

TEXT OF THE INTRODUCTORY ADDRESS DELIVERED BY: **PROFESSOR GRACE NEVILLE**, Vice President for Teaching & Learning 2008-2012, University College Cork on 7 June 2013, on the occasion of the conferring of the Degree of Doctor of Literature, *honoris causa*, on **FERGAL KEANE**

A Sheansailéir, a Chláiritheoir, a Uachtaráin, a Aionna uaisle, a Cháirde agus a Chomhleacaithe,

The degree of Doctor of Literature which University College Cork is today bestowing on journalist Fergal Keane is just the latest in a long series of such accolades. Indeed, if a collective noun existed for such distinctions - a constellation, perhaps, or a galaxy - it would come in useful when trying to convey the high esteem in which he is held by his peers and by the wider public. Time prevents me from mentioning more than a handful of these distinctions: Fergal has been awarded:



An OBE

A BAFTA

The James Cameron Prize for War Reporting

The Edward R. Murrow Award for Foreign Reporting

The Orwell Prize for Best Political Book of the Year

And was overall winner of the Amnesty International Press Award

He has been named:

Reporter of the Year at the New York Festival of Radio

Royal Television Society Journalist of the Year

Sony Radio Reporter of the Year

The list goes on...

He has received honorary degrees from numerous universities, and earlier this year he was appointed Professorial Fellow at the Institute of Irish Studies at the University of Liverpool.

Speakers at various award ceremonies have praised his 'bravery and his outstanding writing', and have hailed his work as 'courageous, honest, petrifying'. But it is Fergal himself who, to my mind - and perhaps unwittingly - best describes

his work and the values that drive him: what he says with characteristic generosity of two fellow journalists in the BBC's classic programme, *'From Our Own Correspondent'* (where his own work is regularly featured) could just as easily be applied to himself: this is what he wrote:

'they had in common an ability to use words that brought the listener directly into the picture and they were engaged, not as partisans, but with a clear sense of moral astonishment at the wrongs they were witnessing'.

In Fergal's work, there is an immediacy, an unapologetic rawness, a controlled but unmistakable anger, a generosity of spirit. Before you realise it, you are no longer on the edge, a mere viewer or listener, but instead he has drawn you right into the very heart of the story. He is in every sense *'un journaliste engagé'*.

Fergal worked in Ireland in various newspapers, as well as in RTE, before being appointed in 1989 as BBC correspondent in Northern Ireland, a region he had in fact covered since the early 1980s. From 1990 to 1994, he was BBC's premier Southern Africa correspondent at a tumultuous time marked by township unrest, the re-emergence of Mandela and the first multi-racial elections after the ending of apartheid. His award-winning reports on genocide in Rwanda from that period make for harrowing viewing. (They are readily available on the internet). In 1995, he moved to Hong Kong as the BBC's Asia correspondent, covering stories from the Tokyo gas attacks in 1995 to the momentous handover of Hong Kong from British to Chinese rule in 1997.

More recently he has turned his attention to a different kind of story – forgotten Britain, an outsider's view of forgotten communities throughout Britain where people try – often with remarkable resilience – to make a life for themselves and for their families in neighbourhoods wrecked by drugs, debt and unemployment: the extraordinary stories of so-called ordinary people. Stories closer to home, and thus arguably, closer to the bone.

He is currently BBC special correspondent covering international affairs, reporting regularly over the past eighteen months or so from the Syrian border.

Fergal's reporting avoids easy answers, excuses, evasions, and he is courageous enough to admit how sometimes he can be defeated by much of the work he does: 'I had seen war before, I had seen the face of cruelty, but Rwanda belonged where

my capacity to understand, much less rationalise, was overwhelmed'. Of the 1944 siege of Kohima in North East India, the topic of his latest book (he has written about ten others) he has this to say: 'I wanted to show that the most savage wars are fought by human beings who in different circumstances would not behave like that at all. I wanted to restore humanity to the public's image of what soldiers are'. And he puts us on the spot too: through his depiction elsewhere of mothers, war victims in Rwanda, dying because they cannot afford the life-saving drugs produced in the West, he prompts us to reflect on our own responsibilities; and by provocatively asking if places like Rwanda are just too far away to warrant our attention, he is surely prompting us to learn from calamitous decisions made by earlier politicians to dismiss quarrels 'in a far-away country between people of whom we know nothing'. It is clear that a passion for history informs all his work – we are reminded here of the words of the late lamented fellow war journalist, Marie Colvin, killed in Syria in the spring of last year: 'we send home the first rough draft of history'.

But it is his ability to capture his audience – listeners, readers, viewers – by weaving his reporting into a story, that sets him apart, that makes his voice distinctive. From earliest times, this is what good storytellers – real and mythical – have always done: from Herodotus to Scheherazade, from the wandering preachers of medieval Europe to the *seanchaithe* of the west of Ireland, good storytellers make time stand still; they create a space within which they weave their stories, stories that help us to discover the world and thus to discover ourselves, to work out what really matters. From the war-torn landscapes that he knows so well, in conveying people's stories Fergal's work stresses our common humanity, what unites rather than what divides us, reminding us all the while of how precious life is, and how fragile. Reporting on women war victims in Rwanda, for instance, he stresses that he wants to portray them not as statistics or as problem cases, but in all their humanity, their strength and their vulnerability. Like a good short story writer (and he has mentioned to me his admiration of Frank O'Connor), he knows how to home in on the detail that will make the rest of the story come alive: a young boy in a dusty refugee camp on the Syrian border aching to go back home because he misses the flowers in his garden, or the joy on the face of a young Rwandan widow responsible for 26 orphaned children as she bakes bread for them. You know somehow from this silent scene, a woman engaged in the primeval act of baking bread, that some day and in some way things will come right for her.

Fergal's ability to enthrall his audience comes as no surprise: born in London and raised in Cork (where his mother, Maura, his sister and two brothers all graduated from UCC – and I am delighted to see Maura here today along with Fergal's wife, Anne, and their two children, Daniel and Holly Mai), his ancestral ties are with North Kerry and particularly with the little market town of Listowel which, over the generations, has produced more than its fair share of classic writers and story-tellers. Indeed, Fergal's uncle, John B. Keane is on record as saying that, in Listowel, it is actually easier to be a writer than not to be a writer! Then again, it's a place where another, older language, vehicle of stories from time immemorial, can be imagined whispering just under the newer language – *ag síoscarnach fen teanga nua*. In fact, one might say that the ability to convey someone's story is in Fergal's DNA – as the son of actor Eamonn Keane, godson of Siobhan McKenna and nephew of John B. Keane. And then when you spot that he was born one 6th of January, the day when we remember three wise men who travelled half way around the known world in search of a good story, you realise that for him, there really was no way that he could have escaped his destiny!

Marie Colvin, whom I cited earlier, would often quote the powerful Quaker motto, 'our mission is to speak truth to power,' just as that other great war correspondent, another strong woman, Martha Gellhorn, would demand that we make 'an angry sound against injustice'. For making an angry sound against injustice, for speaking truth to power to a world-wide audience over so many decades, it is appropriate now in this rebel city, with – at its heart – this rebel university, that we bestow on Fergal Patrick Keane, the degree of Doctor of Literature.

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