

OLLSCOIL na hÉIREANN

NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF IRELAND

TEXT OF THE INTRODUCTORY ADDRESS DELIVERED BY:

PROFESSOR CIARÁN Ó hÓGARTAIGH, President, National University of Ireland, Galway on 5 May 2022 in the Royal College of Physicians in Ireland, on the occasion of the conferring of the Degree of Doctor of Science *honoris causa*, on **FRANK GANNON**

A Sheansailéir, a mhuintir na hOllscoile agus a dhaoine uaisle, is cúis áthas dom Frank Gannon a chur i bhur láthair.

There are several reasons why the National University of Ireland should and is awarding an honorary doctorate to Frank Gannon.

First and foremost, we are a **university** defined by our research, as is Frank Gannon. A graduate and former colleague of ours at NUI Galway, with a PhD from the University of Leicester, Frank's research focussed on the manner in which the oestrogen receptor controlled gene expression.



His work in Galway and subsequently, between 1994 and 2007, as Senior Scientist at the European Molecular Biology Laboratory in Heidelberg demonstrated the cyclical nature of the binding of the oestrogen receptor to its DNA response element that resulted in the sequential recruitment of chromatin-modifying enzymes and ultimately the RNA polymerase, prior to that sequence of events being reversed.

Building on this research, publishing in *Nature*, his research subsequently showed that DNA methylation (previously thought to be an indelible mark) was also subject to dynamic and cyclical change. In fact, he holds a record of publishing three papers in *Nature* in a single year during his time in Galway: one is an achievement in itself, three is marvellous.

His research was therefore clearly pioneering and impactful.

So when, last week, we spoke of one of our research teams at NUI Galway and Boston University, led by Emer McGrath, the next generation, identifying a blood biomarker that could help identify people with the earliest signs of dementia, even before the onset of symptoms, I thought of Frank Gannon's work twenty years earlier leading a previous generation of research in a very different ecosystem of research in Ireland, pioneering in its time and ahead of

its time, defining and commercialising discovery research with a real impact on human progress and well-being – and we honour him today for that.

Second, there is the sense of the nation and the **national** in Frank's work. In 2007, he left the European Molecular Biology Laboratory to take up an appointment as the Director General of Science Foundation Ireland, succeeding Bill Harris. An interview with him in *The Irish Independent* in June 2010 credited him as 'the man who introduced industry funding to scientific innovation'. When you read the article, you can see why. SFI, he said, 'was born out of the realisation that we could lose jobs or move up the value chain ... It was a real game-changer -- one of those things we as a country weren't doing, and that we decided we needed to do. Like the low tax rate or free secondary education.'

So when, last week, the CEO of a major international tech company with 9,000 employees in Ireland, including 1,000 engineers moving to new premises, spoke of investing in Ireland not because of the low tax regime but 'because of access to the best talent, and to innovation and creativity', I again thought of Frank Gannon, a visionary in his time and ahead of his time, advocating for and articulating the connection for policy-makers – and in his own research – between the value of research and national prosperity and progress. And we honour him today for that. And, thirdly, there is a sense of **Ireland** here too. Like many from this place, his generation and before and after, he left this place and made a remarkable impact elsewhere.

During his time at the European Molecular Biology Laboratory (1994-2007), Frank became the founding editor of the journal *EMBO Reports* and contributed a monthly editorial on a range of topics, including the impact of research on society. He also, at this time and before his time, showed a commitment to female researchers by analysing fellowship application data to conduct an objective assessment of the potential causes for the lower success rate of female applicants for postdoctoral fellowships, a precursor to the commitments to equality and diversity which not then but now rightly occupy the efforts research institutions and funders.

Following his time at SFI, in January 2011, he went to the Queensland Institute for Molecular Research in Brisbane as its Director and CEO. The name of the institute was changed to QIMR Berghofer Medical Research Institute (QIMR Berghofer) following Frank's successful winning of a major donation from the Australian philanthropist Clive Berghofer.

Consistent with his commitment to impactful research from the very beginning of and throughout his career, as Director of QIMR Berghofer, Frank made a specific effort to extend translation of the institute's research, through industry and to the clinic, which resulted in increased research and commercial collaborations, particularly with China and India. In 2021, a legacy of Frank's time there, QIMR Berghofer was named as one of the *Queensland Greats* by the Queensland Government.

Bíonn fírinne le fail go minic sa bhfilíocht, dánta Seamus Heaney ach go háirithe. In his poem series, *Lightenings VIII*, Seamus Heaney writes of a meeting between worlds:

*The annals say: when the monks of Clonmacnoise
Were all at prayers inside the oratory
A ship appeared above them in the air.*

*The anchor dragged along behind so deep
It hooked itself into the altar rails
And then, as the big hull rocked to a standstill,*

*A crewman shinned and grappled down the rope
And struggled to release it. But in vain.
'This man can't bear our life here and will drown,'*

*The abbot said, 'unless we help him.' So
The did, the freed ship sailed, and the man climbed back
Out of the marvellous as he had known it.*

In many ways, Frank Gannon has inhabited this marvellous, in-between world.

A pioneering researcher before his time who also straddled the commercial world; a visionary research leader who articulated the value of investment in research to the nation; a man of Ireland who, like many before him, went elsewhere and made a difference wherever he went.

Today we, the National University of Ireland, honour him for all those things.

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 Scientia, idque tibi
fide mea testor ac spondeo totique Academiae.**