



Citation for Patrick Commins on the occasion of the conferring of the degree of Doctor of Literature (DLitt) *honoris causa*

A Phádraig, a Mháirín, a Chormaic, Fiona, Riona agus Treasa, a ionadaithe Sheanad Ollscoil Náisiúnta na hÉireann agus Chomhairle Acadúil Ollscoil na hÉireann, Má Nuad, a dhlúth-chairde agus a chomhleacaithe, go speisialta comhleacaithe as Ollscoil na Gaillimhe, is mór an onóir dhom an t-Ollamh Patrick Commins a mholadh don Dochtúireacht sa Litríocht *honoris causa*.

In this special conferring ceremony of the National University of Ireland, Maynooth I am delighted to propose that the degree of Doctor of Literature *honoris causa* be awarded to Patrick Commins in recognition of his sustained contribution to research on the rural economy and society of Ireland. His outstanding attributes include his vision and ability to think laterally and over the long term, his extraordinary capacity to conceptualise and contextualize, and to keep pushing out the frontiers of research on several fronts. Throughout his distinguished career he promoted new perspectives on rural Ireland, critically challenged the conventional wisdom and proposed workable alternative strategies for government departments among others. Very importantly, he communicated his research outcomes in language that was always accessible to a diversity of audiences that included local rural development activists, undergraduate and postgraduate students, government department and EU officials, senior politicians, and of course his national and international academic peers.

Patrick, or Pakie as he is affectionately known to all of his friends, grew up in the west of Ireland where he acquired from a very early age a thorough appreciation of the deep challenges facing the weaker rural areas especially in the 1950s. Academic brilliance shone through at an early stage and took him from his birthplace a few miles south of Galway city to University College Galway where he completed the B. Comm. Degree with First Class honours in 1957, before proceeding to the Higher Diploma in Education and a short career as a vocational teacher based on the Aran Islands. This brief island posting introduced Patrick not only to the richness and durability of the island culture and the sheer beauty of the place, but also to the love of his life Mairin whom he married in 1962.

The enquiring mind of the young teacher needed stretching beyond the frontiers of his local experience. Thus it was no great surprise that after a short interval back on the mainland he moved to Dublin in 1960 to join the Rural Economy Research Division of the recently established Agricultural Research Institute, An Foras Taluntais.

The potential of the young graduate was spotted very quickly in the fledgling research institute. Pakie was sent by AFT to the University of Oxford where he completed a Diploma in Agricultural Economics. Following his return he worked on the pioneering West Cork Resource Survey. Shortly afterwards, he was successful in winning a Kellogg Fellowship that took him to Cornell University for the period 1965 to 1967 where he completed a Masters in Rural Sociology.

On his return from Cornell Pakie was appointed Head of the Department of Rural Sociology, a post he held until 1989. He rapidly built a small but effective team of rural sociologists who on occasions were known to provide research results that were regarded as challenging, to put it mildly, by members of the Council of AFT. Pakie provided the intellectual rigour and moral support to sustain and nurture these young researchers who have subsequently taken on significant research-based leadership and advocacy roles in organizations such as the Western Development Commission.

Through his work at this time he produced, or contributed to, many seminal reports that became landmark studies and ultimately impacted on the direction of public policies targeted at altering the underlying institutional and structural constraints on the development of a modern competitive agriculture sector and rural economy. Studies that come to mind include a report in 1973 for Macra na Feirme on Farm Inheritance and Succession, the 1978 report of the Inter-Departmental Committee on Land Structure Reform, and again in 1978 a report for the National Economic and Social Council on change and development in Rural Areas. His paper on Imbalances in Agricultural Modernisation for the international journal *Sociologia Ruralis* in 1980 epitomised his careful articulation of a theoretical and contextual framework guided by the latest international writing on the topic. It was in this regard that Pakie towered above most of his contemporaries.

In the early 1980s as the rural sector in Ireland gradually came to grips with the realities of the Common Agricultural Policy Pakie expanded the geographical arena for his research. New projects included consultancy assignments on behalf of the UN in Zambia (1982) and Kenya (1983) as well as an EEC evaluation project in Uganda. The late 1980s brought a new focus with research on processes contributing to social exclusion and marginalisation that drew Pakie into debates on EU Poverty programmes that were later to influence the emergence of the Combat Poverty Agency and the formulation of National Anti-Poverty Strategies.

Throughout the 1990s Pakie provided sound and focused leadership for the Rural Economy Research Centre at Teagasc until 1997 after which he assumed the role of Chief Scientist for Rural Development. During this period he produced many publications that have had a lasting impact. I recall the famous paper with Damian Hannan on the significance of small-scale landholders published in the Goldthorpe and Whelan book in 1992. With Michael Keane he produced another report on Developing the Rural Economy for the National Economic and Social Council. This report published in 1994 is a truly historic document which helped lay the intellectual foundations for the first White Paper on Rural Development in 1999 and eventually the National Spatial Strategy in 2002. What was so distinctive about the 1994 report was the manner in which it conceptualised the spatial structure of the rural economy and its articulation of the complexity and changing nature of rural-urban relations.

Contemporaneously with his work on new models of rural economic development Pakie was also to the forefront in conceptualising and analysing the increasing incidence of rural displacement and marginalisation. This included a joint project with Michael Mernagh, and his contributions to the

pioneering book on Poverty in Rural Ireland published in 1996. Over the same period he became interested in new models of community organisation based on principles of partnership that combined both bottom-up and top-down interventions. His work for the LEADER Coordination Unit in Brussels was especially noteworthy and so also were his many contributions to assisting fledgling local development groups throughout much of rural Ireland.

Another area of great interest to Pakie was rural land use. This was manifested especially in his research on social issues related to forestry. He contributed substantially to the first major study on socio-economic issues in forestry development in the early nineties in association with Brendan Kearney and the ESRI. With Damian Hannan he co-authored a very significant paper on Factors Affecting Land Availability for Afforestation.

The links with NUI Maynooth are especially important for me and I know they are also treasured by both Pakie and Mairin. Based on a personal friendship that extends back to the early 1980s Pakie was instrumental in helping the Geography Department at NUI Maynooth to develop a PhD level research programme that was initially supported by Teagasc Walsh Fellowships and other research funding lines. The first PhD student from the Department, Dr. Seamus Lafferty, produced the acclaimed Census Atlas of Irish Agriculture in Transition. Pakie's contribution to that project as a Teagasc co-supervisor and as a co-author went way beyond the call of duty – I recall him leaving the office in Maynooth after midnight on a number of occasions. This was just the first of a number of research theses completed with his assistance by Maynooth postgraduates.

Subsequently Pakie was a keen associate of the National Institute for Regional and Spatial Analysis (NIRSA) to which he was appointed as an Adjunct Professor in 2002. Building on his vast experience in international research projects with colleagues such as Jim Frawley and Perpetua McDonagh, Pakie and I were invited to participate in a large international study on the territorial impacts of the CAP and Rural Development Policy. For this project we interacted with colleagues throughout many parts of Europe. One of my abiding memories was the high esteem in which Pakie was held by colleagues from Scandinavia to the Mediterranean, and especially by the President of the World Rural Sociology Congress, Professor Mark Shucksmith. The international reputation was, however, always carried lightly and self-effacingly.

In addition to Pakie's involvement with Maynooth we also recognise the significant contributions that he made over many years to programmes provided by both UCD and UCG. His unbounded generosity meant that he was an ever willing and frequent contributor to conferences and other events organised by colleagues in almost university in Ireland.

Pakie's research has always had a strong policy orientation. The climax, perhaps, of his work over many years is the inclusion of a separate chapter on rural development in the current National Development Plan. This chapter along with the general spatial orientation of the Plan, which is without precedent, has its roots in that report for the NESR in 1994, and in the visionary perspective encapsulated in the Rural Ireland 2025 Foresight report to which he made substantial contributions. While Pakie cannot be held responsible for the final text of the chapter in the NDP it is widely acknowledged that there might not have been any, were it not for his tangible contribution to the process.

Sula gcuire mé críoch leis an gcoimre ghairid seo de na saothair is cúis le bronnadh na céime Dochtúireachta sa Litríochta honoris causa ar Phakie, ba mhaith liom aird a tharraingt ar cé mar atá

tacaíocht dhílis tugtha don Ghaeilge aige lena shaol. Mar chainteoir líofa Gaeilge, is minic a chaith sé dua go deonach leis an teanga a chur chun cinn. Sna seachtóidí luatha ba bhall é den Choiste um Thaighde ar Dhearcadh an Phobail i dtaobh na Gaeilge agus bhí sé ina chomh-údar ar an tuarascáil dheiridh sa bhliain 1975; ó 1976 go 1990 bhí sé ina bhall de Chomhairle agus de Choiste Gnó Institiúid Teangeolaíochta Éireann; agus ó 1984 go 1988 bhí sé ina Chathaoirleach ar Choiste Pleanála Bhord na Gaeilge.

This love for the Irish language was matched by a lifelong keen interest in hurling. He played at club, college, and county level and by all accounts was a formidable opponent. His only concession to other than Gaelic sporting pursuits was his love of squash which he played for 30 years, and when on the rare occasion he was defeated, he would come back with a vengeance for which the opposition was no match, who was of course his friend Brendan Kearney.

Despite his many commitments at home and abroad, and the need to have his own space for contemplation and writing, Pakie's family and their achievements have been central to his life. He is very proud of Mairin's expertise in her own profession and takes no little delight in the fruits of her labours! His children Fiona, Riona, Cormac, and Treasa are, deep down, his pride and joy, and are very close to his heart. For all of them and their partners and his grandchildren, he and Mairin have provided a loving and welcoming home, complemented by Pakie's beautifully kept gardens which reflect his attention to detail and perfection in everything to which he turned his hand.

To summarise the profile of such an esteemed researcher, colleague and friend is not an easy task. Pakie is widely regarded as the most authoritative voice on rural development and on the social aspects of the rural economy in Ireland over the past thirty or more years. Most importantly we, his colleagues and friends, treasure his humility, respect, loyalty, comradeship, patience, and personal generosity of time and advice for everybody no matter what their position.

This award of the degree of Doctor of Literature *honoris causa*, is the highest recognition conferred by the National University of Ireland, and it is a most fitting tribute to a person whose career has been marked by distinction and which has already created a legacy of research that will continue to inspire future researchers here and further afield. Your insights, analyses and advice have helped to make this country a better place for everybody.

Praesento vobis hunc meum filium, iam toti Academiae tam moribus quam doctrina habilem et idoneum esse agnitum, et a Pro-Vice Cancellario ad Gradum Doctoratus in Litteris admissum.

Professor Jim Walsh DLitt

9 March 2008