

Come clean, John McClean

Irish rugby's dirty secret

For almost two decades, gardaí have been aware of sexual abuse allegations against John McClean, one of Leinster rugby's most revered coaches.

John McClean

Photo of John McClean by Ray McManus, Sportsfile



by Gemma O'Doherty

At least five past pupils have made complaints to gardaí in recent months claiming McClean molested them in the 1970s and 1980s

JOHN MCCLEAN had the power to make or break a schoolboy's dreams of playing rugby for his country. As a coach in Terenure College for almost 30 years, and then head of the sport at UCD, his role in recruiting future generations of players gave him status and influence. He is credited with spotting Brian O'Driscoll's talent when he was a teenager, and his elite rugby academy in UCD produced a number of players who went on to have international careers.

But behind the glory on the pitch, allegations that McClean had a very dark side are now coming to light. The veteran coach stands accused of a litany of complaints by former pupils at Terenure College who say they were sexually assaulted by him during their time at the private boys' school. Their harrowing testimonies paint a picture of a predatory paedophile who targeted vulnerable youngsters in his charge, grooming them during class before taking them to his office where he carried out his sordid abuse.

Village can also reveal that gardaí have known about the accusations against McClean for almost two decades during which time he continued to have access to children.

As more victims start to come forward, the controversy threatens to escalate into one of Ireland's biggest child-abuse scandals with Leinster rugby bracing itself for a wave of further revelations about a man who was one of its most celebrated coaches.

At least five past pupils, now in their 40s and 50s, have made complaints to gardaí in recent months claiming McClean molested them in the 1970s and 1980s.

Two say they reported him to gardaí several years ago - one almost 20 years ago - yet neither of their complaints resulted in an arrest or prosecution.

The men say they made their original complaints to

Detective Garda Tom Stack at Terenure Garda Station. The same officer is handling the numerous allegations coming to light today. The Garda press office has declined to comment on the matter.

Now in his 70s and living in south Dublin, McClean, who taught English at the Carmelite school, is alleged to have used his powerful position to indulge in a series of depraved attacks on young boys in his care. *Village* is aware of at least ten individuals making complaints about John McClean.

The former coach was nicknamed 'The Doc' due to his enthusiasm for looking after boys' rugby injuries. It is also claimed he would go into shower rooms after games to talk to players while they were naked.

One former pupil describes how he was approached by McClean in the run-up to trials for a sports day in the 1970s.

"He used to ask a few of us athletes to stay back after school to check if we had any problems with muscle injury. One day, I was told to meet him at the doors of the concert hall which I did. There was another teacher there. I knew she knew something was wrong when she asked him what he was doing and why. He told her I had a groin problem and that he needed to fix it for sports day. He then took me down to the back room under the stage and interfered with my private parts. He left the room on two occasions only to come back and do it again and again".

The allegations suggest that McClean tended to go for weaker children who were going through difficulties at school or family troubles.

Some say he preyed on them during class on the pretence he was concerned for their welfare. They say he would order them to stay back after school and attend his office. It was there the most disturbing assaults are alleged to have taken place, sometimes behind a locked door.

Two victims claim they were molested during rehearsals for school plays.

One was 13 when he was allegedly assaulted in the college concert hall while changing into a girl's costume. He claims McClean masturbated himself during the attack. The victim reported the incident to gardaí almost twenty years ago but nothing came of it. He also referred the matter to Terenure College.

McClean went on to become Director of Rugby at UCD in the mid 1990s and continued to have unfettered access to youngsters. The university now faces questions as to what background checks, if any, it carried out before he was given the job.

Village put the allegations of sexual assault to McClean and asked him if he was willing to confirm or deny them. He said he had no comment to make.

Two of his former charges at Terenure say they were so traumatised by what happened to them, they left the school never to return. It is also alleged that the retired coach was capable of severe physical violence.

In one case dating back to the mid 1980s, a former pupil at the school said that McClean beat him with a bunch of rulers tied together with an elastic band across his bottom. The boy was 12 at the time. McClean told the boy his mother had given him permission to beat him if he was not behaving. After the beating, the victim says he hugged him and proceeded to sexually assault him.

This man also reported McClean to gardaí. A file was sent to the DPP but no charges were brought despite the fact that the authorities were aware of at least one earlier accusation against him.

One victim alleges he was sexually abused at the top of the classroom. He says he was brought to the front of the class to be reprimanded over a poor grade and that McClean assaulted him using his black teaching gown as a shield.

Another past pupil describes how he was targeted when his grades started to suffer due to a family illness. On the last week of term, McClean asked him to come to his office one

day after class.

"He was my year head at the time but I hadn't had many dealings with him. He said he wanted to see me about my performance that year, which hadn't been great. On the first occasion, we talked about my issues at home and he told me he understood but that my performance was unacceptable.

I told him my brother was very ill and that it was weighing heavily on me at the time. He changed his tune and started to express what I thought was compassion and understanding. I broke down and he moved in close to me. Suddenly, he had his arms around me. I remember he was wearing his black gown at the time. He was telling me not to worry, but as he did, his touch turned into a sort of petting and he began rubbing my head, back and thighs.

"He started spanking me and began fondling me at the same time. He then stood me in front of him and started to masturbate me. I went out the door that day and never returned to the school again"

Then he told me he needed to see me again the following day. This time, he started to rub me between my legs, my bottom, back and head. He was holding me close and telling me not to worry. I always remember him whispering that I needed to be punished for my poor grades. I was very confused at the time but I realise now he was setting it all up and grooming me.

The next day, he called me back to his office. It was the last day of term.

I remember going in and hearing the door lock behind me. He asked me to go around to his side of the desk. He opened my trousers and dropped them down around my ankles before placing me over his lap. He started spanking me and began fondling me at the same time. He then stood me



John McClean, 1969

in front of him and started to masturbate me. That went on for quite a while. Then he got up, unlocked the office door and said goodbye. I went out the door that day and never went back to the school again".

This ex-pupil is 50 today, but throughout his life, he has been unable to put the experience behind him.

"I've had missed opportunities because of it and there is a lot about my attitude that I think the abuse is responsible for. I never married. I live alone. I suppose it has left me with a trust thing. I need to be in control. If anyone tries to help me, I see that as a hindrance. It could be the smallest gesture but I reject it.

I want McClean to be held accountable. He was so arrogant. He is the type of character who used his position to enhance his own self-importance, you know Mr Rugby, Mr Terenure, UCD, Leinster. He was almost infallible, untouchable. I want to see justice done. I don't know how he has got away with it for so long."

Almost three months ago, *Village* put a series of questions about allegations of sexual abuse to the Carmelite Order which runs Terenure College. They have been ignored. It has emerged however that the school has referred a number of complaints about McClean to the gardaí and the child protection service Tusla.

In December, *Village* revealed that the Carmelite order had made private financial settlements to some past pupils who were victims of abuse. At least one of the payouts related to another rugby coach at the school, Fr Aidan O'Donovan, a notorious paedophile who abused dozens of boys. He was never brought to justice and died in 2013. It is not known if McClean was the perpetrator in any of these payouts.

Members of the past pupils union at Terenure College have been contacted by the board of management claiming that the college was "deeply concerned and saddened" that any pupil could have experienced abuse during their time there. They encouraged anyone with concerns to contact them and the gardaí.

The allegations against McClean have been met with little surprise in some rugby circles. In the 1960s, he began teaching at Terenure College, where he always held positions of authority including year head and coach to the senior cup team.

In the mid 1990s, he left to set up UCD's first



An alleged victim returns to his old school



“Mr Rugby, Mr Terenure, UCD, Leinster. He was almost infallible, untouchable. I want to see justice done. I don’t know how he has got away with it for so long”

rugby academy which enjoyed huge success producing a number of top level players like Brian O’Driscoll and Rob Kearney. In 2011, UCD presented McClean with an award, describing him as a “great director of rugby and a foundation stone of the modern club”.

In 1996, during a Leinster Schools training session at Terenure, McClean spotted the skills of a young Brian O’Driscoll. His decision to switch him from fly half to centre was career-defining for the young star in the making who pays tribute to McClean in his autobiography.

O’Driscoll is not believed to have had any knowledge of the allegations being made against his former coach.

As they garner the courage to speak out, several alleged victims say they are still wrestling to cope with the fallout of the abuse on their

lives. Some have suffered broken relationships, damaged careers, and relentless problems with trust and authority.

Although they are ready to face McClean in court, they are bracing themselves for the possibility they may be denied justice because of the length of time the investigation is taking. This is one of the reasons they have chosen to speak out now.

“Justice delayed is justice denied”, says one. “McClean is a very powerful man in Irish sport and we know how powerful men can be protected in this country. He has been a danger to children for decades and remains so today. He must be held to account for all of the damage he has caused”.

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Breaking their Silence: Abuse victims speak out

“HE LAID OUT THREE DRESSES FOR ME AND TOLD ME TO TAKE MY CLOTHES OFF. I WAS TERRIFIED.”

PETER (NOT his real name) says John McClean started to target him when he was 14. It was the 1970s and he was in second year at Terenure College where McClean was his English teacher.

“It began with him asking to have a private chat after class. At the start, I thought it was just about him taking an interest in my education, but as time went on, he began touching me inappropriately.

He was always in his big black gown. He might get me to read something. He would be sitting behind me and would start touching me. Each time it got worse.

One day he was sitting opposite me and he put his leg between my legs and started massaging me with his knee. He was rubbing me up and down, trying to get me aroused.

I was only a kid of 14 and didn’t know what to do. I felt so embarrassed but he had me locked in a position where I couldn’t move away from him. He then put his arm around me behind my back and started pushing me from behind. He was trying to make me touch him.

One day he told me to come to the lecture hall with him. He said there was a school play coming up later in the month and there was a female part he wanted me to play. He was aggressive towards me. He brought me into the lecture hall and locked the door behind me. He told me he had laid out three dresses for me, which he wanted me to try on. Then he told me to take off my clothes and put them on. I was terrified.

Luckily there was somebody fixing the stage lighting in the hall at the time which caught McClean off guard. He told him to go on his break as he didn’t want to be disturbed but two cleaning ladies appeared. I took the opportunity to grab my school bag and leave. I ran to the fire exit, pushed the door open and ran out of the school. I never went back there again.

More than 30 years later, it still haunts me. It’s time we all had closure. McClean had a notorious reputation and we were all terrified of him and what he might do to us. For so long, I thought I was alone. I can’t help but wonder how many other boys suffered a similar fate”.

“HE TOLD ME MY MOTHER HAD ASKED HIM TO PUNISH ME. THAT WAS A LIE”.

JOHN (NOT his real name) says he was abused by McClean when he was 12. Today he is in his mid 40s but the scars of that abuse still linger. He reported the abuse to gardaí in 2016 but has been disappointed at the lack of action.

“One day, I was summoned to McClean’s office for a lecture. He was my year head at the time. I was around 12 and in first year. I had probably been talking in class. He said my mother had told him he wasn’t to take any nonsense from me and that he had permission to hit me. My mother was a hard enough task master so I didn’t see any reason to disbelieve him.

“We were alone in his office. He gave me a talking to about my behaviour and told me I would have to be disciplined. He then told me to bend over a chair. He took six wooden rulers, held together with elastic bands, and started to strike me over the backside, maybe six or seven times.

Afterwards, he could see that I was in pain and upset. He started to wipe the tears from my eyes and then held me in an embrace, while trying to reassure me that he hadn’t hurt me that much. He then started to grope my buttocks in a sexual way. The whole incident took about five minutes. Afterwards, I went back to class and didn’t tell anyone. There was a culture in the school where you nearly expected this sort of thing to happen to you so I just felt it was my turn.

Through the years, I wanted to report him to the gardaí but I heard through the grapevine he had gone abroad and so he was out of my life as far as I was concerned.

Then my wife found out he was linked to UCD and presumably back in Ireland. That alarmed me. I still bore the psychological effects of what had happened to me and do to this day.

It was at that point I decided to do something about it. I went to the gardaí in 2016 and saw Det Garda Tom Stack in Terenure. He took a detailed statement from me. A file was submitted to the DPP but they decided not to proceed, which disappointed me greatly.

I went back to the gardaí in January of this year and dealt with Tom Stack again. By that point, I was aware that other people had come forward about McClean.

I also spoke to Terenure College about it and told them what had happened.

I’m 46 now. If I was to describe myself, I would say I was a little shy and don’t smile very much. I believe what happened to me in Terenure has impacted on the man I am today.

My mother is in her eighties now and I finally asked her recently whether she had told McClean to punish me. She said that was just ridiculous and she never had.

“I want to see him brought to justice now more than ever. Not only did he abuse me, he lied to me about my mother. That showed an extra level of wickedness and it makes me really angry. He has to be held accountable for all the damage he has done to people’s lives”. 