

Text of the introductory address delivered by: **DR IOGNÁID Ó MUIRCHEARTAIGH**, Pro-Vice-Chancellor of the University, President, National University of Ireland, Galway, on 7 April, 2006, on the occasion of the conferring of the Degree of Doctor of Arts, *honoris causa*, on **MARTIN SHEEN**



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

Onóir as cuimse é don Ollscoil seo an tUasal Martin Sheen a bheith inár measc inniu agus é bheith de phribhléid againn céim oinigh dochtúireachta a bhronnadh air. Fáiltimid ó chroí romhat, a Mháirtín.

On Sunday last, in Los Angeles, Martin Sheen completed filming the last episode of one of the most popular series on American television, *The West Wing*, in which he plays the part of President of the United States, Josiah Bartlett. Three days later, on Wednesday of this week, I met in Galway with an aspiring student who wished to attend NUI Galway in September 2006, and hoped to take courses in Literature, Philosophy and Oceanography. You will be pleased to hear that following that meeting, the President of the United States is in the process of registering as a student at NUI Galway for the forthcoming academic year, and we look forward to extending him a *céad míle fáilte* in the autumn.

By the time he has completed one semester at NUI Galway, Martin Sheen will understand that my introductory words in Irish stated that it was a signal honour for this university to have the privilege today of conferring an honorary doctorate on an exceptional person. While some may question the consistency of our academic policy in conferring a doctorate – honorary or otherwise – on a first year student prior to his coming to the University, I have no doubt that when you have heard of this man's achievements and principles, you will – as I was – be humbled, and will join with me in acknowledging his standing, by the conferral of this honour, the highest which the University can bestow.

Martin Sheen's reputation as an actor of subtle power and, perhaps more importantly, as a man of courage and vision, have been established in a public career spanning more than 40 years. His gifts as a talented actor are complemented by a consistent and meaningful engagement with civil society – in particular through his concerns for his country and its role in the wider international community.

Born Ramon Estévez in Dayton, Ohio to immigrant parents: Francisco Estevez from Spain and Mary Ann Phelan from Terryglass, Co Tipperary, Martin was the seventh of 12 children. He still has relations in Borris O'Kane, whom he regularly visits. He visited them this week, and incidentally I did hear that he was seen in the Credit Union in nearby Roscrea on Wednesday, and I just wondered was he applying for a student loan?!

His tough working-class upbringing was a formative influence, shaping his social conscience. In his own words, each member of the family had to help support the household:

"I was a caddy from the time I was nine until I left home, carrying golf bags for wealthy people. That's how my social conscience was formed. The rich were my best teachers: They were never happy with themselves. They always wanted more."

Sheen left his native Dayton, Ohio, having intentionally flunked his college entrance exam to the University of Dayton, so that he could pursue an acting career instead. He went to New York, where, like many ambitious young actors, he did not enjoy immediate success, enduring a succession of low-paid jobs. In his own words

"I was a soda jerk, a messenger boy, I delivered newspapers," he said. "At times I was broke, got evicted, went hungry, even slept on the subway, but it never occurred to me that acting was not way to go."

After more than a year of casting calls and rejections, he became involved with Julian Beck's libertarian Living Theatre – an *avant garde* workshop committed to a social role for theatre, during which time he won a leading role in the Living Theatre's production of *The Connection*, a play about drug addiction that brought him to the attention of theatre critics. At 24, Sheen got a major break when he was cast as a returning war veteran in Frank Gilroy's *The Subject was Roses*, a Pulitzer Prize-winning play that brought him a Tony Award nomination and a much wider audience.

In 1961, as he began to enjoy the success of his burgeoning career, Martin met Janet Templeton, an Ohio art student studying in New York and soon they were married. Together now for over 40 years, they have four children Emilio, Ramon and Renée Estévez and Charlie Sheen, all four of whom have followed in their father's acting footsteps. And these are indeed considerable footsteps to fill.

Martin Sheen has played more than two hundred screen roles including memorable performances such as the disaffected killer in Terrence Malick's classic film *Badlands*; famously as Army Captain Benjamin Willard, the army officer sent up river to find and assassinate Marlon Brando's Kurtz, in Francis Ford Coppola's 1979 Vietnam epic *Apocalypse Now*. These roles he followed with parts in the Oscar-winning film *Gandhi* in 1982 and later in 1987 in *Wall Street*.

Sincere, modest and down to earth, Sheen has always been open about coming back from the abyss of drug and alcohol abuse. The heart attack he endured during the arduous and prolonged filming of *Apocalypse Now* in the Philippines led him on a four-year spiritual journey that culminated in his return to Catholicism. It was after his part in the making of *Gandhi* in India

that Martin had what he calls 'a spiritual reawakening' on May Day 1981, a moment of clarity which saw him move away from drink and towards a renewed commitment to his social beliefs and Catholic faith.

Perhaps Martin does not realise how appropriate the date – May 1 – was for this 'awakening'. Alone among Celtic cultures, Gaelic society traditionally gave May Day or *Lá Beáltaine* in Irish, a special place in the calendar, marking, as it does the first day of summer. The word *Beáltaine* derives the Old Irish *Beltene* which means "bright fire" and is allied to words meaning "white" or "shining" and the verb "to kindle, light, revive, or re-animate". From this very fitting date - Lá Beáltaine or May Day 1981 - Martin Sheen – 'the shining one' - stepped forth as a figure of renewed faith and social conscience.

In a unique way, Martin Sheen has brought such a force of moral authority to the roles he has played, that he has frequently been cast in political roles often set in the White House. He played Robert Kennedy in *The Missiles of October* (1974) [incidentally his son Emilio has just completed a film – due for release in September - centred on the assassination of Robert Kennedy]; he played Greg Stilson, a premonition of a future president in *Dead Zone* (1983), also the role of political advisor and *éminence grise* in *The American President* in 1995. He played John F. Kennedy in the mini-series *Kennedy – The Presidential Years* in 1983 and provided the narration in Oliver Stone's feature film *JFK*. And of course, over the last seven years he has been known around the world as Democratic President Josiah Bartlett in the critically acclaimed television series *The West Wing*, winning a Golden Globe for his performance.

He has used his celebrity to call attention to many social issues, rooted in his beliefs and in his convictions about fighting for social justice.

In August last year, when he visited anti-Iraq war activist Cindy Sheehan maintaining a vigil outside Camp Casey, as she waited in vain seeking to meet President Bush, he prayed with her and spoke to her supporters, and began his remarks with the comment "At least you've got the *acting* President of the United States..."

Given this perception by some that he IS the President, I would just hope that when he comes to be a student at NUI Galway in the Autumn, he will remember who the real President is!!

With characteristic modesty he downplays the celebrity element of his social activism, stating,

"I am not the President. Instead I hold an even higher office, that of citizen of the United States."

Actions of non-violent civil disobedience have led to him being arrested over 60 times, "I love my country enough to suffer its wrath" he says. This socio-political activism is the visible dimension of his passion for the poor and for the rights of the vulnerable in society. Over the years, he has come to locate

this activity within the wider framework of a comprehensive and consistent ethic of life.

Ramón Estévez *aka* Martin Sheen is one of the great movie and television stars of our time. But he is much so much more than that – a family man, a man of principle, and a man with an outstanding commitment to the disadvantaged, and to the promotion of social justice.

In attempting to do justice to Martin Sheen the social activist, a quotation from Robert Kennedy - whose character as I have said Martin once played in a movie - is perhaps appropriate:

"Each time a man stands up for an ideal, or acts to improve the lot of others, or strikes out against injustice, he sends forth a tiny ripple of hope, and crossing each other from a million different centres of energy and daring, those ripples build a current that can sweep down the mightiest walls of oppression and resistance."

Martin Sheen is just such a man. He has sent forth many such ripples of hope, firm in the conviction that these ripples will build a current that will sweep down the mightiest walls of oppression and resistance.

It is a privilege and a pleasure to present him to you, Chancellor, for the conferral of the degree of Doctor of Arts, *honoris causa*.

A Sheansailéir, cuirim ós do chómhair aisteoir den scoth, fear go bhfuil an daonnacht agus an cathannacht go smior ann, Martin Sheen, le go mbronnfaí air an gradam is áirde atá ar fáil ón Ollscoil.

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