

NATIONAL MUSEUM, 20 MARCH 2013

It is an honour to be here this evening to pay tribute to the individuals and institutions who have brought this magnificent venture to completion. The whole enterprise is an occasion for pride and gratitude.

The original series of photographs and commentaries on the hundred objects in *The Irish Times* by Fintan O'Toole was already a great educational event, and the ongoing co-operation between *The Irish Times*, the National Museum and the Royal Irish Academy has been an exemplary cultural initiative. But now with the publication of the book by the Royal Irish Academy, the provision of the app by Adobe, and with the organization of the exhibition among the different branches of the museum, the scope of the enterprise has widened significantly.

The objects on display range from the Mesolithic Age to the third millennium, and it surely says something about the Ireland I grew up in that I feel closer to the first exhibit from 7,000 years ago than I do to the couple at the end of the book. I first learnt the word Mesolithic from labels on exhibits in the Ulster Museum, flints and scrapers found down the road from us on the banks of the River Bann in Ballyscullion, at a site known to archaeologists as New Ferry. So I find it a surprisingly short journey from New Ferry to that very old fish trap which is the first object in Fintan's book, a skep of interwoven sticks embedded in turf from a bog in Co Meath. This is delicate piece of handiwork as well as a vitally important utensil in the sixth century BC. The penultimate entry in the book is a photo of a man dismantling the Anglo-Irish Bank sign. In each case there is a commentary by Fintan O'Toole that is informed, learned, entrancingly written, sharing his own emotional and intellectual response to the item on view. He lets us know, for example, in a few breathtaking lines, that the first Anglo logo was, to quote the bank's own account, 'based on early Irish references such as flint arrowheads, typography from the Book of Kells and crafted gold artifacts, *and that, quote* the simplicity of the image sets the tone of a more cohesive corporate identity'. So now you know. And every other page of the book contains entries which never fail to teach and delight.

It is not too much to hope, therefore, that this admirable imaginative contribution to our national life should open up a new way of thinking about ourselves and the country we live in. It reminds us that we are not simply a credit rating or an economy but a history and a culture, a human population rather than a statistical phenomenon. It is significant, for example, that when we think of things preserved from the past we often use the expression 'handed down' – 'handed down' instead of the more abstract 'inherited'. 'Inherited' is slightly legalistic whereas 'handed down' presupposes the physical handover of a gift; it situates the exchange in a social context, implies a kind of handshake. And it is that sensation of human contact, of a covenant with the past, of an at-homeness experienced in silence and stillness, it is that combination of distance and familiarity which can give us some sense of belonging with those who have gone before. So it might be said that if we have inherited a debt, we have also been handed down a treasury.

That treasury can now be viewed in situ not only here in the Archaeological Museum but in various other museums and locations, and on the marvelous app so generously available and of course in this gorgeous book. It all goes to remind me of some lines by the great Chilean poet, Pablo Neruda, lines of prose in this case. 'It is well,' Neruda wrote,

It is well, at certain hours of the day and the night, to look closely at the world of objects at rest. Wheels that have crossed long, dusty distances with their mineral and vegetable burdens, sacks from coalbins, barrels and baskets, handles and hafts for the carpenter's tool chest. From them flow the contacts of man with the earth... The used surfaces of things, the wear and tear that hands give to things, the air, tragic at times, pathetic at others, of such things – all lend a curious attractiveness to the reality of the world that should not be underprized.

So, all these objects at rest in their different display cases, at their different addresses are potent reminders that the reality of the Irish world – from the Mesolithic Age to the third millennium – should not be underprized.

Last weekend in *The Irish Times* Fintan wrote movingly of his first encounter with objects in the museum, how his father brought him here and to the National Gallery and opened his mind and senses to exhibits that were priceless but at the same time free. Their great value was that they were

no one person's property, they belonged to everybody. And there was a note of rejoicing, of triumph even, in that happy insight. He must, therefore, know that he has opened doors to the strongrooms where the treasures that have been handed down are available to everyone.

Fintan O'Toole is another treasure who belongs to no one.

Conscience-keeper, public intellectual, writer, biographer, editor, authoritative critic of arts and society – he is all these things. But in all these things he is something else as well, which is to say a patriot, simply defined as 'one who exerts himself to promote the well-being of his country'.

Many other learned men and women, from *The Irish Times*, from the museum, from the Royal Irish Academy and other academic institutions have exerted themselves in this endeavour and their names appear in the text and in acknowledgements at the end of the book. Together they have helped to give deeper meaning and more justified pride to the opening line of that medieval poem where the poet simply declares, *Ich am of Irlond*, I am of Ireland; and in conclusion I would say that the experience of the reading the book and seeing the objects encourages us to believe that there is a centre which can – and does – hold.

Seamus Heaney, 20 March 2013