“We’re lucky in Trinity - we’re surrounded by resources, so you can send students off to read all kinds of things, including things you haven’t read yourself, and that gets them engaging with primary materials and doing their own research. I also like to get students out of the classroom and, again, we’re lucky in Trinity. For one course I teach, ‘Making Shakespeare’, I take students across to the Old Library to look at the first folio 1623 edition of Shakespeare; it’s the only copy in Ireland.”

“Or we’ll go to Marsh’s Library where the Director, Jason McElligott, will show the students interesting things, such as well-worn old editions of Shakespeare’s plays held in the collection, or old Dublin newspapers with adverts for performances of the plays. Next year, I’m hoping to take students down to Smock Alley to see where the plays were performed in the 18th century.”

Andrew Murphy, recently appointed Professor of English (1867), has just finished his first year. For him, it’s a new role but a return to his alma mater: “I studied English here in the 1980s. Terence Brown and Nicky Grene were wonderful mentors - Terence was doing historicist work in English at Trinity long before it became fashionable and Nicky was a wonderful teacher when it came to Shakespeare. In fact Nicky held the 1867 chair before me, so I feel like I’m very much following in my mentor’s footsteps.”

After graduating, he built his career outside Ireland: “I went to Brandeis University in Boston and did my PhD on the Irish context of early modern literature. One of the writers I worked on was Edmund Spenser, who was one of the great poets of the English Renaissance, and he was also a minor colonial administrator in Ireland, with a castle and lands in Cork, which had previously belonged to the Desmonds. That’s where a lot of The Faerie Queene was written; it’s interesting to think of this courtly poem being written in Ireland at time of great conflict, and written in the lands of dispossessed.”

After Brandeis, he was appointed to St Andrew’s University in Scotland, where he worked for twenty years. “I was head of School and also helped set up a new interdisciplinary department to create taught Masters programmes, enabling students to combine different humanities subjects.”
He is impressed by the changes he sees in Trinity's approach to pedagogy. “Back here, after three decades, some of it feels very familiar and as I remember it as a student, but there have been lots of changes. The student body is much bigger now and there's greater flexibility within the curriculum, which I think is great. It's something that always struck me favourably about the US undergraduate system - that you start wide and narrow your disciplinary focus as you progress.”

His own background and route to university have made him a particular fan of keeping your horizons broad: “My dad was a mechanic and nobody in my family had gone to university before me, so the original idea was that I would become a mechanic, but then I did well in the Inter Cert and the principal of my secondary school in Limerick persuaded my parents to let me stay on. Because I'd done well I was put in the science stream, which was school policy at the time. I was set to study Chemistry in NUIG (UCG in those days), but then I had a crisis of confidence about the whole thing, as I was increasingly interested in literature. So I worked in the public service for five years, in Limerick County Council, and I was 22 before I came to Trinity. They were the best decisions I ever made: the decision not to go straight to university from school and the decision to study English when I finally did go. I’m also glad I had the experience of studying science in school, because I feel it gives you a different way of thinking about how things work.”

He has just finished a book on “the rise of literacy in Ireland in the 19th century and how that intersects with the rise of nationalism”, Ireland, Reading and Cultural Nationalism, Bringing the Nation to Book (Cambridge UP 2018) and is now preparing the second edition of his seminal book, Shakespeare in Print, a History and Chronology of Shakespeare in Publishing, first published 2003. “I'm looking to incorporate all the new scholarship that's emerged in the last fifteen years, particularly in relation to digital editions of Shakespeare.”

He points out that digitisation and online databases have changed scholarship in English. Putting together the 2003 book required “a lot of legwork” just going around libraries. Now much more of the material is available online on fully searchable databases.

He is exploring putting together a consortium of researchers across Europe and applying for EU grants to create a digital resource on the publishing trade in Shakespeare’s time. “There's a lot of material but it's diffuse so there would be huge value in getting it into one resource.”

Meantime, he and his wife, who is also Irish, are enjoying settling back in Dublin. He is brushing up on his Irish – “I’m remembering why we all found it so hard at school; it’s a phenomenally difficult language!” - and taking in all the changes of the past three decades. “I left Ireland in 1986 in recession. It feels like a much more cosmopolitan city now. In 1986 it felt like a liberation to go to London; now it feels like a liberation going the other direction, and escaping Brexit.”
To read the full publication, please click here