



Trinity College Dublin

Coláiste na Tríonóide, Baile Átha Cliath

The University of Dublin

Interview with Professor Gerald Dawe

Professor Gerald Dawe retired in 2017 after almost thirty years of teaching Irish literature and modern poetry at Trinity College. Along with Professor Brendan Kennelly he established the MPhil in Creative Writing (1997-8) and was founder-director of Trinity Oscar Wilde Centre (1998-2015). He was elected Fellow in 2004 and has been visiting professor at Boston College and Villanova University in the US and visiting scholar at Pembroke College, Cambridge. In celebration of his career at Trinity, Professor Nicholas Grene interviewed Professor Dawe for our Alumni Newsletter. Gerald has published over twenty books of poetry and prose, most recently, with Padraic Reaney, *Crossing the Sound: Poems and paintings from the west of Ireland* and *The Wrong Country: Essays on Modern Irish Writing*. Information on upcoming readings and events can be found on his Facebook page.

This interview took place in May 2018 between Professor Nicky Grene and Gerald Dawe. An excerpt from the interview was printed in the 2017/208 School of English Alumni Newsletter.

NG: You interviewed me when I retired, and I am now interviewing you on your retirement, but these interchanged roles go a long way back for us. You came to Trinity originally to teach when I was on leave and actually lived in my rooms. I have the lovely poem you wrote for me in House 33. Can you talk to me about what that first experience was like, coming to Trinity from the other side of the country in Galway?

GD: I can. Ireland of the late 1980s was a very different place than it is today. I used to travel by train from Galway to Dublin and the train would sometimes take about 5 ½ hours. Both coming and sometimes going back it would breakdown outside Ballinasloe and we would be sitting there for hours. It was a completely different Ireland. People didn't get vexed or angry; they just sat and waited for the man to come, really. And someone always arrived in and we would hit away. In a funny kind of way, Trinity, and I mean this in no negative way whatsoever, Trinity was part of that world too. It was awaiting transformation and a younger generation of academics such as yourself and others were in the leading role to move Trinity into the later part of the 20th century and I was lucky enough to be part of that new wave of modernising that took place. Dublin itself I remember by smell more than by sight. I remember the smell of the city and as well all know, Trinity was like a lung of the centre of the city with the wonderful trees and the greenery and so on. It was an interesting time, I mean it's over 30 years ago now but I have a very strong sense of the journeying from the west into Dublin, even the city that wrapped itself around Trinity seemed to be on a bridge between the past and a different kind of future. The thing I remember is that the local pubs around here, it was really the last gasp of the 'literary pub' and there would be individuals sitting in the corner and you would imagine they were writing a novel, although it would never actually end up in print, and the barmen were the same barmen who had been there since the 1950s and 60s. They were from Cavan or from Leitrim, 'up the country' as we used to say, but there was also something I do remember specifically about Trinity was that there was a tremendous sense of cultural mission at that stage, that people were feeling that Trinity as an institution had to renovate and to re-envision itself, to reimagine itself, so it was almost as if I was caught between two worlds. There was the old

Ireland, which really hadn't found a new place, and there was the old Trinity, which was in the process of changing.

NG: That's fascinating Gerry. You've always combined the roles of critic and teaching literature with that of practicing poet and have been very prolific in both capacities. How do the two interrelate? Do you try to set time aside specifically for your own writing, or can you manage to create poems while doing critical work at the same time?

GD: Well I started off when I was a young graduate student, finding time to do graduate research because the poet in me was the dominant presence. And of course, as your profession starts to take over you have to find an operating principle, whereby you're teaching first, then your research, then you're writing, but I never found it as a hierarchy, I always saw it as a controlling of the energy. Energy was always the thing that was preeminent in my mind. I could never sit down on a morning and say, okay today I'm going to write a lyric, today I'm going to write a sonnet. There had to be something driving the poem and I could do it in the office I had here, I could do it on the train, between Dublin and Galway. I sort of was a snatcher at poems, until I really got myself into a routine and rhythm and I have preserved that since. Now that the teaching has dropped away and the administration is completely gone, I find that I'm recalibrating the priorities. I am clearing the decks in a way and I am finding an appetite for trying new things is showing itself, but it's a bit like that executive toy that used to be around years and years ago, where I think there were three or four metal balls [that] used to strike off one another. Well, in a way I often found that poems I was writing were being fed thoughts I was thinking about, say a piece of drama, or another poet's work, or a piece of prose that I was writing or teaching or vice versa. I never felt there was a Berlin Wall between the different parts of my critical life and my creative life. I think the real problem for those who are writers who are also teachers, it's not being in the classroom, it's not delivering a lecture, it's the administration. That is, as you well know, such a demanding thing that unless you are on top of it, it will get on top of you.

NG: Absolutely. I remember a time when I was Head of Department, I used to wake up in the morning, and if I thought I had a free morning I had just forgotten something. One of your major achievements during your time at Trinity was the establishment of the Masters in Creative Writing—the first of its kind in an Irish university and the establishing of the Oscar Wilde Centre for Irish Writing, which you directed for so many years. We had some sales resistance to that idea of teaching creative writing at the beginning, and I still sometimes get asked the question, 'can you teach creative writing?'. So how do you field that question?

GD: Creative writing was just a term we used because it was current at the time, people understood what it meant, but I was always uneasy with the title. I mean, to me when you are involved in a master's programme or a PhD programme in literary practice or creative writing, what in fact you are doing is doing what has been done throughout the history of man and woman, which is gathering together people who have a particular interest in a particular art form and sharing how you do this by discipline and by the use of your imagination, your understanding of language and the marshalling and organising of your individual talent. I mean, going back through time painters have done it, as you well know dramatists have done it, actors have done it, it was just a time for the university to catch up with what had always been there. You think of Yeats and the group that associated themselves around himself and Lady Gregory. I mean they were in a sense workshoping or critiquing each other's work. Look at the letters they exchanged and so on but there was a kind of slight resistance here as there was across as other universities started to follow our lead. There was

a sense, and I met it with writers both an uncertainty about what was going to come out the other end, but also a slight unease that the landscape would be populated by lots of 'creative writers', not novelists, poets and playwrights. There may be a cause for rethinking as a result of that, just what was happening on the creative writing front. We were very, very clear in our minds. We were not producing writers to be teachers of creative writing. This was a practitioner course where what we were going to do - what they did in the Players Theatre, in the Samuel Beckett Centre and so on - we were going to produce *writers*. We weren't preoccupied with getting them back into the academy or back into the teaching line. We were looking for individuals who were lucky enough to get on that course to come out better writers, poets, novelists. We didn't have so many playwrights. We had a few. So I think we had a very clear plan, and if you remember back to 1995 when we first got engaged in all this, that we had a very clear plan that this was going to be a course for writers, and not for teachers of writing. And that model marked us out. It marked us out from 85-90% programmes in America, certainly from most of the ones that were running in England and Scotland, but we were unique and still remain unique in that regard here, 20-odd years later.

NG: The Oscar Wilde Centre has had some very distinguished visiting writers including Terry Pratchett, Richard Ford who have come for longer or shorter periods to the Centre. What do you think that has added to the experience of the students and what has it meant to you personally?

GD: Well personally, I mean it was great meeting Terry Pratchett. He was like a man from another planet. It was wonderful to have him in College. I wasn't close to him, but I watched him in his interactions with the students, with staff and with the public and he was wonderful. He was a wizard. Richard [Ford], we became personal friends and I was deeply impressed by his intellectual engagement with the programme, and indeed with the wider outreach that he did when he was based here in Trinity as a visiting professor. Again, it's down to where we are. Trinity has had this long, centuries-old connection with writers and the more I think about it, the more I think it is the primary function of this university, the many ways, to have that association over and beyond any other kind, in business or anything else. Just look at the list of the writers who have been through this college going back 400 years. But even in our time, I remember you bringing Anita Desai, Saul Bellow being here at one stage. It's been second nature for Trinity to have that association, both in terms of writers who have been here, visiting, like the ones you mentioned, the writers who have been part of the School like Brendan Kennelly, Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin, Deirdre Madden and many others. In some way maybe we haven't caught up with just the sheer significance of that internal tradition, but also that someone like Richard Ford would want to identify himself with this university is itself significant. And others, I mean Robert Lowell got an honorary doctorate here. You look back a bit and Derek Mahon, Michael Longley; it's a very, very rich tradition. Anne Enright, Sebastian Barry; actors, playwrights; it's second nature for the university to have that association. What does it mean? Well, I think it means that the students take for granted, and in fact I don't mind that, that's healthy. They can walk in the square in front of us here and walk in the steps of Beckett. That is so cool.

NG: You maybe already answered this, but I will ask it anyway. You had your time of teaching abroad as Visiting Professor at Villanova in Philadelphia and at Boston College. Did that help define for you what was distinctive about teaching at Trinity or are students [just] students wherever you go?

GD: Well, without referring back to student cohorts in either of those or any other universities, the one thing I loved about being in Trinity and teaching here was the quality of the students, particularly when there was a mix of international students in the same seminar or lecture group. I

remember one particular year when I was teaching The Poetry of War sophister option, there was a Russian student there, who at the beginning of the course was quite quiet and reticent and I almost thought withdrawn, but by the second term she was introducing her fellow students to Mayakovski and Blok, Akhmatova. It was an extraordinary thing, because she was reading their work in Russian and then translating it. That felt to me as if there was something very special and rare. And vice versa, the Irish students and the British students, and they were going through the course with me but they were bringing in their own recollection and indeed, now that I think about it a few American students, their own experiences through the family with war and revolution in their own countries. I think that what we have here in Trinity is an expectation of excellence. That sounds corny, it sounds like blurb, but it is true. The students who gravitate towards Trinity know that it's going to be a big ask of them but they read and they work, they engage and they commit. I have been writing references quite a bit these last few months, so I have been going back through time to transcripts, some of whom you forget, 5, 10, 15 years ago. And suddenly you look at what they've done. And where they've been. And they are all culturally engaged. They are all doing things out in the world. And I think the confidence of that comes from being here.

NG: Lots of our Creative Writing students have gone on to be successful and have years in the profession and you probably won't want to pick out individuals, it would be invidious to do that. However, I wonder if you found particular students' work you found developing in striking ways over the time they spent in Trinity, or indeed ones from whom you found yourself were learning?

GD: In the early days there were some very fine poets like Conor O'Callaghan, who was here and Conor was working on his portfolio. He had already published one volume of poems. I think it became *Seatown*, but as a portfolio I think it was called *Little Ships*, or something like that and I remember thinking, this is a very special talent and as the writing progressed you could see Conor growing in authority and a sense of what he was doing as a poet and he's gone on to publish some great books of poems and also a novel. Playwrights, we had some very some very interesting playwrights. In particular one, Jackie McCarrick, very interesting and a real playwright. I found her work very interesting and she's now gone on to do very well for herself in England, particularly in London on the stage there, but also in America. We have had so many novelists, fiction writers, it is impossible to select one. There must be 10 or 12 or 20 even of the cohort of students over many different age profiles, cultural backgrounds, educational backgrounds, from Italy, South Africa, New Zealand, America, England. They have all gone on to publish novels with leading publishers, and to pick out one, well, I suppose the names that are on everyone's lips at the moment. Sara Baume, she was a student on the programme, but there are just so many. And again, without factoring in anybody in particular in terms of their tutors or their lecturers, I think it was being here that was a great inspiration for these students. And there was one student who comes to mind, an older woman who comes from 'out the country.' She wrote a wonderful series of short stories, quite like McGahern, but from a woman's point of view. Wonderful piece of work. She has published these and broadcast these on the radio. The day will come when somebody sits down and does an audit of the 200 or 250 students who have been through the first 21 years of the programme, and it will be, as the Americans say, 'awesome, absolutely awesome!'

NG: Indeed. You've written a lot about your native Belfast, both in poetry and in prose and most recently a book on Van Morrison, *In Another World*. You continue to move back and forth between Dublin and Belfast. This is an impossible question coming up. What are the crucial differences between the two cities in your experience? Have they noticeably changed over time?

GD: I think Dublin is prone to exaggeration. I think Dublin is either in deep despair, or it's in ecstatic control mode. The greatest city in the world. Between the two, that's where I like Dublin to be. It's a

very rare, rich place to live, and as I think I said once before, it has a brave history, and I think the survival instincts of ordinary citizens is very strong and very healthy and very humane. Belfast on the other hand, is a much more realistic city. It has a much more strong, clear sense of the priorities of life, the civic priorities of life, and they do that very well. I mean, I'm taking the Troubles story out of the picture, but I mean they manage the streets, they look after old folk, there's a civic mindedness there, and it is a more realistic place. Between the two, there's a metaphor for the east coast which kind of operates between the ongoing, damaged history of Belfast as the capital of the Troubles, and now it's breaking into a new, 21st century world, and Dublin, which seems to be uncertain where it is at the moment, a bit like the news, a bit like the bad old days are clawing their way back. The property boom, the fallout of the church, this referendum that's been coming and the toxins it's been releasing into the atmosphere. But my heart lies in the West of Ireland, and that's always where it always has been, well, since my 20s, but it's almost as if the yin and yang of Ireland are between Belfast and Dublin. I know the Corkonians will go after me if I say that, but it is true. I was in the West there only the other week and I was walking through Ballina, which is a town very, very close to my heart, and it is in absolute disarray. The Celtic Tiger didn't flash a tail or blink an eye around there and I mean when you look at what's going on around the countryside, when you get out of Dublin and see there are really big problems this country has yet to face and it hasn't faced them and it is related to the economic collapse and the sense of dispiritedness of what has fallen through that. Ballina looks like a forgotten town, it is dreadful.

NG: Yes, it's true of an awful lot of the towns.

GD: I mean, you know, you get around, too. You know.

NG: Last piece of reciprocity. I spent my leave in 1988 to 1989 in Cambridge, your first year in Trinity. You spent your last year before retirement in Cambridge as a Visiting Fellow in Pembroke College. What sort of perspective on Trinity did your time in Pembroke give you?

GD: It brought me back to what the root of a university is. I know that we have to keep on banging on about funding and the business of sponsorship and jobs and all that demand now that the state has withdrawn so much of its financial support of the university or of universities. But being in Pembroke made me think that universities aren't about money, they are about ideas and about having the space, the cultural, and imaginative and historical space to think thoughts and to write music or poems or new ideas of aesthetic or critical ideas on your own space, on your own time. There is something wonderfully facilitating about the architecture of Pembroke and other, as you know, Cambridge Colleges, which we have here in Trinity. We have that. Perhaps, dare I say sometimes on a grander scale in some cases, but being in Pembroke made me feel that I was supported by every brick in the building, every little garden that I came across. That it was there to help you think. That's really all.

NG: Couldn't be better. I mentioned the poem you had written in what were then my rooms in 33, Goodnight. I thought maybe as a sign-off would you read that poem for us.

GD: I will, happily. And it's dedicated to you.

Good Night

Since we haven't met yet

and more than likely won't -

things being what they are -
I felt a little note, off-the-cuff,
might do the trick.

Between us there is next to nothing,
but I have heard you cough
early morning and have begun
to expect to hear your window
rattle on its sash at any time,
and guess that when you turn
you face me in bed in this
Hall of Residence.

I have heard too, at midnight,
you laugh and shuffle about
with some bloke whose voice
mumbles against the stereo.
(Your taste in music is not mine.)

And now, having spent the night
reading the work of friends,
I wanted to jot this down
because in some way you have
entered myself as much as the room –
a silent partner sleeping out
the police car's shocking klaxon,
and the equatorial heating pumps
in the background a steady beat,
and somebody's alarm goes off
prematurely, although we all
still sleep, or are meant to.

The magnolia and cherry trees
flower in the gardens below.
In the labs, experiments are timed
to perfection, but the invisible dust
descends on books, paintings,
maps, busts, the executive aquarium,
even the washed dishes on the rack,
and on our faces upturned in the dark.

Gerald Dawe, *Sunday School* (The Gallery Press, 1991).