

# FOREWORD

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Perhaps I'm biased, but the Provostship of Trinity College Dublin is the pre-eminent academic position in the country. In the course of the thirty-six chapters of this wonderful book, one can't help but compare the thirty-six leaders of the College between 1592–1927 as they stewarded one of Ireland's great institutions through good times, and through bad.

There were some definitively good men, such as William Bedell, who proceeded from the Provostship to the See of Kilmore and died there amid his flock during the rebellion of 1641. His funeral was attended by colonists and Gaelic chieftains alike. There were several whose goodness was less apparent, such as John Hely-Hutchinson who was appointed Provost in 1774 without any discernible qualifications for the post. He was at loggerheads with the Fellows right from the start. He did have political pull, however, which proved useful. The youngest Provost was Michael Ward, appointed at the age of thirty-two. As an explanation for his rapid rise it was said of him that he had 'a great sagacity in dexterously managing proper conjunctures', which we may take as a commentary on the career opportunities available to English adventurers in seventeenth-century Ireland. Commenting on Provost Ward, one of our most famous Provosts, Sir John Pentland Mahaffy, said 'no wonder clever lads sought their fortune in Ireland'. Mahaffy was seventy-five years old when he was appointed Provost in 1914. The oldest Provost on appointment, he presided over Trinity with fortitude at a time of war and revolution.

This book is a powerful study of humanity, or of male humanity at least, as there has yet to be a female Provost. Wives do, however, appear in its pages. For example, Mrs Traill supported Provost Traill in advocating women's rights, and she was the first president of the College's Elizabethan Society. Daughters also appear. Provost Salmon's wife died a decade before he was appointed, and we read that Miss Fanny Salmon 'looked after him in the Provost's House'. Similarly, Rachel and Elsie Mahaffy 'kept the house' for their father. They were finalising the holiday arrangements for the servants when the 1916 rebellion broke out. Elsie kept a diary of the events of that Easter week which is now preserved in the College Library.

Appointment to the Provostship catapulted its holder into a life of privilege, and Provosts often moved in the highest aristocratic circles. This was famously so with Mahaffy, who claimed friendship with the King of Greece, was acquainted with Kaiser

Wilhelm IV, and was entertained by Edward VII and other members of the British Royal family. Bernard too loved to socialise with members of the aristocracy. It should be said, as well, that Provosts were usually well paid, often extremely well paid: the Provost and Senior Fellows at times managed to divide a substantial portion of the College's revenues amongst themselves.

I have found all this material fascinating, and so evidently has the author. A Trinity man through and through, Dr Boyle hails from Skreen, Co. Sligo, where his father was the Church of Ireland rector. He entered Trinity College in 1956 as a sizar and junior exhibitor to study experimental sciences, was elected a Scholar on Trinity Monday 1958, and joined the academic staff as a lecturer in chemistry in 1961. He was elected a Fellow in 1972, was Senior Dean under Provosts Watts and Mitchell, and has been a Fellow Emeritus since 2003.

One might ask why Dr Boyle did not write a straight narrative instead of this Provost-by-Provost account. I venture to suggest it is because, having served under five Provosts, he knows the influence a Provost can wield, or hopes to wield. The Provost is both head of the College, in the sense of being head of the house, and head of the administration, and chairs both the College Board and the University Council. The Provost nominates the officers who hold office for one year, being re-nominated (or not) on an annual basis, and this unusual arrangement puts considerable power into a Provost's hands. If matched with some imagination and administrative ability, it can change the course of the College's history. But if individual Provosts are important, yet there is an unexpected conclusion at the end of this Provost-by-Provost account. It is that precious little may sometimes be achieved in a single Provostship. While some individual Provosts (Bartholomew Lloyd comes to mind) have in a short term of office managed to revolutionise the fortunes of the College, others twice as long in office achieved nothing.

Buildings provide tangible evidence of progress. The finest building in the College today is the Old Library. And all of us Provosts since Baldwin might look on his works and despair, knowing we will never open anything like it. As it happens, the foundation stone was laid during Provost Pratt's tenure but he did not live to see the building completed. Baldwin got the credit, and deservedly so, partly because he remained Provost for so long, forty-two years. It was the longest Provostship ever, and perhaps a consequence of his inability to exit from it successfully. Many of the College's projects were started by one Provost and finished by another. But in the long run, the buildings are perhaps not the most important, and certainly not the most permanent. William

Bedell's Latin graces have outlived any building so far constructed.

In the preface, we are advised by Dr Boyle that 'our precious heritage of now more than four centuries must be treasured and not squandered'. But how to treasure it? At my first alumni dinner as Provost I sat beside a graduate born in 1927. He told me of writing to the Provost as an undergraduate requesting that hot baths be installed in the houses of Botany Bay. The reply from the Board, when it eventually came, was that such facilities were quite unnecessary as academic terms were only seven weeks long. Clearly, the innovation of regular bathing is now with us, and we are the better for it. We are having similar discussions today about Wi-Fi. Some traditions perform need to change, and others should not change. One of Trinity's great strengths is that it is able to tell the difference.

Traditions are valuable when they provide a sound connection to intrinsic values. Among such values are excellence in scholarship, as measured by nothing less than an international reputation; a culture of self-governance and autonomy, while valuing the accountability to which educational institutions are rightly subject; and, ultimately, an affirmation that educating for independence of mind is the greatest treasure. Trinity's traditions can provide a firm foundation for success over the long term, and should not be interpreted as running counter to innovation – quite the contrary. As the first university in Ireland to put many subjects on the curriculum, from genetics to business administration, from social work to bioengineering, from creative writing to neuroscience, Trinity has a tradition of innovation, driven by a fine collegiality that encourages diversity, debate, and genuine dialogue.

What would the Provosts whose lives are described here make of the challenges of 2015? I think they would be pleased to see a vibrant and successful institution. They would be taken aback to hear that Trinity has 16,800 students, 6,000 of them postgraduates. Most of all, they would be surprised that Trinity, under the Universities Act, has become a public state institution with all financial matters – fees, salaries, and pensions – now under state control. That this has long-term consequences is clear as we strive to compete in a global environment. The final chapter in this story is far from written.

While Dr Boyle has written a Provost-by-Provost account, I'm sure he would agree with me that Trinity's history is not all about the Provosts. Rather, Trinity's history is a tribute to the many thousands of people who have worked steadfastly over the centuries since the College's foundation in 1592. Their endeavours have been to the great profit of their country. They have created for Ireland one of its most respected

institutions. They have created, it should also be said, a university known more for the fame of its graduates than for the fame of its Provosts! And rightly so, for Provosts only serve the objectives of education, of offering students the opportunity to achieve their potential as individuals and as citizens, and of offering the opportunity to all to undertake research and scholarship that benefits Ireland and the world.

Trinity alumni now form a global network of more than 100,000 individuals spanning 130 countries worldwide. I speak for them all, and for all current staff and students in thanking the author for linking Trinity with its history. In so doing he has shown us much of what is valuable for Trinity's future.

Patrick Prendergast

Provost

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