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The ‘Upstart’ who founded a university

Founding president of University of Limerick Dr Ed Walsh hands over a ‘vital archive’ of his papers

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Image



By Alan Owens

Almost exactly 50 years to the day and the hour since then Taoiseach Jack Lynch performed the official opening of the National Institute for Higher Education, founding president of University of Limerick Dr Ed Walsh returned to his old stomping ground for a different kind of ceremony.

The inimitable academic and retired president – who served from NIHE opening in 1972 to 1998 – was in UL on September 27 to hand over a ‘vital archive’ from that time.

The main component of the papers presented to UL President Professor Kerstin Mey and the Glucksman Library comprised of 28 and a half years of Dr Walsh’s diaries – over 300 in all in 26 boxes – which recount significant events from the time.

Taking place also was the exhibition launch of ‘A University of Our Time: University of Limerick, 1972–2022’, a year-long public exhibition, one of the many events to mark the anniversary of the establishment of the University.

Dr Walsh noted that he and UL President Professor Kerstin Mey were due to speak at the ceremony “precisely 50 years to the hour from the time the Taoiseach performed the official opening in 1972”.

“I used to have a diary in my wallet and when anything that I thought was of significance was happening – good or bad – I wrote it down. In the early days I was very conscious that, if we succeeded in what we were trying to do, it would be seen in hindsight as quite significant,” Dr Walsh explained.

“I took quite a lot of notes almost hourly in the early days – buying the site, trying to encourage the minister to increase the budget from £5,000 for the first year, trying to get a telephone. In fact, we purchased the campus site here within weeks of I starting (in the job) but I still hadn’t a telephone,” he laughed.

President Mey thanked Dr Walsh for the “treasure trove” of papers he was handing over and hailed “the importance of his leadership for the foundation and establishment of the University, and the importance and excitement that he has handed his papers to UL.

“The resulting archive is vital for our organisational history and our organisational future, for generations to come to understand how hard the region fought for higher education and the transformative impact it has had already and will have going forward,” said Professor Mey.

Speaking for 20 minutes, assisted by a Power Point presentation with pictures from the time, Dr Walsh held the room captivated with his stories of tenacity, belligerence and sheer determination to deliver a university for Limerick – which it finally was in 1989, a testament to the many people who sought to forge a new beginning for Limerick with a recognised third level institution.

Dr Walsh catalogued the diaries meticulously when writing his autobiography ‘Upstart: Friends, Foes & Founding a University’ – and the resulting database was handed to Professor Mey while his family, friends, former colleagues and members of the original class of 1972 watched on.

“I was on the job for 28 and a half years, so there are some over 300 different diaries,” he explained.

“I spent a long time going through each page and writing down a summary on an excel spreadsheet, with a keyword. I am also giving two discs to the President – one that has a chronological sequence of events for 28 and a half years, and the other is based on topics. People frequently contact me (to ask) ‘are you sure about this or that’, and I go to this database and I discover very often the answers.

Asked about his memory of September 27, 1972 – he said: “What caught the fancy of the community – apart from the Taoiseach (being present) – was the fact that the religious ceremony, which at the time would normally just be performed by the Catholic priest or bishop, I said we are going to invite the protestant bishop too, it is going to be an ecumenical ceremony. And one of the faculty members – Peter Ward – said, well I am Jewish, what about the chief rabbi? So, I said ‘Peter, you are in charge of the religious ceremony and if you can get the two bishops and the rabbi to participate, that is wonderful’, and he did.

“It was most emotional that he participated and I think it symbolised in 1972 our determination to break with bad traditions and to start new ones and to build bridges.”

Following the presentation, Dr Walsh, Professor Mey and Mayor of Limerick City and County Cllr Francis Foley cut the ribbon on the exhibition in the Millstream Building, which is open to the public and explores the origins and development of the University and the institutions that went before it.

The exhibition, curated by Dr Zara Power of UL’s Department of History, is a “wonderful immersion in the journey taken through the first steps of establishing our founding institution”, Professor Mey said.

Drawing on a range of objects, images, documents, oral histories, and video footage, the multimedia exhibition looks at the campaign for a university, the establishment of the NIHE and the National College of Physical Education, and Thomond College of Education, the attainment of university status and the part played by students, staff, donors, and others in establishing a community of scholars and students at Plassey.

It is open Monday to Friday, 9am-5pm. For more, see www.ul.ie/50.

Images below:



Mayor of Limerick City and County Cllr Francis Foley with Dr Walsh and President Kerstin Mey



A small selection of images from UL captured and on display at the UL50 exhibition
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