

Editor's Introduction

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As the Western world lurches seemingly unstoppably towards extremism and basic human rights are curtailed and suspended in the name of national security, the role scholars of the Humanities can play in society is more important than ever before. Writing in *The Guardian* in May 2017, Francine Prose states that: “The humanities can touch those aspects of consciousness that we call intellect and heart – organs seemingly lacking among lawmakers whose views on health care suggest not only zero compassion but a poor understanding of human experience, with its crises and setbacks.... They help us learn how to think, and they equip us to live in – to sustain – a democracy”. The benefits of a Humanities education have long been acknowledged, teaching students to be independent thinkers, to critically assess texts and perspectives, to understand how language can conceal and misrepresent truths and, perhaps most importantly in the current context, to tolerate ambiguity and strive to see both sides of an argument. In their work on designing a rubric for the teaching and assessment of the Humanities for the Washington State University, Michael Delahoyde and Collin Hughes summarize the aims of a Humanities education as follows: “Critical Thinking begins with fostering a *willingness* to consider seeing the world from another foreign or otherwise remote perspective, especially difficult at times given the way we depend on our facts and figures, the virtuosi of our knowledge, memory, authority, and arrogance. This area nevertheless necessarily includes an affinity for suspending what we know in order to imagine (with a degree of verisimilitude) what is quite literally and physically beyond our experience, culture, ethnicity, religion, gender, and so on”.

The essays included in this volume reflect the willingness of staff and students in the Department of Humanities to question received ideas and consider alternative perspectives. Drawn from the disciplines of English, History, Archaeology, Politics and Social Science, they demonstrate the cross-pollination that is at the heart of teaching and research in the Department. Many of the essays focus on individual texts, sites and contexts, and yet the writers generate universal insights that can be applied across the discipline areas. The specific role played by literature in engaging with - and ultimately - changing hegemonic ideas about race and gender is assessed in a number of essays, while the ongoing relevance of historical texts to challenge contemporary social problems is also a central theme. The Irish landscape and its ability to facilitate a dialogue between past and present is the theme of essays in the areas of both literature and history/cartography, while the use of contemporary digital resources to preserve and communicate our heritage is also addressed. Above all, the idea of research as a form of active citizenship is apparent: the essays analyse national policies and institutions, and critique the role they play in limiting and constraining the lives of citizens. Education emerges as a key weapon in the fight for a better world, with important interventions being developed to facilitate an active, engaged and above all respectful digital dialogue. In his *Narrative*, Frederic Douglass, ex-slave and leading figure in the Abolition movement, described reading as “the pathway from slavery to freedom. As the essays included here attest, society continues to depend on scholars of the Humanities to lead a way towards a more enlightened, tolerant and progressive world.