

Text of the introductory address delivered by: PROFESSOR JIM WALSH, Vice-President, National University of Ireland, Maynooth, on 3 December 2008 in Dublin Castle, on the occasion of the conferring of the Degree of Doctor of Laws honoris causa, on SEAN DONLON

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

Seán Donlon has had an outstanding and distinguished career in the Irish public service, having been Irish Ambassador to the United States of America during a critical phase in the development of Irish-American relations and Secretary General of the Department of Foreign Affairs with a particular role in the conduct of Anglo-Irish relations.

Seán was born in 1940, the second eldest of 13 children of Tomás and Peggy Ó Domhnalláin, in Athboy, Co Meath. His father Tomás, a school principal and later an inspector, was a great Irish 'cultural nationalist' and a strong supporter of the Irish language. Indeed, he was the author of 'Buntús Cainte' which will be known to most of us who have studied Irish, and is still widely used as a teaching text in schools throughout the country.



At the age of 12 he went to St Finian's College in Co Westmeath and then, in 1958, he went to Maynooth to study for the priesthood. He was a contemporary of John Hume at Maynooth and developed a friendship that was to have a profound influence later in his professional life. The vocation however lasted only one year and Seán went on to UCD to study History, which was his great love, and Irish.

After graduating from UCD he entered the civil service via the Department of Finance, and later moved to Foreign Affairs.

From day one, Seán was on the fast track. After stints in Bonn and Boston he became assistant secretary at the Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA) in 1973. Posted to the fledgling Anglo-Irish division, Seán was involved in gathering evidence for the human rights action taken by the state against Britain over the brutal interrogations of men in barracks in the North. He also played a role in the Sunningdale Agreement of 1973.

In 1978 he was appointed by Jack Lynch as Ambassador to Washington, a posting that served as a high-profile theatre for the enactment of the next stage of the Anglo-Irish drama. Much has been written about what happened over the next three years. They were difficult and controversial times, but Seán built up a bulwark of 'key influences' in Washington that were to play an influential role in the affairs of the North over the next decade and more.

It was Seán who nudged the 'Friends of Ireland' group into being. This was founded by former Democratic House speaker Tip O'Neill and included Ted Kennedy, Daniel Moynihan and Governor Hugh Carey of New York - the so called 'Four Horsemen'.

The group served as a counterpoint to the more traditional nationalist republican leaning Ad Hoc Congressional Committee on Irish Affairs, and, as one commentator put it some years later "developed a reputation for moderation in Irish affairs". What this meant in effect was the wooing away of mainstream Irish-American support from groups such as Noraid.

Seán returned to head the DFA in 1981 and was one of the principal architects of the historic Anglo-Irish Agreement. The treaty gave the Irish Government, for the first time, a consultative role in the North's government while confirming that there would be no change in the constitutional position of Northern Ireland unless a majority of its people consented. It also set out conditions for the establishment of a devolved consensus government in the province.

The Agreement was signed on 15 November 1985 at Hillsborough Castle, by the British Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher, and an Taoiseach, Garret FitzGerald.

In 1987, at the age of 46 and at the top of his profession, Seán entered the private sector, lured by Tony Ryan and his aircraft leasing company GPA, which Ryan had founded in 1975. Seán was appointed executive vice-president and chief commercial officer, and decamped -- like all the other GPA executives -- to a new home in Killaloe, Co Clare, where he still lives. In the bleak 1980s GPA stood out like a very glamorous beacon indeed. The company men - as they say - worked hard and played hard, with the odd begrudger accusing them of driving up the price of everything in the Shannon region.

The glamour stakes were further upped by the type of men that Ryan -- aided by the very well-connected Seán Donlon -- attracted to his board. They included former Taoiseach Garret FitzGerald, former British Chancellor of the Exchequer, Nigel Lawson, former attorney general and EU Commissioner, Peter Sutherland, and Sir John Harvey Jones, onetime chairman of chemical giant ICI.

In 1989 Seán even managed to persuade Graham Greene to head the newly minted GPA literary awards, though at the ceremony itself Greene famously objected to the winning entry.

In 1992 the GPA flotation collapsed and Seán went on to take up a position in what remained of the company before being appointed to John Bruton's inner circle in 1994 as special adviser on the North. In that role he played a major part in developing the principle of consent which laid the groundwork for the Good Friday Agreement.

Seán was appointed to the Chair of the Governing Authority of the University of Limerick in 2002 and helped to guide UL through a critical and highly successful phase of its growth. In the same year, the then Taoiseach, Bertie Ahern, appointed him to the board of the Special Olympics World Games held in Ireland. He is currently non-executive director of a number of companies including Hibernian Group, plc., Norwich Union International Ltd, Enba plc and Euroto Ltd.

I mentioned earlier that Sean comes from a large family. I am delighted to welcome en masse all of his ten surviving siblings, eight of whom are NUI graduates, two are completing professional doctorate programmes and of course younger sister Aine has only recently retired as Professor of Education and Vice President at UCC. The Donlon family relationship with the NUI is indeed very extensive.

Seán has two children, Monica and Brendan, from his marriage to Paula and I am also delighted that they are here on this special occasion together with his partner Veronica to celebrate the conferring of the degree of Doctor of Laws, *honoris causa* on the latest Donlon graduate.

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 utroque Jure, tam Civili quam Canonico, idque tibi fide mea testor ac spondeo totique Academiae.