



NEW BEGINNINGS

Freedom to Write and Irish PEN

The Freedom to Write Campaign (Ireland) was an informal, independent group of writers that emerged from WORD, a professional writers' network associated with the Irish Writers Centre. Our aim was to promote Freedom of Expression by raising public awareness about writers who are at risk, or in prison, or who have been murdered because of their work. For three years, we worked with Human Rights organisations and Irish literary institutions and groups on events and campaigns, highlighting the work of writers at risk or in prison, at festivals and in print.

During this time, we made strong links with PEN International as well as with Irish PEN and other institutions and associations connected with Irish writing. So when we were approached by the outgoing committee of Irish PEN and asked to consider taking over the running of the organisation, of course we agreed. But we decided to take the opportunity to rethink the structures and organisation of Irish PEN and set up new ways of working.

Irish PEN Steering Committee

We established a steering committee to oversee the transition from the old Irish PEN to a new Irish PEN/PEN na hÉireann. We are: June Considine, Catherine Dunne, Kate Ennals (Secretary), Pádraig Hanratty (Membership Secretary and Newsletter Editor), Sophia Hillan (Vice-Chair), John O'Donnell, Iggy McGovern (Treasurer), Liz McManus, Maria McManus, Lia Mills (Chair), and Éilís Ní Dhuibhne.

Over the summer the committee has been managing administrative changes, such as devising Articles of Association and setting up a limited company, a pre-requisite for applying for charitable status.

RECENT EVENTS

Impact of COVID-19

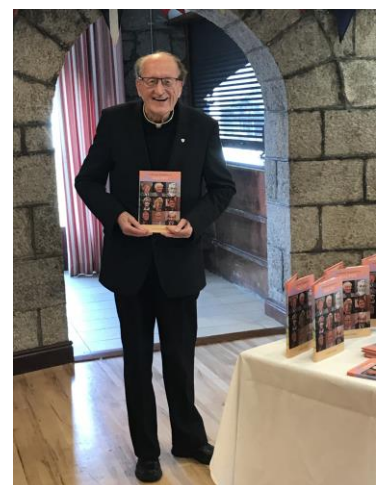
Some planned events, such as a reading in the Italian Institute to celebrate International Women's Day, had to be cancelled due to COVID-19.

Event for Fr Tony Gaughan

A small, COVID-compliant ceremony was held at the Royal St. George Yacht Club to thank Father Tony Gaughan for his long service to Irish PEN over the years.

Fr Gaughan was presented with a trophy to mark the occasion of his retirement. Speeches were made by Vanessa O'Loughin (outgoing Chair) and by Catherine Dunne, recent recipient of the Award and a member of the steering committee.

Fr Gaughan's memoir, *A Personal Perspective on Irish PEN*, is a lively, engaging look back on Irish PEN's work and activities from its establishment in 1934. It describes some of the meetings, lectures, panel discussions, talks and award dinners.





Award to Eavan Boland

The 2020 Irish PEN Award for Outstanding Contribution to Irish Literature was due to be presented to Eavan Boland at an event in March.

Because of her untimely death, this presentation has not yet taken place.

Eavan is a great loss to all of us and to Irish literature. We extend our deepest sympathies to her family, and we hope to hold a small, private ceremony with them sometime in the coming months.

WORK WITH OTHER GROUPS

Recent Actions

We remain in close contact with the WORD group and with the Irish Writers Centre.

At the same time we have been building relationships with sister organisations abroad, such as the PEN Centres in England, Scotland and Wales, and with Irish associations such as Aontas na Scríbhneoirí Gaeilge, the Irish Writers' Union and Letters With Wings.

They have worked with us on some of the following issues:

Margaret Keane

Together with PEN Centres in England, Scotland and Wales, Aontas na Scríbhneoirí Gaeilge (ASG) and the Irish Writers' Union (IWU), we protested the decision by the Archdiocese of Coventry not to allow the family of Margaret Keane to have an inscription in Irish on a family gravestone. Permission to appeal the ruling was refused. A subsequent decision by the Arches Court of Canterbury reversed that ruling and allowed the Appeal to go forward.

Intimidation of journalists

The Welsh, Irish, Scottish, and English (WISE) Centres signed statements of protest against the intimidation of journalists on social media and sent messages of support to journalists experiencing such intimidation in Northern Ireland and in England.

Ilhan Sami Çomak

We have publicised and solicited contributions to PEN Norway/Norsk PEN's project to raise awareness of the inhumane detention of poet Ilhan Sami Çomak in Turkey. This included writing to MEPs to ask them to get involved in the campaign for his release. This correspondence is ongoing. (Further details below.)

Letters With Wings

To celebrate Poetry Day Ireland, some of us took part in a campaign to solicit messages of support for writers in prison, curated by Letters With Wings (LWW). An online reading followed, on 26th June.

Worldwide Reading for Democracy

Together with LWW, we took part in the 2020 Worldwide Reading for Democracy (Hong Kong) initiated and co-ordinated by the International Literature Festival, Berlin.

This reading took place online on 9th September.

Varavara Rao

We joined with Scottish PEN in a statement protesting the detention of poet Varavara Rao, detained in India, who contracted COVID-19 in prison. Varavara Rao was moved to a hospital. Campaigns on his behalf continue.

Belarus

Concerned by the escalating situation in Belarus and threats of imprisonment against members of the Coordination Council of the Belarusian Opposition – which includes writers and artists – we wrote to the press.

Our letter was published by the *Irish Times* and the *Irish Independent*, alerting people to the danger to Svetlana Alexievich (President of PEN in Belarus) and the arrest and detention of, for example, National Theatre Director, Pavel Latushko.

Our colleague Hanna Komar, who works for Belarusian PEN, was also imprisoned. We subsequently wrote to the Honorary Consul of Belarus in Ireland and to the Department of Foreign Affairs, calling on them to speak out. We await a response to these letters.

DATES TO LOOK OUT FOR

Launch of New Irish PEN

We will launch the new Irish PEN/PEN na hÉireann at an online event to coincide with PEN International's Day of the Imprisoned Writer on 15th November, 2020.

Participants: Jennifer Clement (President, PEN International), Brian Keenan, Éilís Ní Dhuibhne, John O'Donnell, the new Patron of Irish PEN/PEN na hÉireann (to be announced).

Musicians: Cormac Breatnach and Eamon Sweeney.

You can sign up for the online event via Eventbrite:

https://www.eventbrite.ie/e/launch-of-the-new-irish-penpen-na-heireann-tickets-125309035699?fbclid=IwAR1oqxhdV0p-0liQNFSd_GHI1JfYcNuuZ9y3xTanRVQ7QsNO6Hx276zTAiQ

You can also find details on our Facebook page:

https://www.facebook.com/PenCentreIreland/?view_public_for=1620113758202200

And you can find details on our website:

<http://www.irishpen.com/news/launch-of-the-new-irish-pen-pen-na-heireann-november-2020/>

AGM

The first annual general meeting (AGM) of the new organisation will take place in late 2021 – the centenary year of PEN International. At the AGM, a new committee will be elected by members.

MEMBERSHIP

Becoming a Member

We hope that you will renew your membership or, if you have not been a member before, please consider joining us now. Your subscription goes to support the valuable humanitarian work of PEN International as well as to support us in keeping you informed about different campaigns.

When COVID-19 has subsided and we are able to consider public gatherings again, we plan to stage more events, at which we look forward to meeting you all in person. Your subscription will also go towards paying writers and performers at such events.

Note that membership of Irish PEN/PEN na hÉireann equates to membership of PEN International.

2021 Subscriptions

Details about subscriptions for 2021 will be included in the next newsletter.

BREAKING THE SILENCE

Nasrin Sotoudeh

In October, the 2020 Right Livelihood Award was awarded to four recipients for their contribution towards equality, democracy, justice and freedom. Amidst the celebrations and publicity that followed, one of the recipients was battling serious illness in Tehran's notorious Evin prison.

She is Nasrin Sotoudeh, the Iranian writer, lawyer and human rights activist, who was sentenced to 38 years imprisonment for legally representing human rights victims.

On 11th August, Nasrin went on hunger strike in protest against the dire prison conditions political detainees in Iran continue to face during the COVID-19 pandemic. Her husband reported that she was removed to hospital on 19 September due to heart problems and other health issues but, despite being gravely ill, was returned to prison five days later. As her health continued to deteriorate, Nasrin ended her hunger strike on 25th September.

The campaign for her release has been highlighted in a joint statement from 16 UN experts, who denounced her return to prison where she is at heightened risk to COVID-19, as well as with her serious heart condition.

Irish PEN/PEN na hÉireann has sent letters, co-signed by the IWU, ASG and Letters With Wings, on her behalf to the Iranian Embassy and the Department of Foreign Affairs.

Ilhan Çomak

In a Turkish jail, the poet Ilhan Çomak has achieved the grim record of being Turkey's longest-serving student prisoner. Aged 21 when arrested, he was tortured for 19 days before admitting to a crime he did not commit.

Twenty-six years later he is still incarcerated. Despite being held in solitary confinement with only a pet bird for company, Ilhan has written and published eight books of poetry.

PEN Norway has mounted [a vigorous campaign](#) for his release. His poetry is being publicised and poets are responding to the 'Write for Ilhan' campaign with poems dedicated to him.

Irish PEN/PEN na hÉireann has contacted a group of Irish MEPs and petitioned them to use their influence to highlight Ilhan's case.

NO SMALL TALK

The No Small Talk campaign was an initiative that grew out of WORD, a sub-group of professional writers in the Irish Writers Centre. Members were becoming increasingly concerned about the growing levels of divisiveness and hostility in public discourse, initially in the context of Brexit.

Its aim was to initiate and facilitate a conversation among writers and artists of Ireland and Britain in order to strengthen the existing links between us, to recognise the various languages spoken on these islands and to challenge the current public discourse that creates division and conflict.

The No Small Talk campaign received practical support from Dublin UNESCO City of Literature, The British/Irish Secretariat in Belfast, and Imagine! The Belfast Festival of Ideas and Politics.

Both Paul Muldoon and Marie Heaney are enthusiastic supporters of the campaign.

No Small Talk's future now lies within the new Irish PEN/PEN na hÉireann. No Small Talk will continue to retain its independent status while operating as a subcommittee of the newly restructured Irish PEN/PEN na hÉireann.

With the continuing uncertainty around Brexit and the re-opened question of a hard border, the campaign members feel it is more important than ever to encourage efforts and develop strategies towards positive debate.

The members of No Small Talk are confident that the all-Ireland focus of new Irish PEN/PEN na hÉireann will provide a supportive and dynamic home for the continuation of this vital campaign in the years ahead.

FUTURE NEWSLETTERS

Please note that, from now on, hard copies of the newsletter will be possible only if specifically requested, either by email or by post, from the Membership Secretary.