acknowledgement of the worth – the beauty, even – of “The Other”, despite a history of enmity.

Elliott’s life has been dedicated to such leaps of imagination. She has done this in her numerous award-winning books:

Her acclaimed biography of *Wolfe Tone: Prophet of Irish Independence*

Her *Partners in Revolution: The United Irishmen and France*, which drew connections between French revolutionary traditions and Irish politics.

*Robert Emmet: The Making of a Legend* telling the story of that young, idealist, Protestant member of the Anglo-Irish elite who led an unsuccessful rising in 1803 and was executed for High Treason.

*The Catholics of Ulster*, a subtle analysis of the opportunities and limitations facing Catholics. It is widely acknowledged to be a classic in its own time.

Her Ford Lectures in Oxford, which were published under the title *When God Took Sides: Religion and Identity in Ireland – Unfinished History*.

And, this year, *Heartlands: A Memoir of the White City Housing Estate in Belfast*, which is the story of a mixed-religious working-class community in Northern Belfast between 1945-69. This was the estate where Elliott grew up. It has been described as a “new kind of social history”, a “suggestive and quietly subversive interrogation of many of the assumptions too easily made about Northern Ireland before the Troubles”.

Throughout her work, key themes emerge: memory, myth, invention and imagination.

The philosopher Slavoj Žižek once observed that the “true choice apropos of historical traumas is not the one between remembering or forgetting them.... We should... accept the paradox that, in order really to forget an event, we much first summon up the strength to remember it properly”. Elliott performs this function of memory: providing interpretations of historical events in order that different people can (like King Priam and Achilles) eat together and admire each other’s beauty, acknowledging their extraordinary likeness, as well as difference.

But who, you may ask, is Marianne Elliott? She was born in County Down, near the small village of Strangford, to Sheila (O’Neil) Burns from Kerry and policeman Terry Burns. Shortly after her birth, her family moved to her father’s city of Belfast. There, the Ulster Catholic Burns family settled happily into White City, that mix-religion, non-sectarian housing estate on the edge of north Belfast. Elliott writes eloquently about that estate, “surrounded by fields rolling down from the Cave Hill and overlooking the sea”. White City “never quite felt like urban living”, she recalled, adding that the “beauty of Belfast’s setting” was a “poignant contrast to the living conditions and sectarianism in the streets below, a form of escapism allowing that deep love of the place which I noted in my father and which I have retained”.

She attended a Catholic primary school, followed by grammar school, then went to Queens’ University in Belfast in 1967, where she read history as well as French and philosophy. While doing her PhD at Lady Margaret Hall, Oxford, she met her beloved husband, the distinguished geologist, Trevor Elliott. Much later, they had a son, Marc, who is currently doing a PhD at SOAS but did an earlier degree at Birkbeck.

In 1975, she could be found lecturing in history at the West London Institute of Higher Education, followed by a stint as a Research Fellow at University College Swansea then by the University of Liverpool. In 1988, she was the Simon Fellow at the University of Manchester.

This was the time when she met with some extraordinary luck. She was offered a post here in Birkbeck, in the Department of History, Classics, and Archaeology. To remind ourselves all what a different place universities were then – let me tell you that she was the person in the department in charge of the first RAE (now REF: Research Excellence Framework). In those days (and this will send a shudder of horror through our Master), there was no elaborate structure of College or even departmental committees and approval bodies. Elliott and the head of department, Richard Evans (now Sir Richard) simply sat up until midnight the evening before it was due and got it done. And the strategy worked. The Department of History, Classics, and Archaeology was ranked well above the University of Oxford's History Department prompting a letter in The Times saying that this was proof that the process was fair. She was our colleague and, it must be said, comrade. I remember – as do others here on the platform – drinking gallons of red wine after class at Jakes Wine Bar (Tavistock Square).

She has always remained loyal to our College – retaining close friendships with us, and generally spreading the word, not only that Birkbeck is the most wonderful place to work but also that our students are unrivalled.

Alas, she left us in 1993 to become Professor of Modern History at the University of Liverpool. From 2007, she held the first Blair Chair of Irish Studies there. It was a Chair perfectly suited for her since it had been established with an endowment from the Irish government in recognition of Tony Blair's role in brokering the Good Friday Agreement. Crucially, she was the Director of the Institute of Irish Studies there from 1997 until 2014. Under her leadership, the Institute became a world authority on all things Irish, whether history, literature, politics, or language. The Institute fostered not just academic links but addressed the deeper questions concerning peace and reconciliation. Her staff and students speak of her empathy, as well as her capacity to “rescue critical situations through energy, insight, and the saving grace of humour”. In 2002 Elliott was elected a Fellow of the British Academy, and in 2017 made an Honorary Fellow of the Royal Irish Academy.

Elliott is also a public intellectual. Just 2 weeks ago she was awarded the Christopher Ewart-Biggs lifetime achievement award for a body of work contributing to peace and reconciliation in Ireland. In 1992-93, she served as one of seven commissioners on the Opsahl Commission. This independent Commission went all around Ulster, listening to over 3,000 people's views about the future of Northern Ireland – their fears, suspicions, and, most of all, their overwhelming desire for peace. Elliott co-wrote its report, "A Citizens' Inquiry", which was crucial in leading to the Downing Street Declaration and eventually to the Good Friday Agreement. In 2000, Elliott was awarded an OBE for services to Irish Studies and the Northern Ireland peace process. In 2017, was awarded the Irish Presidential Distinguished Service Award. She has served on the Board of Encounter (the main flagship of peace and understanding created by the UK and Irish governments) for about 10 years.

But, as the College Orator, my job is also to tell you about "the person". Who is she, really? Elliott has a huge appetite for conviviality. At the annual Conference of Irish Historians in Britain, which she co-founded with her great friend, Roy Foster, she is always the last to go to bed. This (you must take my word for it) is quite a feat if you adhere to Irish stereotypes!

I think the best word to describe her was given to me by her son, Marc: she is "frantic". She loves the sand and sea; yet never stops working. Her friends whisper that they are wary about travelling with her and her trusty travelling companion (an oversized suitcase, un-affectionately-named Brutus) because she courts travel chaos: her planes are regularly grounded, delayed, or missed; trains are diverted and cancelled with a regularity that beggars belief. On St Patrick's Day, she is the first on the dance floor. She attends concerts by the Northern Irish rock group, "Snow Patrol" and has an equally suspect taste for Goldie Hawn films. She is also a talented artist, obsessive runner, keen cyclist, devoted gardener, and great soup maker.

She is intellectually curious and generous to other scholars. She is intellectually fearless, a role model to early career scholars, and profoundly compassionate. In the

words of one of her colleagues, “her sharp intellect is combined with the capacity to understand different and sometimes competing viewpoints”. This should not lead you to assume that she is “soft”. Quite the opposite. Elliott is courageous and fierce in defending what she believes in.

Elliott is simply one of Ireland’s finest historians and defender of all that is good in intellectual and social life. We are thrilled to welcome her to a Fellowship at Birkbeck.