

**Address given by Mr Batt O’Keeffe TD the Minister for Education and Science, at the launch of the *The National University of Ireland 1908-2008 Centenary Essays* in NUI 49 Merrion Square Dublin 2 on 25 November 2008 at 6.30 pm**

Chancellor, members of the University, ladies and gentlemen,

This is the first opportunity I have had since becoming Minister for Education and Science to visit the offices of the National University of Ireland. I am delighted to be here to launch this wonderful centenary publication.

Let me start by extending my congratulations to you Chancellor and the whole university on the completion of one hundred years in the life of the National University of Ireland. Since its foundation in 1908, this university, as a whole federation, and through its four Constituent Universities, has been a truly national institution, has been of great importance in the development of Ireland and has made a significant contribution to national life.

With the Irish Universities Act 1908, the island of Ireland gained two new universities, Queen’s University Belfast and the National University of Ireland, whose story is rehearsed in these centenary essays.

For non-historians, it may be surprising to learn, from John Coolahan’s very interesting piece on the historical background to the establishment of the two universities, that ‘the Irish university question was one of the three great issues in Anglo-Irish relations, the others being the land question and home rule.’ Surprising because at the start of the twentieth century, unlike now, university education was the preserve of an elite and the numbers who participated in it were very small. At the same time the interest in the advancement of higher education in Ireland may be seen as reflecting a people whose aspirations were rising. The National University of Ireland was established in response to the increasingly insistent demands of the majority population on the island for a stake in higher education. Echoing the larger demands for self-determination, which were to take slightly longer to achieve, the demands articulated over several decades for a university to meet the needs of all the people were finally heard with the establishment of the National University of Ireland.

By any standards, the story of the National University of Ireland is one of the great success stories in the building of the Irish nation since independence. The University began as quite a small institution. I understand that at the start there were only around 1,000 students whereas today there are over 65,000.

NUI has contributed greatly to Irish society through its graduates. They are to be found in numbers in key institutions of State, in the Dáil and Seanad, the judiciary, the public and private sectors, the professions and the arts. As the Taoiseach remarked at another NUI centennial function earlier this year, twelve members of the current cabinet are NUI graduates, myself included. The leaders of the two main opposition parties have also come through NUI. So I think it is fair to acknowledge that the National University of Ireland has left an indelible mark on the public life of Ireland.

The National University of Ireland has also played an important role in Irish identity politics. The early controversial decision of the NUI Senate to make Irish a requirement for matriculation has undoubtedly provided support for the Irish language in the educational system. NUI has also consistently promoted the Irish language and Irish culture through its scholarly journal *Éigse a Journal of Irish Studies*. I understand that this year NUI will award three Post-Doctoral Fellowships in Irish Studies.

The University started as one institution with four colleges. Three were constituent colleges. The fourth at Maynooth was a recognised college. All of

these institutions have grown in size and standing so that today, in addition to the original university, there are four self-governing constituent universities, with a shared history and traditions, making up the NUI federation. In addition, there are five NUI recognised colleges which receive their awards from NUI.

I am pleased that through the Higher Education Authority the Government was able to contribute financially to the celebration of the NUI centenary. I am happy that this has enabled a number of worthy centennial projects to be realised.

The National University of Ireland has been an important institution in national life and has been intimately connected with the leadership of the country. There have been only four Chancellors in the history of NUI : each of them has been a major figure. I don't need to remind people that the present Chancellor, Dr Garret Fitzgerald was a distinguished Taoiseach and Minister for Foreign Affairs. His predecessor as Chancellor, Dr T K Whitaker has been one of Ireland's great public servants. As a visionary Secretary in the Department of Finance, he played a key role under Seán Lemass in getting this country on its feet and energising the economy. Éamonn de Valera, who was Taoiseach and President of Ireland and father of our constitution, was elected Chancellor of NUI in 1922 and held the role until his death in 1975. The first Chancellor of NUI, Archbishop William Walsh, was an important figure in the nationalist movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. The book has interesting pieces on each of these great men.

There is also an enlightening piece by Sonia Pařeta on the position of women within the university. She highlights the many strong women who particularly in the early days when it was necessary to do so, asserted the equal rights of women to higher education. Nowadays as we know women outnumber men in the university though perhaps are not yet as fully represented as they might be in the senior ranks.

The book also has essays on each of the four constituent universities at Dublin, Cork, Galway and Maynooth, highlighting their individuality and sense of themselves.

When concluding the debate on the bill which became the Irish Universities Act 1908, the then Secretary of State for Ireland Augustine Birrell expressed the hope that 'these universities we are founding today, which will last long years after every one of us has crumbled to dust, will have before them years of usefulness, and pride and distinction and glory.'

I congratulate all those who have contributed to this handsome, scholarly volume worthy of its subject and a fitting contribution to the celebration of the centenary of the National University of Ireland. I commend the authors, the editor Tom Dunne and the co-editors, John Coolahan, Gearóid Ó Tuathaigh and Maurice Manning, the publisher UCD Press and the designer Lyn Davies and I wish the publication every success.