

TEXT OF THE INTRODUCTORY ADDRESS delivered by **PROFESSOR FERGUS D'ARCY**, University College Dublin - National University of Ireland, Dublin, on 13 June 2003, on the occasion of the conferring of the Degree of Doctor of Laws, *honoris causa*, on **FRANK O'KANE**

A Sheánsailéar, a mhuintir na hOllscoile agus a dhaoine uaisle:

Frank O'Kane, Chairman and Chief Executive of Mercury Holdings plc, Sandyford, Dublin was born in Strabane, Co. Tyrone.

His father, Edward, was a farmer and livestock trader and his mother, Anne Teresa Forker, was a native Irish speaker from the village of Annagry in Co Donegal. Frank grew up in Strabane and went to school in St. Columb's College, Derry.

After college he joined his brothers in the family company, J. J. O'Kane, Electrical Engineering, which enterprise was responsible among other things for bringing electricity to the homes of West Donegal during the campaign to electrify rural Ireland in the 1950's.

Frank left Strabane to work for Rotary Engineering in Dublin in the mid-sixties and soon after met his future business partner and lifelong friend, Joe Morgan.

He also met and married Rosaleen Dooher from Lifford, Co. Donegal, and they have four children - Eamonn, twins Clodagh and Ronan, and Rachel.

In 1972 Frank and Joe left Rotary to set up a small company that over the years developed into a major enterprise, Mercury Holdings plc.

From the very beginning Mercury Engineering was associated with University College Dublin at Belfield, and the story of UCD's growth and development on the Belfield campus is mirrored by Mercury's growth as a major Irish and international engineering company. While UCD expanded from 6000 students in Earlsfort Terrace in 1963 to 19,000 in Belfield in 2002, Mercury grew steadily, due largely to the idealism, vision, acumen and commitment of Frank O'Kane.

His first contract at Belfield was in the provision of services for the construction of the new Administration nerve centre in 1972, now known as the Michael Tierney Building. In the thirty years since, Frank and Mercury have been involved in almost every major infrastructural development on the Campus – Phase 1 and 2 of the Library, the Faculty of Agriculture, the School of Engineering, O'Reilly Hall in 1994, the Faculty of Veterinary Medicine in 2000/01 and currently the prestigious Conway Institute for Biomedical Research, begun in 2002.

Mercury began as an electrical engineering business, but in its thirty years in existence expanded into a comprehensive hi-tech engineering services company that now encompasses Mechanical Engineering, Fire Protection and Sprinkler Systems, Information Technology Division, together with overseas services and trading companies. One of these - Irish International Construction Company – has been continuously working in the extremely challenging environment of Libya since the 1980's, developing services for airports, transportation and infrastructural projects.

In 2000 with the application of Eastern European countries for EU membership, Frank launched Mercury into Poland and in May of that year Taoiseach Bertie Ahern opened the offices of Mercury Polska in Warsaw; the Irish company is now one of the major overseas engineering enterprises in Poland.

Mercury's success comes from its reputation for reliability and expertise and above all the ability to get things done. World-class companies in the cutting edge industries of pharmaceuticals and information technology sought out Mercury for plant development in major undertakings. International enterprises that engaged Mercury when setting up in Ireland include Pfizer, Merck Sharp and Dohme, and Wyeth Medica in pharmaceuticals; Compaq, Hewlett Packard, IBM and Intel in computers. Mercury also provided state-of-the-art clean and sterile laboratory and production environments for these companies. Over the last fifteen years Mercury successfully competed for major international contracts, including engineering services for the food processing industry in Holland and France.

In the course of an economic development that has seen Mercury achieve an annual turnover in excess of EU260 millions, Frank O'Kane became a major employer of labour. Starting with his partner Joe Morgan and himself, the company now employs between 2,000 and 3,000 people directly, and hundreds more indirectly. In the process the company provides apprenticeships for up to five hundred young workers, including engineering graduates, is one of the largest placement employers for FÁS, and has a reputation for best employment practice and as a pioneer of in-house up-skilling. At Sandyford, Mercury has its own Training Centre to provide employees with the very latest in IT skills. Its role as a model employer is exemplified in the training of these young people. As well as acquiring specific job skills, a great deal of attention is given to training in health, safety and the law.

The Irish Construction Industry Magazine as recently as last month placed Mercury as number one in the top ten Mechanical and Engineering Contractors in Ireland, with a turnover far outstripping its nearest rivals.

Frank O'Kane is a modest man who prefers to keep a low profile publicly and get on with the running of his company and his life without inviting too much attention. In the same way his quiet and unpublicised generosity has touched the lives of many individuals and helped them achieve their educational and artistic goals. All of this must remain private to individual artists and scholars who owe him so much, but typical of his generosity is the purchase of a very valuable violin for a young Irish musician, and financing of international standard tuition to go with it.

His contributions to UCD's growth have not just been to its physical fabric. Frank's personal generosity has sustained the academic aspirations of its Centres for Film Studies and Drama Studies, including the restoration of the Observatory as a new screening facility. At the same time he has been a generous contributor to the work of its Medical Centre for Infectious Diseases.

To those who have the privilege of knowing him, he is a loyal and encouraging friend, always positive, good-natured and good-humoured. To those who know him well he is never happier than when indulging in his favourite pastime of hill walking in County Wicklow. He is also noted for some memorable renditions of "I'm a freeborn man" and "The town I love so well" in Dobbins and other restaurants he is known to frequent in Dublin!

Frank O’Kane reflects the good things that have happened to Ireland during the past quarter of a century, as the country emerged from an era of poverty and hardship to become a successful modern economy. He has shown passionate commitment to a well educated, civilised Ireland, North and South, and to a civilised world...a man deeply committed to freedom and the democratic process. The University, the Academy and the Country are all in his debt.

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 testor ac spondeo, totique Academiae.