

over Parliamentary Questions he submitted about a very intriguing deal



Dealmaker:
Ms Barnes
with Bertie
Ahern at the
Joyce Centre

tate the deal, AIB forked out the cash for the National Library, claiming the full amount back against its tax bill.

However, since the Sotheby contract specified that the seller's name should remain secret, Ms Barnes was not identified as the original owner of the manuscript until May.

At one point, as the National Library prepared to announce the purchase, Peter Selly of Sotheby's told the library that Ms Barnes 'would obviously prefer it if her name did not come out at all'.

Ultimately the identity of Ms Barnes as the seller emerged when the tax clearance certificates were issued.

BUT questions have been raised as to whether the National Library had been earlier offered the documents. According to Freedom of Information documents obtained by the Phoenix Magazine, National Library research fellow Dr Luca Crispi first told his director of 'extraordinary Joyce manuscripts held by a French book dealer in Paris' in June 2004.

The museum entered tentative discussions at that point and by June 29, Dr Crispi wrote: 'For now nothing will happen in Paris. I was told we have the right of first refusal through July.'

There appears to have been very little progress made during the summer but in October, Dr Crispi noted: 'As far as I know nothing will happen until next year ... but everything is proceeding on course.'

Less than two months later Dr Crispi would be sitting in Sotheby's alongside his director Aonghus O hAonghusa negotiating to buy the material from Laura Barnes for a significantly marked-up price tag.

However, Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism John O'Donoghue denied any suggestion that the manuscripts had been offered at a lower price than was later agreed in the sale between AIB and Barnes. He told the Dáil that 'at no stage was the material on offer to the National Library at a lower price than was subsequently agreed'.

Ms Barnes declined to respond to a request for an interview this week but did confirm that she had contacted Mr McGrath.

She was upset that somebody had been asking personal questions about her but added that she had said 'nothing mean' to him.

'Clearly, maybe I shouldn't have done... but I figured I should stand up for myself.'

She said she had been contacted by the Department to confirm details in the responses officials were preparing for Mr McGrath.

'He wanted to know everything about me short of what I had for breakfast.'

She has also gone on the record to defend her role and to deny suggestions of any conflict of interest.

'When I did the transaction, I was under no contract with the Department or any entity in Ireland. I wasn't even in the country,' she said.

She has also defended the use of different names by explaining that she always uses her birth name for legal purposes.

'Keeping your name out of the deal is standard procedure.'

'I was not under contract (to the Irish government) when I bought the material.'

'I was just a bookseller. Sotheby's sold it to the National Library in an arm's-length transaction, because I know people in there and they know me.'

'No-one in the library knew the vendor was me until the sale was done.'

Ms Barnes said that three independent valuations had been carried out by the National Library and that 'taxpayers paid the sustainable market price'.

Commenting upon the announcement of the purchase, Dr Crispi welcomed the deal saying it was an extraordinary acquisition which would 'give rise to much speculation and debate'.

He was right in more ways than one.