

# Side by side into the light



An independent state and a great university, the two great ideals advanced together into the 20th century. **Conor Brady** looks at a remarkable close and fruitful relationship



The lives of UCD and the independent Ireland that was brought into being (at least partially) by the Treaty of 1921, have been coterminous to a remarkable degree.

Both the ideal of a great university, reflecting national aspirations and the political ideal of an independent Irish State sprang from the same roots, the same objectives and the same cultural resurgence of the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

When Professor Donal McCartney published the most recent history of UCD (in 1999) he called it *UCD A National Idea*. The title encapsulated well the sense in which the identities of the State and the university have always overlapped.

It is possible to chart a parallel development between State and university down the decades, as both have come of age, growing and adapting to changing needs, new opportunities and new challenges.

Political scientists and some historians will argue that many if not quite all of the essentials of a new Irish State, enjoying a considerable degree of autonomy from Britain, had actually come into being well before the extended period of violence that began in 1916 and that we now call the War of Independence.

The cultural phenomenon that was the Gaelic Revival had provided Ireland with

an alternative iconography and political culture to those of the Empire. By 1898 a vibrant system of elected local government had been established. As Home Rule inched forward, so too did a process of "Hibernicising" public services and institutions. Even the police forces – long the instrument through which British control of Ireland had been effected – were designated to be placed under Irish control.

Trinity College's monopoly on university learning had been challenged by the emergence in the late 19th century of St Patrick's College, Maynooth, Newman's "Catholic University" (later "University College") in Dublin and the Queen's Colleges at Belfast, Galway and Cork.

The first decade and a half of the 20th century saw a significant expansion in the numbers of young Irish men – and some women – of a nationalist and Catholic background who were able to avail of university education. Standards of living were rising. There was a growing cohort of Catholic doctors, lawyers, civil servants, teachers and business people with the means to give their own children a university education. And there were other young people from Catholic backgrounds who could juggle the demands of business, trade or profession to allow them to attend lectures and take degrees.

UCD as we know it today grew from Newman's original "Catholic University"

at 86 St Stephen's Green, via the Irish Universities Act 1908 which brought the National University of Ireland into existence.

The college was initially scattered through a collection of buildings but the Stephen's Green premises served on and even yet remains part of UCD. A significant factor in shaping the new college's nationalist identity was the provision that representatives of the new county councils should sit on its governing body.

The two Dublin universities perfectly represented the polarisation that was emerging between Irish and British identities.

Trinity College was unionist, Protestant and British. Its alumni served King and Empire. Its heroes were the British monarchs, statesmen and generals, adventurers and merchants who had coloured one third of the world map in imperial red. Its vision of history, art and culture almost wholly ignored the Ireland that pre-dated the Anglo-Norman invasion of 1169.

By the outbreak of the first World War, in contrast, the heroes of UCD were the giants of the Fenian Cycle, the pre-Norman kings, the Brehon lawyers and the succession of patriots who had risen down the centuries to assert (as it was claimed) Ireland's nationhood.

Early professors and senior academic staff were, in many instances, household

names as the authors of important texts of the Gaelic revival.

This worked its way into the volunteer mobilisation that began with the outbreak of the first World War. The Dublin officer-corps of the Irish Volunteers, raised to protect Ireland and then to ensure the delivery of Britain's promise of Home Rule, was a roll call of UCD staff and graduates.

When the Rising broke out on Easter Monday, 1916, UCD staff who took part included James Ryan (later a Dáil deputy and Minister), Michael Hayes, Liam O'Broin and others. One UCD woman staff member, Louise Gavan Duffy, was in the GPO. Many students and graduates were also involved, notably Eamon de Valera.

With the establishment of the State and the departure of the British administrative corps, hundreds of posts had to be filled in executive, administrative, technical and professional grades. Men – and again, a few women – with trained minds and perhaps with a flair for administration were needed.

Key jobs across every part of the public service, from the Diplomatic Corps to the senior ranks of the Garda Síochána, from the Department of Finance to the National Army, were filled by UCD graduates.

As the new State sought to establish the basis of its economy, it became clear that a number of key activities would have to be developed in order to main-

tain some degree of prosperity. Irish agriculture would have to be stimulated and put on a scientific basis if it was to provide for the country's needs, much less build up its exports.

Thus under a Dáil Act of 1926, the Royal College of Science in Merrion Street and the Albert Agricultural College at Glasnevin were transferred to UCD.

Dairy scientists, agricultural advisers other specialists came from UCD to staff the State's fledgling industries. They managed the creameries and the co-operatives and what we would nowadays call "agribusiness" enterprises such as the sugar factories.

When the Vocational Education Act was passed in 1930, establishing a system of "technical schools" around the State, many of the executive officers and senior staff were drawn from UCD's agricultural science classes.

The decision to harness the Shannon and develop the first great hydro-electricity plant at Ardacrusha, saw scores of skilled engineers working alongside the German specialists from the Siemens firm which had secured the contract.

Later, the growth of the ESB and the establishment of Bord na Mona, added further requirements for engineers.

These developments were wholly consistent with the thinking among the Irish nationalists who had driven the objective of the university. Padraig Pearse had

Students pass the new Veterinary Building in Belfield. Photograph: Brenda Fitzsimons

written of the new university as "an intellectual headquarters for the Gael." John Dillon said it should be a "a genuine expression of national intellect and national ideals."

As Professor McCartney put it, those who developed the concept of the university wanted to "establish in UCD, pragmatic departments such as commerce, education, agriculture, applied science, engineering, architecture and veterinary medicine."

A SIGNIFICANT element in the development of the State was UCD's role in providing "second chance" university education in the years when full-time attendance at third-level was a viable proposition for only a small minority of the population.

Evening degree courses in arts and commerce, in particular, gave university training to many who would not otherwise have been able to get it. A great many of Ireland's leaders of industry, its directors of utilities and its heads of public services got their university education this way – among them TK Whitaker, Ireland's most distinguished public servant and author of the early *Programmes for Economic Expansion*.

Down the decades, many of UCD's leading academics have stepped out of their university roles into those of Ministers and leaders of important State bodies.

Most notably, Garret FitzGerald came from the Economics Department to be Taoiseach. Cabinets of every political persuasion have included UCD graduates, including two, Charles Haughey and John Bruton, who served as Taoiseach.

With the move to Belfield in the 1960s and 1970s, the changing UCD reflected a changing Ireland. It was also responding to new priorities identified by the State. Ireland was going for sustainable economic growth, based on high skills and educational development. It was also clear that Ireland's future would lie with the emerging European community.

UCD would be to the forefront in educating the scientists and the engineers that would be needed as the economy was built. It would also produce a large proportion of the economists, the accountants, the diplomats, the social scientists, the teachers and others who would provide the services required for the administration of a modern state.

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# The L&H: behemoth among UCD's societies

Hugh Oram looks over the colourful history of the Literary & Historical Society

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AMONG the countless campus societies at UCD, one stands out in the mind of the general public – the L&H, the Literary & Historical Society. On many occasions during the past 40 years, often raucous, frequently revisionist and sometimes rancorous debates at the L&H have hit the media headlines, making it the Late Late Show of the Belfield campus.

Two recently published books give a detailed summary of the L&H and its innumerable debates during the past 150 years, as well as an insight into the personalities involved, many of whom went on to national prominence. In the earlier days of the L&H, many of its personalities played vital roles in the creation of an independent Irish state.

The roll call of names included Kevin O'Higgins, John A Costello and Patrick McGilligan. In more recent decades, names that have emerged from the L&H have often been connected with high office in the legal profession, the likes of Adrian Hardiman, who is now a judge in the Supreme Court, writers, such as Aidan Mathews and media personalities, such as Vincent Browne, Henry Kelly, John Horgan, Maeve Binchy and Kevin Myers.

To mark the contribution of the L&H to UCD's 150th anniversary, a steering committee was set up in 2000, chaired by Desmond Green, who was auditor of the society in 1960-61. It was decided to produce two books.

The first was a reprint of the L&H centenary book, produced in 1955 and edited by Professor James Meehan. This book gives a thorough account of the L&H's first century, covering the time when the society was a much smaller and more sedate organisation. In those earlier years, the mob hadn't discovered itself, but the L&H quickly became influential; one of the contributors to its debates in the very early 20th century was a certain James Joyce.

The L&H became the place where nationalist and Catholic Ireland put itself under scrutiny. Even in those earlier years, there was no doubting the quality of debate. Besides Joyce, two other renowned speakers were Patrick Pearse and Eamon de Valera. After independence, the L&H settled back into cosier ways, prompting Flann O'Brien, aka Myles na Gopaleen, to utter his famous polemic in 1935, "What is wrong with the L&H?"

Besides the reprint of the centenary book is a new production, *The Literary & Historical Society 1955-2005*, bringing the story up to date. The new book has proved a winner: the first edition



Michael McDowell at the L&H in 1970 – and below Dermot Gleeson and Dorrie Finan at a debate in 1968



quickly sold out and a second is being prepared by publisher A&A Farmer. Lawyer Frank Callanan, who was L&H auditor in 1977-78, edited the new volume.

WITH about 60 contributions in all, the book also has a fine section of photographs, where the contribution of people such as Oliver O'Brien was paramount. Among the photographs is a picture of a demure looking Michael McDowell, in 1970, complete with flower in his buttonhole. Mary Finan was the marketing

adviser. Of her, Green says: "She's the only person I've ever met who can flutter her eyelashes with powerful effect down the phone."

The book was launched in Belfield last March at a packed dinner with 400 guests. At the launch, Dr Hugh Brady, president of UCD, said: "The L&H has provided a forum for the past 150 years at which both ephemeral and eternal issues have been debated." He said that the new volume shows that the L&H was and is a place where the different sides of the most contentious public issues in Ireland have come face to face.

In the 1950s, as Maeve Binchy recalls in her contribution to the book, the

L&H was "the sex of the fifties." Alternative forms of entertainment simply didn't exist so the highlight of student social existence was the argy-bargy of an L&H debate.

Hugh O'Flaherty, a former Supreme Court judge, remembers the 1950s fondly in the book as "the golden age for debating."

Vincent Browne is somewhat more circumspect "Several of those now fully registered as astounding national idiots 'graced' the L&H in the mid-1960s," he writes. They managed to say nothing at all, with spectacular panache, he says.

In 1961, Browne recalls, the L&H had to hold its agm in the Shelbourne Hotel, because UCD had suspended the society.

A long-ago contributor to an L&H debate is pictured, Oliver J Flanagan, the Fine Gael TD with very strict views about sex.

From 1962, comes the photograph of a young and sprightly looking Charles J Haughey, Minister for Justice, addressing the L&H on the motion that "man's liberty fades as bureaucracy grows."

Patrick Cosgrave also features. A young man from Finglas, Dublin, his views were very right wing. His term as auditor, 1963-64, saw some of the liveliest carry-on at the L&H. Cosgrave later became a close confidante of and adviser to Margaret Thatcher. He died nearly four years ago.

The L&H has long been seen as a spawning ground for politicians and that's true to some extent.

A number of former auditors have reached high political office, including a President – Cearbhall Ó Dálaigh – four ministers, three attorneys general, three chief justices and five judges. While it's relatively easy to shake the popular belief that the L&H has been a breeding ground for politicians, the same can't be said about barristers.

*The Irish Times* has had its part to play in all this. The newspaper has long sponsored L&H debates and the earliest reference in the book to an Irish Times L&H debate is dated 1960.

NEXT year, the 26th World Universities Debating Championship will be staged in Dublin and the L&H will be able to assume what many of its supporters see as its rightful place: world domination in the league of university debate.

Eircom is the primary partner sponsoring next year's event and *The Irish Times* will be the L&H's media partner.

These days, L&H debates may be less rowdy, less headline grabbing than some of the spectacular events of the 1960s and the 1970s, but the L&H, despite much more competition, retains its place as the premier society of UCD.