

Sr Margaret MacCurtain OP

Margaret MacCurtain was born in Cork in 1929 - the middle child of five siblings. She is the daughter of Sean MacCurtain (a school inspector) and Ann McKenna. Her father's role as inspector meant that discussions about schooling and the importance of education permeated family conversation and it is perhaps unsurprising that Margaret not only became a teacher but also a Principal at Sion Hill, Blackrock in the 1950s. While pursuing her PhD studies, Margaret won a Salamanca Scholarship for the period 1962-64 which took her to Madrid where she completed her Doctorate in 1964. She joined the History Department at UCD in the same year and began a career in scholarship that has profoundly impacted, in particular, the study of women in Irish history.

During student unrest in the late 1960s, the *Irish Times* published a picture of Margaret (or Sr. Benvenuta as she was more widely known at that time) in full Dominican habit, atop a table in deep conversation with mutinous undergraduates and, while the university remained coldly tolerant, the Dominican Order (in keeping with its culture of facilitating powerful women) supported her by their silence.

Margaret showed the same determination when she refused to submit her lecture notes for the then Archbishop of Dublin's approval. Recalling this incident in 1999, she mused "I believe in freedom of expression. I will never submit to giving my lecture notes to any superior. They are mine, I am part of the university system that goes back 800 years and I just could not accept this". In the early 1970s, Margaret was engaged in editing the first paperback series of the *History of Ireland* and in 1979 was seconded to become Head of the first College of Further Education of the Dublin VEC. In this role she oversaw an innovative curriculum, including media studies, rock music (including business skills for budding stars) and art portfolios. Between 1984 and 1988 Margaret served as Prioress of Sion Hill Convent. While immersed in these activities, she continued to mine the rich seams of Women's History. Viewed with much skepticism within the Academy at the time, Margaret's unflinchingly scholarly approach to the past began to result in the unveiling of a hidden history. While her specialism remained seventeenth-century Irish and European history, Margaret's gradual revealing of women in the past began to influence a generation of students leading to a significant widening of the discipline. The Academy and the nation owes Margaret a debt of gratitude for her unrelenting search for the vast family of neglected, national female ancestry – for locating them and "placing" them in our national narrative.

Had it not been for early pioneers of Women's History such as Margaret, the advent of other forms such as labour history, slave history, and children's history would have been much retarded. Works such as *Women in Early Modern Ireland*, *Religious Women and Their History*, *Ariadne's Thread: Writing Women into Irish History* and *Women in Irish Society: The Historical Dimension* have become seminal points of departure for students and researchers and invaluable contributions to Irish historical studies generally.

It would be impossible to provide a comprehensive list of Margaret's achievements and crusades in a citation such as this. She fought for the right to re-marriage after civil divorce, for the abolition of corporal punishment in schools, against the development of Wood Quay, for children with special educational needs, against domestic violence and Apartheid and was one of those who brought Rosie Hackett to national attention. She chaired the National Archives Advisory Council from 1997-2002; was a member of the editorial board of *Field Day IV* and *V* and was the second person to have held the Burns Chair of Irish Studies at Boston College.

Finally, one must note what is, perhaps, the most significant aspect of Margaret's life. She entered religious life aged 21. Her family was 'horrified', she remembered in 1999. "They couldn't believe that someone who had been such a student activist in my day at University College Cork could think of...entering an order which had a medieval cloister element to it." In carrying out research into the history of schooling in Ireland, This Dominican ethos is at the heart of Margaret's work and personality - as a consecrated Religious, academic and social campaigner. Described by Mary Kenny as 'a stalwart of Irish feminism' Margaret has, by looking to the past, helped us not simply to see further into the future but to shape it. Her outstanding attributes include courageous individualism, scholarly integrity, great personal humility and a profound love of freedom. She ranks amongst Ireland's foremost scholars and activists.

Margaret's scholarly work and its impact, combined with her role as a tireless campaigner, advocate for human rights, voice of the disadvantaged, and dissenting activist, make her eminently suitable to receive Dublin City University's highest honour.

A Uachtaráin, I ask you to confer on Margaret MacCurtain the degree of Doctor of Philosophy (*Honoris Causa*).