



An Illustrious Alumnus – Victor Griffin (1924-2017)

Victor Griffin was a student of Philosophy and Theology at Trinity College Dublin from 1942 to 1947. Thereafter he was curate and then Rector of Christ Church, Derry, and later rural Dean of Derry, concurrently with being a Lecturer in Philosophy at Magee College, Derry, 1950-1968. He was elected Dean of St Patrick's Cathedral in Dublin in November 1968 and served in that post for the following 22 years.

He entitled his autobiography *Mark Of Protest*. This was fitting in that he was, like his great hero and predecessor Dean Swift, an Aristotelian “great souled” person who fought against bigotry, protested on behalf of the dispossessed and worked for the preservation of Ireland's heritage. He was a liberal broadminded thinker who actively supported the divorce referendum, the north-south Peace Train movement, the Dublin Crisis Conference on inner-city rejuvenation, the resistance to any “abortion amendment” being made part of the Irish Constitution, the opposition to apartheid in South Africa and the protests against the Dublin Corporation's offices being built over the Viking archeological site at Wood Quay. Appropriately in 1979 he was made one of the “People of the Year”, a title awarded to those who “have demonstrated their courage and energy” on behalf of Ireland and the world. It was also appropriate that with his personal generosity he inaugurated the annual Jonathan Swift Lecture and symposium.

During his time among the philosophers at Trinity, VG remarked that he was greatly helped both academically and personally by the Hegel scholar Francis La Touche Godfrey. Godfrey was a chain-smoking Senior Fellow who delighted his students by beginning his lectures ten minutes late and ending them ten minutes early, but in the interim spreading the word that the spirit of the Absolute would work its purposes so that justice and freedom would eventually prevail. VG also mentioned that he was aided in paying his way at Trinity by winning essay prizes on the work of Locke, Berkeley, Kant and Hegel, and by being elected to a Foundation Scholarship, celebrating the latter in Davy Byrne's in Duke Street. But being elected to “Schol” also entailed the financial commitment of either hiring or buying the Scholar's gown with its distinctive long sleeves. Indeed he remarks that, before he had acquired one, he was rebuked by the Professor of

Philosophy, A. A. Luce, the great Berkeley scholar, for appearing at his lectures “academically nude”.

In describing how, during his time at Trinity, Catholics were not permitted by their own archbishop to attend “the Protestant University”, he mentions the following story. A Catholic student, defying the ban, studied at Trinity. However a few days after graduating he was killed in a road accident. When he presented himself at the gates of Heaven, St Peter was reluctant to admit him. However God, hearing the student’s protests, said to Peter, “Let him in. Don’t you know I’m a Trinity man myself?”

While a student VG had digs in Mountjoy Square the environs of which, he said, revealed to him “the destitution and degrading conditions of decaying tenements in which human beings were forced to live”. With the exception of the socialist Jim Larkin, he felt that the politicians of the time had no real commitment to bettering the lives of those on the scrapheap of Dublin society, making do with empty rhetorical flourishes from time to time. This thought remained with him ever afterwards.

In those days women were considered second-class students at Trinity. Women could not sit the exam for Scholarship, and were barred from participation in the campus societies, such as The Philosophical Society, the debating society which met in the GMB. While The Theological Society, being composed almost exclusively of ordinands, was in effect also a wholly male affair, The Metaphysical Society in no way discriminated against women. VG himself liked attending The Metafizz and many years later he was delighted to return to Trinity to give talks to its members. I was present when he gave a talk on George Berkeley. During the course of that evening The Metaphysical Society was presented with a solid oak lectern by some of VG’s former students (some from his Magee days). If you look under the upper book-rest part of the lectern you will see a brass plaque inscribed “Presented to the D.U. Metaphysical Society in honour of the Very Reverend Dean Griffin – October 1998”. In fact the plaque was placed there sometime after the actual presentation, as I could imagine VG objecting to the use of “very reverend” before his name. He was against such honorific titles for churchmen or anyone else.

In his autobiography, Victor Griffin ends the chapter about his time at Trinity with these affectionate words: “So I left Trinity, dear leisurely, tolerant, friendly Trinity, sad at leaving and full of memories but also proud of having a world-renowned academic foundation as my Alma Mater. As a Trinity man, for all time, I could hold my head high”.

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