



CLONGOWES

CLONGOWES WOOD COLLEGE SJ

HEADMASTER'S ADDRESS

Mr President, Reverend Fathers, Guests, members of Staff, and Old Clongownians, it is a great pleasure to have this opportunity once again to address you at the Union Dinner.

For my birthday last month, one of my sons bought me a book written by an OC entitled *In My Alphabet*. If you haven't guessed who the author is, the summary on the back cover of the book gives the game away, and it reads: '*In My Alphabet*, Nick Hewer takes us through an A to Z of some of the most remarkable and entertaining events of his life. With chapters on subjects from endoscopy to Jesuits, from Tottenham Hotspur to one on Underwear, there is something for all tastes within these pages!' As you might imagine, I had a most enjoyable lunch in school with Nick Hewer and Gerry Wilkinson (both on the 1962 table this evening) when they visited the College last summer.

So far I have just read the Chapter on *J for Jesuit* which gives a fascinating insight into the life and times and some of the shenanigans of boys and staff in Clongowes in the period 1955-62. You conclude about your time in Clongowes, Nick: 'I think we were happy overall.' This got me thinking about Clongowes of yesteryear and the College of today, and one of your contemporaries, Fr Michael Sheil, who makes reference with reasonable regularity to Clongowes today as a 'holiday camp' which suggests that times might be a little different in 2019!

Custodian of our Jesuit ethos

I was speaking with a parent recently who, in a well-meaning way, was suggesting that it is easy to be the Headmaster of Clongowes. I felt like saying (though didn't): 'Well, all you need is a clear head, broad shoulders, a warm heart, a thick skin, nerves of steel, a steady hand and sure footing!' What I did say, however, was that as Headmaster I am, with the Board of Management, simply the custodian of our Jesuit ethos and values, and these are my constant and prime concern.

Last autumn, we launched a short promotional film, which I imagine many of you will have seen, in which we set out to capture the very essence of Clongowes. At the outset, the production company spent some time in the school, engaging with groups of boys, staff and parents. Each step in the process of making the film crucially involved the students. A group of Rhetoric boys (including Hugo [O'Donnell], Charlie [O'Neill] and Fred [Sargaison] here this evening) wrote the script and what you hear in the film are their words. This was a particularly important aspect for me as I wanted the film to be a genuine and heartfelt reflection of how the boys themselves feel about Clongowes and what is so special for them.

What the film does is to convey the camaraderie, sense of community and respect which is present amongst the boys themselves and between boys and staff. Our older boys are so supportive of the younger boys and hence the concept of the piece as 'Sixth Year Speeches' whereby a group of Rhetoric boys have responsibility, one by one, to tell their

own personal story to boys in Elements, opening with the line: 'Good morning and welcome to Clongowes. You're about to start something that will change your life forever.'

It's quite an emotional and aspirational piece, with a mixture of words of inspiration and challenge, obstacles and success, and achievement and joy. I hope the substance of the piece was identifiable to you as Old Clongownians. Certainly the feedback thus far from all quarters has been very positive indeed.

Family and togetherness

Along with a second companion film focusing on the activity of the boys and our excellent facilities, the films give such a good sense of the **family and togetherness** of today's Clongowes Wood College. Walk into Clongowes at any time and you sense warmth and community. That sense of togetherness was so evident amongst the players themselves and their parents, and the whole school before and after Tuesday's defeat in the Senior Cup semi-final. The benefits of Clongowes' unique, exclusively seven-day boarding context also resonates strongly with parents, near and far. I travelled to Dubai last month to introduce Clongowes to families interested in sending their sons to the school, and the warmth of welcome from current parents living in the UAE could not have been more generous.

We share, I think, a common belief that a boarding school is a most nurturing, challenging, healthy, and above all joyful form of education. The hallmark of any good boarding school is that it should mirror the very best of family life and the family home. The best homes are full of life and laughter. They offer understanding and patience; they provide support and comfort when things go wrong. The best homes give children clear boundaries. They set high expectations and they instil values by which to live. A strong family life nurtures the self-esteem that youngsters need to go out into the world with confidence. This is what we aspire to do, and more, complementing modern family life in Clongowes in 2019.

That sense of togetherness and family is such a characteristic amongst Old Clongownians too, as I have come to appreciate. Friendships, which began in school, become lifelong friendships, as this evening demonstrates.

Some words of thanks

Before I finish, some words of thanks. Firstly to Old Clongownians who entrust their sons into the school's care. And then to the Old Clongownians who are currently serving on the College's Board of Management: Peter Gray (OC'73), the Chair of the Board; Kieran Brennan (also OC'73), the Chair of the Buildings sub-committee; Joe Rooney (OC'79), the Chair of the Finance sub-committee and also Head of the Foundation; Andrew Coonan (OC'86), a parent rep on the Board; and, last but by no means least, Fr Michael Sheil (OC'56) who needs no introduction! And also to Paddy Halpenny (OC'76), the Chair of the Foundation Board of Trustees.

In closing this evening, I should like to thank your President, Conor Daly, and the Union committee for organising the annual dinner and for all their work during the year, and thank you also to the committee of the Benevolent Association.

And so, ladies and gentlemen, may I ask you to be upstanding and raise your glasses, as I propose a toast to the Clongowes Union.