

OLLSCOIL na hÉIREANN

NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF IRELAND

TEXT OF THE INTRODUCTORY ADDRESS DELIVERED BY:

MS CLIONA de BHALDRAITHE MARSH on 2 December 2014 in the Royal College of Physicians in Ireland, on the occasion of the conferring of the Degree of Doctor of Laws *honoris causa*, on **ANNA MAY McHUGH**

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

There is hardly a person in Ireland who has not heard of the National Ploughing Championships – called “the Ploughing” by the cognoscenti -- (a term I will now use throughout this citation) and of its director Anna May Mc Hugh, on whom the National University of Ireland honours today by awarding her a doctorate.

The horse and the plough has always been a part of rural Ireland, fêted in song, poetry and literature, a part of our folklore, when life in the countryside was inextricably linked with season and soil. Gerald Manley Hopkins, Patrick Kavanagh and several others have written of the plough and the furrow.

A verse form a ballad “Horses and Plough” lauds the plough:

*“Invoking a blessing I started the day,
I earned another that's what I would say,
Asking for guidance to keep my know how
And plough a straight furrow with horses and plough”*

The ploughing of the field was an art form in itself. The relationship between horse and ploughman was especially close.

To quote Anna May : “It is a wonderful sight seeing a field being ploughed. A good ploughman is an artist”.

Local ploughing matches and challenges were common and had undoubtedly existed, in one form or another, since the first horse and plough in Ireland. But the idea of an inter-county Ploughing Competition was new. Two men, J.J. Bergin, from Athy, a progressive farmer and Civil Engineer, and farmer Denis Allen of Gorey, debated which county had the best ploughmen, Kildare or Wexford. This progressed further as on the 16th February, 1931 nine counties met in competition on the “plains of Kildare”. This was followed in 1932 by the second competition, attracting a large crowd. And thus were the beginnings of what we know today as the National Ploughing Championships.

Anna May McHugh, whose achievements we celebrate here today, *is* the National Ploughing. There is no question of that.

She was born in Clonpierce, Ballylinan, County Laois, and attended the local national school, then St Brigid’s Secondary School in Athy, after which she studied for a diploma in commercial studies. In 1966 she married a man “from the other side of the village”, a farmer, John McHugh from Ballycorman. They had two children, DJ and Anna Marie. DJ is farming the home farm and Anna Marie is working with Anna May in the National Ploughing Association.

Anna May began her involvement with the Ploughing Championships under JJ Bergin when she was appointed his secretary. On Bergin’s death she became secretary of the NPA and Sean O Farrell became director. On O’Farrell’s death in 1972, Anna May -- due to her thorough knowledge of ploughing and farming, as well as her organisational and administrative talents and skills, was appointed his successor, to become Managing Director, a full time position.

The World Ploughing Championships were held in Wexford the next year, so her organisational and administrative talents were evident for all to see. Since then, under her baton, the NPA has grown from strength to strength. Her career with the organisation spans more than 60 years.

She has been the recipient of many awards -- Laois Millennium Person of the Year, *Irish Independent* Event Industry Award 2009, Ernst and Young Entrepreneur of the Year

2011, Veuve Clicquot Business Woman of the Year 2013, FBD Women and Agricultural Awards-Lifetime Achievement Award. She was elected an honorary member of the RDS in 1984 , served on the board of Teagasc and the Laois enterprise board -- the list goes on and on.

Anna May had brought a small not-for-profit organisation event to become the largest outdoor event in Europe and one of the largest agricultural events in the world. What an achievement.

The facts and figures relating to this year's event are stunning and would make any event company blush. More than 1400 exhibitors, 400 journalists and media people, 500 temporary staff, volunteers, judges and stewards, 25 km of track-way -- which equates to 10,000 individual panels -- and 40 catering stands.

With a strong emphasis on education 200 school tours took place. One newspaper showed a group of schoolgirls having their photo taken -- not with any of the competitors or politicians but with a group of nuns who came along in their habits. How things have changed.

How could one person do this?

It is her enthusiasm, her ability to manage, and to bring people along with her. The stewarding is entirely voluntary and the stewards come back year after year. This could only be due to her extraordinary organisational talents and people's skills.. She keeps her ear to the ground, is very pleasant, a tough bargainer -- yet never reneges on her word. She is a woman of few words, but carefully chosen words at that. And out at the event she always looks extremely elegant, regardless of the weather- dry weather causing dust to rise and wet weather bringing mud.

The attendance figures this year reached nearly 280,000. As Anna May said at the opening : |"It not only provides a national stage for showcasing all things agricultural but brings together people from all sectors of Irish society, both rural and urban."

As well as all this, Anna May has a great interest in hurling and loves discussing the skills and strategies of the game with Kilkenny hurlers, even during the Ploughing championships.

Many may not know that she is also a former Laois and Leinster camogie player.

A woman of strong religious beliefs, she is one of the chief organisers of a Passion Play which takes place every two years in her native Ballylinan and the next one is already being planned by her for Easter 2015.

Her idea of relaxation is to tend her garden and to look after her laying hens. A family orientated person, she loves having her children and grandchildren to visit, while all the time keeping up her interests in Agri-affairs.

Not many of you can boast of poems or ballads written about you. Here is an extract of a long ballad by the late Seán MacConnell of *The Irish Times*, which was even recorded by RTE:

“If she would run for Taoiseach

She would win it in a hack

If she ran the country like the plough

Sure millions would come back

But she’s far too good for politics

She knows more than all that crew

So she’s sticking to the ploughing

Our Anna May McHugh”

The National University of Ireland would like to honour Anna May Mc Hugh not only as an exceptional woman but also for her selfless work in promoting Irish agricultural through the Ploughing in Ireland and abroad.

**PRAEHONORABILIS CANCELLARIE, TOTAQUE UNIVERSITAS:
Praesento vobis hanc meam filiam, quam scio, tam moribus
quam doctrina, habilem et idoneam esse quae admittatur,
honoris causa, ad gradum Doctoratus in utroque Jure, tam
Civili quam Canonico, idque tibi fide mea testor ac spondeo,
totique Academiae**