

FACULTY OF LAW: changing times

Remembering the early days of gentle revolution

Law students played a key part in social and academic life at Earlsfort Terrace, writes
Peter McGuire



Above: Senior Counsel Dermot Gleeson pictured with Dorrie Finan attending a Literary and Historical society event in 1968.

Law students have always been at the centre of the most important episodes in UCD's history.

When Michael Tierney was president of UCD, he was regularly engaged in battles of will with the students of the literary and historical society, which was dominated by law students.

Many law students went on to

play a role in the so-called "Gentle Revolution" of the early 1960s, when UCD students rebelled against the structures of UCD authority.

An era of UCD's history ended with the transfer of the faculty of law to the Belfield campus in 1970, but many of the most significant and influential names in the legal profession can still trace

their roots back to Earlsfort Terrace.

One of Ireland's most eminent barristers, Paul Conlon SC, was a law student in Earlsfort Terrace. He has worked as a prosecutor and defender on a range of civil and criminal cases, constitutional law cases and international law cases.

He has fond memories of his

time in the Terrace, where he studied both arts and law before sitting his professional law exams.

"I remember those times as a period of awakening," he says. "There was a great emphasis on real study, analysis, communication and transparency in the university, and that was slowly beginning to feed out into wider society. . . . Sadly, I think that ethos is under constant challenge in Ireland today," he believes.

"At that time, students from all the different faculties would have mixed together a lot more.

"Students from architecture, arts, commerce, medicine and dentistry would all have been in the same building, so you could get to know a large number of other students. Students from different areas wouldn't have been fragmented."

Students from the UCD faculty of law were heavily involved in Tuairim, a political discussion group which analysed and debated some of the problems of Irish society.

"Economic and political life was at a low ebb in the 1950s and this was when people began to think about how the country could move forward," explains Conlon who, along with other law students, was a member of the group.

"We had discussion groups and from these groups emerged a journal. We were trying to formulate ideas for development and employment in Ireland. The group and the journal were pluralist in that we were open to all ideas and opinions.

"We analysed problems or issues and we put our results before the relevant authorities," he says.

Within UCD, Tuairim was engaged in regular discussions about the move to Belfield and often released pamphlets and statements opposing it, which were treated seriously at the highest levels of government.

According to Conlon, much of the inspiration for the ideas of Tuairim came from the teaching staff of the faculty. "There were great lecturers on the course who could really stimulate interest," he says.

"Seamus Henchy, for example, who became a Supreme Court judge, was an excellent lecturer in constitutional law. He was always very insightful and challenging.

"Even outside the law faculty, this was a time when people like Dudley-Edwards and Kevin Nolan were reviving the department of history, while John Kelly

was instilling students with a love of, and interest in, politics."

Much student time, however, was taken up by social life rather than academia. "There was much more time to really get involved in the college life," Conlon recalls.

"There was a great number of clubs and societies, from the bigger ones like the L&H to the smaller ones like the commerce or law society. They were more like social centres than societies focusing on a particular area.

"The Terrace was a very friendly place, and when you were walking through it, you would always see someone you knew. You could then walk from the Terrace, through the Iveagh Gardens to Newman House.

"Newman House had newspapers, sitting rooms and a large room for societies to meet. It was very much a part of the social life of the college."

Conlon was a committee member of the L&H while he was in college.

He feels that the society may have been less political in the 1950s than it was to become in later years. "From the 1960s, you would have found more people using it for personal or political purposes.

"We always got in interesting speakers. One of my highlights was when the writer Ulick O'Connor addressed the society. Seamus Soroohan, who is now a senior counsel, was a frequent speaker at the L&H during my time there. Other people who were involved were Richard Ryan (who would go on to become the minister for finance), and Patrick Connolly (who served as attorney general in the 1980s)."

The societies were a vital lifeline for students in the 1950s, Conlon believes.

"Going to societies was a good way for students to socialise when they wouldn't have had the money to drink.

"I remember there was so little money around that when I graduated in 1954, I had a conversation with Ronan Keane (later to become chief justice of Ireland) about how we might be able to save up enough to go to the 1960 Olympics in Rome, and that was a long time away."

Those days of hardship are now a distant memory.

Today, Roebuck Castle towers over the Belfield campus. It aims to continue where Earlsfort Terrace left off, striving to produce students who will leave their imprint on the social, political and academic life of the nation.



A portion of the Kevin Barry memorial window in Earlsfort Terrace. Photograph: UCD archive