

TEXT OF THE INTRODUCTORY ADDRESS delivered by: **PROFESSOR IOGNÁID Ó MUIRCHEARTAIGH**, President National University of Ireland, Galway on 4 June, 2004, on the occasion of the conferring of the Degree of Doctor of Laws, *honoris causa*, on **MICK O'CONNELL**

He had to reach the island in the winter gale
He pushed the little boat
Over the rough stones till she came afloat:
You'd swear he could see nothing when he hoisted sail
And cut the dark. Once, a grey shape blurred
Above his head while pitch black water slapped
And tried to climb over the side but dropped
Into the sea, thwarted. In time he heard

The special thunder of the island shore,
He hauled the boat in, sheltered near a rock
And smiled to hear the sea's defeated roar;
Breathing as though the air were infinitely sweet,
He watched the mainland where the hard wind struck.
The island clay felt good beneath his feet,
A man undeceived by victory or defeat.

A Sheánsailéir, a mhuintir na hOllscoile, agus a cháirde,

Onóir as cuimse domsa duine de mhór-laochra ár linne, Michael (Michael) O'Connell, a chur in bhúr láthair le go mbronnfar air an gradam is airde atá ar fáil ón Ollscoil.

In describing Michael O'Connell as a man undeceived by victory or defeat, Kerry poet Brendan Kennelly captured some of the essence of the man whom it is my inestimable privilege to present to you for the conferral of the Honorary Degree of Doctor of Laws this afternoon. While Michael is seen by many as the greatest Gaelic footballer of all time, he is also so much more. Oileánach, an island man, fear simplí, a simple man, yet at the same time a man of deep complexity and great conviction. To his family and friends, Michael O'Connell is many different things - husband, father, friend - a man who is loyal, principled - arguably to a fault, compassionate, and ever willing to offer help and support.

Rugadh agus tógadh Michael O'Connell in Oileán Dairbhre (Valentia Island) sa bhliain 1937. The presence on the island of the Western Union Cable Station (staffed by many people from the south of England), the Valentia wireless station, and Lightkeepers residences ensured a multi-cultural population unique among the islands of Ireland. The island he grew up in was a very special place. Notwithstanding the cosmopolitan nature of its population, it was also a very simple place. A place of contrasts - no electricity, only a couple of cars, but also two bakeries, two doctors, a village hospital, and even a Freemason Lodge.

His father Jeremiah, born on the neighbouring small island Beginish, was a small-holder and fisherman, who also piloted ships and was cox of the Valentia Lifeboat. His mother Mary, came from the mainland, and Jeremiah and Mary had nine children, two of whom died in infancy. Michael's surviving siblings are Christina,

Catherine, John, Mary, Eileen and Noreen, several of whom are with us today, agus cuirimid céad míle fáilte rompa inniú.

Michael received his early schooling on the island at a time when it supported three national schools. He went to the Christian Brothers' secondary school in Cahersiveen, crossing from the island by boat, and cycling up to the town. He spent a year here in UCC, before deciding – notwithstanding outstanding academic results in his first year engineering exams – to return to his native island. There is a story that one of your predecessors here, President Wrixon – Dr. Atkins – travelled to Valentia to try to persuade him to return for a second year, but Michael was adamant that he wished to remain on his island. If true, that story suggests that the modern mantras of outreach and access were alive and well here in UCC long before the current trends.

As arguably (and it's an argument I would happily engage) the greatest Gaelic footballer of all time, and like the athlete Eric Liddell portrayed in the movie "Chariots of Fire", Michael O'Connell was the true Corinthian, the keeper of the flame. He played the game with a purity and a sportsmanship that will never be beaten. He elevated the concept of the game to Olympian levels. He never descended, despite provocation. He always played in the uplands. Tony O'Reilly has said "in my sporting experience, two men had been unique in my period, and perhaps in the twentieth century. They were Jack Kyle and Michael O'Connell. Both were magical footballers, both disinterested in personal glory, both amateurs in the true sense of the word."

Michael's views on how the game should be played were idealistic and his bible had no place for fouling or negative tactics. His attitude would be something akin to a theory propounded by Brendan Kennelly, which would deem fouling to be a sin against a divine art. The game of Gaelic football would be infinitely better if all players accepted that dogma. His philosophy of the game could be encapsulated in a few words "good hands, good feet and play and let play". For Michael, high fielding was the outstanding feature of the game, and one of which he was the greatest ever exponent. He also believed passionately in the importance of being able to kick accurately with either foot.

His efforts brought many honours to the Valentia man – including four all-Irelands, six National Leagues, seven South Kerry Championships with his home club, Valentia Young Islanders, a railway Cup medal at the age of 35 in 1972, Texaco footballer of the year in 1962, selected in the Sunday Independent's Team of the Century in 1984, and on the team of the Millennium in 2000. But memories of these multiple achievements are far more transient than those of the style, artistry, elegance and integrity which accompanied them.

To quote a great expert on the game of football, another famous Kerryman, Mícheál Ó Muirheartaigh "Bhí críochnúlacht thar an gcoitiantacht ag baint le peil an Oileánaigh agus ní raibh a shárú le fail i léiriú iliomad scile na h-imeartha. Lean draíocht na farraige i dtír é agus b'ionann gach baohléim a chaith sé i dtreo na spéire ar thóir na caide agus éirí éatromchosach an fhaoláin ó bharr na dtonn mórthimpeall Oileáin na Sceilige."

The relationship between Michael and his now wife Cavan-born Rosaleen began through a chance encounter. When Rosaleen visited Valentia while home from New York, she fell in love first of all, not with the famous footballer, but with a site on his land. Her plan was to build a house there and return from America permanently. Her

very first meeting with Michael when she called to enquire about the site didn't exactly leave her star-struck. She recalls him as being "unfriendly, most unfriendly". She believed that he doubted if she had the price of the site. They kept in touch when she returned to America, when he acted as her unofficial agent with the builder. He understood that the acquaintanceship would end when the house was built. And the rest, as they say, is history. They married in 1972, and have three children, Máire, Mícheál and Diarmuid, whom we are also delighted to have with us today.

For Michael and Rosaleen, the news that their newly-born son, Diarmuid, had Down's Syndrome was an experience that caused them to weep together. But the sorrow of those early days has since turned to happiness and a deep love for their special son. Now, says Michael, we weep with joy. Michael describes Diarmuid as a great friend, and considers him the greatest blessing he could ever have been bestowed. "There are times that I'm away, if I just speak to him on the phone or just think about him, it's something that gives me great joy and happiness". An RTE programme a few years ago – aptly entitled *An tOileánach* – illustrated the bond between Michael and Diarmuid more eloquently than any words could do. There was one clip in which Diarmuid was asked by the reporter "Who was the greatest Gaelic Footballer of all time?". He had been coached to reply "Denis Berkamp and Mick O'Connell", but rogue that he is, when asked live, he responded "Maurice Fitzgerald"!

Even before Diarmuid was born, Michael had fund-raised for the Kerry Parents and Friends Association – starting first with Saint Mary of the Angels at Whitefield between Beaufort and Killorglin when it was set up. Diarmuid went on to spend many happy years at Whitefield. Rosaleen and Michael then worked to help establish a residential and training facility on Valentia Island – located indeed on Michael's own land, on the very field on which he honed his immaculate and unequalled skills – a facility for Diarmuid and his friends which would enable them to live life to the full in their native place among a community which Rosaleen has described as, and which I myself know to be "the salt of the earth".

Michael O'Connell truly is an exceptional person. Is mór an onóir dúinn-ne anseo in Ollscoil na hÉireann gradam a bhronnadh inniú ar dhuine de mhór laochra ár linne, ar pheileadóir den scoth, ar fhear uasal, éirimiúil, ar athair, ar fhear-chéile, ar chara linn go léir. I bhfoclaibh Oileánaigh eile "ní bheidh a leithéid arís ann".

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, totaeque Academiae.