

Kieran O’Conor’s speech at the reception organised by the Moore Institute, NUI Galway to honour Conor Newman’s eight years as Chairman of the Heritage Council.

Conor Newman and I have been best friends since we met in October 1981 as newly-minted First Years studying archaeology at UCD. I could regale you with stories about our time as undergraduates and then MA students at the latter institution. As these would include tales of drink-fuelled fieldtrips to various important archaeological monuments throughout Ireland (these trips would probably make modern Health and Safety officers shudder with horror), it is probably best that I don’t. However, I remember the undergraduate Conor Newman as a loyal friend, always reliable and generous, and as an incredibly smart person who effortlessly gained a First every year but who still managed time to play a very handy game of indoor soccer (despite being educated at Blackrock College!) and attend every party going. We also excavated together at Moynagh Lough Crannog in Co. Meath during the summer recesses and there we both learnt excavation skills from the Director of that site, the late John Bradley, that were to be beneficial to us as working archaeologists later in our careers. Conor, our mutual friend Niall Brady (who lectured here on Underwater Archaeology) and I were the UCD Department of Archaeology’s MA class of 1986. Conor’s thesis was a re-interpretation of the 1930s excavation of the crannog at Ballinderry, Co. Offaly and it was very well received by our examiners. It was in reality a PhD in its scope, size and depth of scholarship. Conor eventually was employed by the Discovery Programme to carry out an in-depth study and survey of the royal site of Tara. In this, he was ably assisted by Joe Fenwick - who, luckily for us, is now our Field Officer. Conor’s book on Tara made him the foremost authority on this highly important complex and he became one of Ireland’s early pioneers of landscape archaeology. In my opinion, too, this book demonstrated to an earlier but still influential generation of archaeologists that field survey, with its different methods, could provide detailed information about our past in a cost effective way and that excavation, which costs a fortune, was not always necessary to make important discoveries. Conor has continued his research to international acclaim ever since and was awarded the British Academy’s highly prestigious John Coles Medal for Landscape Archaeology a few years ago – the only Irish person to ever be given this honour.

You can see then that Conor and I go back a long way. However, today we honouring Conor’s eight years as Chairman of the Heritage Council – a statutory body established under the 1995 Heritage Act whose brief is to promote the different aspects of Ireland’s heritage. The wide brief of the Heritage Council during Conor’s time as Chairman included giving expert advice to the relevant minister (Arts, Heritage, Regional, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs) and his / her department, providing advice to local communities hoping to engage with their heritage, providing funding for heritage projects and partners, running education programmes and generally acting as an advocate for the importance of heritage to Irish society and Ireland’s economy.

I served on the board of the Heritage Council between 2012 and 2016 and, so, was in a position to have seen the great contribution Conor made and continues to make to Irish heritage, the Heritage Council, Irish society and, let us not forget, to NUI Galway’s national and international reputation. Much of this contribution was aided by the high quality of the Heritage Council’s staff, who were ably managed by the Council’s CEO Michael Starrett. I know that Conor will pay tribute in a few moments to Michael and his hard-working dedicated staff and I would like to now do the same.

Conor as Chairman was instrumental in creating major heritage policy initiatives put forward by the Council. During Conor's time, the Heritage Council made numerous submissions to government on a wide variety of issues such as heritage-related tourism, the National Landscape Strategy (in which Conor played a massive role), renewable energy, rural regeneration and the role heritage can play in it, a World Heritage Site policy for Ireland, high value Nature farming, built heritage conservation, bogland conservation, the Cultural Policy for Ireland and Historic Landscape Characterisation. Conor put his own imprint on all of these submissions. The government's recent initiative on the regeneration of small towns in rural Ireland owes a lot to the Heritage Council's submissions on the subject.

Whilst on the Heritage Council's Board, I was impressed by Conor's energy in continually advocating the importance of Ireland's heritage, not just to the economy but to society and our sense of place. He, in my opinion, was the first to recognise in the aftermath of the 2007-8 crash, the desire by communities, especially rural communities, to re-engage with their heritage. During Conor's eight years as Chairman, he regularly drove the length and breadth of the country speaking on behalf of the Heritage Council at literally hundreds of events and to hundreds of communities. I might add that he always wrote his own speeches. Conor chaired 50 full Board meetings and was always willing to listen to everybody's views. Furthermore, he also chaired hundreds of working group meetings linked to the work of the Heritage Council. Despite all this, Conor continued his duties at NUI Galway as always, lecturing to undergraduates and postgraduates, supervising numerous theses, taking part in the running of the Discipline and School and regularly producing peer-reviewed publications.

As Chairman, Conor, along with Michael Starrett, with whom he had an excellent working relationship, also provided leadership and clear thinking in times of adversity for the Heritage Council despite its hard-working and motivated staff. Remember that his chairmanship of the Heritage Council coincided with a massive downturn in our economy. The Heritage Council's budget was cut by a shocking 75%. Conor shepherded and guided the organisation through these bad times and, with Michael, was largely responsible for the increase in monies allocated to the Heritage Council this year. Furthermore, under Conor and Michael's leadership, the Heritage Council emerged intact and with flying colours out of an official review of its work in 2013-14.

Conor, therefore, through his work with the Heritage Council, has done the State some service. He is a patriot in the noblest sense of the word. It is entirely fitting that we honour him this day and mark the conclusion of his successful 8-year role as Chairman of the Heritage Council. In other countries, not just Britain, he would have been given a high civil decoration for his services to the State and its people. In that respect, I congratulate Professor Dan Carey and the Moore Institute at NUI Galway for arranging this reception for Conor. He truly deserves it.