

Title	Citation by Professor Áine Hyland for Sister Mercedes Desmond on the occasion of her conferring with an Honorary Doctorate by University College Cork
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Publication date	2015-11-02
Original Citation	Hyland, Á. (2015) 'Citation by Professor Áine Hyland for Sister Mercedes Desmond on the occasion of her conferring with an Honorary Doctorate by University College Cork', University College Cork, 2 November 2015.
Type of publication	Other
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Download date	2026-10-29 10:29:59
Item downloaded from	https://hdl.handle.net/10468/17713

**Citation by Professor Áine Hyland for Sr. Mercedes Desmond
on the occasion of her conferring with an Honorary Degree by UCC 2nd
November 2015.**

Sr Mercedes Desmond was born in Donoughmore, Co. Cork in 1922. She sat her Leaving Certificate examination in 1941 in the Presentation Convent in Thurles and entered the Mercy Convent in St. Maries of the Isle, Cork in 1942. She was professed as a Sister of Mercy in 1944 and took her Final Vows in 1947.

Although she had never studied science at secondary school, Sr. Mercedes enrolled as a student in UCC to study physics under Professor J. J. McHenry. One of her external examiners was Professor E.T.S. Walton who won the Nobel prize for physics for his work on splitting the atom. Sr Mercedes also studied mathematics and chemistry and in 1948 she graduated with a B.Sc. degree and subsequently a H.Dip in Ed.

Co-incidentally she graduated the same year as my late husband Bill Hyland, who was also awarded a B.Sc in Maths and Physics and who went on to study for a Masters degree under Professor M.D. McCarthy, who was subsequently to become founding Director of the Central Statistics Office and in the 1960s, President of University College Cork.

In 1949 Sr. Mercedes was assigned to St. Aloysius School, Sharman Crawford Street, where she taught Physics, Chemistry and Mathematics throughout her teaching career. In 1962, along with a small group of other science teachers, she founded the Irish Science Teachers' Association. Since that time, this organisation (which currently has a membership of 1,200) has had a profound effect in helping to ensure the highest possible standards of science education in Ireland. St Aloysius School became the home of the Cork Branch of the Irish Science Teachers Association and for over 40 years Sr Mercedes would personally open the school for the monthly meetings of the ISTA and would welcome teachers with tea and coffee and delicious baking.

Sr. Mercedes immersed herself in science education both at local and national level. She participated in and organised numerous in-service courses for science teachers ranging from glass blowing to electronics to ecology field trips to astronomy. These courses were organised by the ISTA within the network of universities and Institutes of Technology throughout the country. Since the founding of the ISTA, she has served at all levels of the ISTA, has represented the Cork branch on the Council of the ISTA and has represented the ISTA at conferences at home and abroad.

Sr. Mercedes was appointed principal of St Aloysius school in 1978 and during her term as principal, enrolment in the school rose to 1200 students, making it the largest girls secondary school in Ireland at one stage. During her years as Principal, she served as a member of the Executive Council of the JMB in Ireland. She retired as principal in 1985. Her enthusiasm for education never waned, and as well as serving as Manager of St. Aloysius School up to 1992, she continued to serve as a member of the Board of Management of the school until ten years ago. In 1995 she was the recipient of the Science Educator of the Year Award from the Irish Science Teachers Association - awarded “for her outstanding contribution to science education in Ireland”.

Like George Boole, Sr. Mercedes worked throughout her life to improve the social and educational conditions of young people in her neighbourhood. Like him, she dedicated her life to stimulating the interest of her pupils in science and mathematics. She believed, like Boole, that observation and experimentation is the basis of all scientific investigations. Like him, she never divorced mathematics from reality – she always emphasised that mathematics had its origins in the solving of practical problems and she never taught in an abstract way. To quote Boole, she believed that “We ought **not** to illustrate every rule by appropriate questions, but to put the line or the rod or the measuring chain in the hands of the pupil and require him to prove his attainment on any fitting object that may present itself”. She agreed with Boole’s dictum that “The pupil should be required to commit nothing to memory before it is understood”.

I feel particularly privileged to have been invited to read this citation for Sr. Mercedes. I was fortunate in the 1950s to be a pupil of the Sisters of Mercy and I had the benefit of being taught Mathematics by a Mercy nun who believed that girls were capable of taking the Honours mathematics at Leaving Certificate level. When Sr. Mercedes began to teach Mathematics in St. Als in 1949, only 15 girls in the country sat Honours Leaving Certificate Mathematics and only five got Honours. Ten years later, when I sat the Leaving Cert myself, 38 girls took the Honours paper, and I was one of 16 girls who achieved an Honours grade. In conferring this Honorary degree on Sr. Mercedes, UCC is also honouring all those religious women in Ireland throughout the decades who not only provided excellent educational opportunities for girls, but who, like Sr. Mercedes, were outstanding role models and exemplars of female leadership.

I would like to end this citation with the words used in a presentation made to George Boole when he left a school near Lincoln to set up his own school: "Great man, thy fame will live when thou art gone ... Genius will bid thy name forever live .." On behalf of University College Cork, I re-state these words: "Sr. Mercedes, thy fame will live when thou art gone --- Genius will bid thy name to live forever".