

A Question of Human Rights

During the last couple of months, I have witnessed two incidents where different individuals were in no doubt of the fact that they knew their rights, once at a supermarket check out and the other in a local post office. It was also patently evident by the unspoken response to these unilateral claims that the recipients thereof, too, were fully cognisant of their own rights as with flashing eyes and squared shoulders returned the compliment with interest.

It is sadly probable that the situations in which the four individuals found themselves and which gave rise to these brief altercations were probably in breach of all their rights (the perpetrators being protected by a mass of rules and procedures) and that, finding themselves on unsure ground, they chose the only ground that saved face, they stood on their dignity.

The concept of Human Rights has defied clarification for centuries. The last serious attempt to define them was in 1948 with the drawing up of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. According to Thomas Burgenthal, a former President of the Inter American Court of Human Rights, the thirty odd articles of the Declaration gave the legal concept of the original Charter of the United Nations Internationalised Human Rights a moral force.

To mark the sixtieth anniversary of the Declaration Seán Love, then with Amnesty International, and Roddy Doyle, with the co-operation of the Irish Times, conceived a project whereby thirty odd writers were invited to write an imaginative piece in response to a designated Article, these to be prefaced by Seamus Heaney. Beginning on March 15th 2008 and weekly thereafter, the pieces appeared in the Irish Times and were subsequently published in book form by the Liberties Press in November 2009 under the title From the Republic of Conscience.

The book is informative on a number of levels. It

offers the reader a unique chance to actually read each of these Articles in isolation. Generally such documents are written in a language guaranteed to confuse and bewilder but here, the text is clear and unambiguous, not to say uplifting. Even then, it takes several readings for the full meaning of each Article to set in and the result is explosive in its simplicity.

Then, the imaginative piece that accompanies the Article gives the Declaration a human face and brings the reader down to earth. Each writer stamps his or her own personality on their interpretation and while the results may vary from the ironic, funny, serious, sad to the satiric, they are always interesting, often adding an unexpected dimension to the Article's meaning and ramification.

Perhaps the most interesting level of all is the overall effect of the book on the reader, particularly on his or her attitude to the whole issue of Human Rights. What becomes evident is that the Universal Declaration of Human Rights is not worth the paper it is written on in practical terms. Practically every country in the world (especially those who ratified it) blatantly flouts it when they choose or need to.

However, it is extremely important that the Declaration exists. Underlining this, Heaney writes in the introduction:

“Since it was framed, the Declaration has succeeded in creating an international moral consensus. It is always there as a means of highlighting abuse if not always as a remedy: it exists instead in the moral imagination as an equivalent of the gold standard in the monetary system. The articulation of its tenets has made them into a world currency of sorts; it provides a world-wide amplification system for the small voice; still, it provides a world-wide amplification system for the small voice.”

Above all the book reminds us that with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights the Rest is far from Silence. Whether or not it can be translated into our daily lives is another question altogether.