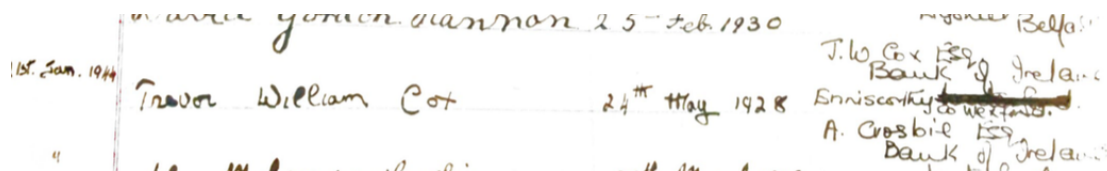


William Trevor, Old Columban

A talk given by Julian Girdham on Thursday 23rd March 2017
in the Big Schoolroom of St Columba's College
to mark the life and writings of the author.



William Trevor died in November 2016, aged 88. He entered the College under his real name, Trevor William Cox, in January 1944 and left in July 1946. Those mere two and a half years out of the 88 were however disproportionately important in the shaping of his artistic imagination. Schools can sometimes, for their own PR purposes, claim more influence than they should on the achievements of their famous alumni, but in this case the evidence is plentiful: and it is of course in the words of William Trevor himself.

In an interview with Mike Murphy on RTÉ Radio in the year 2000, he said about St Columba's:

It was a 'posh' school, to use a contemporary word. When I was at Sandford Park, we thought how strangely they spoke. We would imitate the Columba's accent. But when I got there that school was very pleasantly mixed. There were a fair number of Anglo-Irish representatives there, but there were also a lot of shopkeepers', farmers' and clergymen's sons. It was in those days a good school, because the bullying which had been a feature of its past had been stamped out. I do remember being beaten a couple of times and very unpleasant it was too ... if you're going to be beaten you should be beaten by a responsible beater with a licence or whatever. It was however an interesting school because the staff were interesting men ... I remember it with some affection now having mocked it in my writing for a long time. I do look back on it as being probably a very good school.

It is characteristic of Trevor's courtly manners that he apologises for 'mocking' the school, but in fact I think that mockery is not the dominant tone in his writing about St Columba's: rather it is an abiding fascination, which never left him. Late into life he was writing about the annual excitement of receiving the OCS Bulletin. A handful of years ago he kindly donated a collection of signed first editions, which can now be seen on display in the Library, and here is a small personal connection: in the mid 1980s as literary co-ordinator of the Kilkenny Arts Week, I wrote to Trevor at his address in Devon asking him to read at the Festival. A while later a courteous letter accepting the invitation arrived, and in mid-August I picked him up from the railway station and accompanied him for

the rest of the day prior to the reading at the Castle. He was as good company and as charming as everyone says; within a little while, he became particularly interested in me when he heard that not only was I an Old Columban, but had recently returned to the College as a teacher. He was hungry for information about the school.

Trevor was fascinated by all schools, and, fictional or real, they appear again and again throughout his writing: Sandford Park in Ranelagh; a grammar school in the wonderful novella 'Nights at the Alexandra'; the Swiss finishing 'school' in *Fools of Fortune* run by a truly creepy couple, the Gibb-Bachelors; the Tate boarding school in Wexford ('all food tasted of rust'); the all-girls' Springfield Comprehensive; Elm Park prep school near Armagh in 'Apply Directly to the Headmaster' and the superbly funny 'The Insatiable Roache-Quinn' (a brilliant portrayal of a bunch of teachers you really wouldn't want your child to encounter; luckily it closed shortly after Trevor left). In the essay 'Schools in the Blood' Trevor referred to 'my obsession with schools and life in schools'. So much so that in 1976 Lemon Tree Press produced an entire book of his writings about these institutions, the punningly-titled *Old School Ties* (and that was 40 years before he died; a lot more material was to come). This was a writer whose first major novel, *The Old Boys* (1964), was about how men in their 70s are still acting out the psychodramas of their school days; and the very last short story in the massive Collected edition, 'Folie à Deux', is about the meeting again in Paris of two middle-aged men whose previously met each other decades before as new boys in the Cloisters before Chapel.

On the first page of *Old School Ties* is a fragment called 'At the Convent':

As a child, I attended a convent in Youghal, one of a tiny handful of boys in the lowest form. We didn't feel - as six-year-olds don't particularly - members of a minority group in an overwhelmingly female world. Nor did I, occupying as the only Protestant a second minority area within the first, feel an outcast or in any sense peculiar. During prayers and lessons that touched upon religion I talked to the lay sisters in the kitchen and was often given small pieces of pink marzipan. Touched by this attention, I brought them gifts in return: oranges and a pack of raisins, which I collected from Miss Meade's, a shop in which the goods were free. You just said what you wanted, I explained to the lay sisters, and Miss Meade wrote something down in a book. The lay sisters laughed, but made me take my presents back. Such small incidents I remember vividly, with the smell of floor polish and the Reverend Mother's worn elderly face and the glowing cheeks of Sister Tracy, a country girl. When I look back on that convent in Youghal I experience a wave of happiness.

This was the first, the original Edenic prelapsarian school, a motherly kindly protected place, utterly innocent of any form of difference, and where he was not yet an outsider. He did not yet feel that he was 'on the periphery'. It was Miss Willoughby's schoolroom in Skibbereen, in contrast, 'where first I learnt that the world is not an easy-going place'. Probably the most significant theme in Trevor's writing is time, its relentless erosions and its creation of loss, and this accounts for the pervasive sense of melancholy. Schools are institutions in which

time can both seem to move quickly and stand still, and which in retrospect can seem preserved in aspic, both places you want to get away from and yet later sometimes wish you were still in.

His final school as a boy was St Columba's, and it is worth considering why above all this was the one which so greatly influenced his writing. Like that very different first school in Youghal, it was a place which seemed to absorb difference, but this time it was last stop before adulthood, and certainly not a place of innocence. In between there were many other schools, and periods of no schooling; St Columba's seems to have provided at last some sort of stability in an unsettled childhood (Trevor's father was a bank manager who moved around the country, and it became increasingly clear that his parents' marriage was unhappy). In his own words, 'In all sorts of ways it was at St Columba's where I first became aware that black and white are densities of more complicated greys'.

Before I move on to the College, a quick jump forward. Trevor did not take the usual route here, which was through one of the established prep schools, like Aravon, Headfort, Castle Park and Brook House. But he did teach in prep schools later, and wrote about how fascinated he was by them:

Perhaps if I had [been as a boy] I would not have found its small world so extraordinary. I drifted into that world and eventually drifted out again. Retrospect lends my memories a glow of affection, but at the time the going was rough enough - especially with the lazy days of being a student in Dublin still part of my recent past. I had been a medical student for 24 hours, it being then born in upon me that curing the sick was a mistaken vocation. I had considered become a veterinary surgeon but in time recalled my fear of cats (he took his revenge on cats in *The Old Boys*, in which the monster-moggie Monmouth meets a brutal end in a bin) ... the TCD Careers' Office sent me to see a man who manufactured telephone boxes: he said that strictly speaking he was looking for a qualified engineer ... In the end I answered an advertisement in the *Irish Independent* which stated that a lady was looking for someone to teach her backward daughter to read and write: *Suit a nun*, it suggested. The lady explained to me over tea in the Royal Automobile Club in Dawson Street: 'Well, I mean we had someone female in mind. I mean a nun. Or an ex-nun. Something like that.' I said I thought I could do as well as a nun or an ex-nun, and in the end the lady said she supposed I could.

So for a while he travelled out of Dublin daily on the bus to be a personal tutor. Time does not permit me to go into his subsequent experience as a teacher in prep schools, but his writing about this is brilliantly funny. He moved onto schools in England after Elm Park before drifting into copying-writing: the seeds of the artistic life that were sown in St Columba's took a little while to flower, but he retained fond memories of his teaching years. In his terrific interview with Mira Stout in the *Paris Review* in 1989 he said:

I liked teaching math best because I don't have a natural way with figures and therefore had sympathy with the children who didn't either. And I greatly respected the ones who did possess that aptitude. My skill in art

and English made me impatient, and I found those subjects rather dreary to teach as a result. A headmaster asked me once, "Why are the art room walls covered with pictures of such ugly women? And why have some of them got those horrible cigarette butts hanging out of their nostrils?" I explained that I had asked the children to paint the ugliest woman they could think of. Unfortunately, almost all of them had looked no further than the headmaster's wife. I like that devilish thing in children.

And so to St Columba's. Unlike its predecessor Sandford Park, where there were only 11 or 12 boarders, this was a complete boarding environment, a world entire of itself, perhaps his first true community since that convent school in Youghal:

Schools came and went. The last one I went to was St Columba's, set high in the Dublin mountains. It was, and still is, the only public school of its kind in the Republic of Ireland, famous for much but most of all for skill on the hockey pitch. In its big, beautiful deer park there is a ruined summer-house where Robert Emmet was said to have courted Sarah Curran. We used it as a shelter from the wind, crouched low among the blocks of stone, smoking our wartime American cigarettes. When first I arrived, I was impressed by the presence of a butler [Flood appears in *Fools of Fortune* as 'Fukes'] and a vast number of maids, one of whom was known as the Bicycle. Receiving me with a handful of other new boys, the Headmaster showed us a tiny water-colour which he said was probably by Turner, and a chest that had been, he thought, the property of Anne Boleyn, and a rectangular object beneath glass that was believed to have been in the possession of St Columba himself. "The Chapel," said the headmaster [Warden Sowby], "is the centre of school life. I should like you to remember that." He did, and both that sentence and Chapel itself feature repeatedly in the writings, along with the detail that one of the favourite pupil pastimes was flicking butterpats upward and trying to get them to stick to the ceiling of the Dining Hall.

The Columban magazine gives few hints of what was to come later in life. Trevor William Cox appears first in the Hilary Term edition of 1944, arriving less than a year after the departure of Michael Campbell, author of the single most sustained literary treatment of this place, the best-selling 1967 novel *Lord Dismiss Us* (the central teacher in that book, Eric Ashley, appears under his real name, Peter Allt, in Trevor's essays 'Mentors'). He wins two awards which point the way to his first artistic métier, the Warden's Prizes for Woodcarving and for Sculpture. He is named best maiden speaker in a debate in which he 'asked the House if they did not think that, behind a fleshy exterior, there was something permanent, a soul, that would be free to roam after death', and in a later debate on the Partition of Ireland says 'it was perfectly obvious that Partition was a great evil and advocated the extermination of the people in the 6 counties'; perhaps that 'devilishness' is in those two comments. There is no mention of him in the Literary Society reports. He makes it onto the Rugby First XV, where his play demonstrates 'zest' and 'abandon'. One literary connection: he is editor of *The Columban* in his final year.

One teacher in particular had a great influence on him, the renowned sculptor Oisín Kelly, then teaching Art, French and Irish, about whom he writes vividly in his essay 'Mentors':

In the art room he didn't fulsomely encourage. His example of doing rather than thinking, his dislike of the amateur, his distrust of philosophy, of the cerebral and academic, weren't thrust upon you: they were there, you shared them or you didn't, you stood on your own two feet. He was impatient and tetchy and down-to-earth. You weren't put into the world to be pampered. If you wanted to learn, listen to what was being said to you: if you didn't, no one else was going to fret.

For some years Trevor was a professional sculptor, and Kelly's values may well have persisted. As an author, Trevor disdained the cerebral and academic, the flashy, he worked hard and produced a huge body of work (almost 2000 pages of short stories alone) that is always beautifully shaped. In the *Paris Review* he said 'I have no messages or anything like that; I have no philosophy and I don't impose on my characters anything more than the predicament they find themselves in.' And when he says 'I have to create for the novel a tremendous amount of raw material, and then cut the novel out of it' he echoes Michelangelo's famous statement 'Every block of stone has a statue inside it and it is the task of the sculptor to discover that'.

That seems a good metaphor for Trevor's writing. So many of his short stories have within them the possibilities of entire novels, and an autobiographical essay which also has this density is what I think is his best piece of non-fiction, 'The Warden's Wife' from 1992, in *Excursions in the Real World*. He sets the scene:

Gowns were worn in the classrom and in Dining Hall, and surplises in Chapel on Sundays. The gowns covered the top half of the body only, and somewhat inadequately, but were useful for smuggling slices of bread to toast in the furnace room, for soaking up spills and polishing shoes. Traditionally, no junior was permitted to walk around with his hands in his pockets. Traditionally on St Patrick's Day the entire school, even the stout housekeeper, the cook, the bursar's secretary and the two school nurses, assisted in the planting of potatoes. Traditionally, there were cock-fights - one boy perched on another's shoulders, lashing out at a pair of rivals - and Cloister Cricket, and words with local meanings, different from the accepted ones, and small idiosyncrasies of behaviour. Traditionally, the first fruits of the potato-planting were eaten on St Columba's Day ... in spite of its *crème-de-la-crème* reputation, St Columba's in 1944 was a genuine microcosm. You didn't have to be clever there... when it chose to, it became a world of its own. Double-saving time was kept one summer, clocks an hour ahead of standard Irish time. No bathing attire was ever worn in the hilltop swimming pool, by boys or masters, since no one ever passed by. The school's meat was slaughtered on the premises; it supplied all vegetables and milk.

So, magnificently, the College was in its own time zone, blithely ignoring the time down the road in Rathfarnham. It manufactured its own timelessness.

He goes on to describe Mrs Mary Sowby: 'Once she had been beautiful: I often heard that said during my two years at St Columba's and perhaps it was true... all that was certain was that no beauty remained.' Fascinated by this plainly intelligent woman who is merely 'the Warden's wife' rather than herself, whose entire life seems to be a suppression of her individuality, the essay which he writes is brilliant in its imagining of her inner self. Reading of her death in Canada in 1989, he is startled to discover that during her time at the College she had become 'an expert in matters of the turf, regularly attending race-meetings'. Trevor is forensically perceptive of character. He was just the sort of pupil you don't want in your own class.

The third of the essays in *Excursions in the Real World* about St Columba's is another gem, 'Long Stewart', an affectionate account of Kenneth J. Stewart from Boyle, Co Roscommon, whose family is still part of the school community and with whom Trevor kept in touch until Stewart's death, also in 1989.

St Columba's recurs throughout the fiction. While school incidents in *The Old Boys* may not have been taken from Trevor's time here, much of the background clearly is. On Old Boys' Day there is a Chapel service, a cricket match, and in the evening a Dinner:

Mr Nox glanced round the Dining Hall. It hadn't changed since last year; it hadn't changed very much since he was a boy. The ceiling was still stained with the marks of butter, flicked there from the points of knives.

Versions of the College appear in short stories such as 'Mr McNamara', 'Torrige', 'Family Sins', 'Traditions' and 'Folie à Deux'. However, the most extended treatment of the College in the novels is in *Fools of Fortune* (1983). The central character, Willie Quinton, lives in another Eden, the house in County Cork called Kilneagh, with his parents, siblings, aunts, and his tutor, the sympathetic defrocked priest Father Kilgarriff. Willie's father repeatedly says he will go 'to the school he'd been at himself, in the Dublin mountains.' For Willie, this was 'a source of mild terror', a threat rather than the opportunity his father considers it to be, and in imagining being beaten by a bamboo cane he fantasises that the local GP will declare he is 'too delicate for a place like that', and hopes his mother will protect him from the 'grim establishment', 'founded in 1843'.

He goes, all right, after a fire destroys his house and most of his family, and Chapter 5 as well as part of Chapter 6 is given over to this experience: 'Exposed to the winds that swept across the gorse-laden hillsides, the school ... was a cloistered world of its own', not just physically chilly but a place where there is little innocence. Again the Warden and other teachers are vividly evoked. In Chapter 6 Willie has the great summer of his life, falling in love with his cousin Marianne. He cannot talk of such pure feelings with anyone who 'would understand my feelings and my diffidence', but finds an unlikely confessor in the figure of the timeless butler Fukes: 'Loving the school as nobody else did, he never left it and was inordinately proud both of his servant status and his loyalty'.

T.W. Cox (ma) left the school in the summer of 1946. An essay in the December 1964 edition of the *London Magazine* called 'Leaving School', which he cannabilised for other essays, describes the experience. His feelings are ambivalent. He prepares to go out into the post-school world, and in Chapel there is

a great roar as we sang the end-of-term hymn. *Those returning make more faithful than before...* Every time we had heard those words in the past we imagined the day when we would sing them for the last time, when we would roar them out because we would not now be more faithful than before, because we were not returning.

The words are from the hymn *Lord Dismiss Us*, which Michael Campbell took as the title of his novel. But the reality of leaving is not as thrilling as he had expected, the experience is ambivalent:

School was for ever over, yet school persisted ... the present days, and the ones that were promised, seemed dull and disappointing. At school I had had a position: I had sat at the end of a table in Dining Hall: I had given out biscuits at break.

The outsider, who initially had turned down the Warden's offer of prefectship, had become one of us.

Trevor found his vocation eventually, and in over fifty years produced an extraordinary body of work of the highest quality that will surely last. It is work of great variety, covering a huge range of characters, places and events, but schools run like a thread throughout the corpus, and one school in particular colours that thread more than any other.

I finish with *The Old Boys*, and the words of a venerable Housemaster:

"The School may do as it likes," H.L.Dowse has said, "It may keep its own time. It may be almost entirely self-supporting. It may train its own small army; print and publish its own propaganda. It may invent traditions, laws and myths." At the School a man once taught the boys in his care that New Guinea was part of Canada, that steppes were steps, that the Danube flowed through Spain. He used no text-books, and allowed only the maps he drew himself on the blackboard. They found him out eventually, but many still carry with them his strange geographical images. The School belonged to itself, adapting what it decided it required. "A miniature of the world," said H.L. Dowse to every new boy he interviewed. But once, later in his life, he said instead, "The world is the school gone mad."

END

