St. Columba's Day Celebrations Speech, June 2010.

Professor Dickson, Chairman, Fellows of the College, colleagues, Columbans past and present, parents, friends and supporters of St. Columba's…

it gives me great pleasure to welcome you all here to the St. Columba's Day Celebrations, 2010. Days such as this allow us to celebrate all that is good in our school and to re-affirm the principles which guide us on a daily basis, and which underpin our commitment to the pursuit of excellence for the young people in our charge. The perils of striving to attain excellence are clear and evident in the words of the eighteenth century English poet, Charles Churchill, who writes in his Epistle to William Hogarth:

"The danger chiefly lies in acting well;
No crime's so great as daring to excel."

It is my earnest hope that I can demonstrate in this address that, in "daring to excel", we at St. Columba's commit no crime, nor make a vain or idle boast.

In his opening address, the Chairman has emphasised the importance of the whole community and the work so many do here in a great variety of ways to achieve our aims. I would like to take this opportunity to endorse his comments and to express my thanks to all of those among us who give so willingly of their time to seek to achieve the success we do: pupils, teachers, maintenance staff, ground staff, gardeners, caterers, medical staff, cleaners, laundry and linen room staff, secretaries, the Bursar and her staff. So many people, all working in the common cause of the good of the College... Thank you all.

On a day such as this, it is perhaps appropriate for us to consider the aims of our founders and the ways in which we measure up to these nearly 170 years after our establishment in 1843. Many of you will be familiar already with parts of our history but some may be less so.

Our nineteenth century founders were several in number and included William Sewell, Sub-Rector of Exeter College, Oxford; Viscount Adare, son of Lord Dunraven; Lord J.G. Beresford, Archbishop of Armagh; and Robert Corbet Singleton, the Senior Fellow and first Warden of the College. Sewell, however, was the one who had the clearest vision of what St. Columba's should resemble and who had the foresight to set down his thoughts on the matter for posterity.

As a member of the Oxford Movement which sought to promote what we might today term 'high-church Anglicanism', Sewell was firmly of the belief that the ninetenth century Church could only be reformed, revived and strengthened through education. He became convinced that Ireland needed a better educated clergy and that this ideal could only be achieved through the creation in the country of what he termed 'an Eton of its own'.

Most schoolboys of the time, whether in Ireland or in England, lived in surroundings which were bare and plain. Sewell, by contrast, wanted them to be exposed to the beauties of nature and art. Pupils also lived lives in which they were largely detached

from all adult contact and conversation, except in what was then considered the formal and even hostile atmosphere of the classroom.

Instead of this, Sewell wanted to see boys nurtured by men who did not think that classroom teaching was the only responsibility of a schoolmaster.

Many schools were too big: instead, they should be of such a size that the needs of the individual could be met, as in a large family. The curriculum would be widened to include subjects such as music, which would fill aesthetic needs, and the values of good manners and scholarly conversation.

There should be in schools, he argued, both order and freedom, discipline and self-government, decency without luxury, and dignity and erudition without ostentation.

Sewell's new school was to be to the benefit of society. The new education was to start with the gentry, but the school should also pay its tithe: every tenth place should be free to a needy pupil, a cherished ideal to which we should genuinely and realistically aspire.

St. Columba's College opened on 1st August,1843, and by the end of the first term there were seven boys here. The Constitution of the College was that of an Oxford College: there was a Warden and seven Fellows or schoolmasters, with eight governors and the founders in the background.

Sewell imagined a small and intimate community of devout and cultured men, working for love of scholarship with no thought of pecuniary gain. The Warden was to be *primus inter pares*, first among equals, supported by a loyal band of colleagues. The Fellows, or teachers, were to be like elder brothers to the boys, sharing their work and their play, their simple meals, and supervising their moral welfare, thus re-creating the atmosphere of a large family.

The curriculum, although based on Classics and religion, also included Irish, practical arithmetic, music, drawing, modern languages, modern history and physical science. Special emphasis was laid on musical training under the direction of Edwin Monk who wrote the melody to the famous hymn 'Angel Voices' which we sang earlier today in our Chapel.

Regrettably, Singleton and Sewell were to sever their connection with the College just three years later when a dispute arose over the observance, or rather, the non-observance of the Statute on fasting on feast days. Both men went on to found another school, St. Peter's, or Radley College, as we know it today, on similar lines to St. Columba's, in 1847, and I am pleased to announce that the Warden of Radley, Mr. Angus McPhail, has agreed to be our guest of honour at this event in 2011.

In his 'Journal of a residence at St. Columba's', Sewell paid tribute to Singleton in the following enviable and unanswerable terms:

" The Warden has acted with great judgement and forbearance as well as firmness. But with all his strictness, he is the most tender-hearted, affectionate creature – quite like a child.

The manner in which he has kept the Fellows together, and brought them to their present state of harmony, is wonderful. They all seem to look up to him with great awe, and yet to love him very much. And the discipline of the school he has managed in the same way."

You will not be surprised to hear me confess that tributes such as this are the envy of all 14 Wardens, including myself, who have succeeded Robert Corbet Singleton!

From this brief outline of the vision of our founders, it will be clear that much has changed in the intervening 167 years here. For one, we are larger and more international. But I hope it will also be abundantly clear to all of you how much has remained the same, or similar, or, at least, recognisable to the twenty-first century listener.

Anyone in my position will be keenly aware of the challenges involved in remaining faithful to the ethics, ethos and vision of our forebears at St. Columba's. But this is precisely what I, and all my predecessors, have sought to achieve.

We remain committed to the idea of a small school, just 300 in total, a place where the individual is known to, and appreciated, by all; one in which scholarship is rightly valued and applauded, but one in which there is also room for the wider talents of the arts and physical exercise; one in which the beauty of our surroundings remains a cherished ideal; in which boys – and girls for the past 40 years – have space and gardens to move about in; one in which the place of daily worship in our beautiful Butterfield Chapel remains embedded; one in which the demands placed on our pupils are considerable but in which they also receive the support and care of a dedicated group of teachers.

In short, size, the individual, scholarship, performance, self-confidence, busyness, good manners and compassion remain at the core of our daily lives.

Crucial in this regard are the combined efforts of our pupils and their teachers. In twenty-first century 'speak', they are the greatest resources we possess, and you will not be surprised to hear me say that, when pupils are first admitted to the College, they are explicitly confronted with our traditions and aims, and urged to live up to them.

By the same token, teachers who work in the College are urged to make themselves indispensable by contributing not only to our scholarship but also to the extra-curricular life of the College, and to its traditions of dedicated pastoral involvement and care.

I feel immensely proud – and at the same time – genuinely humbled by the way in which our boys and girls, and men and women, respond to this daunting challenge on a daily basis.

As I have said already, we are a small school, deliberately so. Our overall numbers are just 300. This figure has risen slightly over the years, a fact which is emphasised in G.K. White's history of the College, published in 1974.

In addition to small aggregate numbers, our working units are also small. Class sizes average just 15 overall, and our House sizes, the pastoral and administrative divisions in which we work, are also small, with an average size of 35. These figures enable us to get to know the pupils in our care well, whether it be in the classroom or in the myriad ways in which we work with children outside the classroom, on the games field or on the stage.

We aim to treat every child as the individual he or she is, and we seek to get to know their strengths and weaknesses quickly and accurately so that the former can be developed and the latter overcome.
Unsurprisingly, this means that children have challenges placed in front of them, hurdles to overcome, and targets to reach. In short, they cannot hide from us, as sometimes happens in larger schools and larger classes. The positive results which this approach nurtures enable us to get the best from our pupils, whether it be in their academic or extra-curricular life.

In recent years, our academic results have been little short of outstanding. Last year's leavers achieved a College record when they averaged 446 points per candidate in their Leaving Certificate examinations. A result like this should be set in its proper context.

We are a mixed-ability school which does not cherry-pick its pupils on entry. The average score of 446 points per candidate achieved last year arose out of a cohort of young people who received CAO points ranging from 60 at the bottom to 600 – the maximum possible – at the top.

This is due in no small part to the efforts of our classroom teachers, but also to those of the Learning Support Department, which works with individuals and small groups of children who experience learning difficulties.

A score of 446 points per candidate equates to an average of six B grades at Honours level per pupil. In the British equivalent 'A' Levels, our average equates to more than two A grades and a B. Many of you will be aware that grades such as these are sufficient to gain entry to some of the best universities, either in Ireland or the UK. Results like these are something for all of us – pupils, teachers, parents – to be proud of and to celebrate.

There were many individual success stories in these figures – too many for me to mention here – but primary among them are the achievements of our two Todd Scholars for 2009, Rebecca Feeney Barry and Max Guennewig, both of whom scored a maximum 600 points.

The progress which our pupils make during their time here, and particularly in the final months and years, is something which we monitor very closely.

This is evident year by year, through the efforts of the pupils themselves as they approach their examinations, but also through those of their teachers who work so hard to facilitate and reciprocate their efforts by organising additional revision classes and speaking to pupils on an individual basis outside the classroom and in their own

time. This is precisely what we mean when we refer to the pursuit of excellence in the College.

I know that children are naturally competitive and that those present here today will be eager to match and even to surpass the achievements of their predecessors. This should not concern them overly, however: a determination by each and every one of them to do the best they can will ensure that the College's enviable record of success is maintained.

Many of them have worked, if not tirelessly, at least with great dedication in recent months in order to achieve the best they can when they sit their examinations in this very Hall in just a few days' time. I am sure you will all wish to join me in thanking them for their contribution to Columban life over a number of years and in wishing them every success at this important time.

It would be unwise and unfair of me, however, to emphasise only the academic aspects of a Columban education in 2010. All schools surely do their best to educate their pupils to the best of their ability. Where St. Columba's differs, perhaps, is in its long-established attempts to offer as broad, balanced and holistic an education as it can.

This is made very clear to me at the event which annually precedes today's celebrations, namely, the sixth Form leavers' and parents' dinner which took place last night up in Whitehall. Taking place as it does before the pupils sit their examinations, this event offers us an oppportunity to consider our leavers beyond mere academic confines; to consider instead the whole person.

What is immediately apparent is the way in which our pupils carry themselves on such occasions, how they interact on a personal level, both with their teachers and their parents, and those of their fellow pupils.

It offers us an opportunity to see the young men and women they have become during the years of their schooling: well mannered and polite, engaging and interesting, at ease with themselves and those they meet. This development of the person is essential to any good education.

One of the ways in which we achieve our outcomes is through the development of the individual's talents in spheres other than the academic one. Sometimes these are sporting in nature; at others, they are musical, or involve a talent for drama, public speaking or debating.

More than 350 competitive sports fixtures are organised here annually; pupils of all ages take part in plays; many perform in concerts or are taken to compete in concerts elsewhere. All of this helps to build a sense of self-esteem and self-worth which bestows on our pupils a confidence which enables them to deal with whatever life throws at them.

Columbans are rarely susceptible to bullies because they have a strong sense of right and wrong, but also because they have an equally strong sense of their own value, and will not tolerate unjustified or wanton denigration.

They are encouraged to be enormously self-disciplined in their daily lives because they are busy, have numerous commitments, and have to balance the conflicting demands which are placed on them. They are busy boys and girls, and need to know how to organise their lives effectively and efficiently. This is a lesson for life which serves our pupils well in their future lives.

In accordance with our founders' wishes, all our pupils take part in daily sport and exercise. This is an essential complement to academic study, particularly in the months leading up to stressful periods such as those involving examinations. Nearly half of them learn a musical instrument here, and are encouraged to display their talents on stage at various concerts and events.

Our drama productions, from the Form I play to the senior play, enable them to take part in teamwork alongside their teachers, to learn more about others in the process, and to discover parts of themselves which have hitherto been dormant or hidden, perhaps even from themselves.

House debates teach them the value of preparation and planning, as do the various public speaking competitions which see young and old stand up and deliver performances of which they – and others – can be proud.

In all of this, the element of performance is crucial: the sense of delivering something which instructs and entertains at the same time.

From time to time, some of our number achieve outstanding recognition of their individual talents. One thinks of Ross Canning in Form IV who continues to be selected for the Ireland U16 hockey team and who, this summer, will compete in the European championships;
of Sam Bewley and Harry Morris in Form II, who have been selected for the Leinster U14 hockey squad;
of Dalton Tice in Form V who has been picked for the full Leinster U19 rugby squad;
of Juliana Huggard in Form II, who is national indoor archery champion;
of Rebecca Scott in Form VI, who is the Leinster Schools' archery champion;
of Alex Owens in Form II, who is training with the Leinster U16 girls' hockey squad this summer;
of Caroline Mueller Methling in Form V, who is doing the same at U18 level;
of Stephanie Brann and Aoise Keogan Nooshabadi in Forms V and IV, who are both training with the U17 Irish girls' cricket squad;
of Patrick Tice in Form IV, who played for the South of Ireland schools' U17 cricket team in its recent victory over the North West;
and of Philip Blackley, James Bowlby, Harry Bravery, and Patrick, who all represented Leinster Schools against an MCC team at Clontarf on Wednesday last.

In the musical field, we celebrate the achievements of young musicians like Siobhan Brady for her talented cello playing and singing;
of Sally Beeby and Molly Buckingham for their outstanding singing;
of Lingfan Gao, for his exceptional piano playing, which has seen him selected as one of only five to perform at a symposium in Oxford this summer.

Our successes this year in many musical competitions have seen our pupils selected to perform in the National Concert Hall and winning national recognition.

Robbie Hollis and Patrick McGonagle in Form V have won through the national heats of the European Youth Parliament to represent Ireland in the Ukraine later this year. Patrick has also won a national competition organised by Young Social Innovators for an essay on family life which was recently published in the Irish Times.

It is inevitably somewhat invidious to mention these individuals, not least because so many others, equally deserving of recognition, are left out. What is important is that we recognise and pay tribute to the contribution of all our pupils to the success of the College. The College is nothing without its pupils: their achievements are our achievements and our achievements are theirs. We are interdependent, as we should be, and we recognise the part we all play in one another's successes.

None of these successes, however, would be achieved without the involvement, the dedication and the nurture offered by our teachers. Quite simply, they are the engine of all that happens here, the *sine qua non* of our success. St. Columba's, as we have seen, prides itself on its tradition of teacher involvement in all aspects of its pupils' lives, both in the classroom and outside it, a tradition stretching all the way back to the vision of our founders.

A huge amount of our teachers' efforts are directed at pupils in their free time, after a day's work in the classroom, when many are exhausted, and have perhaps only an evening's prep supervision or a weekend duty to look forward to.

I cannot emphasise enough the importance of their contribution, and the voluntary nature of it. None of them is required to undertake the roles they do in the extra-curricular field or the pastoral one. That each of them does so, willingly and enthusiastically, is testimony to their professionalism, their pride in doing a job well and, most of all, their devotion to their pupils. In acting thus, they maintain our founders' vision, not least in their detachment from what Sewell earlier referred to as pecuniary gain.

On this auspicious day in the College's calendar, I wish above all to salute and thank them for their efforts and I would ask you to join me in doing so.

Much of this speech has been an attempt to quantify the essence of a Columban education in the twenty-first century, to pin down its strengths, to enunciate its ethos or characteristic spirit, and to do so in the context of our history and traditions. As I have asserted, it involves excellence in all things, but it also champions participation and involvement, irrespective of ability or worth of contribution.

It values the commitment of individuals to the whole, their busyness, and their willingness to deliver on potential through performance and application. Most of all, however, it requires an ability to get on with others, to work as part of a team, so that the sum of the whole can be greater than that of the individual parts. In short, it demands self-sacrifice, dedication and modesty.

Such spirit, unsurprisingly, is embodied and epitomised in the person of the Senior Prefect, Alec Cherry, whom we will shortly hear from. Alec has been an inspiration to us all in 2009-2010. Quite properly, he thought seriously about the responsibilities involved in such an appointment when I offered it to him a year ago.

He considered his commitment to achieving the best academic results he could in his Leaving Certificate in 2010; he reflected on the fact that he would be holding down a role in Tibradden House during this year with the junior boys; and he also expressed concern about the demands placed on him by being captain of rugby. Having done this and consulted one or two trusted advisors, Alec accepted the position, and it will come as no surprise to you to learn that I believe he has carried out his many responsibilities with great diligence and due regard for the position.

He has been clear in his analysis of situations, dedicated in his determination to acquit himself with distinction, and an inspiration to us all in the example he has set.As Senior Prefect, in keeping with Sewell's ideal, he has been like an elder brother to the entire pupil body, respected and trusted by all.

This, ladies and gentlemen, boys and girls, is the Columban spirit which is alive and well in 2010, and which I commend to you all. I am confident that the College will be equally vibrant in the years, decades and centuries which lie ahead of us.

Perhaps I might be permitted to conclude this address with the words of a pupil as they were communicated to me in a touching letter I received just a few days ago. These are only some extracts from it:

"I would like to say that at this moment in my life I am really honoured and thankful to be in this school. I have to concentrate on my work but friendship is also very important for everyone. I feel I am settling really well into St. Columba's College. I have never been so comfortable or happier for such a long time. It is like I finally found a home and a place where I really feel I belong. Since I came to St. Columba's, my life has changed so much and it is still changing. My character and personality are quite a bit different than before. I now feel secure with everything. Before I came to St. Columba's, I found it really hard to make friends. Now it is working better for me to create friendships gradually. I am enjoying the company, passions and ambitions of others. It is just that I am learning so many things from this school and from nice and helpful teachers and pupils. I feel I am getting stronger, more confident, and more ambitious than I was. For the future, I will never forget this place and will always remember that St. Columba's College has changed my life in the greatest way. I hope everything is going well in this school. It is a great, friendly and enthusiastic place."

I thought long and hard about whether to include this in my address today and I apologise to the individual for reading from a private letter. But more than anything I have said today about our founders' vision, about the character of the school in 2010, about what we strive to achieve here, these words have a power and an immediacy which are humbling and inspiring at the same time.

Thank you all for coming here today to share in our celebration of our College. Floreat Columba et floreant columbanenses! Thank you.