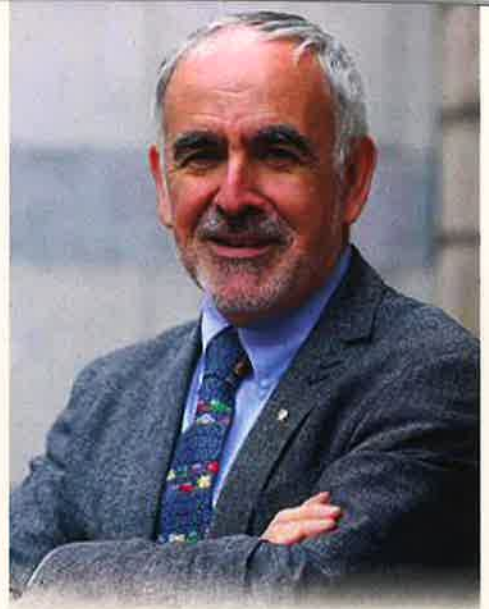


## Ageing



Alison Bough. Head of Policy and Programmes at Active Retirement Ireland: 'Ageing is not an illness, Death is not the cure'

Matisse's *The Snail*, a work completed by the artist after suffering disability

Prof. Des O'Neill (TCD): spoke on the challenge of euthanasia and assisted suicide

# The opportunities and challenges of ageing

**Eileen Casey reports on a thought-provoking event Ageing in Ireland and the EU: Opportunities and Challenges Symposium**

End of October and leaves are falling, nature's reminder that the year moves on and soon our trees will be bare. Skeletal branches will soon stretch out, finding space to outline sculptural majesty against wintry skies. I love looking at these shapely beauties, this stripping back to bone as it were. However, there isn't to be much time to dwell on such philosophical matters because I'm about to attend a symposium; an important gathering of experts in the field of ageing. The Castletroy Park Hotel (a very comfortable billet) is but a stone's throw from Limerick University so I enjoyed a brisk walk before the day's events.

Held in the Glucksman Library (*Ollscoil Luimnigh*) and chaired (in the main) by Dr Michaela Schrage-Fruh (Associate Professor of German and European Studies), guest speaker delegates represent important agencies such as Active Retirement Ireland, Allied Health/Ageing Research Centre, European and Irish Research Projects, Festivals and Community Projects, among others. At the outset, I'd committed to the full day's programme, beginning at 9am and culminating in a reading from women writers at 17.15 pm. Stamina for one thing is required for a full day's listening, not so much physical variety as mental. I'm pleased to report that speakers were of such high calibre and the material discussed proving to be of so much interest, not just because I'm ageing, but on many other levels also. My own input focused on the reading. In association with writers Mary O'Donnell and Mary Rafferty, we three read essays/poems from *Well, You Don't Look It!*, a publication of writings on ageing women from women writers, edited by Michaela Schrage-Fruh and Eilís Ní Dhuibhne (Salmon Publishing). But more of that later.

### Keynote address

The keynote address: *Amplifying Older Voices: The Age Manifesto and the European Elections 2024* is delivered by Alison Bough. Bough is head of policy and programmes at Active Retirement Ireland (Ireland's largest membership organisation for older people). As such she champions the rights and well-being of older people. 'Ageing is not an illness, Death is not the cure'. I remain transfixed by Bough's opening statement and her going on to make the point that because we are living longer, ageing is not generally seen as a cause for celebration but rather as a reason for striking alarm bells. Expressions of these 'alarms' is exemplified by negative terms like 'Silver Tsunami'. Ageing

is therefore seen in the same vein as natural disasters. This shouldn't be the case, especially as our ageing population is increasing (up 40 per cent since 2013).

Bough maintains that a more holistic approach to ageing increases positivity and ultimately, how the ageing process is viewed. Longevity is increasingly seen as 'burdensome' in economic and societal arenas. Even the way the media portrays the older age person is unacceptable i.e. in a dependent role, honing in on ageing hands (which in truth are rather beautiful) resting on the inevitable mobility aid, either a walking frame/electric scooter or walking stick. Consequentially, the older person incrementally becomes 'invisible' while policy makers are unable or unwilling to engage with older person issues. There is no Independent Equality Commissioner for older people, shocking as that is. This political apathy results in not seeing the advantages older persons can contribute, many of whom hold full driving licences with a lifetime of skillsets to offer. Bough would like to see intergenerational projects and a recognition that many older people simply do not wish to retire, instead wanting to remain active. In European parliament elections, panel discussions on ageing are conspicuous by their absence. Politicians will soon be at our door here in Ireland, the question of providing an Independent Irish Commission for our ageing population should be raised as a solid political agenda. We live in an ageing world, for sure. By 2030, 1.4 billion people will be aged 60 and over. The main point gleaned from Bough is that while our own government and EU members (most of whom are over 50 themselves!) are not advocating for older persons, we will remain voiceless.

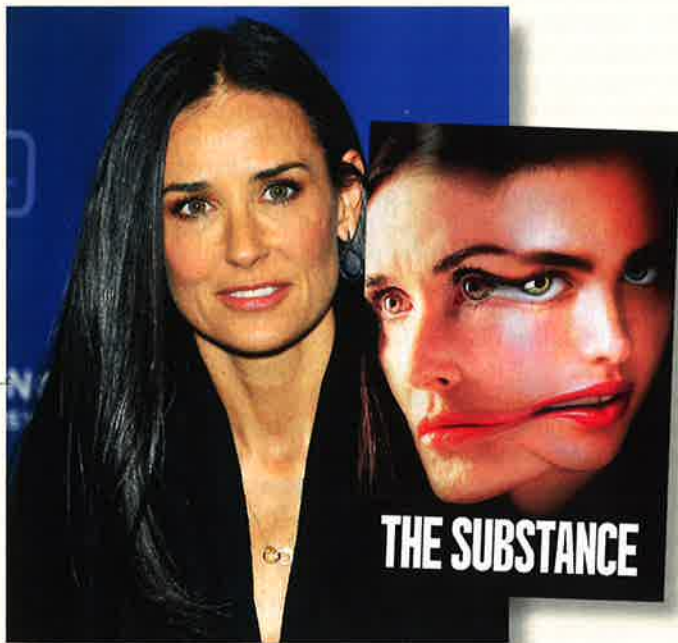
### Challenge of euthanasia

The morning's programme also includes a segment by Prof. Des O'Neill (TCD): *The Challenge of euthanasia and assisted suicide for how we view ageing and caring*. O'Neill's field is gerontology. This quiet spoken individual posits that aligning with the humanities in later life is beneficial and forms part of self-actualisation. As an example, he highlights Matisse's *The Snail*, a work completed by the artist after suffering disability. In 1941, Matisse underwent surgery in which a colostomy was performed. Afterwards, he started using a wheelchair. All of the individual pieces make up a pattern. In a way, Matisse breaks down convention itself and rebuilds it to suit his new

## Ageing

perspective. Arts and Humanities are vital for positivity, inner reflection, ultimately arriving at an understanding with the authentic self. O'Neill discussed the important issue of euthanasia, very relevant today; recently the Dáil voted by 76 to 53 to accept the assisted dying report after the Coalition parties allowed free vote. 33 couples in The Netherlands in 2023 opted for assisted suicide, a chilling statistic. Euthanasia in that country amounted to 1 in every 20 deaths, a frightening percentage. It's indeed a challenging discourse. O'Neill put forward how there is a 'corrosive undermining of our shared existential vulnerability'. Set this against a widely held belief that there is a tendency to promote disintegration as a means of opting out of life. In language such as 'I do not want people I know watching my body waste away'. As is the way of such forums, I struck up conversation with a woman who considered it an absolute privilege to take care of her aged mother. It meant that this lady's mother could remain in her own home and of course that's not going to be possible in every case. O'Neill highly recommends engaging with gerontological film and literature.

*The Substance* has just come into cinema, telling the tale of a fading celebrity (Demi Moore) who uses a black market drug to create a much younger version of herself (Margaret Qualley) with unexpected side effects. *The Substance* is described as a satirical body horror film. Books recommendations include Ursula Le Guin's *No Time to Spare* or Lionel Shriver's *Should we Stay or Should we Go*, both of which contain interesting insights. Shriver's novel deals with death, grief and loss and has been described as 'Hilarious. Fiery phrases spit and crackle. Disgust expands and bursts into belly laughs, a very funny book' (*Sunday Times*).



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O'Neill promotes optimal ageing where the ageing process is reframed through socialised ageing and a stronger move away from inequality towards equality. Take nursing homes as a point of fact. One of my sisters had a fall earlier this year and after hospital care, spent two stints in nursing homes – one public, one private. Neither of these caring institutions provided mental

stimulation. With my own eyes I saw incumbents either sitting in their rooms wearing glazed expressions or walking aimless up and down the corridor. In one of the homes, there were no sliders on some of the walking frames. Result? A high pitched metal screech. Unacceptable by any standard.

## DCU – an age friendly university



Dr Christine O'Kelly (DCU): 'Forget about the age, just think about the person'.

Dr Christine O'Kelly (DCU), is a vibrant communicator, her contribution riveting; *Current Landscape and Progress of the Age-Friendly University Global Network*. O'Kelly's maxim is 'Forget about the age, just think about the person'. DCU can boast that 2,000 older people pass through the campus every week. She's also a huge proponent of using older person experience; 'It can be a huge benefit in the classroom'. Hers is a multidisciplinary advisory board approach to Third Age. Harnessing talents, intergenerational solidarity, collaborative projects, all point in the same direction; healthy ageing. Some of the modules available to older people are: Creative Writing/ Psychology/Art Appreciation Class/Painting/Printmaking/ Photography/Beginner's Spanish/Conversational Spanish/ Introduction to conversational French.

There's so many courses that it's well worth looking on the DCU website. The age friendly university (AFU) is now enjoyed by over 150 universities globally, including Australia and America. A fuse for higher learning has been lit, its light is shining all over the world. The AFU is affiliated to The Irish Senior Citizen's Parliament (development@seniors.ie). New members are welcome. The ISCP is a non-partisan political organisation working to promote the views of older people in policy development and decision making. The ISCP has 200 affiliated organisations with a combined membership of 500,000. It's worth remembering that set down in the European Pillar of Social Rights (at the 2017 Gothenburg Summit), one of the twenty principles is that everyone has a right to training and lifelong learning.



DCU – an age friendly university, it can boast that 2,000 older people pass through the campus every week

One of my favourite components of the symposium programme was *Cuimhneamh an Chláir/Clare Memories Project*. Spearheaded by Paula Carroll, this is a locality based, memory gathering and recording, socially shared enterprise. Storytelling and place-making results in a community passing on heritage from tradition bearers. Oral histories are curated, often in a public interview format. This elevates the speaker, lending a sense of significance to what is often regarded as the uninteresting and the unwanted. Reminiscences are so vital. They offer a collective memory experience to a group, encourages deep listening and facilitates self-expression. No other county facilities such a programme. I continue to be moved by a particular memory excerpt recounted by woman in her 80s, talking about the death of her sister, aged 10 years, from diphtheria. What was so moving, apart from the decades old incident, was that this woman was allowed to tell her story, in her own voice, using her own colloquial phrases, a story received with respect. There's a spiritual element involved in this narrative (seeing two doves above the body of the dead child) conveyed as if it was the most natural occurrence in the world. This is old wisdom, old knowledge. We cannot lose sight of it.

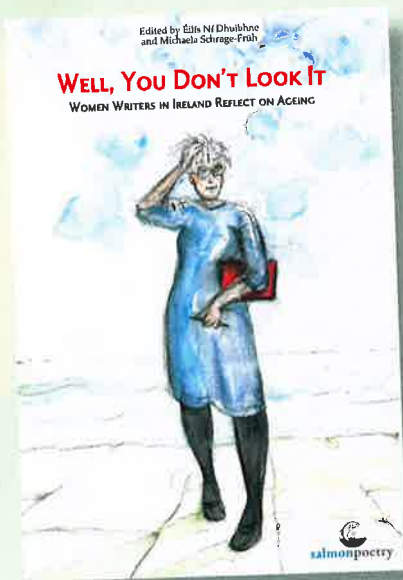
Dr Tara Byrne (Age & Opportunity) presented: *How a festival can subvert understandings of ageing: considering the Bealtaine Festival*. It's unlikely that there are folk who have never participated in the Bealtaine Festival, held every year in the month of May. But A&O are not just for May. They aim to promote an Ireland where older people are more visible, more creative, more active...more often. A&O support organisations wanting to hold their own events. Subverting stereotypical images of ageing is also a prime mover. 'Where do all the old gays go?' (youtube) is just one example. 'Prom Night' (part of 2024 Bealtaine) was a charming way of allowing older age men and women to experience a celebration that perhaps wasn't available to them earlier on in life. Age & Opportunity is such a valued organisation, advocating for older age, we are so blessed to have such treasure. A&O also call for the setting up of an Independent Commissioner for Ageing and Older People.

Another intriguing talk was delivered by Dr Luis Freijo (King's College London), about ageing and gender in European cinema. Those of us who frequent the cinema will know how often the narrative of decline is shown on the big screen.

At day's end, and as a way of unwinding for a very attentive audience, three women writers (myself included) read from *Well, You Don't Look It!*, reflecting

on ageing. Mary O'Donnell and Mary Rafferty read pieces that were thought provoking, funny, illuminating. My own piece, titled 'Mirabilis Jalapa' (The Four

O'Clock Flower) included this poem. *Mirabilis Jalapa* is a plant that doesn't flower until the day progresses, symbolic of how we can still blossom in older age.



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### The Four O' Clock Flower

*Unnoticed in daylight. Drab petals fold stem tight. Forced to bide your time, no clues cue your presence. Plain in pale sight. Morning creeps by. Late afternoon dims noon. You flare to life, spot-lit by evening's crenulation, scarlet flames around you. Songbirds parachute down. Drawn to *Mirabilis Jalapa*, named when Aztecs ruled. Miraculous revelation, shadow lipped. True night flower, midnight-sipped.*



*Mirabilis Jalapa* (The Four O'Clock Flower) is a plant that doesn't flower until the day progresses, symbolic of how we can still blossom in older age