



# A Danger to the Men?

*A History of Women in  
Trinity College Dublin*

1904-2004

*edited by*

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## ONE OF OUR OWN, 1973-7

I walked through the gates of Trinity in 1973, a seventeen-year-old from north Dublin and the first woman of her family to go to university. I did so against the express wishes of my parents. My mother believed that book learning in a woman was an impediment to marriage and my father was convinced that educating women – or girls, as he would have put it – was a waste of money. I, however, had wanted to be a teacher ever since I had started school, aged five and a half. For eleven years I was able to pursue my studies because I received government grants and scholarships, here and in France, or research fellowships from Trinity, the Collège de France (Paris), and the International Federation of University Women (Geneva). Although this was mostly a meagre generosity, not always sufficient to keep hunger at bay, it left me with a sense, I suppose, of moral debt. For me it is not just right but life-giving for someone educated out of the public purse to try to give back to society at least something of what she has taken.

The magic of Trinity did not impress me initially, although I was to come to love its architecture, gracious spaces and interiors – and, above all, its libraries. But at first I was too busy struggling to survive. The education I had received at my inner-city school would have been more than adequate for the purposes my parents had intended it, namely, a commercial course and a good job in the bank or Guinness's. But it left me very unprepared for University. And at that time there were no Access programmes, no peer-mentoring or, I seem to remember, no real awareness on the part of universities that some people might need more help than others. Indeed, universities seemed to adopt a sink or swim policy: survival of the first year was seen as the necessary proof that one was 'university material'. Perhaps everyone in the first year lectures was at sea – at least that is what I tell my own students now to encourage them. But I was the only one who trundled into lectures with an English language dictionary because otherwise I could not understand what the lecturers were saying in the essentially Latinate English of the University. I never failed an essay or language exercise but I got very low marks until the Easter of my first year. I had been the star of my school – my self-esteem plummeted and I wanted to drop out at Christmas. Funnily

enough, my parents persuaded me to finish the year before I made up my mind. So how did this skinny, timid, under-educated teenager from north Dublin turn into a professor?

Trinity in the early seventies was still a College, although staff complained about rising student numbers – the population was, I think, around 6500, less than half of what it is now. As a College it prided itself on providing personal attention to the people it was educating, which in the French and Spanish departments, where I was studying, took the form of small-group teaching. Of course, the lecturers all seemed rather forbidding to me but when I ran into difficulties with one of them in my second year and could not go to my tutor, who was his best buddy, I thought of the nice woman in the French department who had taught me in seminars in the first year and beat a path to her door. Janet Morgan listened to me, took me into her seminars late for the second year, gave me individual tuition to help me catch up and nurtured my interest in seventeenth-century France. At the end of my second year, it was she who set alight a new aspiration within me when she wrote on the end of my essay on Voltaire's *Candide* that if my work continued to be of this standard, then I should think of an academic career.

I hugged that comment to myself through all the ups and downs, the deprivations, the difficulties and also the delights of the ensuing nine years. And during those years I met and worked with other academics, here and in Paris, who recognized a talent in me, and, no doubt, a hunger and a determination. They taught me, challenged me, talked and listened, ripped my work to pieces and helped me to sew it together again in a different and better shape, and adopted me into their families, showing me a love and respect that gave me the confidence to take my own place in this world. In a word, I was fortunate enough to be educated at a time when some individuals still clung to the humanist ideal of education and tried to put it into practice where they could. They believed – or at least their actions implied they did – that education is centred on the person, that education occurs as a result of a personal interaction between the teacher and the taught, that it is not about productivity and output, or the values of the market, but rather concerned with the shaping of citizens, the nurturing and fulfilment of their potential, and the equipping of a new generation for the public good. Even in the seventies that ideal was disappearing as student numbers began to soar and staff student ratios changed for the worse. But it is likely that a person such as I would have fallen through the net were it not for the encouragement that I received – no doubt at some personal cost – from those who lavished their time and energy on me as they taught me.

Trinity in the seventies still had a somewhat prattish West-Brit air at times. Within those walls geography could be remapped in a sentence, as lecturers referred in con-

versation to the 'mainland' – by which, as we inferred, they meant England – or passed comment on the poor educational standards outside the centre. That one required more thought, since we knew that London was the capital and a major cultural centre; amid hoots of laughter and derisive mimicry we concluded that they were referring to the market towns of Cambridge and Oxford. Although there were many Dubliners like myself, there was also a colourful set of people who gravitated around the sports clubs. There was hushed awe when a young man with rooms in the Rubrics, generously devoted to parties, decided to fail his third-year examinations deliberately so that he could captain the boat club the following year. At weekend house parties, I was closely questioned by parents anxious to determine what year my mother had graduated from Trinity; my surname suggested that enquiries about my father's graduation would have been pointless. It was a place where a Dublin child might learn to speak of herself using the impersonal 'one', play croquet, or go to garden parties, wearing silly clothes in the middle of the day. I participated in much of this with some detachment because for me the central excitement of College was the discovery that the intellectual life was an end in itself and that it could bring a depth and a breadth and a richness to a whole life. I often wished someone had told the bookish child I had been that such a world existed – I might have felt less marooned.

When I returned to Trinity from Paris in 1984, overjoyed to be appointed to a lectureship in the College that had played such an important part in my life, the student body seemed less diverse to me. However, the Oxbridge loyalties of Trinity were still in evidence, not least in the French department. It was as if the only people considered suitably qualified for a position at Trinity were those who had studied at England's two historic universities. On the day after my successful interview, I went to the Department of Early Printed Books, where for three years (1978–81) I had daily pored over books as tall as the human torso, and whose librarians I held in some affection. Indeed, the week before I left for Paris in 1981 to take up my French government scholarship, 'Paul' (Mary) Pollard, Head of EPB and generally regarded as formidable, had taken me aside and told me that she had some money put by and that if I should ever fall into need then I was to be sure to call on her; I could pay her back later. She had no knowledge of my circumstances, that I was aware of, and I never knew what prompted her to say that to me. My need never became so overwhelming that I felt obliged to take up her offer, but I came close. And the fact that she was there, and I knew she had not made that offer lightly, helped me to keep going. Anyway, I could hardly wait to tell them the news. One librarian, Vicky Cremin, was unable to contain herself and sighed, 'At last, one of our own.' By that she could not have meant a Catholic, because I had long stopped being one. I assumed she was referring to my Irish nationality and

my Trinity degrees and the fact that they, the librarians and the academics, had all had a hand in growing me at home.

What was it like working as a member of the academic staff in Trinity in the eighties? It was lonely. I was appointed at a time when there was a ban on hiring in the public services; three positions had to be vacant before one could be filled. There were so few academic staff appointed that year that the usual introductory courses were not run. That meant that there was no ready-made network of people of my age and stage, and the women that I can remember were appointed on short-term contracts and were friends only for a time. My delight in returning to Trinity was tempered by the challenge of working in a department where I had previously been known as a callow youth. It was probably also unnerving for my sometime teachers to find that their new colleague was the student whose presence in undergraduate seminars had, on occasion, made them beat a path to the Library on a Saturday morning to do extra preparation – or so I had been told, but had not, at the time, understood why they felt compelled to behave in such a manner. And there will rarely be a comfortable fit between people when one of them returns from the vortex of rapid personal and intellectual transformation abroad to a group of individuals who seem to have grown ever more like themselves in the interval. Inevitably, the network of friends I developed was drawn from the older staff and from the wider College.

Jill Ker Conway remarks that 'one generation can give another that sustenance [to sustain our dreams], not so much by what they say as by how they live, and how they include one within the life pattern they've created'.<sup>5</sup> So it was for me, up to a point. Of course, I gravitated towards the older staff with whom I shared at least some of the values that I sought to embody in my chosen profession. These were people who embraced collegiality and parliamentary politics, who thrived on the cut and thrust of conversation and debate and the power of argument to change a mind; they also celebrated eccentricity and loved a good story. While they believed that excellence in research was the non-negotiable measure of academic stature, they also lived out their belief that such excellence should issue in public service. The chronic gender imbalance in that generation of academics meant, however, that most of these colleagues were men.

Some thought to compliment me by remarking that I had a 'male mind', to which I usually replied that my mind was very much my own – a reply that caused pandemonium. Others defended the use of male pronouns and concepts such as the 'common man' on the grounds that it was generally accepted that these included women – and were discomfited when asked to whom such matters were 'generally' acceptable. Yet others were unnerved when College introduced a policy to counteract sexual harass-

ment, believing that no man in his office would be safe from unsubstantiated allegations if its provisions were not confined to misconduct between students. Initially they got their way, though it flew in the face of the testimony and evidence that students and younger staff were the object of predatory attention from some of the notorious older men. But not long thereafter Irish universities became explicitly subject to the scrutiny of the law of the land and answerable to its provisions for the protection of the dignity of all. As the world changed around them, these colleagues could wax eloquent with nostalgia *sotto voce* for the old Trinity, for the one that was altered irretrievably by the lifting of the ban or by the admission of women staff to membership of the Senior Common Room. In some respects, it was that old Trinity that I had come to love, the one represented by these men and their intelligent and honorable, if at times reactionary, commitment to the common good. But as a woman of a different generation and, after 1990, a walking, talking, living and, above all, thinking oxymoron – a woman Fellow, I was at first dimly and, with time, sharply aware that the affection I bore to the institution was, of necessity, shot through with ambivalence.

I found no real resting place among Trinity women either, although I am fortunate to count some of them among my closest friends. I was in a sense suspended between different understandings of how to survive and rise through a patriarchal institution whose infinitesimal percentage of women professors had remained stable over forty years. The older women in the humanities and letters had been shaped, as I had myself, by the humanist model of the thinker as detached observer who studied, explicated, admired and transmitted the great Western tradition handed down through the generations. They had learned in the name of 'objectivity' – as I had – to refer to the self as reader or critic by using male pronouns, or no pronouns at all, and to embrace the essentially élite, male, white Western curriculum as somehow representative of all humanity and the bearer of a universal significance. Although they tolerated feminist criticism and incorporated women writers into the curriculum, they did not question the assumptions on which the curriculum, and their own place within its transmission, had been established. They would not have been happy to be called feminists and could even be heard to observe that being a woman was somehow incidental to being a good academic. It is easy to be dismissive of these attitudes. But it is more helpful to recognize that when women are in a tiny minority they have to adjust to the dominant ethos in order to survive. That some of them did survive and live to tell the tale from positions of eminence perhaps sufficed to make a space where others could follow.

Many of the generation of women who were to succeed the eminent older women, and who were also older than I, tended to orbit around the Centre for Women's Studies. My own ongoing reading in postmodernism and feminism meant that I was

more in sympathy with their commitment to framing an alternative curriculum or at least altering the existing one by bringing in other points of view or subjects of study. I had come to appreciate that all knowledge is constructed by very embodied thinking subjects, who frame and shape the artefacts of thought to promote or safeguard their own interests. I incorporated women writers and feminist and deconstructive approaches into my senior sophister teaching, which brought intellectual excitement and the fun of heated debate into the classroom. But I was unable to embrace a more separatist approach. For I was also a humanist and an enthusiastic student of the acerbic wit and rationality of the Enlightenment. I believed in radically questioning the assumptions of the humanist and Enlightenment traditions, and in ferreting out, restoring, and transmitting the occulted voices of the past, but I could not dispense with these traditions altogether. Knowledge is cumulative and we can only build alternative ways of thinking and being if we have a thorough grasp of what has gone before. So, I worked on, suspended, as I have said, between these two understandings of what it was to be a woman in College, sympathetic to, and yet critical of, both. I drew sustenance for my own journey largely from books but also from stimulating conversations with colleagues and students in Theology who also struggled to transmit a tradition while radically revisiting its presuppositions.

Any narrative of my 'Trinity experience' would be incomplete, however, without some understanding of why I chose to leave – an action so unthinkable for some that they derided my choice both privately and in public, unaware that their hubris simply confirmed my decision. Paradoxically, my ambivalence to the institution was nourished not by alienation from it, but rather by my involvement with and commitment to the life-pattern it had created and the values it sought to promote.

I do not remember when I became a tutor, or College mentor, as the office is known elsewhere. Sometime in the nineties maybe, and somewhat reluctantly because of the quite appalling time commitment involved. For a shy person it was an oddly liberating experience because being a tutor allowed a person to enter gently when invited into the private lives of those we taught. I still feel my heart contract at the memory of the stories of grief and personal struggle, deprivation and self-destruction that I heard or intuited from behind the sometimes brash façade of the largely middle-class students who made their way to my office for a cup of tea and a ready and, I hope, sympathetic ear. And I am grateful for the glimpses of dignity and courage, the shared laughter and the tears, and the opportunities afforded to do good as a tutor by simply using position and knowledge to give the young a helping hand through the system. But the system was often resistant – to the point of destructiveness, as I discovered on one memorable occasion. It is hard to give a flavour of what happened without going

into details that are not mine to reveal. A young woman, having completed her final examinations, was under threat of being sent down without a degree. As I listened, it became painfully clear that staff, and one man in particular, had contributed by negligence to the situation, a negligence that was admitted to me privately by his head of department but publicly denied. In the months that followed, the student and her family came under intense pressure – and so did I, as I stood between her and the institution with nothing but a commitment to justice to sustain me. I was repeatedly warned that I was not doing myself or my career any good by taking this young woman's part. I was even phoned at home and told that institutions were more important than individuals, and that I should watch out and not bite the hand that fed me. In the end, a change of regime brought a more reasonable mind to bear on the situation and a compromise was worked out that was acceptable to all parties – and I was *persona grata* again. But something got broken during those months that could not be repaired. That young woman, with her whole life before her, had her confidence shattered; I remain aghast at the way the old boys' network made a whole institution close ranks against her and against me, seeking a scapegoat in order to avoid admitting its own inadequacies. Certain experiences change the direction of a person's life.

Shortly after this, Trinity was convulsed by the proposed Universities' Act. While I had my own reservations about some of the provisions of the Act, I was nonetheless taken aback by the reactionary fervour that swept College. The torpor of Fellows' meetings was transmogrified into impassioned agitation. Withdrawn colleagues became orators, predicting the destruction of a great tradition. There was no place for dissent from these doomsday predictions; indeed, there was no sense that dissent might be possible. As a woman working in a patriarchal institution, and a woman who had recently experienced why a framework of law might be very pertinent to the management of universities for the good of all, I stood apart from the hand-wringing. A part of me was secretly appalled by what could have been interpreted as a latter-day Irish version of Oxbridge élitism, since much of the argument against the legislation was driven by Trinity's sense of its entitlement to remain outside the mainstream of the society whose taxes made its continued existence possible. I listened for some sense that, with all its flaws, the legislation might have something to contribute to the wider framework of third-level education in this country, or be important for the future of other universities, most notably Maynooth, but I listened in vain. While I would not expect academics or academic institutions to bow to legislation without presenting arguments and insisting on revisions, I was nonetheless unable to fit together the public service ethic that had shaped me with the resistance to public accountability I now saw before me. I felt out of sync.

The final push came as a result of an experience shared by many under the tight budgetary constraints of public service education: I was not considered eligible for promotion to senior lectureship in 1995. My former head of department, Roger Little, made indignant and comforting noises about the old boys' network that had ensured that some were promoted ahead of me. There was certainly a buried gender discrimination at work. 'Women', as Adrienne Rich remarks, 'have always been seen as waiting,'<sup>6</sup> and it was, no doubt, assumed that I would wait for recognition to be bestowed upon me. I, however, received the news shortly after I had buried my father and while I was making provision for my mother in what was soon to prove to be her last illness. The death of those close to us reinforces the sense of life's brevity and the urgency to live it now. I knew that my publications, past and to come, and my international reputation as a scholar whose work had changed the way people thought about her subject, would make me eligible for a chair elsewhere. But, as one of the senior administrators remarked to me sadly, Trinity rarely appoints its own to chairs, and, I added to myself, especially if its own are women. Future prospects were dim; the drive to promote women to senior positions in Trinity occurred after I left. I was approaching my fortieth birthday and was about to hit those restless years when change is desirable and energy still high. I began to look around for opportunities that would challenge me afresh, encourage new growth, and offer me the recognition to which I aspired. I was promoted to senior lectureship the following year but by that stage it was too late. I was in the process of negotiating a research fellowship in the United States and shortly thereafter applied for and was appointed to the chair of French at NUI Maynooth.

I chose Maynooth. There were many in Trinity who could not bring themselves to congratulate me for what they saw as, at best, a sideways move. I was confident that the time had come to move on, however. Often, as David White observes, the 'walls that once sheltered us at certain periods of our life only imprison us when we have remained within their confines for too long.'<sup>7</sup> The French department had changed little since I was a student and the older staff still had some years to go to retirement. The Trinity that had shaped me and that I had loved was passing away, as those who had made it retired, some prematurely, worn out – it seemed – by the effort of perpetuating the ethos of the old Trinity. They had included me in their life-pattern but that pattern, the old Trinity, had to pass away; for all its strengths and beauty, it was a pattern based on privilege and exclusion. The younger generation had different values – values often shaped, of necessity, by those of the market. Yet an uncritical embrace of market values by universities can result in increasing numbers of staff engaged in self-promotion at the expense of the public good. It was enough to make a person

hanker after the concept of education as a moral act, so central to the humanist tradition that I was simultaneously exploring and dismantling in my research and teaching. It was time to leave, to allow younger colleagues transform Trinity into a different cultural space, defined by the imperatives of their own generation. It was time to take on a new challenge in a paradoxical situation – an old university facing new beginnings. It broke my heart to leave Trinity and particularly to resign my Fellowship – that ultimate, if outdated, form of belonging. But a new existence as an oxymoron awaited me, as professor and head of department in an institution where such positions had been prototypically patriarchal, having been occupied not just by men but by the Fathers.

Within three years of my appointment to NUI Maynooth I was elected a Member of the Royal Irish Academy, listed in Marquis *Who's Who in the World* and in the millennial edition of *Who's Who in Ireland*, and nominated for an award as a Distinguished Speaker of the World. Whether such distinctions help to assuage the hardships and challenges of my new existence is doubtful. They are, of course, deeply gratifying at one level of being and certainly confirmed my sense that it had been right to move on from the sheltering, but ultimately enclosing, walls of Trinity. Nonetheless, these impersonal forms of recognition are hardly what make a person get out of bed in the morning, nor are they emotionally sustaining in an environment that can be punishing when a woman professor and head is in a minority of one. What does sustain is rather the affection, and even admiration, of students who are themselves the first women and the first men of their families to receive a university education. I am awed and grateful for the calling that has enabled me to play some part in the transformation of often bewildered teenagers into confident adults, capable of holding their own in an intellectual exchange in French with their teachers and examiners. And my heart stirs within me when the few write or return to thank me because I believed, and I pushed them to believe, that they could do it – too.