Establishing John Moriarty Institute for Ecology and Spirituality in Dingle, Ireland

Michael W. Higgins
John B. Roney, Sacred Heart University

Available at: https://works.bepress.com/michael_higgins/
Sacred Heart University has established the John Moriarty Institute for Ecology and Spirituality in Dingle, Ireland. The Institute’s mission, as stated on its website, is to understand and consider the richness and wonder of the natural environment, and to promote a deeper reflection on human spirituality as an important and necessary element for a flourishing life of meaning and purpose.

The Institute was inspired by a panel at the “Sea, Land, and Spirit: Coastal Environment in the West of Ireland,” hosted by SHU on its Dingle, Ireland, campus in June. It brought together experts and academics to speak about the coastal environment, and one panel focused on the Irish philosopher John Moriarty (1938-2007), a writer, poet, philosopher and native of County Kerry. Upon his death, he left a remarkable body of thoughts to unravel and reflect upon, including beautiful literary portraits of his surroundings and the deep connection humans have to the environment and creation.

Following the conference, discussions about the relevance of John Moriarty’s ideas as an effective means to understand and appreciate the environment attracted more widespread attention. Michael W. Higgins, distinguished professor of Catholic Thought at SHU, and a scholar who is able to place Moriarty in the context of other great philosophers and thinkers, was asked to address audiences in Ireland, the United States and Canada. Everywhere he has gone the reception has been profound. The institute has “developed very organically,” said Robin Cautin, dean of the College of Arts & Sciences, who attended the conference. The inspiration for the institute occurred in a place that, to her, offers an ideal space to see the environment in its fullness, with sweeping hillsides, rugged coastlines and small communities surrounded by green fields. “The attendees of the Moriarty panel were so moved by what they experienced in the room; it was palpable. Many of us felt that it shouldn’t end with this conference, and we discussed how to harness what happened and do more,” she said.

Moriarty’s writings and thinking can be compared with Thomas Merton (1915-1968), an American Catholic writer, theologian and mystic; Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862), the celebrated American essayist, poet, philosopher and naturalist who was inspired by tranquil Walden Pond in Concord, Mass.; and the work of W.B. Yeats (1865-1939), the Irish poet and one of the foremost figures of 20th-century literature. Like these fellow writers, Moriarty became “deeply troubled with the direction of Western Civilization and he wanted to get off the bus,” said John Roney, professor of history, co-chair of SHU’s Dingle Council and conference organizer.

Planning for the institute began almost immediately. Roney met with Higgins and others at the close of the conference to affirm the importance of establishing a permanent institute and formalize an agenda. “It was a real team effort and, throughout the summer, we began to develop a unique plan,” Roney said.
Realizing that Moriarty still had family in Ireland, the group contacted them with the help of Brother Sean Ahearn, a Moriarty disciple. The family blessed the idea of the institute. "That confirmed that Sacred Heart could be the steward of his legacy," said Roney. Higgins will be the director of The John Moriarty Institute for Ecology and Spirituality.

The institute will be housed in SHU’s new campus building in Dingle, a former Christian Brothers school. “Although the school has been abandoned for about 15 years, it has good bones," Roney said. "Completion of the purchase of the property should be done before the end of 2017." The new building will enable students and researchers to use library and archival materials, as well as shared space for offices and classrooms.

Cautin said this endeavor fits with SHU’s overall mission. “Sacred Heart is committed to developing the whole person—intellectually, socially, emotionally, ethically, spiritually—and this speaks directly to the mission of the Institute,” she said.

The institute has a virtual presence already, at www.johnmoriartyinstitute.org, and a lecture series has been formalized, with the inaugural lecture set for Nov. 28, 2017. Next June, 4-12, 2018, Higgins and Ahearn will lead an Adult Educational Tour entitled "In the Footsteps of John Moriarty" with 20-25 people who will see key environmental sites and consider their connection with nature.

Higgins is deeply impressed with Moriarty—the way his thinking spans disciplines, his concern about climate change, his intellectuality and spirituality. "A significant number of our graduates have Irish stock, and Ireland has nostalgic appeal, which allows us to situate their Hibernianism. But the appeal is just as great for others, as Moriarty is a global thinker who happens to be Irish. This is not an ethnically exclusive undertaking and is more so tied to an internal presence and spiritual focus," Higgins said.

The institute, in Higgins’ opinion, also “offers hope to people who are despairing about the climate,” emphasizing that humans should be stewards of the Earth, not masters.

© 2017 Sacred Heart University