

Citation by Professor Mary E Daly, UCD School of History and Archives and President of the Royal Irish Academy on the occasion of the awarding of the UCD Ulysses Medal to former President of Ireland, Mary McAleese at University College Dublin, Bloomsday (16 June) 2014

It is a both privilege, and a challenge to introduce Mary McAleese on the occasion of the award of the UCD Ulysses Medal. How can I summarise the achievements of a woman who has been President of Ireland, Pro-Vice-Chancellor of Queen's University Belfast – the first woman and the second Catholic to hold that office; an impressive current affairs reporter on RTE, the Reid Law Professor in Trinity College Dublin, and a passionate and articulate commentator on a wide range of social and political issues.

Education struck me as an appropriate starting point. Mary Patricia Leneghan, born in North Belfast, was the first member of her family to graduate from university. Her years as a law student in Queen's 1969-73 coincided with some of the worst violence of the Northern Ireland Troubles. But a law degree enabled her to leave Belfast for Trinity College Dublin, and to take control over her life. Her career has been marked by periods working in higher education, interspersed with her roles in the media, and as President of Ireland. It is noticeable that when she finished her two terms as President of Ireland she again returned to higher education – as a doctoral student in canon law at Rome's Gregorian University, travelling around the city on a motorino; as visiting professor in Boston College and chair of an EU High Level Review Group on the Modernisation of Higher Education.

When Mary McAleese addressed the L and H Society in UCD in February 2000 she told them that 'the great gift that education conveys is personal empowerment – the confidence and capacity to choose your own pathway through life , not a route preordained by family, not a route pre-ordained by society, family or circumstances. To choose also, how to use those talents and abilities which education has honed – whether to use them for purely personal advancement or to take a wider and more generous view of how they might be applied'.

This can be read as a summary of her life. Education, especially her training as a lawyer, plus the debating skills that she acquired as a student in St. Dominic's secondary school, have given her the knowledge, the intellectual capacity and the confidence to speak, write and act upon many of the key issues in Irish society over the past forty years . She has never been afraid to adopt an unpopular, unfashionable position, and she has continued to confound those who have sought to categorise her. A committed

and remarkably-well-informed Catholic, she was a member of the Irish Catholic Hierarchy's delegation to the New Ireland Forum and she numbers many bishops and priests among her close friends. Yet she has supported campaigners for women priests and shortly after becoming President she was reprimanded for taking communion under the Anglican rite – a public gesture that reflects her long involvement in ecumenical gatherings. She was co-founder with David Norris of the Campaign for Homosexual reform; as President of Ireland she addressed the LGBT Diversity National Conference. She has a long record of involvement in penal reform; prisoners' rights, campaigns for Irish prisoners overseas, including the Birmingham Six and the Guildford Four and she is a strong advocate for the rights of the disabled. Her Ph.D. thesis which is near completion addresses the treatment of children in canon law. Children featured prominently during her Presidency; visits to every national school close to Aras an Uachtarain, which brought her into contact with many children from deprived communities and new immigrant families. And many of her speeches refer to the opportunities that education can convey, and the need to open up opportunities for marginalised groups, so that they can be released from 'the prison of under-achievement'.

As President of Ireland her motto was 'Building Bridges' ; the calendar of events in the Aras included international garden parties for representatives of new immigrant communities; a 12 July celebration for those belonging to the Unionist tradition; a reception for the survivors of institutionalised child abuse, and one for the people of Omagh. She continued and expanded on her predecessor Mary Robinson's engagement with the global Irish community: indeed she made a major speech on this topic in UCD.

But her bridge-building related to the Northern Ireland Peace Process and Ireland's relationship with Britain. Mary and Martin McAleese were born in Belfast, and their lives have continued to straddle the two parts of Ireland, giving them unique insights and contacts north and south, in nationalist and unionist communities. The precise role that they (and I deliberately include Martin) played in the Peace Process will only become known at a later date. However in the mid- 1990s (before she became President) Mary McAleese worked with the late Fr. Alex Reid of Clonard monastery to re-establish the IRA cease-fire after the 1996 Canary Wharf bombing. While in the Aras, Martin was a very effective conduit between the Protestant paramilitary organisations and the Irish government.

Mary McAleese's term as President included the 1998 Good Friday Agreement and the successful establishment of the Northern Ireland Assembly with a power-sharing executive. She shared a platform with First Minister Ian Paisley. But her most

significant and historic public engagements were with Queen Elizabeth II. On 11 November 1998 – the first anniversary of her inauguration as President, they jointly opened the Irish peace tower at Messines, which commemorates all the Irish troops who died in the Great War, and In 2011 she memorably welcomed Queen Elizabeth to Aras an Uachtarain and accompanied her to the Garden of Remembrance and the Memorial Garden at Islandbridge.

Before she became President, Mary McAleese remarked that 'The emotional reach of the Presidency is much, much greater than its Constitutional reach'. Through the events that she hosted as President, and her carefully-worded speeches she expanded the reach of the Presidency into all aspects of Irish life, and beyond. Anybody who has been privileged to see her in a public gathering cannot fail to be conscious of her genuine interest in people.

At her first inauguration as President of Ireland in November 2011 she quoted a poem by Christopher Logue I will just give the four last lines:

Come to the edge!

And they came,

And he pushed

And they flew.

We do not know where Mary McAleese's next flight will take her. . . .