

TEXT OF THE INTRODUCTORY ADDRESS DELIVERED BY: **PROFESSOR SAMUEL McCONKEY**, on 3 June 2010 in the National Concert Hall, on the occasion of the conferring of the Degree of Doctor of Medicine *honoris causa*, on **FR ROBERT JOSEPH MacCABE**

Chancellor, members of the University, Colleagues,

It is my privilege this afternoon to propose Father Doctor Robert MacCabe for an Honorary Doctorate from the National University of Ireland.

Through decades of devoted health-care work in the hot isolated mountainous desert beside Lake Turkana in northern Kenya, Fr

MacCabe has shown lion's courage and particular passion for caring for the nomadic people who live there. By establishing a mobile medical clinic to serve the migrant pastoral Turkana, using bicycles and 4 wheel drive vehicles, he has demonstrated how the innovative leader must create new ways of working when the old ones don't perform or achieve their targets.

Through his systematic research, his artistic photography and meticulous note-taking Fr Dr MacCabe has documented the culture, traditions and language used by the Turkana people. He has re-presented these ideas outside to others by his teaching, his media contributions, in his theses and in his book. Since 1973 he has been teaching at RCSI for two or three months each year, using well-illustrated talks about snake bites, rabies, tetanus, kala-azar, insect bites, and about solutions to providing health services to remote rural areas.



L-R: Dr Maurice Manning, Chancellor NUI; Fr. Robert MacCabe; Dr Attracta Halpin, Registrar NUI

Fr MacCabe and his work have been featured on RTE, our national broadcasting company, in reports from BBC London, and his work and personal life achievements have been described and illustrated in the Irish Times and other publications. In an interview with Joe Humpheries of the Irish Times he described the place he lives: "The sky in Turkana at night time is absolutely beautiful because there is no electric night, there are no clouds, and you see the stars spread out over a vast area." Not for nothing, he said, do the Turkana people use the same word "akuj" to describe both the sky and God.

In summary I propose that Fr MacCabe has exemplified through his long and productive life so far many of the virtues and attributes of the ideal medical doctor:

the commitment to serve one's patients without regard for personal comforts or reward,

meticulous medical research and scholarship,

leadership to change and do things differently whenever the old models fail,

a profound appreciation of the beauty of the earth and of the diverse and wonderful people who live on it with us.

I commend him to you for this honorary degree and to the graduating class of young doctors here as a pattern, an exemplar, a model from whom you can learn how to be a doctor.

A third generation doctor, from a family with distinguished medical and military service; he was born in Mallow in Co Cork, and brought up in Sandycove in Co Dublin. He won the Irish National Junior Tennis Championships in 1944, and played at Wimbledon in 1948. He studied medicine in UCD but while a student he fell deathly ill with tuberculosis. He recovered and graduated successfully in 1949. He was House Physician and House Surgeon at the Mater Hospital Dublin in 1950, and was Resident Medical Officer at Grosvenor Sanatorium in Kent until 1952. He made a commitment to join the Carmelite order, studied Theology and Philosophy from 1954 - 1961, then was ordained as a priest. The Carmelite order does not have an eponymous founder; rather a group of prayerful zealous devout hermits, who lived on Mt Carmel, first adopted the rule of life and commitment which is known as Carmelite in the early 13th century, and I propose to you that Fr Dr MacCabe, in his

life has demonstrated the courage and zeal of Elijah, the prophet of Mt Carmel, described in the books of the Old Testament and respected greatly within the Carmelite tradition.

From 1962 - 1977 Fr Dr MacCabe worked as a priest and doctor at the border area of Mozambique and Zimbabwe, then called Portuguese East Africa and Southern Rhodesia, at a time of war and conflict. He was almost blown up by a land mine while driving to a field clinic. Two of his confreres were shot dead. Two of the other doctors were shot. He was reluctant to leave, but his superiors ordered the Carmelite mission to move. In 1972 he was awarded the Gold Medal at Liverpool School of Tropical Medicine. In 1973 he was awarded a Doctorate for his thesis entitled *Medical Conditions in a remote area of Zimbabwe*.

Having been forced to leave one remote place, he found another one, Lokitaung, west of Lake Turkana in northern Kenya, close to the borders with Sudan, Ethiopia and Uganda. It is a hot hilly area, with intermittent drought, isolated from the rest of Kenya; to get there is a two days drive from Nairobi on a road pestered with bandits and robbers, so best to drive in a convoy. The Turkana keep cattle, dogs and sheep and migrate from place to place with their animals in search of pastures. Sometimes raiders come over the border to steal the cattle and drive them off to Sudan. Those of you who have seen the film 'The Constant Gardener' will recognize the wonderful landscape. Several humanoid fossils dated 1.7 m years ago were discovered near the lake in 1970s by Mary and Richard Leakey and others and indicate that early humans lived there.

In Turkana Fr MacCabe realized that a hospital and fixed clinics would not work, as the people moved from one transient settlement to another. He set up mobile clinics, trained staff, secured funding, and built a network of relationships. He was helped by two groups of Irish religious sisters; the Medical Missionaries of Mary and the Holy Rosary Sisters. Fr MacCabe learned the language of the Turkana people. He learned what was their conception of illness, disease and health, and traditional cures. He has cared for people with tuberculosis, AIDS, malaria, children with diarrhea, and festering eye conditions. He has gone to great length to obtain effective treatments for his patients: transportation of emergency obstetric cases, anti-tuberculosis medications, rabies vaccines, snake anti-venom, Glucantime for visceral

leichmaniasis, powerful anti-retrovirals for HIV. He has led distribution of bed-nets to prevent malaria and other preventative interventions. He has documented this through his beautiful photographs some of which can be seen in his book, *Desert Nomads: A study of the pattern of the Turkana people of north Western Kenya*.

Honorable Chancellor of the University, I present to you this man whose ideas and life I know well, and I request that you admit him to the degree of Doctor of Medicine, *honoris causa*.

Praehonorabilis Cancellarie, totaque universitas.

Presento vobis hunc meum filium, quem scio tam moribus quam doctrina habilem et idoneum esse qui admittatur, *honoris causa*, ad gradum Doctoratus in Medicina, idque tibi fide mea testor ac spondeo, totique Academiae.