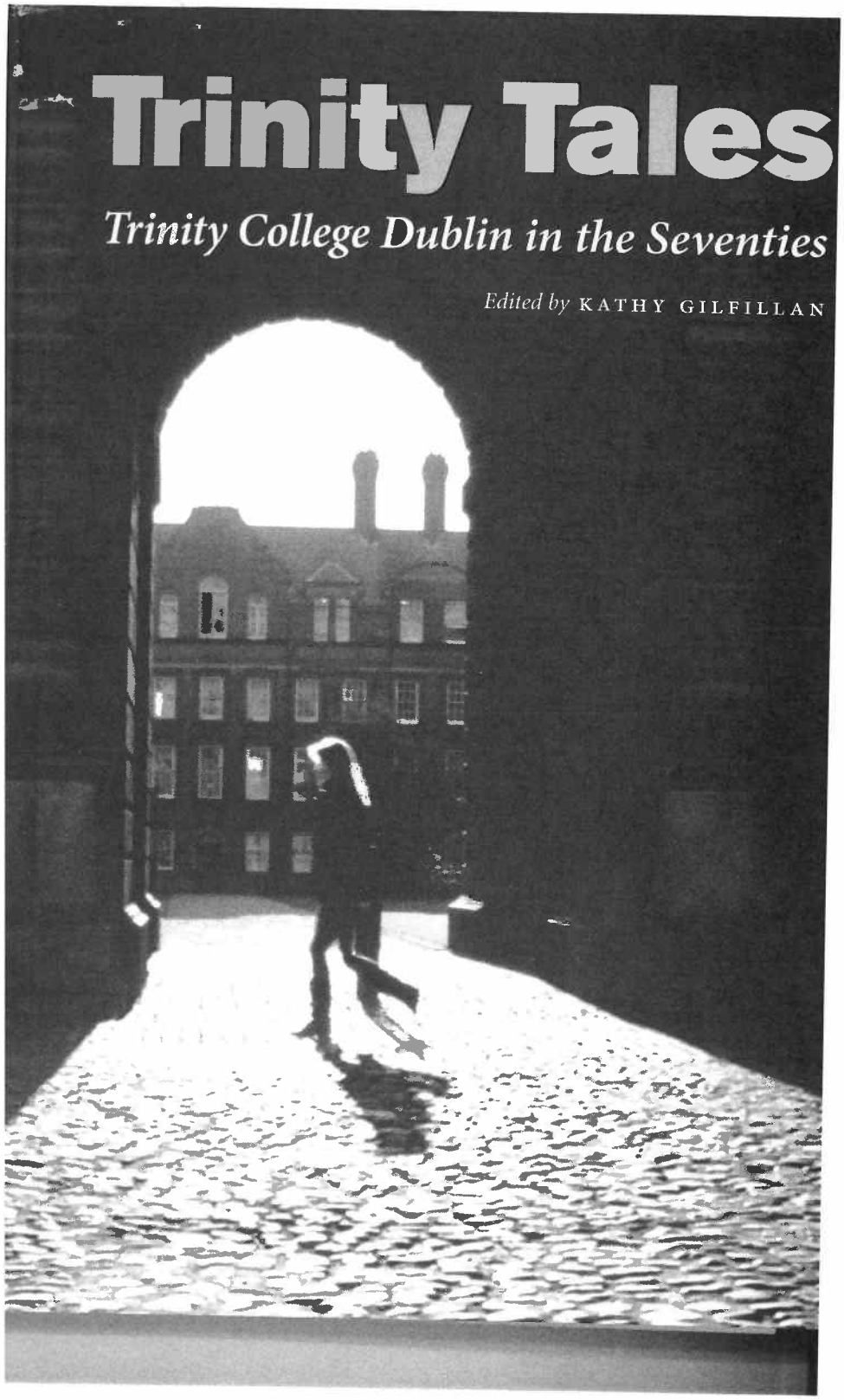
Trinity Tales

Trinity College Dublin in the Seventies

Edited by KATHY GILFILLAN



A COUNTRY PROD IN PURSUIT OF A NEW IRELAND

ted smyth

I CAME UP to Trinity in 1968 without a clear idea of my own Irishness. I did not realize that many others, including Trinity itself, were searching for a new identity amidst profound change and dissatisfaction with the state of Irish politics. I was unhappy with the old models on offer: the detached Protestant Irish model with a shadow of original guilt hanging over the past, or the exaggerated Catholic nationalist model of the Patrick Pearse school that had been mythologized during the fiftieth anniversary of the Rising two years earlier.

Trinity was a startling liberation for me. I had no idea that behind that cold Palladian front there could be such an abundance of choice, identity, hope, imagination, debate and friendship. In my four years from 1968 to 1972 I was never bored for a minute. There was too much going on and we had the freedom and security to explore beyond our comfort levels. Trinity was an incubator for the changes that were challenging the religious, social and political verities of Ireland. This was not the 'Protestant garrison' that was the subject of sneers, nor the affected Trinity of J.P. Donleavy's *The Ginger Man*, frolicking among the 'Oirish'. This was a Trinity that itself was seeking a new role as it helped to create a New Ireland. Some challenged authority in the company of hundreds of other students (and professors like the late Kader

Asmal, Mary Bourke Robinson and David Thornley) who were fed up with the denial of fundamental rights, whether in South Africa, Northern Ireland or, at home in the Republic, to women and the poor. The Catholic Church's ban on the faithful attending Trinity was based on a fear they might become Protestant, but by 1970, when the ban was lifted, the greater fear in Trinity and UCD was that the faithful would think for themselves. A popular ditty at the time satirized the ban: 'Your young men may loot, pillage and rape, and even have carnal knowledge, but however depraved, their souls will be saved, if they don't go to Trinity College.'

Yes, Trinity was becoming 'Irish' as we moved through the seventies but it was melding into a different sort of Ireland, a questioning, non-sectarian, inclusive and confident Ireland. In 1970, George Dawson, Professor of Genetics, predicted that by 1975 Catholics would comprise 60 per cent of the student body at Trinity, compared to 40 per cent at the time and concluded that the university would become 'increasingly representative of the Catholic tradition'. Professor Dawson has been proved wrong as young Irish men and women embraced a broader, more secular identity over the following decades. In 2008, my nephew Tim Smyth, the then auditor of the Hist, invited me to chair the Honorary Members' debate and Trinity seemed even more dedicated to the liberal pursuit of knowledge.

IF TRINITY WAS was an incubator of change, the Hist was a Petri dish where the issues of the day were fiercely debated. In my first weeks I was drawn to the successor to Edmund Burke's Debating Club where I learned as much about politics as in class. Notable exceptions were lectures by Moody, McDowell, Aidan Clarke, Jim Lydon and David Thornley. The latter was elected to the Dáil as a Labour member and he invited politicians to joust with us in seminars, including Cathal Goulding, chief of staff of the Official IRA. I once asked Thornley how he reconciled his Marxist and Catholic loyalties. With a broad smile, he said, 'Smyth, you're a bastard.'

I was elected to the Hist committee for the Bicentenary session of 1970. I remember being disappointed by the dullness of Senator Kennedy's rather academic address (and puzzled by his ill-fitting formal trousers that were above his ankles) when he opened the week of Bicentenary celebrations in March.

That night, Teddy displayed little of the fire and hope that Bobby had stirred up in the 1968 presidential campaign before his assassination. And the next night Gene McCarthy's speech to the Hist equally failed to capture the excitement of his presidential campaign when his surprisingly high anti-war vote in New Hampshire had convinced LBJ not to seek a second term. We seemed to be witnessing the death of American liberalism, with the left unable to understand how their divisions had handed the election to Nixon and emboldened the forces of reaction and war.

By contrast, in Ireland and Trinity, the seventies offered new hope and, finally at the end of that first week of Hist events in March 1970 we heard something different and exciting. It was termed the 'Irish Debate' on the subject 'That Emmet's epitaph be now written'. I had not heard John Hume speak before in person and his speech that night was fresh and visionary. He spent the next forty years consistently preaching the same message of non-violent politics to bring peace and justice to Northern Ireland. He never wavered when many others were 'sneakin' regarders' of violence or when British policies were so inept as to increase support for the Republican and Loyalist death squads. Hume also was instrumental in convincing Irish-American leaders like Ted Kennedy, Speaker Tip O'Neill, Pat Moynihan and Hugh Carey (the Four Horsemen) to lean on the British to adopt a policy of equality between the two allegiances in the North. Many historians sneer at the 'great person' school of history but John Hume stands out in my mind since that time as the person who did more than anyone else to bring peace to Northern Ireland.

In 1972 I was halfway through my final year at Trinity when we heard on the radio that British paratroopers had opened fire on unarmed marchers in Derry. I was auditor of the Hist and we adjourned our meeting the following Wednesday, 2 February, 'as a mark of respect to the thirteen people killed in Derry on Bloody Sunday'.

We were furious and helpless with rage, all the more so those of us who were non-violent constitutionalists. Whether it was internment in 1971 or Bloody Sunday in 1972, it seemed the British could never get it right. That Wednesday night I joined a protest march on the British embassy in Merrion Square. It was misty and dark as we stood outside the embassy when we heard glass breaking and saw flames shoot out of the windows. The burning of the

British embassy seemed to me at the time like a natural symbolic reaction; the staff had emptied the building, the Gardaí stood aside and no lives were threatened. However, such acts also contributed to the murderous cycle of retaliation that followed.

In addition to the North, the other compelling issue that impinged on our Trinity bubble was whether Ireland should join the European Community. At Hist debates since de Gaulle's veto of British entry in 1963, the mood had swung for and against membership. In the summer of 1971 I was hitchhiking around Italy with fellow history student Hugh Frazer, on our way to link up with Jenny Graham, a beautiful and charming student from London. I bored them both regarding what line I would take on membership of the EC at my inaugural address in October. I seem to recall that Hugh saw some merit in EC policies that countered social inequality and he later went on to become head of Combat Poverty in Ireland (and to marry the bright Hist committee member, Hilary Simms). In the end I decided that the loss of our sovereignty was too big a risk to take and that our interests would be ignored by the big powers. Instead of being subject to one large power Ireland would be at the mercy of three and capital would flow to the centre and away from the peripheries.

The Hist was eclectic and lively in the early seventies, debating both serious and not so serious issues. There were votes in favour of legalizing abortion, a secular constitution, and liberating women and votes against Stormont, the use of political violence, the release of Lt Calley (responsible for the My Lai massacre) and the proposed Arts Block. Happily, the motion that 'Sex kills romance' was also defeated (I invited Peter Sellers, but he declined, regretting the fact that he could not come 'to dirty up dear dirty Dublin'). The motion that 'Mad dogs are preferable to Englishmen' was carried, largely with the support of visiting teams from the Glasgow Union and Edinburgh Spec.

Most Irish people are now familiar with Shane Ross, who has earned a deserved reputation as the scourge of greed and ineptitude. At the Hist he was an iconoclastic and witty debater who also seemed in search of his Irish identity, having been sent to an English public school. Richard Clarke, who preceded me as record secretary, became a respected Church of Ireland bishop in the new non-sectarian Ireland. Ernie Bates was a dangerously charming advocate for the school of violent Republicanism. Donnell Deeny preceded me

as auditor and, to no one's surprise, is a judge of the Northern Ireland High Court. Director of Public Prosecutions Jim Hamilton and I faced off for election to auditor. During my tenure he sportingly remained fully involved as the leader of the 'loyal' opposition and nearly impeached me one night, until by 4 am exhaustion had set in and some additional allies had been roused from bed. My treasurer, Donal Donovan, appropriately became a financial advisor to the IMF. He had an unfortunate habit of bursting into my rooms on Front Square to wake me mid morning to deal with some crisis or other. Declan Kiberd, who succeeded me as auditor, was a brilliant and impish debater who is a celebrated Professor of English at UCD and columnist in *The Irish Times*. Donal Curtin seemed perpetually amused at life and became a senior economic advisor to the New Zealand government. James Connolly, the Censor, was a strong debater and became auditor two years later. Two years after that, Mary Harney became the first female auditor, displaying a political gift that subsequently enabled her to become tánaiste.

Lectures were stimulating although we were dreadfully underworked compared to the suffering of engineers and doctors. I under-appreciated the joys of Jim Lydon's exam questions such as, 'How important was the so-called Geraldine supremacy as a fact in Irish political life in the fifteenth century?' Or Professor Otway-Ruthven's 'Discuss the character of the French monarchy under Philip the Fair'. The Ott, who had been finally recognized in 1968 as the first woman fellow in Trinity, threw me out of one of her classes for not wearing a gown – 'Mr Smyth, you are academically *neuude*' – but I got my revenge by organizing the Otway-Ruthven Bloomer Football contest. She showed real class by presenting the voluminous knickers I had bought at Clery's to the winning team.

We students were now agitating for more say in our affairs and one result was that John Healy (later president of Atlantic Philanthropies) and I became the first student representatives on the History School committee. In a February 1970 memo we argued reasonably that Latin should not be an admission requirement to the School of History and that British history should not alone be part of the core in the first two years, but should be broadened to include all European history. We also argued that the final exams should begin before the end of September, which at the time resulted in grades not

being known until the middle of October! This archaic custom meant that two years of exams were crunched into five days with two three-hour exams every day. It buggered up the summer holidays and gave one a false sense of comfort during the school year. I still have nightmares of, one week before the final exam, opening a folder on a class I had taken in my Junior Sophister year (Eighteenth-Century Economic History?) and finding nothing in it.

I made enduring friendships in History classes, including the centered and world-wise Jonathan Bailey who, with the gregarious and hilarious law student, Joanna Kennedy, became the organizers of our History/Law social group. Mrs Sheila Harbison was our class mother and the actual mother of the state pathologist at that time, John Harbison. Recently widowed, she had decided to get a degree and she kept many of us sane as we battled with our demons. Clodagh O'Brien spoke beautiful French and took her focus on social justice to Brussels where she works on African development. We had weekend outings to Wicklow and, being fairly penniless, were grateful for the hospitality on Sunday evenings provided by Jonathan's parents or by Justin McCarthy's mother. Justin had grown up in Beirut when his father was one of the first Irish army officers assigned to UN peacekeeping duties.

We were none of us wealthy and evenings in Slatts were limited by the cost of a pint. It was much more affordable to get drunk on cheap wine or sherry at club gatherings or in rooms. My white-tie outfit for the Hist cost £5 at the Council for the Blind on Dawson Street, where the racks of tailcoats were a monument to the passing of the Anglo-Irish. Cars were an asset in socializing and my parents had bequeathed me an imported London taxi that could accommodate quite a few. Trouble was it had a faulty starter and on frosty mornings I would give passers-by the choice of turning the key or spraying ether into the gasket to fire the engine. There were the horsey balls and the Trinity balls but these were the exception. More socializing was done in the cave of the Buttery or on the soup runs where we searched for homeless people who had not found shelter from the wet night. Every year I took part in the Belfast–Dublin Walk and finally completed it in 1971 with the help of loyal friends who took turns to keep me company on the road. I walked the 104 miles in thirty-two hours non-stop, a testimony to doggedness if nothing else. Many of us sang in the Choral Society, loving the *B Minor Mass* and *Oratorio*

under the direction of Dr Groocock, who urged us in his thick German accent to have what sounded like sexual rehearsals. My room-mate in Front Square was Dermot Agnew, a Northerner and a very talented musician and organist, now based in London.

There were really no drugs in our group but a reasonable amount – though never enough – of sex. It wasn't flaunted as people discretely paired off, quite a few later doing the decent thing and getting married, Tony Aston to fellow law student Jenny Thomas, Arthur Moran to Amanda McVittie, Patsy Read to James McCarthy-Morrogh and Sally Figgis to Colin Keane.

The juiciest sex scandal relating to our time occurred twenty-five years later in London. Rupert Pennant Rea, who was a year ahead of me in History, became editor of the *Economist* and then deputy governor of the Bank of England, the heir presumptive to Eddie George. Unfortunately for him, he hooked up with another former student from Trinity, Mary Ellen Synon. The relationship subsequently cooled on his side and scorned, Mary Ellen took the steamy story to the tabloids, giving birth to the memorable headline, 'The Bonk of England'.

Like most students I was assigned to digs for the first two years. I was lucky to live with Miss (not Ms in those days) Helen Fleming in 117 Leinster Road. A fellow lodger, Richard Pine, wrote later in an *Irish Times* obituary that it was probably the only digs where the lodgers conspired against the landlady and insisted on putting up the rent. Miss Fleming had a heart of gold. She was devoted to her ancient auntie and her four students who doubled up in the front two rooms of a Victorian-style villa. She insisted on mixing two English and two Irish students and would grill us on why we didn't have a social life if we came home before midnight. On dreary Sundays when we felt homesick but were also sick of home, she brightened us up with pancakes laced with whiskey. Because of Miss Fleming's generous habit of buying us fabulous food and drink when she had money, we had to work out a staggered system of paying the rent so that there would be some funds for meals at the end of the month. Her first generation of students included my cousin-in-law, Homan Potterton, former curator of the National Gallery, who has written an excellent book on growing up Protestant in rural Ireland.

We organized protests against the proposed Arts Building in Trinity on

the grounds that nobody should tamper with the unique and extraordinary beauty of Trinity College. By the grace of patronage from Grattan's Parliament, we enjoyed one of the most beautiful and spectacular eighteenth-century campuses in the world. Even on depressing, rainy days I never ceased to be comforted by this oasis within the city centre, with the broad expanse of Front Square highlighted by Charles Lanyon's campanile and flanked by Chambers' Examination Hall and Chapel. The campus is only forty-two acres, and constantly adding buildings for the worthwhile goal of accommodating more students destroys a unique college, when more imaginative and forward-looking planners would have established a second college elsewhere in the city.

In 1972 I invited Professor Heuston of the Law School to speak at a debate opposing the Arts Building. He declined, writing that the 'promoters of the building have adopted the motto "never explain or apologize" and I don't believe there is the slightest chance of them changing their mind'. In 1965, thirteen houses in Lower Fitzwilliam Street had been demolished, despoiling one of the most magnificent Georgian streets in the world, and replaced with a Soviet-era design by Sam Stephenson for the ESB. Many of our local protests tried to prevent a recurrence of this vandalism, especially the later Hume Street destruction.

In my final year at Trinity I applied to become a third secretary in the Irish Diplomatic Service. I was the first member of my family to join the Irish government service but it seemed like a natural extension of the journey I had begun in the sixties, identifying with and participating in the shaping of our nation, rather than standing on the sidelines. I was encouraged to apply by Freddie Boland, Trinity's chancellor, who had a prominent diplomatic career and who had broken his gavel as president of the United Nations General Assembly, trying to bring Khrushchev to order. A number of my fellow history students were also recruited to the Irish Diplomatic Service, including Brian Nason, Eugene Hutchinson, Paul Murray and Isolde Moylan. This was a time when scores of English recruiters came to Trinity, so I applied to Lloyds bank and Ford, mostly, I must admit, to get free trips to London.

As I look back nearly forty years later I realize that my sense of identity has broadened considerably, as has that of those Trinity friends who continued to live in Ireland. I had the privilege of fifteen exciting years in Irish diplomacy and

then took leave of absence in 1988 to live in the United States, which my wife, Mary Breasted, had missed since we left New York in 1981. I was also curious to see what life was like outside the cloisters of diplomacy and to explore the business sector that is meant to generate the jobs and taxes necessary for general prosperity. I was asked by one business leader if I wanted to serve God or Mammon. It seemed like a false choice since the overriding purpose of business should be to benefit society. (Interestingly, the work culture did not differ that much in practice; when asked the difference between the private and public sector, one diplomat friend joked, 'In the private sector it's dog eat dog, but here it's just the opposite.')

While I hold Irish and American passports, I feel at heart a citizen of the world, as well as Ireland, the United States and Europe. We have all become more interdependent than ever in the face of globalization, the diffusion of power, terrorism and climate change. The most important challenge of our time is to tackle the obscenity of growing inequality. We must create a new economic model that gives men and women the dignity of earning a decent living and which protects us from reckless boom bust cycles. And as Ireland struggles through another crisis of confidence, we can take heart from Heaney's 'The Cure at Troy':

> History says, don't hope
> On this side of the grave.
> But then, once in a lifetime
> The longed-for tidal wave
> Of justice can rise up,
> And hope and history rhyme.

Ted Smyth (TCD 1968–72; History and Political Science) worked as a diplomat on the Irish peace process, was chief administrative officer of the Heinz Company and is today executive vice-president of McGraw-Hill in New York. He is a trustee of the Ireland Funds, Glucksman Ireland House and the Clinton Institute in UCD.

These time-capsule recollections of Trinity College students in the seventies include those of U2 manager Paul McGuinness, director of the Gate Theatre Michael Colgan, novelist James Ryan, writer Robert O'Byrne, judge Fidelma Macken, publisher Antony Farrell, Dillie Keane of Fascinating Aïda, Mary Harney, Liz O'Donnell and others, who have in different ways shaped the Ireland of today.

The seventies were significant, with Catholic students allowed into the College as British grants enabled a welcome invasion by the Northern Irish; post-Woodstock, a global counterculture was at work. Together, Irish nationals and expats created an interesting fusion of sensibilities, styles and philosophies.

As the decade of political and social upheaval unfolded — from the availability of the Pill to the horrors of Bloody Sunday and the Dublin bombings — Irish youth came to embrace a changed Ireland. Buoyed by idealism and other substances but tethered by pragmatism, contributors to *Trinity Tales* mirror a time when everything felt possible.

Kathy Gilfillan (TCD 1968–72) has gathered in an extraordinary mix of evocative personal narratives, which will resonate whether you went to Trinity or not.

Cover design: Niall McCormack.
Photograph: 'Looking beyond the Campanile towards the Rubrics'.
Courtesy of Trinity College Dublin Audio-Visual and Media Services.

E LILLIPUT PRESS
62–63 SITRIC ROAD,
ARBOUR HILL,
DUBLIN 7, IRELAND

www.lilliputpress.ie
ISBN 978 1 84351 191 5
9 781843 511915

Trinity Tales

Trinity College Dublin in the Seventies

KATHY GILFILLAN

LILLIPUT