

OLLSCOIL na hÉIREANN
NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF IRELAND

TEXT OF THE INTRODUCTORY ADDRESS DELIVERED BY:

PROFESSOR PETER GRAY on 6 NOVEMBER 2025 in the Aviva Stadium, on the occasion of the conferring of the Degree of Doctor of Literature, *honoris causa*, on **ROBERT SAVAGE**

A Sheansailéir, a mhuintir na hOllscoile agus a dhaoine uaisle.

Chancellor, university members and ladies and gentlemen,

It is an honour and a pleasure to be asked to provide this citation for my colleague and friend Rob Savage, who is fully deserving of the honour bestowed by the National University of Ireland by the award of the honorary degree of DLitt. Professor Savage is one of the leading historians of modern Ireland of his generation and a specialist in the complex and highly charged histories of politics and public broadcasting on both sides of the Irish border, and of the northern 'Troubles'. He has also played a central role in developing transatlantic relationships between historians of Ireland, and Irish Studies scholars more broadly.



A native of Massachusetts, Rob Savage was educated at Needham High School and then Boston College – an institution to which he has devoted his academic career and where he has held the post of Professor of the Practice of History since 2015. After studying for a Masters degree at UCD, he returned to Boston College to complete his PhD under the supervision of Professor Kevin O'Neill, later taking up teaching posts in Irish Studies and History at the same institution. From 1995 to 2003 he was associate director and then from 2003 to 2010 co-director of the Irish Studies Program at Boston College (returning as interim director in 2020-2), playing a formative role in developing BC into one of the leading centres for interdisciplinary study and understanding of Ireland, and its relations with the world, not only in north America but globally. Boston College has been and remains one of a handful of international institutions committed to serious investment in expertise in and engagement with interdisciplinary Irish Studies, through a network of partnerships and initiatives from which numerous scholars and students on this

island have benefitted. We thank Professor Savage, and through him his colleagues past and present, for this service in making the history, culture and politics of our island better understood beyond globally.

Rob Savage's personal commitment to internationalising his own scholarship is evident from a series of visiting research positions overseas he has held, often attained through highly competitive application processes. Host institutions include the University of Galway (2004 and 2013), the Institute for Advanced Studies in the Humanities at the University of Edinburgh (2007), the Long Room Hub at Trinity College Dublin (2012, 2018), the Institute of Irish Studies and School of History at Queen's University Belfast (2014, 2017-18) and Venice International University (2024).

Such extended periods of research in Ireland and the UK have laid the groundwork for Rob Savage's transformative scholarly outputs, which combine deep and insightful archival exploration and analysis, mastery of the historical literature, and the keen critical eye of an outsider cast over Irish events. His interests have extended widely across 20th-century Irish history, and include an edited volume on Ireland in the New Century: Politics, Culture and Identity (Four Courts Press, 2003), and a succinct analytical biography of Ireland's third Taoiseach Seán Lemass (published by the Historical Association of Ireland in 1999, and republished in a revised version as part of the University College Dublin Press 'Life and Times' series in 2014). For Savage, Lemass was 'the great Irish moderniser', not least for his support for the economic reform proposals advocated by the secretary of the Department of Finance, T.K. Whitaker, in response to the economic and demographic crisis of the 1950s, as well as for initiating the process that would ultimately lead to Ireland's EEC accession in 1972, and tentatively opening up a dialogue of détente with the government of Northern Ireland in the 1960s.

Lemass's other great achievement was to oversee the introduction of public service television broadcasting to Ireland in 1961, and it is this element that connects the biography to the core themes of Rob Savage's academic output. Through a quartet of ground-breaking studies, he has made the political history of Irish television broadcasting (and British coverage of Irish affairs) his domain, subjecting them to rigorous historical scrutiny and setting agendas for future students to pursue. These books come as two pairs, the first reviewing broadcasting policy in the Republic through to the early 1970s, the second tracing the impact of the Troubles on the BBC in Northern Ireland and London to the end of the Thatcher administration in 1990.

His first monograph, *Irish Television: The Political and Social Origins* (Cork University Press, 1996), addressed the debates that preceded the launch of RTÉ's public service on New Year's Eve 1961. This required reviewing the development of radio broadcasting from its beginnings in the Irish Free State as

it set a template for the character and culture of broadcasting within the newly independent country. Coming under pressure to ‘catch up’ with BBC and independent television programming already reaching many people in the country via masts in western Britain and Northern Ireland from the early 1950s, the state and interest groups such as the Catholic Church and commercial lobbies wrestled with how Ireland should respond. Savage’s conclusion that ‘in adopting a state-owned and operated commercial public service, Ireland retained a certain degree of dignity and independence’ and that ‘it would be difficult to define the outcome as anything less than a victory for the Irish people’, reflects positively on the compromise reached by Lemass’s government in establishing RTÉ.

This study was followed up in 2010 with *A Loss of Innocence? Television and Irish Society, 1960-72* (Manchester University Press), which considered the impact of the new medium in Ireland and attempts by both government and the Church to impose control on what was a potentially disruptive and unruly social phenomenon. His book has been praised for avoiding the temptation of reductionism in treating both, opting instead to follow the complexities revealed in the archival record about differences of opinion within these power structures that could be exploited by the new RTÉ executive to promote their own institutional agenda. If always subject to political pressures, Irish television retained a significant degree of autonomy not always granted or preserved by state broadcasters elsewhere.

These tensions between state power and broadcast media were next explored in the more febrile and tendentious context of Northern Ireland in Rob Savage’s second book pairing. *The BBC’s ‘Irish Troubles’: Television, Conflict and Northern Ireland* appeared with Manchester University Press in 2015, the product of extensive inquiry into the BBC archive and recently released state paper records. Here two nodes of activity had to be investigated – the regional wing in Belfast that moved from radio to local television output by the 1960s, and tended to operate as part of the Ulster Unionist establishment, and network news and current affairs, based like the BBC top brass in London, which had largely ignored Northern Ireland before 1969. With the outbreak and escalation of the ‘Troubles’ this stance was sustainable, with the shooting war becoming increasingly paralleled by battles over its media representation. As UK governments sought increasingly to shape the narrative, the BBC in the 1970s actively resisted the pressure, albeit at the cost of adopting a degree of internal self-censorship. Widely and very positively reviewed, the book was short-listed for the 2018 Ewart-Biggs Literary Award.

The later chapters of the book flag the escalating state-BBC antagonism following the election of Margaret Thatcher as UK Prime Minister in 1979, and this is given full-length treatment in the final book (so far), *Northern Ireland, the BBC, and Censorship in Thatcher’s Britain* (Oxford University Press, 2022). This has drawn critical acclaim for locating the notorious 1988 broadcasting ban

on republican voices within its wider historical and political contexts, including international damage to the BBC's reputation and the UK's standing as a liberal democracy. Attempts at state censorship of coverage of Northern Ireland were regularly contested by broadcasters, often unsuccessfully. Throughout Savage treats this difficult history with nuance and sophistication, making an important contribution to the British 'high' political history of the period as well as placing a seal on his quartet of outstanding monographs on the politics of Irish and British broadcasting.

With his research now moving to open up the history of equally controversial dimensions of the northern conflict, specifically the experience and treatment of informers as part of the 'dirty war' in the 1970s-80s, Rob Savage continues to build on what is already an outstanding and innovative body of work. Here is a historian at the height of his powers, who has made an immense contribution to understanding both the recent history of modern Ireland and how journalistic ideals of 'telling the truth to power' can become compromised by the power politics of the media in democratic societies.

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 Litteris; idque tibi fide mea testor ac spondeo
totique Academiae.**