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SATURDAY 30 MAY 2009

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University challenge

It took many years of lobbying before Limerick got a third level institution. As UL celebrates 20 years of university status, key figures recall the joy and the struggle. **Anne Sheridan** reports

ON THURSDAY, June 1, 1989, the University of Limerick bill was brought through the Seanad - bringing to an end a campaign for a university in Limerick, which began in the 1840s.

As far back as February, the tension in UL was palpable when the Minister for Education Mary O'Rourke was about to

introduce legislation granting university status.

In the days leading up to the news a major celebration was being planned days in advance but kept top secret until the official announcement was made.

No one was invited until that very day, but 5,000 people gathered at the campus to be part of a "momentous occasion" that evening.

Those in the higher echelons had known four days

previously, and Minister O'Rourke, was present on campus to make the announcement.

Chuck Feeney, the billionaire American philanthropist, who donated millions to UL's capital projects, had flown in crates of champagne from the United States that morning.

He was there too, as was Dr Tony Ryan, the founder

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The Sexton Street Band lead a rally demanding a university for Limerick in the 1960s
PICTURE: COURTESY OF UNIVERSITY OF LIMERICK

University challenge

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of Ryanair, and deputies Michael Noonan and Willie O'Dea. Everyone had wanted to share in this moment.

"It was the most memorable and probably the most astonishing day of our lives, bar getting married and having children," recalled Dr Edward Walsh, the university's founding president, who remained in office for 28 years. "For most of us it was probably the most astonishing day in our careers."

Noel Mulcahy, former vice-president of UL, sang "There is an Isle", but 20 years on memories are hazy of those dizzyingly exciting moments.

It was, Dr Walsh said, "an emotion packed day" and not merely an academic event - even when the Taoiseach and Minister O'Rourke formally opened the university on September 14, 1989.

"It was the end of a long, long struggle. It was almost an emotional achievement knowing the many generations who were involved in attempting to achieve this."

President Emeritus John O'Connor, who collected Minister O'Rourke from the airport that morning, added: "People didn't need very much encouragement to enjoy themselves."

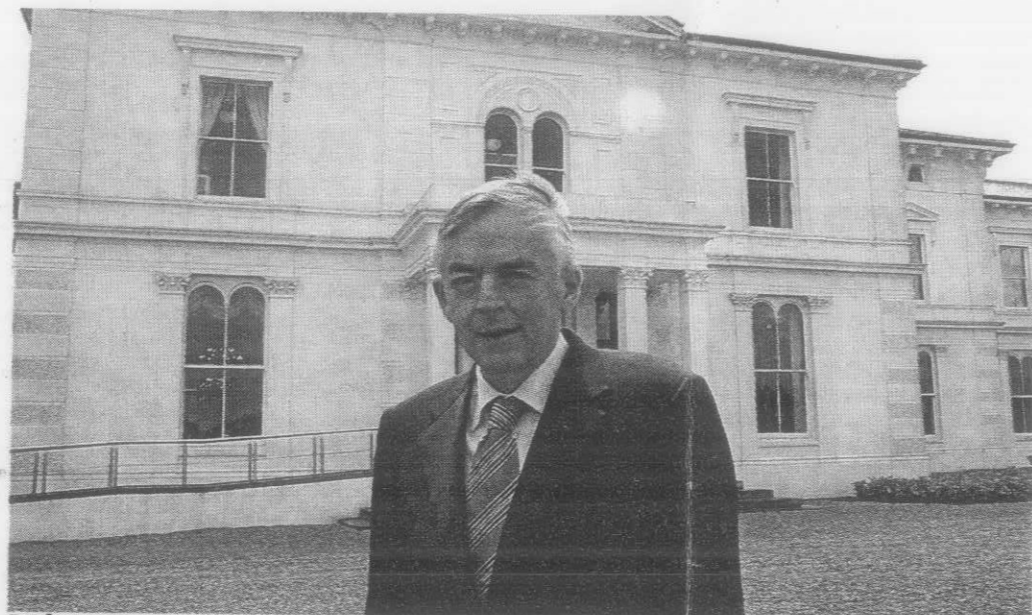
"I'd say everybody was singing that night. All the stops were pulled out."

Mr O'Connor, who began work in the then National Institute of Higher Education in the early '70s, remembered the fireworks display and the efforts it took to resolve security issues.

But the event was doubly significant. Not only was UL the first university created in the history of the State, but they also had the power to confer their own degrees - unlike other universities which preceded it.

The long and arduous fight for university status had seemingly afforded them more privileges than most.

"We decided who should receive a degree, whereas the others, like Cork and Galway, were dependent on the National University of Ireland office in Dublin," said Dr Walsh.



Professor Don Barry: the university's third president says UL is committed to creating the most outstanding student experience in Ireland - despite the deficit in government funding

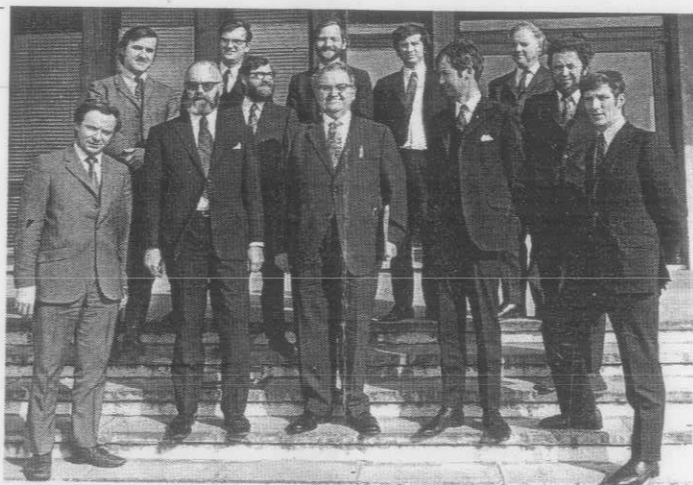
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the hotel," said Dr Walsh.

The deal was done; another coup in a long line for UL.

Up until the granting of status, Walsh said they focused on "extracting as much as we could" though the State. "But this permitted a new wave of great development. We were way ahead [of other colleges] in terms of our investment profile."

Mr O'Connor said the fact that Limerick didn't have a university didn't deter Feeney, though in



Dr Ed Walsh, centre right, with a delegation from the World Bank which helped fund the institution in its early days PICTURE: LARRY WALSH

replied "A rose by any other name," to queries if a new educational institution in Limerick would be established, and if it would be called a university.

It may not have started out as a rose, but with careful, steady pruning, the campus that is the University of Limerick has blossomed, growing in size and stature over the past 39 years.

It began its life as the National Institute of Higher Education in 1970, taking in the first group of

when it had just five degree programmes, five diploma programmes, and 12 faculty members.

Now, the university counts over 11,500 students and 1,500 faculty and staff.

Fast forward 37 years and Professor Don Barry, the university's third president, said despite the challenges posed by a deficit in Government funding for third-level education they are still committed to "creating the

who played a largely unrecognised part in the university, can lay claim to that history.

Many of those present, particularly the university's current students, may not be aware of the struggle it took for Limerick to be granted its status.

Dr Walsh has recalled the "sackcloth and ashes plight" of the institution back in the '70s - as his successor Dr Roger Downer would later term it.

The founding president said when they commenced work on Monday, January 19, 1970 they had no office, no typewriter, not even note paper. This newspaper reported at that time that the new director of the Institute of Higher Education was seen working with his new staff member from a parked car in O'Connell Street.

"Our budget for 1970 was £5,000 so the prospects looked bleak indeed," said Dr Walsh. "But the Limerick County Council made available the office they had abandoned at 71 O'Connell Street. Anne and I moved from the car and commenced a working partnership that was to last for a further 25 years and see the creation of the University of Limerick."

Moves to establish the University of Limerick date back to 1845 when the mayor led a delegation to London to make the case for one of the proposed Queen's colleges.

Cork, Galway and Belfast were chosen as the locations for the colleges, with Limerick narrowly missing out in favour of Galway.

After accepting its first cohort of students in 1972, the NIHE finally morphed into the University of Limerick in 1989, having passed through the hands of five education Ministers.

It then became the first 'new' university created in the Republic after the creation of the Free State. As a consequence, sources point out that it was viewed as "the baby" by the Higher Education Authority, the Department, Dr Walsh and possibly Feeney also. In the early years, Walsh said, "it was generally held that Limerick had been fobbed off and nothing of a consequence would result."

Determination and dedication to cause finally made dream a reality for Limerick

FORMER Mayor of Limerick Tony Bromell believes that were it not for the efforts of the Limerick University Project Committee, which was established on October 19, 1959, the university as we know it might not be there today, writes Anne Sheridan.

"To start looking for a university at that time seemed to be the most daft thing you could think of," said Mr Bromell, one of two surviving members of the original committee.

The other members were: John Moloney, Dermot Hurley, Margaret Liddy, Tom Duffy, Pat McCarthy, Jim Lyons, Gerard O'Connor, Sean Prendergast, Michael Finnan, John Hurley and Jack O'Dwyer.

He continued: "It was a time of utter depression with massive unemployment, massive emigration and widescale poverty. People wanted jobs. A lot of people were suggesting at that time that we shouldn't have become independent at all...that 1916 was a waste."

"To talk to the general population in Limerick in that time about creating a university, the reaction was 'we'd prefer a job'."

Despite all that, he believed they "sold the message very well" and got the backing from people in Clare, Kerry and Tipperary, and the rest of the hinterland. "We went anywhere we were invited...or invited ourselves."

Furthermore, the need



Former mayor Tony Bromell with the submission from the Limerick University Project committee to the Commission on Higher Education PICTURE: OWEN SOUTH

afterwards."

Students accompanied by the Sexton Street pipe band went on to march outside the office of the commission and the Minister's office in Dublin, with banners proclaiming "Limerick demands a university."

The project committee began taking full page advertisements in the Sunday Independent at a "huge cost," but it was a community effort and donations flooded in from the public. One church gate collection in the city yielded £200, "a huge sum in the '50s."

"It shows that if people know exactly what they want and fight for it...but of course there'll be disappointments along the way. The officials in the department knew we weren't

Plassey surpassed all the other options, in Walsh's view, even if the infrastructure was non-existent, and Plassey House and the surrounding 70 acres was bought for £72,000.

Bromell recalled that at that time "pigeons were flying in and out of the roof of Plassey House" and while the Department of Education insisted that the historic building be knocked down, Walsh fought to keep it "as it was something of quality from the past".

As a further matter of principle, Walsh insisted that the opening of the NIHE be an ecumenical, rather than a Catholic affair, and sought to have the Chief Rabbi at the ceremony, as well as the Catholic and Protestant