

TEXT OF THE INTRODUCTORY ADDRESS DELIVERED BY **PROFESSOR GERARD T. WRIXON**, Pro-Vice-Chancellor of the University, President, University College Cork - National University of Ireland, Cork on 6th June 2003, on the occasion of the conferring of the Degree of Doctor of Laws, *honoris causa*, on **CHARLES HENNESSY**

A Sheansailéir, agus a mhuintir na hOllscoile,

In recent years, the university has honoured a wide variety of people who have distinguished themselves - in sports or theatre, in politics or community. This man has shown his abilities in all of the above. To describe Charles Hennessy as a man of many parts would be an understatement for he has been an articulate spokesman, advocate and, indeed, champion of numerous diverse movements and associations. The environment, arts investment, architectural heritage, local democracy, and local and regional strategic planning have all benefited from his considerable gifts as a speaker and activist.

There are probably many here today who would be somewhat surprised if I introduced him, as well, as a sportsman. But an outstanding sportsman he was. At school he won Junior and Senior cup medals playing for Presentation College. He went on to play outhalf for UCC, Cork Constitution and Lansdowne. At the same time he was seriously involved in swimming and sailing. And, if that were not enough, he was also playing senior soccer on a regular basis. (I personally do not see how he had enough time to actually play all these games, but I am assured that he appeared for Western Rovers, Evergreen United and UCD.)

His gifts as a public speaker I have already mentioned, and undoubtedly these same gifts led him into that other great arena of public performance – the theatre. From his school days, through university and onward he appeared with a succession of drama and musical groups – a list that reads like a role-call of Cork theatre over a period of twenty or thirty years: Presentation Theatre Guild, Cork Operatic Society, the Gilbert and Sullivan Group and Southern Theatre Group all benefited from his talents. Most famously, or infamously, he was a founder member of the original “Slaggers” who wrote and presented topical satirical reviews in the old Group Theatre in South Main Street. Michael Twomey and Frank Duggan – later more widely known as Cha and Miah – were with Charley in that group. However, perhaps because he was now an established solicitor, Charley appeared under his stage name, Cahal Stenson. And, might I add, in the margins of all this sport and theatre, he was still pursuing a career in law. He spent three years at UCC law school, went on to the Incorporated Law Society in Dublin and finally returned to Cork to establish a very successful professional practice.

Undoubtedly these same gifts for oratory and for theatre also served him well in his political career as an elected member of Passage Town Council, and as a campaigner for community and environmental causes.

All of these are significant adornments, but the thing that unites them is summed up in the phrase “community service”. If that sounds too pale and pious, let me spell out what it means. Over the last forty years, Charley Hennessy has contributed voluntary and unrewarded service to the political, social and cultural life of the city, the region and the country in numerous ways:

Σ He was in at the very foundation of the Cork International Film Festival in 1955, went on to join the festival committee and has been Chairman of the Festival Committee for the last 13 years

- Σ He has served 25 years as an elected member of Passage West Town Commissioners, including twelve terms of office as Chair.
- Σ He acted on the board of the Sirius Trust to ensure the rescue of the architecturally important premises of the old Royal Cork Yacht Club in Cobh and restored them to public use as a wonderful arts centre.
- Σ He has served on the Cork Chamber of Commerce and been President of the Cobh & Harbour Chamber of Commerce.
- Σ He has served on Cork City Council Strategic Planning Committee, and Cork Corporation Arts Committee.
- Σ Yet, even while being at the centre of the establishment, he has never lost his independence of mind and spirit, spear-heading a number of very important environmental campaigns to preserve the ecology and amenities of Cork harbour area, being a member of An Taisce and of the Cork Environmental Council.
- Σ He was appointed to the Irish Arts Council in the late eighties and early nineties, a time of enormous challenge and change in the Irish arts scene.
- Σ He served on the board of the Irish Film Centre when that was being established in its new home in Temple Bar.
- Σ And in addition to this support and advocacy, his great passion for art has also shown itself over many years in the most direct way - through the help and patronage he has given to numerous young painters and sculptors.
- Σ This patronage and advocacy was acknowledged in 1999 when he was appointed to the Chair of the National College of Art and Design – a position he continues to hold today. This is a pivotal role in an institution central to future developments in Irish art.

This is what I mean by “community service”: a lifetime of work, campaigning, supporting, and working to improve the life of the society around him. In a period when sports are becoming increasingly professional, when voluntary organisations are facing intensifying difficulties of recruitment, when academic and professional competition are narrowing the focus of people’s lives, when materialism and individualism dominate our social and economic life, it is important and appropriate that this university should honour someone who has given so much to his society in so many different spheres.

It is with pleasure that I propose

PRAEHONORABILIS CANCELLARIE, TOTAQUE UNIVERSITAS:

Praesento vobis, hunc meum filium quem scio tam moribus quam doctrina habilem et idoneum esse qui admittatur, honoris causa, ad gradum Doctoratus in utroque Jure, tam Civili quam Canonico, idque tibi fide mea testur ac spondeo totique Academiae.