



Ollscoil na hÉireann  
National University of Ireland

## **TEXT OF THE INTRODUCTORY ADDRESS DELIVERED BY:**

**PROFESSOR MARY DALY on 7 MARCH 2023 in the Royal College of Physicians in Ireland, on the occasion of the conferring of the Degree of Doctor of Literature, honoris causa on MICHAEL LILLIS.**

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

Michael Lillis is a man of many parts: a distinguished diplomat, Celtic scholar and linguist, a successful international businessman, co-author of a fascinating historical biography, and a man whose walk along the Grand Canal with senior British official David Goodall, who was the recipient of an honorary doctorate from the NUI – helped to transform Anglo-Irish relations and the history of Northern Ireland. It is impossible to do full justice to Michael Lillis' achievements in this short citation.

Born in county Dublin, he spent much of his childhood in remote West Cork, and after home schooling he achieved a First Class Honours Degree in Celtic Studies at University College Dublin. He aspired to an academic career, but his father entered him for the competition for Third Secretary in the Department of External Affairs. He joined Iveagh House in 1968, on the eve of major developments that would transform the Department's remit: the Northern Ireland crisis, and Irish membership of the European Economic Community. Michael Lillis has played an important role in both fields, though it is the Northern Ireland story that is most significant.

As his friend the late Ronan Fanning pointed out, in 1969 no Irish government department had responsibility for Northern Ireland and it was not inevitable that the renamed Department of Foreign Affairs would assume the key role. That happened, primarily because of the commitment and initiative shown by young diplomats such as Michael Lillis. At an early stage in the conflict he travelled to Northern Ireland, collecting stories of mistreatment of members of the nationalist community, that were used in the Irish government's case against Britain at the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg. In the course of those investigations, he came to know John and Pat Hume, who remained close friends for the remainder of their lives.

He was posted to the United States in the mid-1970s, at a time when there was no momentum on political solutions for Northern Ireland; Irish-America's support for militant republicanism was at its most vocal, and the US State Department retained its traditional position of unquestioned support for Britain. In the past US Congressmen and Senators of Irish-American descent had frequently passed resolutions denouncing partition, but these had no impact, and their actions were not aligned with Irish government policy. That changed in 1977. Garret FitzGerald credits Michael Lillis as the person who brought senior Irish American politicians together to work with the Irish government to influence US policy on Northern Ireland. He did this, ably abetted by John Hume, and Sean Donlan, who was Irish ambassador to the USA, through his persuasive charm, gift for friendship, Cuban cigars, and generous hospitality. On St Patrick's Day 1977, the so-called Four Horsemen – Senators Daniel Patrick Moynihan and Ted Kennedy, Congressman Tip O'Neill and New York Governor Hugh Carey announced the formation of the Friends of Ireland. In August that year, in a major break with past policy and practice, US President Jimmy Carter announced his support for a peaceful settlement in Northern Ireland that involved both communities, guaranteed human rights and an end to discrimination. The immediate impact of these achievements was mainly symbolic, but they proved central in the longer-term to Northern Ireland settlements, such as the Good Friday Agreement. The Friends of Ireland on Capitol Hill remain a strong bipartisan group in a divided Congress, and both Congress and the White House have exercised significant influence relating to the Northern Ireland Protocol – a continuing legacy of work done more than fifty years ago.

When Garret FitzGerald Taoiseach in 1981, he appointed Michael Lillis as his advisor on foreign policy and Michael also served two short stints in Brussels in the Cabinet of Irish Commissioner Richard Bourke. When he was appointed head of the DFA Anglo-Irish Division in 1983, reporting to DFA Secretary Sean Donlon, Anglo-Irish relations were in an uneasy state, in the aftermath the Hunger Strikes and the Falklands War. Security seemed to be the only aspect of Northern Ireland policy of interest to British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, and Michael Lillis suggested that Ireland should offer her the prospect of improved security and concessions on Ireland's constitutional claim on Northern Ireland in return for the Irish government securing a role in Northern Ireland affairs, as the protector of the nationalist community. Taoiseach Garret FitzGerald gave him permission to make these proposals 'on a non-attributable basis', to David Goodall, a senior foreign office diplomat, who was seconded to the Prime Minister's team. This happened as already noted, in a walk along the Grand Canal, following a relatively low-key meeting of British and Irish officials, and a good lunch.

When David Goodall reported this approach to colleagues in Whitehall, they were sceptical, even suspicious. The Northern Ireland Office regarded Michael Lillis as 'devious, anti-British and unreliable', while noting that he was close to Garret FitzGerald, but David Goodall's diary, recently published by the NUI at Michael's initiative, noted that he was 'by background and conviction a strong Irish nationalist with his fair share of historic resentments of the British role in Ireland' but he 'impressed me as being an essentially honest man'. The British Embassy in Dublin described him as a 'workaholic... lively...friendly and agreeable...close to Garret FitzGerald'.

The discussions that were initiated in September 1983, eventually led to the Anglo-Irish Agreement of November 1985, but the process was slow and there no guarantee of success. There were other walks, many dinners, often in Irish country houses, many glasses of whiskey. Success was achieved, despite the IRA bombing of the Conservative Conference in Brighton in 1984, and a changing parade of Secretaries of State for Northern Ireland, each less enthusiastic than his predecessor. A strong team of Irish officials, Michael Lillis, Sean Donlon and Dermot Nally, and their counterparts in the British Foreign and Cabinet Office persisted with the negotiations.

The historic significance of the Anglo-Irish Agreement signed in November 1985, has been rather forgotten following the Good Friday Agreement, though as Michael has consistently pointed out it remains embedded in the text of that Agreement. For the first time, the Irish government secured a voice in Northern Ireland affairs, which was, as noted at the time, more than consultative. This was in return for formally recognising that any change in the status of Northern Ireland would only come about with the consent of the majority of the people of Northern Ireland.

Within weeks of the Agreement being signed, Michael Lillis, Daithi O Ceallaigh and their colleagues moved into the first Irish government offices in Belfast at Maryfield – a historic moment. Their accommodation, which was often described as the bunker, was like a barracks. The team ate their meals in a room without curtains, with RUC men with sub-machine guns patrolling outside, and the noise of protests by angry unionist paramilitaries that lasted for months. When writing this, Kevin O' Higgins' description of the Provisional Government came to mind: 'simply eight young men in the City Hall standing amidst the ruins of one administration.....with wild men screaming through the keyholes'.

Before the Maryfield team went to Belfast, the gardai took their footprints, which could be used to identify their remains in the event of an explosion. Journeys to and from Dublin were fraught affairs. But under Michael's leadership the team in Maryfield became a band of brothers and sisters; living in close proximity, and making some

improbable friends among senior British and Northern Ireland officials, through the legendary hospitality – good food and drink - which remains a constant theme in the Lillis biography. These relationships enabled the secretariat to highlight major grievances of Northern nationalists – policing, security, under-representation in the judiciary, social and economic deprivation, and neglect of the Irish language. The full impact of this work has yet to be evaluated.

Michael's final posting in DFA was as ambassador to the United Nations in Geneva, where his long commitment to human rights featured once more. He was a member of the team that investigated human rights in Cuba, a role that resulted in a two-hour meeting with Pope John Paul II, and two evenings spent with Fidel Castro, where over Cuban cigars and rum, they discussed Catholicism, Castro's Spanish roots and his surprising admiration for General Franco. As a young diplomat in Madrid, Michael met Franco, when he had escorted Franco's granddaughter to the opera.

His subsequent career in aircraft leasing, a field where Ireland is a world leader, gave him ample opportunity to deploy his diplomatic and linguistic skills. Most of this work was in South America, where he heard the story of Cork-born Eliza Lynch, the life companion of the nineteenth century Paraguayan dictator, Field-Marshal Solano Lopez. Her biography, co-authored with his close friend Ronan Fanning, added a colourful chapter to the history of the Irish diaspora.

One recurring theme in Michael Lillis' career is his gift for friendship and the sheer diversity of his friends and acquaintances. Historians know that people matter, and personal relationships can be transformative. Throughout a distinguished career, Michael Lillis has used his powerful and original intellect, and his capacity to build personal relationships to promote the interests of Ireland; to bring peace to Northern Ireland, and advance British-Irish relations. In honouring Michael Lillis today we are also recognising the work of a proud Irish public servant.

#### **PRAEHONORABILIS CANCELLARIE, TOTAQUE UNIVERSITAS:**

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