

FOREWORD

by Professor Aidan Clarke

It is a puzzling and faintly disturbing fact that no Provost of Trinity has written a memoir and it is appropriate that Bill Watts should be the one to break the silence. His retirement in 1991 was the unnoticed end of an era. For the previous three hundred years, since the admission of St George Ashe to the office in 1692, the provostship had been held by an unbroken line of twenty-seven Trinity graduates. In many cases, the price of that convention was an unreasonable resistance to change. It was a price that many were only too ready to pay. In other cases, however, the tradition benignly ensured that innovation was sensitive to the ethos and values of the community. It was by slow increments rather than by abrupt lurches that the College evolved into a university without ceasing to be a collegiate body.

I first encountered Watts as a Senior Lecturer endowed with impressively creative pragmatic skills, who bewildered the University Council by the readiness with which he accepted criticism of his proposals and the resilience with which he recast them again and again until they met with the approval of a body which never quite knew when it had crossed the line between discussing the principle and getting the detail right. As Senior Tutor at the time I was particularly impressed with his attitude towards academic appeals. With traditional disdain for natural justice, the Senior Lecturer was present at the meetings of the committee that

reviewed his decisions but Watts never attempted to influence the discussion and never questioned the decisions. The characteristics he displayed then foreshadowed a provostship in which determined leadership was combined with flexibility: the aim was unwavering but it was never dogmatic because it amounted to doing what was best for the College within the constraints imposed by differences of opinion. The measure of success was a Board that succeeded in being at once talkative and efficient without deciding a single issue by vote in ten years and a University Council that divided only on appointments to professorships. These were ten difficult years in which growth in student numbers went hand in hand with reduced resources. To the confusion of those who took it for granted that survival and forward planning were the most that could be achieved, Watts insisted on action. To the Treasurer, who dutifully stood guard over the capital reserves, he simply observed: "This is the rainy day that we've been saving for". Financial cut-backs were not allowed to impede development and the 'edifice complex' to which he confesses ensured that the College was well ahead of the game when the financial climate changed in the 1990s.

There are two intertwined themes in these pages. One is the straightforward story of a working class Protestant who made good in both the fundamentally meritocratic hierarchy of Trinity and the impersonally egalitarian world of scholarship. The other is a matter of fact account of what a Provost actually did and the context within which he did it in those rapidly receding days before change ceased to be evolutionary and the College began to lose touch with its past. Both themes reveal interesting contrasts. One evokes a time when the system was sufficiently humane and supple to accommodate a talented student who chose to switch from the arts to the sciences and when strength of character was more important than research funding. The other suggests the fruitfulness of responding to the demands that the new Ireland makes on its universities with a resolute determination to defend the fundamental values of higher education and of Trinity in particular. This has nothing to do with the retention of such quaint survivals as Commons, cobblestones and the conduct of ceremonies in Latin:

it has to do with the preservation of an environment in which scholars can pursue knowledge without constraint and in which students are able to experience that activity at first hand.

This is a story of success, a modern morality tale in which strong principles, common sense and a commitment to public service prevail, but only through the agency of prodigiously hard work. From the foundation of the Central Applications Office to the resolution of the problems of the private hospitals, the memoir quietly records the cutting of a succession of Gordian knots, throwing light into dark corners on the way. And, perhaps most notably and instructively, it reveals how, amidst the plethora of public duties and concerns, Watts found time to continue to indulge the passion for investigating lake-beds for evidence of past climate change that has given him an international reputation in Quaternary Studies. Typically, he pays generous tribute to those who helped him on his way.

In the absence of earlier memoirs we can never know if Watts was the first Provost to clean the lavatories before starting his day's work. I think we may be certain that Gerry was the first Provost's wife to do so. Gently radical and sharply perceptive, Gerry managed to have it both ways. While she continued teaching, made it clear that she was not part of a provostial package and maintained a sceptical distance, she was, nonetheless, always an unobtrusively present source of strength and there was never any doubt that the outstanding success of the Watts provostship was achieved by a team effort.

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