



TEXT OF THE INTRODUCTORY ADDRESS DELIVERED BY: **MS CLIONA de BHALDRAITHE MARSH**, on 20 September 2007, on the occasion of the conferring of the Degree of Doctor of Literature *honoris causa*, on **MARGARET Mac CURTAIN**

A Sheánsailéar, a mhuintir na hOllscoile agus a dhaoine uaisle, Is onóir domsa Margaret Mac Curtain a mholadh do chéim oinigh inniu. I feel very privileged to present Dr Margaret Mac Curtain for the award of an honorary degree, the highest honour the National University of Ireland can bestow.

The daughter of Sean and Ann Mac Curtáin, Margaret Mac Curtain was born in 1929 in Cork. She is the middle child of five siblings. After school she attended UCC where she was awarded her BA. After her degree she entered the Dominican order 'to give it a go' as she puts it herself and as we see she is still with the order. Tá cuid acu anseo inniu mar aon lena deirfiúr Éilis.



Margaret answers to the names of Margaret, Peig, Sr Benvenuta, Sr Ben, Benvenuta and even Bennie..., a testimony to the many facets of her very rich life and her influence right across the social, political, religious and cultural spheres not only in Ireland but also abroad. She is a true educator: 'e-ducare' draw out- to bring out that which is within. Many generations of students who have had the honour of her as an educator can vouch for this.

She has a distinguished and internationally acclaimed academic career and has published extensively in the field of history particularly on Irish women in their historical dimension, and on the role of women in Ireland.

Margaret, after finishing her BA, then proceeded to complete her Masters and PhD. It is extremely difficult to describe the activities and involvement of this remarkable person in a few words. She is an academic, an historian, a Dominican, broadcaster, editor, former lecturer, College Principal, University Governor, counsellor, advisor to Government, linguist. Her scholarship and inspirational teaching have been recognised with many honours and awards, including Honorary Research Fellowship in University College Dublin,

She is above all a great listener who puts everything else on hold to listen to you particularly when she knows you may be seeking help and advice. So many of us have benefited from her help given in such a selfless manner. To try and give an appropriate account of her achievements to date would keep us here too long so let me albeit very subjectively highlight some of the major achievements during her



lifetime. In the 1950s she was headmistress of Sion Hill. She continued her academic studies and was awarded a Salamanca Scholarship for the period 62-64 when she studied in Madrid and completed her doctorate in 1964.

She joined the History Department of UCD in 1964 and instilled a great sense of curiosity in her students, encouraged and challenged them thus helping them reach their full potential. Her students are to be found in every walk of life today. During the gentle revolution of 1968 a national newspaper pictured her - habit and all - standing on a table talking to students. The university authorities were not amused. However to their great credit the Dominican order never sanctioned her activities. Nor did the order bow to the dictates of the then Archbishop of Dublin when he demanded to see Margaret's lectures before she delivered them. This was only the beginning of this radical person's involvement in social issues. Nach iad a bhí ciallmhar na mná rialta úd.

One of her significant achievements during the period 1968-1973 was the publication of the first ever paperback series of the History of Ireland published by Gill and MacMillan for university level.

During the period 79-83 she was seconded to a very important project which was to head up the first College of Further Education( later a Senior College) of the City of Dublin Vocational Education Committee.( VEC) This was a very innovative project and a difficult one... she introduced subjects such as rock music, media studies, art portfolios and business skills for young budding rock musicians long before these concepts and terms became buzz words. PLC colleges are now part of the educational fabric.

She served as Prioress from 84-88.

She was never afraid to highlight neglected aspects of scholarship and introduce new disciplines. She was foremost in developing Women's History at University Level. Today there is a strong academic cohort of researchers in the field with a major project "Women in History". In addition to this she was a great support to those academics who fought to have Women's Studies established as a discipline in its own right and was a founder and Board member of WERRC the women's education research and resource centre .She was appointed as one of the first Senior research fellows by the Faculty of Arts in UCD. She was a leader of the resurgent Irish women's movement in the 1970's and 1980's and is respected today for her continuing input to Irish social development.

Her work in the public service included chairing the National Archives Advisory Council from 97-2002. She was also involved with Treoir 2000 a report on the state of Irish at the end of the twenty-century.



Margaret was a member of the editorial board of Field Day IV and V, volumes, which were described as a monumental and heroic work of collective scholarship by the NY Review of books in 2003. She was the second person to have held the prestigious Burns Chair of Irish Studies in Boston College. At the end of her period she was awarded the Eire Society gold medal for her work. She still continues to work closely with academics from Boston College. One of her other interesting projects was in connection with the City and State of New York - the great Irish Famine Curriculum in New York City and State which won a social studies national award. She was a consultant on this project and had very hands on approach devising and teaching the curriculum. The programme was the initiative of her great friend and colleague Máirín Murphy who is here with us today. Margaret never sought public acclaim or credit for her work and I am convinced that we only know of some of her achievements.

Her free spirit and radical mind set is well known. Pé áit a mbíonn sí tá sí spraoiuil, lán be bhrí agus ní féidir gan ligint di thú spreagadh chun cinn. Ceann de na focail a cloistear uaithi nuair a chuireann tú ceist ag lorg comhairle.. 'Go for it'. What a positive approach...mol an óige.. ach ní do'n ghlún óg amháin a thugann sí am agus comhairle.

It wouldn't be appropriate to close without mentioning some of her other activities which may not strictly fall under an academic rubric.

She knew that the Argentinean team were playing in Dublin and staying in the Shelbourne hotel. She donned her habit, and looking as if butter wouldn't melt in her mouth she chatted to a young waitress and found out where the team was having its private dinner. Before anyone knew what was going on in she marched and launched into a verbal attack in Spanish - her Madrid period served her well - and in no uncertain terms stated how the behaviour of those in power was unacceptable. Her speech was cut short when she was escorted out! The next time the habit came in useful was the famous Wood Quay episode in 1978 when again tapping on the locked entrance to the site she spoke to the security guard at the gate and managed to inveigle her way in. Little did the poor man know that a large group of her friends were outside and thus started the Wood quay occupation? The rest we know. When Margaret retired from UCD she told us of her plans. "to ride off across the Canyon de Chelley across the mountains in Arizona...the girls are going West "...anyone who knows Margaret is well aware that she is retired only in name...her life is as busy as ever- she is indefatigable; duine iontach , duine breá . Is mór an onóir dúinn í bheith anseo inniu leis an gradam seo a ghlacadh

*PRAEHONORABILIS CANCELLARIE, TOTAQUE UNIVERSITAS: Praesento vobis hanc meam filiam, quam scio tam moribus quam doctrina habilem et idoneam esse quae admittatur, honoris causa, ad gradum Doctoratus in Litteris, idque tibi fide mea testor ac spondeo, totique Academiae.*