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

James McGuire is one of the most significant Irish historians of his generation: an outstanding university teacher, particularly in the role of supervisor of innumerable MA and PhD students many of whom now teach in universities throughout Ireland and beyond; an exemplary scholar, who edited Irish Historical Studies from 1987 until 1992; and the Managing Editor of the Dictionary of Irish Biography which was published in 2009 and won the American Publishers Award for Professional and Scholarly Excellence as the best multi-volume reference work in humanities and social science.

James McGuire was educated at Glenstal Abbey and at UCD where he took his BA in history and wrote a Master’s dissertation on Irish constitutional issues after the Glorious Revolution of 1688. He then became a research student at Gonville and Caius College Cambridge, until his appointment, in 1972, as a lecturer in UCC. At first he combined this with weekend teaching at UCD until his appointment as a lecturer, from 1974 until 2008, initially in UCD’s then Department of Irish History and, latterly, in its School of History and Archives.

The focus of James McGuire’s research and teaching was the high politics of Ireland in the late-seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and the breadth of his influence is reflected in the publication, in 2009, of a festschrift in his honour, People, Politics and Power. Essays on Irish history 1660-1850, edited by three of his former students (James Kelly, John McCafferty and Charles Ivar McGrath) all of whom are with us today.

However it is as an academic leader, facilitator and conciliator that James is best-known and most-admired. As secretary to the Irish Historical Society from 1976-81, and as editor of Irish Historical Studies from 1987-92, he transcended the antagonisms of Irish historians with panache and diplomacy at a time when heated debates relating to historical revisionism had been prompted by the violence in Northern Ireland.

As Chairman of the Irish Manuscripts Commission since 2005 he has overseen a major strategic review and restructuring of the Commission, while broadening its range of publications and raising its public profile. His scholarship has also been recognised by his election as a Member of the Royal Irish Academy in 2008 and his appointment as Adjunct Professor in the UCD School of History and Archives.

In 1997 James McGuire was appointed as editor of the Royal Irish Academy’s Dictionary of Irish Biography. Under his adroit but unobtrusive direction, the initial plan to publish the Dictionary, volume by volume over many years, was abandoned, and it was decided to publish the entire dictionary in nine volumes and in digital format simultaneously. This was a daunting challenge - particularly given the poor track-record of previous multi-volume Irish scholarly works - and its completion...
sealed the success of the largest research project in the humanities ever undertaken in Ireland.

By international standards, the DIB was, and is, run on a shoe-string. The number of in-house staff was always small and is now miniscule by comparison with other national biographical dictionaries. There was no funding to offer fees to external contributors, unlike their counterparts writing for the Oxford Dictionary of National Biography. Yet persuading leading scholars to write major entries was imperative and James McGuire’s talents as a recruiting officer coupled with his feline diplomatic skills in coaxing eminent historians (some of whom had a reputation in regard to deadlines that might charitably be best described as problematic) to deliver copy on time rank among his most significant editorial achievements.

The President of UCD, Hugh Brady, who much regrets that he cannot be here today, has spoken of James’s wisdom and impeccable judgment which he saw at first-hand when he served as his advisor on a range of issues during the first half of his presidency. My own favourite example of James’s diplomatic acumen is the counsel he once offered me in the shape of a quotation from a letter the Earl of Clarendon sent from Dublin Castle to the Earl of Rochester in 1686: “I can tell a man a thing whenever I have a mind to it, but I cannot unspeak it when I have told it: therefore it is the safest error to be silent.” - advice, alas, that, in my own case, has sometimes been more often honoured in the breach than in the observance.

The Dictionary of Irish Biography is, in short, the greatest monument to James McGuire’s achievement in the promotion of Irish historical scholarship. For its editorial perspective is avowedly and unashamedly historical and champions what he himself has described as ‘the empiricist approach of the historian (even if the contributor was not an historian, and many were not) over the more theory-based approaches found in contemporary literary or cultural scholarship’.

But let me conclude not with the words of a historian but with what Seamus Heaney said when he launched the Dictionary in Belfast: that

‘were Yeats still alive and reading, he might be inclined to repeat with even more justification, the praise he bestowed on Lady Gregory’s book about Cúchulainn: “I think this book is the best that has come out of Ireland in my time”. [It is] a resource of enormous importance, not only for professional students and scholars but for every literate person on the island. ... Just by dipping into any ten or twenty pages of any of the volumes, the average person will strengthen his or her sense of being a link in the human chain that binds us by affection and election to a large, liberating and reimagined Irish community....It is a browser’s paradise, a Plutarch for the people, an annals of Ulster and a Hibernian book of the dead all rolled into one’.

And, if it were not for James McGuire, it would never have happened.

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 Litteris, idque tibi fide mea testor ac spondeo, totique Academiae.