

TEXT OF THE INTRODUCTORY ADDRESS DELIVERED BY: **MS CLIONA DE BHALDRAITHE MARSH**, on 6 May 2011 in the Royal College of Physicians in Ireland, on the occasion of the conferring of the Degree of Doctor of Laws *honoris causa*, on **MARY FINAN**

A Sheansailéir, a mhuintir na hOllscoile agus a dhaoine uaisle,

Is mór an onóir domsa Mary Finan a chur i bhúr láthair do chéim oinigh inniu. It is a great honour and indeed a pleasure for me to present Mary Finan for the award of a Doctor of Laws, *honoris causa*, by the National University of Ireland.



Mary was born in Roscommon to John and Mary Finan and is one of six children. Her family moved to Dublin when she was quite young. She was educated at St Louis High School in Rathmines, where she excelled as a pupil, was Head girl, winner of debating trophies-the Gael Linn prize for díospóireacht as Gaeilge and the Aer Lingus Hibernian Cup for English debating. She then went to UCD to study for a BA in French and English, where she became actively involved in many extra mural activities - a genuine holistic education - these included the Cumann Drámaíochta, correspondence secretary of the L&H (in another era she would have been Auditor) and Dramsoc. She was in the cast of the Cumann Drámaíochta's winning entry Oedipus Rex in the Intervarsity dramatic competition which was produced in the Taibhdhearc. Mary even found time to stand in for Claire Bloom in the film *The Spy who came in from the Cold*. Even at this early stage she was able to carry a very full load. After graduation Mary decided to pursue a career in PR. She completed a marketing management course at the Harvard Business School.

Public Relations has become ever more important in Ireland over the past 30 years as companies increasingly recognise the vital importance of good communications with all its many stakeholders. Never more so than today as Ireland has to work its way out of the current crisis and must be able to communicate this to its citizens and to the rest of the world.

Mary was one of the founding partners of Wilson Hartnell Public Relations (WHPR), now part of Ogilvy and WPP, the world's leading communications group. Mary began her career advising companies on their PR requirements to which she brought her creative flair. She reinvented herself as a corporate PR advisor as she clearly saw that this was where the future lay. As an advisor she entered the board room - a predominantly male confine - and thus came into contact with the very top business brains. When Mary entered PR in the 1970s it was dominated at board level by men as was the business media. In order to succeed she needed not only to be good, she needed to be exceptional. Mary changed the face of PR by raising it to a level of professionalism hitherto unknown. Her thoroughness, precision, knowledge of the business world and hard graft became her trademark and woe betide any person who did not follow the same high standards. She rapidly rose to the top of her profession and her name became synonymous with excellence. It was no coincidence that Mary was PR advisor for three of Ireland's most successful business men- Michael Smurfit, Tony Ryan and Niall Fitzgerald.

She built up a great team and had the support of her colleagues Michael Maugham and Roddy Guiney who helped to make working life very pleasant and inspirational - they worked together for more than 3 decades and I believe are still speaking to each other. As mentioned Mary set very high standards; however she was extremely fortunate to have had the support and wisdom of Alison McDonald of WHPR who ensured that Mary had the necessary back-up while working towards a deadline and thus ensured that the company retained its place as the top PR Company in Ireland.

There was yet another person who was very important in Mary's life - both personal and professional. In 1970 Mary married Dr Geoffrey Mac Kechnie, a lecturer and one time

Head of the Department of Business Studies in TCD; she was very fortunate in that she could discuss ideas from her own practical world of business with Geoffrey who came from the theoretical world of business. He was a great support to Mary and encouraged her at all times in her career. He is greatly missed by all who were fortunate to have known him. Victoria their daughter together with her fiancé Simon are here celebrating this event.

Mary went on to become managing director of Wilson Hartnell PR - the first woman to head up a large PR company in Ireland. She went on to oversee its ultimate incorporation into WPP, today the world's largest communications group. She also laid the foundations that saw WHPR grow into Ireland's number one PR company in recent years. She was Managing Director of WHPR until 2003 and was subsequently appointed Chairman until 2007. She specialised in marketing and corporate and financial communications and on leaving WHPR, joined a number of boards in the financial services sector, including Canada Life (Ireland), the ICS Building Society and 4D Global Energy Investments Plc.

A firm advocate of public service, she was active in this area throughout her career. Mary broke through many a glass ceiling. In 1996 she was elected the first woman President of the Dublin Chamber of Commerce. Latterly, she was appointed Chairman of the RTE Authority where she completed her term in December 2008. She is currently Chair of the Economic & Social Research Institute (ESRI), on the Board of Trustees of the DCU Educational Trust, and a director of Cheshire Ireland and The Buildings of Ireland Charitable Trust. To all these boards she brings her professionalism, wealth of business experience, boundless energy and her always courteous manner.

Mary has been an active supporter of the arts in Ireland extending back to her days as a member of Dramsoc and the Cumann Drámaíochta in UCD. Her interests span music, opera and theatre. She is currently on the boards of Opera Ireland and the Gate Theatre to which she brings her strong creative flair and sense of business acumen.

She brings to the Gate Board her infectious enthusiasm, ethical behaviour, knowledge and unmistakable commitment to theatre as well as her business acumen - the latter vital in dealing with theatre people. She took time out to accompany the Gate to its international performances - at her own expense may I add - including the Charleston Spoleto Festival in the USA, Sydney, Edinburgh, London, Tel Aviv and Paris. She became and still is a great support to the Gate Theatre's director Dr Michael Colgan - and such was the friendship among the board members that Mary has made lifelong friends among them, including Michael Colgan and Ronnie and Nora Tallon who are here today.

She has given generously of her time to her alma mater UCD by accepting various roles, including being a member of the advisory board of the UCD Clinton Institute. She is one of the infamous "Belfield bashers" who jog round the campus particularly at the weekends; I believe they keep a close eye on the developments in Belfield as past and present Presidents know well.

Despite her extremely busy life Mary is known for her loyalty to her friends and family.

The National University of Ireland would like to honour Mary Finan not only as an exceptional business woman who rose to the top of her field of PR but also for generously sharing this invaluable experience with the public service -interpreted in its broadest meaning - and for her selfless work in promoting the Arts and Irish artists in Ireland and abroad. In case anyone is misled by my citation Mary has in no way finished this work of promoting the arts and culture - she has many more years to give selflessly

*Praehonorabilis Cancellarie, totaque Universitas:  
Praesento vobis, hanc meam filiam 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 ac spondeo totique Academiae.*