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## Edna O'Brien at the James Joyce Library

The name Edna O'Brien is synonymous for a particular generation of Irish people with having brought sex to a not so free-loving 1960s Ireland. This impressive if somewhat inaccurate accolade was created thanks to the publication of her 1960 novel *The Country Girls*, and its swift banning by the Irish Censorship Board. A novel based on the sexual awaking of two young girls from the West of Ireland sparked national outrage and contempt, with a public burning of the book held in the churchyard of O'Brien's home town and the Minister of Culture branding it 'a smear on Irish Womanhood'. Her following five books published during the 1960s met the same fate at the hands of the Irish Censorship Board. This controversy facilitated the creation of a literary figure known as Edna O'Brien, a beautiful young woman who wrote risqué books which often contained strong autobiographical tendencies – a real 'Connemara Dietrich'.

Of course times have changed significantly since those heady days of moral outrage. Yet, these issues of her early censorship and flamboyant persona still linger within the critical reception of her work in Ireland, and her definitive positioning within the canon of contemporary Irish writing. To date Edna O'Brien has written over 20 works of fiction, as well as plays, screenplays, poems, and non-fiction, including a biography of her literary mentor James Joyce. She has received many awards such as becoming an honorary member of the American Academy of Letters and the recipient of the Irish PEN Lifetime Award, the Los Angeles Times Book Prize, the European Prize for Literature, and the Ulysses Medal from University College Dublin. In addition to all this she has also managed to maintain a degree of controversy regarding her work by choosing subject matter that provokes consternation and rebuke nearly 50 years after her first novel's critical reception.

The acquisition of a selection of Edna O'Brien's papers to UCD James Joyce Library occurred in tandem with her appointment as Adjunct Professor of Creative Writing by the School of English, Drama and Film. These events represent a significant correlation between the establishment of a creative writing programme and the safeguarding of literary papers to ensure the elucidation of the creative processes for the next generation of writers and readers. Much like Edna O'Brien's indebtedness to Joyce, the presence of her papers held at both Emory University and UCD allow present and future scholars to consider and reconsider the significance of her work, as well as examining the contextual implications provided through her extensive personal correspondence.

The material held in UCD Special Collections relates to Edna O'Brien's later work. This includes her 2002 novel *In the Forest*, which sparked debate and harsh criticism from leading media commentators who viewed O'Brien as crossing the line into the realm of private grief. The novel is a fictionalised portrayal of the real-life murders of a mother, her infant son, and a priest in County Clare. The material held in Special Collections contains O'Brien's extensive research into the murders, including copies of psychiatric evaluations dating from the perpetrators infancy, interviews and witness statements, media reports of the subsequent trial, and correspondence. From the archivist's perspective, such material is at once vital and highly sensitive. It requires both the imposition of appropriate time

restrictions on accessibility, and an acknowledgement of the immediate power that such highly emotive material may have on family, friends and witnesses.

In addition to novels, plays, screenplays, and critical works, O'Brien's papers contain a fascinating and eclectic collection of correspondence. Such names as Cherie Blair, Harold Bloom, Hilary Clinton, John Osborne, Antonia Fraser, Harold Pinter, Jane Fonda, John Major, and Seamus Heaney appear in her list of correspondents. It is clearly true that Edna O'Brien is a fascinating individual whose writing shall merit critical attention for generations to come. The listing of her collection has also been enhanced by the fact that she is still actively engaged in the work of writing and lecturing.

A visit by O'Brien and this year's creative writing class to Special Collections in November was an exciting and unique experience. It provided us with the opportunity to hear her speak about the diligence and fortitude required to be a writer, and to witness her recollection of the drafts which were put on display. It also hopefully engendered within the students a sense of awareness regarding literary manuscripts. It is particularly vital in this technologically advanced time that the writers of the future are conscious of the need to chart the creative process through the various stages in the life cycle of a literary work.

Imagine, for example, the insights lost to scholars had Joyce's manuscripts and correspondence been deleted. The scope for close textual analysis and genetic criticism would have been lost, as would the fascinating biographical information gained from his letters. Perhaps Edna O'Brien's papers would not now be housed in the James Joyce Library, nor would she have written her Joyce biography. The indebtedness of writers to the creative inspiration gained from fellow writers is immense, as the entire history of literature can attest. The fact that the first book ever purchased by Edna O'Brien was *Introducing James Joyce* by T.S. Eliot speaks of this indebtedness and also of the inspiration that created O'Brien's luminous prose:

'...a jejune Jesuit spurning Christ's terrene body, a lecher, a Christian brother in luxuriousness, a Joyce of all trades...a quill-frocked friar, a timoneer, a pool-beg flasher and a man with the gift of the Irish majuscule script.' (Excerpt from *James Joyce* by Edna O'Brien)