



TEXT OF THE INTRODUCTORY ADDRESS DELIVERED BY: **DR IOGNÁID Ó MUIRCHARTAIGH**, Pro-Vice-Chancellor of the University, President, National University of Ireland, Galway, on 20 September 2007, on the occasion of the conferring of the Degree of Doctor of Laws *honoris causa*, on **EUGENE MCGEE**



A Sheánsailéir agus a mhuintir na hOllscoile:

Is mór an onóir domsa fear uasal, tuarisceoir den scoth, eagarthóir irise, foillsitheoir, bainisteoir fóirne peile thar cinn, agus saineolaí ar chursaí spóirt, Eugene McGee, a chur in bhúr láthair le go mbronnfar dochtúireacht oinigh air.

I hope I can be excused a personal aside before I introduce Eugene McGee this afternoon. Exactly 25 years ago from yesterday, September 19, 1982, I brought my eldest daughter, Róisín, then seven years of age, to Croke Park to see her first all-Ireland final. It was Kerry versus Offaly, and Róisín asked me which team she should cheer for. I told her "Kerry of course", knowing the importance of instilling basic values at an early age. All was wonderful until the final minutes, when the Séamus Darby goal dramatically ended the dream of an historic Kerry five-in-a-row. Róisín, totally traumatised, turned to me and said "it's all your fault, you told me to cheer for Kerry". She still has not forgiven me, and so it was with some mixed feelings that I accepted the honour of presenting to you Chancellor, for the conferral on him of an honorary doctorate, the manager of that Offaly team, Eugene McGee. I will return to the matter of the 1982 game later on.

Eugene McGee was born in the parish of Colmcille in north Longford, the second youngest of seven children born to Owen and Catherine McGee. His father was a national school teacher or 'the Master' as he would have been known in those days. Eugene had the rare distinction of being taught by his father in national school and by his brother in secondary school, the late Fr Philip McGee, a well-known GAA figure who was the last principal of Moyne secondary school and the first principal of Moyne community school, which evolved from the Moyne Latin School, originally a hedge school and later a preparatory school for seminarians.

Eugene himself followed the family tradition of teaching for almost a year when he graduated from University College Dublin with a BA and HDip, but the attraction of journalism soon had his attention. English, he will admit, was one of his best subjects and, while at UCD, one of his first assignments was to cover a rugby match between UCD and TCD for the UCD weekly newspaper. He also wrote for the GAA weekly newspaper, *Gaelic Weekly*, which began publishing his articles.

After graduating from UCD he worked for the national newspapers: *The Sunday Press*, *The Irish Press*, *The Sunday Tribune* and the *Evening Herald* as



GAA columnist and he worked freelance with the *Longford News* until his appointment with the *Longford Leader*.

Following a strike in the paper in 1983 which lasted 38 weeks, Eugene became the new editor of the *Leader* and he was in charge of the revival of the paper which had been off the streets for the duration of the dispute. His job was to pick up the pieces and he had total editorial control. Faced with the task of making the *Longford Leader* the pre-eminent newspaper not just in County Longford, but in the midlands, the first step was to recover all the lost sales from the *Longford News*, which he did in about six months. He personalised the paper more and brought in several technological changes. The *Leader* was the first provincial paper in Ireland to get agreement with the National Graphic Association over direct input, which would allow its journalists to use Amstrad computers. He also brought business and administrative changes, and in 1989 he led a management buy-out which took the paper, which was founded in 1897 by J.P. Farrell and had remained in the Farrell family since its foundation, out of the Farrell family completely, with himself becoming the majority shareholder and Managing Editor.

The *Leader* is the traditional paper in the County and that inspires loyalty in its readers. Eugene McGee's editorial policy was for the *Leader* to be a totally neutral paper. He also saw the paper's job as defending the local community and to speak up for the local community. The survival of the paper after the 1983 strike bears testimony to its popularity with Longford people and to the leadership and integrity which Eugene McGee has shown in running the paper. He recently retired from the position of Managing Editor of the *Longford Leader* and writes a weekly column for the *Irish Independent*.

Eugene McGee, who has given so generously to Longford, is not only known for his journalistic skills but also for his sporting achievements. He has been one of the most successful coaches and managers in Gaelic football, starting with the UCD Club whom he coached to six Sigerson Cup wins as well as two Dublin championships and two All-Ireland Club titles in 1974/75. He later managed the Offaly football team which won three Leinster titles and which, as already mentioned, stopped the great Kerry team from winning the five All-Irelands in-a-row by beating them in the All-Ireland Final of 1982. The defining moment came a few minutes from the finish when Séamus Darby scored the memorable goal which was to give Offaly a one-point victory (1-15 to 17 points) and snatch what appeared to be the Kerry team's place in history right from under their noses. He also managed the Ireland team on two occasions for the Compromise Rules International Series against Australia, winning the 1990 series in Australia 2-1.

Eugene McGee's first book *Classic Football Matches* was published in 1993. The book featured 30 great football games played between 1955 and 1992 and showed his great interest in and enthusiasm for Gaelic football. In 1996 his great writing skills were manifested again in *St Mel's of Longford: A History 1865-1990*, which tells the story of the diocesan college for Ardagh and Clonmacnoise since its foundation in the post-famine era of 1865 right up to 1990 and its outstanding academic and sporting record.



Eugene lives with his wife, Marian, and children, Conor and Linda, adjacent to the grounds of St Mel's College in Longford. He has been quoted as saying that the best thing he ever got out of Offaly is not the All-Ireland, but his wife! He is a man of great integrity and one of the top journalists who challenged the GAA in his sports columns on issues that others did not dare to raise, while consistently showing his interest and enthusiasm for the sport.

I had hoped that this conferral might, for my daughter Róisín and myself, exorcise the ghosts of 1982. However, I went to Croke Park again this Sunday with Róisín, and although at 32 years of age she no longer asks who to cheer for, I am pleased to say her early upbringing has borne fruit, and she arrived at the match in her Kerry jersey. And we won! But as luck would have it, Róisín nearly left the stadium before the game started, suffering severe flashbacks, when in the customary honouring of the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of an All-Ireland win, the aforementioned Offaly team of 1982 (amongst them the *bête noir* Seamus Darby) reappeared and paraded right in front of us.

Eugene McGee has been an outstanding journalist, and a great football manager and expert, and, in presenting him to you for conferral of this honorary doctorate, a Sheánsailéir, I forgive him for 1982, agus anois iarraim ort an gradam is airde atá ar fail ón Ollscoil seo a bhronnadh air, sin é Dochtúireacht Oinigh.

*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.*