

A Note on a footnote of Jim Walsh's

by John Cosgrave (jbcosgrave@gmail.com),

former member of Mathematics Department, Carysfort College

In the note below there are elements which some readers might find incredible (they could be forgiven, as I find them incredible *myself*) - I dare say that the *three choices* part might raise a few eyebrows (not to mention the *holiday camp* element) - and, Ireland being Ireland, I can well imagine that some readers might think I have made some of it up.

*Nothing* I have written below is made up; *all* parts have *independent witnesses, visual* (Daltún Ó Ceallaigh of IFUT) or *reported to* (Professor Tony O'Farrell of Maynooth Mathematics).

I had *long intended* writing what I have written below, but could never work up the emotional energy required *until now* (the reason for my doing so now will be clear in a moment), but I can point to the fact that I had *long put into the public domain* (in 1999) the *three choices* part. I did so when I was working at St Pats and had just acquired a web site. My site (originally it was [www.spd.dcu.ie/johnbcos](http://www.spd.dcu.ie/johnbcos), then it got changed to <http://staff.spd.dcu.ie/johnbcos>) was shut down by DCU when St Pats was fully absorbed into DCU, but I managed to save its contents and incorporate it into the Archive section of my new web site (<http://johnbcosgrave.com>).

I wrote the three choices element in the Autobiography part of that site, and it is now at this address:

<http://johnbcosgrave.com/archive/biograph.htm>

Scroll down to "*Following the bizzare closure of Carysfort College ...* " on that page and you may read " *... a senior civil servant put it to me that I had three choices...* "

In fact, looking at that page for the first time in ages, I see that I also wrote (in The Bones section) about "*... the permanent gift of the [Government] Department of Education ...* ", and, incidentally, about *gross vandalism* in the previous section.

Doubters amongst you could say: *John, you've made that up just now... after all, as you state at the top of your page, at your 'Note of April 2017', you can now edit the contents of your page and so make changes, changes there ...*

True (that I can edit, add, subtract, modify, ... ), but I would point to the fact that there is a (quite remarkable) international web archive called *WaybackMachine* - it's at

<https://web.archive.org>

- and early versions of my old St Pats web site may be found there in which I have *already* written (going back to at least 2001, but probably much earlier) about "three choices". See *Addendum*.

Also, re "*long intended*" above, see "*Amongst my plans for this page is to give a personal account of the shocking closure of Carysfort College in 1988*" in the above mentioned Note of April 2017.

---

From CARYSFORT COLLEGE REMEMBERED I quote the following from (p.306) Jim Walsh's article Carysfort College as a Formative Scholarly Environment

" *My recollection is that the attitude of senior officials in the Department and also of the HEA Chairman towards Carysfort College as an institution with a distinguished history of preparing teachers, and towards the management and staff, was hostile, disdainful, dismissive, uncompromising and closed from the outset.* "

When I read those words I thought that one of those officials must include a certain Mr. Seán Ó Nualláin.

But then I saw that Jim had a footnote (#3) at the word 'outset', a footnote which read:

" *By contrast, the Department staff, including Seán Ó Nualláin as Secretary of the Ministerial Working Group, who were assigned responsibility for ensuring that every member of Carysfort's academic staff was redeployed satisfactorily, were courteous, constructive, very helpful and understanding.* "

On a first reading of Jim's footnote I thought that he was being uncharacteristically sarcastic, but, on rereading, I came to the conclusion that he wasn't. Jim and I most certainly had quite differing experiences with respect to this Mr. Ó Nualláin, because he was, and remains, the *single most ignorant individual* I have encountered in my entire working life, indeed in my whole life (and I have gone over in my mind all the unpleasant characters with whom I have had dealings, from my childhood through to the present day), and I now set down my experiences with this individual.

Most (all?) of you in receipt of this will have attended the staff meeting in early June (does anyone have an exact date?) 1988 - attended also by Daltún Ó Ceallaigh, our redoubtable IFUT General Secretary - a meeting at which we were addressed by this Mr. Ó Nualláin (does anyone know if Daltún kept a record of that meeting?)

Who can forget the gist of that meeting? For the purposes of what I wish to record here I mention only that with regard to the redeployment of some staff members to other third level institutions around the country, this Mr. Ó Nualláin read out a list of institutions that had made requests with regard to certain (unnamed) individuals: UCD wanted someone from French, English, *etc.*, ... , Maynooth wanted someone from ... *etc.* There was *no* mention of any institution requesting anyone from Carysfort Mathematics (Ryder and myself only, since my former splendid colleague Michael Barry had the previous year found a job in the States, and opted for the Department's generous early retirement package).

It was mentioned that (the apparently kindly) Mr. Ó Nualláin was willing to meet with individual staff members - with Daltún present - to discuss personal concerns. How many of you, like myself, traipsed down to meet with him?

(Aside. Even Jim himself would appear to have forgotten a truly memorable moment from that staff meeting. I refer you to his comment on p.307 of his article: "*Indeed, in my own case, when I enquired years later about my status, I was informed that it was akin to that of a non-returnable gift provided to the university.*")

In fact what happened at that meeting was that shortly after Mr. Ó Nualláin had read the list mentioned earlier, Jim *himself* asked about the status of individuals transferred to other institutions... To which Mr. Ó Nualláin remarked that such staff would be "*the permanent gift of the Department of Education*".

When subsequently I moved to Pats - I'm coming to that later - I was frequently asked about the closure of Carysfort (*there but for the grace of god could we have gone too...*), and it drew a laugh when I informed them that I was a *permanent gift [to them] by the Department of Education*. Whenever I used to pass (the lovable) Tom Halpin (English Department) in the college he would smile at me and say "*Ah, John, permanent gift of the Department of Education*".

Ask Tom about this should any of you come across him. You could make him smile by saying that "*John, the permanent gift of the Department of Education, was asking after you*".

So, I know all about this gift business *not* from having heard about it from Jim years later, *but* from hearing it at the time.) [end of Aside.]

Now, I entered the room to meet with this (kindly, I thought at the time) Mr. Ó Nualláin - Daltún present - and he opened with what I thought was a rather bizarre question:

*Mister Cosgrave, what is your view of the world?*

As you can imagine I was quite thrown by this (wouldn't you have been?) For a moment I thought he was trying to engage me in some sort of discussion about the state of the world itself in general... He must have thought me to be stupid as I had to ask him what he *meant* by this question.

He clarified by telling me that he wanted to know what I thought of my *own personal situation* with regard to the college's closure.

(Ah, so that's what he wants to know; ah, I can tell him about that.)

I told him that I was just a bit surprised that, in reading out his list, there was no mention whatever of any Mathematics Departments around the country wanting to have me moved there.

*And why would I be surprised?*

I embarked on a blathering listing of various reasons as to why I thought there would surely be *somewhere* who wanted to have me move there:

I had studied Mathematics (only) at Royal Holloway College of London University ('65-'68), and I had given tutorials for (the wonderful) Professor H. G. Eggleston (H.O.D.) for three years ('68-'71) while I did my PhD there. I held a one year Temporary Lectureship there for '71-'72, held another Temporary Lectureship in Manchester University for the years '72-'74 (I didn't tell him that while there I had given two especially advanced courses to post-graduate students and interested staff - one of them, incidentally, the remarkable mathematician Ian G. Macdonald, FRS, and H.O.D - courses that I offered voluntarily over and above my required duties), that I began (Oct. '74) a three year Lecturship at the Jos Campus of Ibadan University (Nigeria) - which had to be cut short (Nov. '75) because my wife's serious illness - that Manchester had found monies to see me through the remainder of the year '75-'76, but that I was interviewed in Carysfort in Dec. '75, and was offered appointment the following day.

I told him that in Sept. '75 I had been offered a job (by Richard Timoney, the then H.O.D.) in UCD (one for which I had not applied; *for one year initially, while we take steps to have you made permanent*), but, because of the uncertainty surrounding my wife's unknown length of stay in hospital in Nigeria, that offer fell through (and my friend Colin Walter was plucked from Cambridge in my place).

I told him that I had been offered a permanent job in UCC in Sept. '74, but that I had turned it down (there were reasons, reasons that would have been beyond Mr. Ó Nualláin's comprehension. The UCC offer came the very day after I had accepted Manchester's).

I told him that I had once (in '73) been second choice for a permanent job in TCD; I knew this because TCD informed me, while they waited for their first choice to make up their mind (clearly awaiting the outcome of another application elsewhere, but eventually opting to take the TCD offer).

The whole point of my telling Mr. Ó Nualláin all of this was to attempt to explain my puzzlement with regard to his list of who-wanted-whom.

None of this may be disputed, and was witnessed by Daltún.

Mr. Ó Nualláin listened to all of this with *apparent* concern and interest; I could have known the cards he was keeping so close to his chest, but I soon found out.

It was of course pleasing that someone *appeared* to be listening, but that was all. Outside I rhapsodised to others about the lovely gentleman waiting to hear their woes.

Then, a development. One of the things that we all knew, or thought we knew, was that there was an embargo on new posts in third level institutions around the country, pending a resolution of the Carysfort issue. Nobody was being allowed to advertise new posts, at least ones that could be filled by Carysfort staff.

Then I recalled having seen a short term post having being advertised in Maynooth earlier that year, and I wondered: how come they got clearance to advertise (admittedly only for a short time posting) ... ? On an impulse - perhaps just a few days after the Carysfort staff meeting - I decided I'd phone Professor Tony O'Farrell - the then H.O.D. in Maynooth, and the only person there with whom I had ever had any contact - and when I got through it happened that Tony wasn't there, and I was asked if I'd like to speak with someone else. Yes, of course, and I was put through to a staff member.

When I explained who I was, and why I was phoning, this person told me that the department had had a meeting about Carysfort staff, and that they had put in a request to have me transferred there. *Had I not heard of this?* No, no, I hadn't heard of this. When Tony got back, this would be conveyed to him, and I'd hear from him, as indeed I did.

(Of course I thought there had simply been some breakdown in communication, and thought how happy Mr. Ó Nualláin when he heard about all of this... one less problem for him to be concerned about.)

Then I wondered if perhaps something similar had happened with respect to UCD... And so I phoned there, just out of passing interest (for I *knew* - the foolishness of youth! - I'd be headed to Maynooth). It turned out that exactly the same had happened there: a meeting, and they wanted to have me go there. They, of course, had wondered *why* they hadn't heard from me: doesn't John want to come to *us*?

A few evenings later I met Tony and Tom Laffey (UCD, and the best Irish mathematician in my view) at a mathematics meeting in town, and we joked about all of this. I made it clear, though, that I was going to Maynooth, simply because I'd heard (by chance) of their interest *first*. After the meeting Tony drove me home, and on the way very kindly said that he would completely understand should I change my mind, and want instead to go to UCD. (He

knew, of course, that UCD was just up the road for me, while going to Maynooth would have been quite a travel burden, my not being a driver).

What to do then? Tony suggested I write to this Mr. Ó Nualláin, and just tell him that all was sorted (we still just thought that he hadn't been informed, that he was living in simple ignorance of the facts).

I wrote a letter to Mr. Ó Nualláin, telling him what I thought was the good news, and waited for a response... Tony all the while asking about developments.

After some three weeks *no* response was received, and I decided to phone Mr. Ó Nualláin.

I told him who I was - *you remember we spoke out at Carysfort, you were so good to listen to me, you wanted to know how I viewed the world, ...* - and wondered when I might be hearing from him.

*You won't be hearing from me Mr. Cosgrave. I thought that he must have confused me with someone else - some other Mr. Cosgrave who won't be hearing from him* - and so I reminded him that I was the Cosgrave in Mathematics at Carysfort, the one who had written to him to tell him that I had sorted matters for him... .

*Oh, he knew who I was alright, and I wouldn't be hearing from him, and it was time that I lived in the real world.*

I really did think that he was confusing me with someone else, and started to repeat my earlier blatherings.

Then Mr. Ó Nualláin got down to basics (*courteous, constructive, very helpful and understanding* ?!):

*"Mr. Cosgrave, you have only three choices: either you emigrate, or you take early retirement, or you go to Drumcondra."*

Pardon? What?

I blathered on about how I had no wish to emigrate... that when I was in London I thought there was nowhere else in the world I would want to live, that I felt the same about Manchester after I'd had to go there, that I never thought I'd ever want to live in Ireland (ever, ever, ever), but that having come here to take up my Carysfort job (thinking at the time: as soon as Mary gets well again, I'm going to start looking around, and get out of here as soon as I can) I found that I loved being here, that my English wife loved it here too, and so I wouldn't want to emigrate.

This Mr. Ó Nualláin must have thought I was a slow learner, but a learner nevertheless, for he said:

*"So, Mr. Cosgrave, now you have just two choices: either you take early retirement, or you go to Drumcondra."*

I blathered on about how I was too young (I had been forty-two earlier that year) to take early retirement. In England I'd had three years of FSSU contributions (London 1 + Manchester 2), but that on leaving Nigeria I had no money and had cashed in my benefits, and so my only pension recognition would be the twelve and a half years service I'd had at Carysfort.

Mr. Ó Nualláin worked it all out for me: *"So, Mr. Cosgrave, now you have just one choice: you go to Drumcondra."*

Then - perhaps divining that one day in the future he would be *singled out* (from the many others) for being "courteous, constructive, very helpful and understanding" - this Mr. Ó Nualláin adopted *an entirely different way of speaking to me* (perhaps he was beginning to pity me?):

He put it to me that St Pats was a "holiday camp", wondered why I wouldn't just go there and treat it as such, told me that *"we might close it down in a few years time, and then you could go to Maynooth"*

Did Mr. Ó Nualláin think he was being *very helpful*, or perhaps only just *helpful* in telling me this? Or showing me some *understanding*? Did he think that he was *courteous*, or *constructive*? Did he not think that I might alert St Pats to the possibility that *they* might be closed down in a few years? What sort of contempt did he hold for me, or for St Pats, that he couldn't even care if I was to report his *dismissive* words?

Can readers of this imagine the *absolute outrage*, the *anger*, that I felt at having this put to me? This gentleman was employed by our government's Department of *Education*, and he spoke to me in those terms. How could he possibly have *thought* I would be happy to hear that St Pats was a *holiday camp*?

It is impossible to convey the *shock* I felt after I put down the phone... I remember trembling, shaking, and feeling a complete bafflement that there could exist in our country a person as *ignorant* as this Mr. Ó Nualláin.

---

I reported all of this to Tony O'Farrell in Maynooth (it would not be right for me to report what he thought of it), and after digesting it he returned to me to ask if I had any political connections that I might explore - I told him I didn't, and had never in my life had any, nor would never ever want any - but asked if I had any objections to Maynooth's adopting a political approach to the matter. I didn't (it was not for me to tell others how they should or shouldn't act), and this is how Maynooth proceeded:

At the time there were two well-known FFers in that region, John O'Connell and Gerry Brady, and they were briefed by Maynooth to make a case to Mrs. Mary O'Rourke (then occupying the very seat barely cold from Gemma Hussey - okay there was a Mr. Cooney in between them - need one say any more about how quickly ... ).

The simple case made by these two individuals to Mrs. O'Rourke was that Maynooth had some 550 students and 5 staff, while if I were to go to St Pats then I would be one of 3 staff teaching some 50 students, and thus it made more sense for me to be transferred to Maynooth. Tony O'Farrell reported back to me that Mrs. O'Rourke was rather taken with this argument, but needed to consult with her officials before making a final decision.

Some days later, though, Tony reported back to me that Mrs. O'Rourke's hands were being tied by the Dept. of Finance, who argued that there were two fillable vacancies in St Pat's (the HOD there - Fr. Brendan Steen - had been due to retire the previous year, but had stayed on for another year, and tragically Fred Klotz - the other Mathematics lecturer, apart from Olivia Bree - had died months beforehand following a cycle accident... ).

Michael Barry had taken USA leave from Carysfort for Carysfort's final year 1987-88 (I made up a new 3rd year course to replace Michael's, otherwise the College would have had to find someone - unfamiliar with our ways - to teach our students in their final year. I didn't seek, wasn't offered, and wouldn't have accepted, any payment for that work).

The two St Pats fillable vacancies were filled by Gerry Ryder and myself. And there I had better stop.

Friday 16th November 2018

---

*Addendum.* After I had written the above I decided I'd take a look at 'saves' of earlier versions of my web site (one which I started in the summer of 1999). If you don't already know of (sorry for repeating myself, but it really is the *quite remarkable*, and *free*, though donations are accepted) WaybackMachine.

If you don't know what to do to see saved-in-time earlier forms of a web site - and these are *not changeable*, *cannot be forged*, *cannot be edited-after-the-event*, they are there for all eternity, as it were - then this is what you do:

#1. Go to this web page: <https://web.archive.org>, and at the top you will see a box in which is written:

"Enter a URL [i.e., a web page address that you may know] or words related to a site's home page]"

(For myself I had forgotten the meaning of 'URL' and had to look it up... it evidently means "A Uniform Resource Locator (URL), colloquially termed a web address ... " Thank you Wikipedia.)

#2. In my case I entered my original web site address, [www.spd.dcu.ie/johnbcos](http://www.spd.dcu.ie/johnbcos), and - as if by magic - there it was, or rather there *they were*...

You will see a time-line at the top of the page going (for some unknown reason) from 1997 (perhaps that was the year when WaybackMachine started? No, it wasn't, for according to [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wayback\\_Machine](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wayback_Machine) it was launched in 2001), then 1998 (when my site didn't exist), then 1999 (when I started it) through to 2017 (when it ceased to exist)

While the very first 'snapshot' *appears* to have take place on 28 Nov 1999, clicking on that date in the calendar brings

up my page with this footing: "This page was last updated 16 February 2001 12:53:01 -0000"

That (16 Feb. 2001) page has this address:

<https://web.archive.org/web/20010520121919/http://www.spd.dcu.ie:80/johnbcos>

There's a menu on the left-hand side of that page, ranging from 'Nikhil Banerjee' down to 'Great Web Sites', and in the midst of those is 'Biography', and clicking on it brings up this page:

<https://web.archive.org/web/20010422030627/http://www.spd.dcu.ie:80/johnbcos/biograph.htm>

There ("This page is under construction. I will add to it from time to time.") I see that I wrote in 'The bones' as follows:

September 1988. Moved ("the permanent gift of the [Government] Department of Education," according to a senior civil servant) to Mathematics department of St. Patrick's College, Drumcondra, Dublin 9, Ireland.

and, further down, in the 'Longer biographical details' section I wrote:

Following the bizarre closure [about which much could - and may, in time - be written] of Carysfort College by the Irish government in June 1988 I transferred to my present College in September 1988. (A senior civil servant put it to me that I had three choices: to emigrate, to retire (at 42!!), or to transfer to St. Partick's College.)

Concerning "about which much could - and may, in time - be written" I thought it would probably never be written. Why? Simply because, like all of you, I just had so much else (*of value*) going on in my life to be bothered writing up this account of one individual's experience of the closure of Carysfort - and who would care anyway? - but at the same time I always thought that I should do it, simply to set down that *this is how it was*, this is *an example of what we had to put up with*.

---

At <https://techcrunch.com/2016/12/08/backing-up-the-history-of-the-internet-in-canada-to-save-it-from-trump/>:

" The data stored by the Internet Archive — which includes Trump's presidential campaign websites from 2008 and 2012 as well as full text-searchable transcripts of his television interviews — is also crucial to fact-checking Trump, Kahle says. "We think we have work to do to try to stem the tide of fake news," he said. "Let's at least make it easy to cite what's happened. At least make it easy to go and find these sorts of things." "

---

A passing historical note re Manchester. I insert it just to give a flavour of the desperate employment market for young mathematicians at the time.

They - Manchester - had only advertised a one-year temporary post in August '72, very late in the day given that the academic year '72-'73 was about to begin. There was a reason for the late advertisement, again I relate it for historical interest.

The department had 50 staff and *mathematics* 450 students, giving a staff/student ratio of 8.5. The university admin. wanted to get the ratio up to 9.5, and the dept. had been told that no new appointments could be made until that ratio was attained. *Ergo*: more students or staff leaving...

But, late that summer, a young, permanent staff member decided he was giving up Mathematics, and because the teaching timetable for the coming academic year had already been determined, the dept. was given permission to advertise a one-year temporary lectureship.

Ninety-six PhD holders applied, of whom twelve were short-listed, and interviewed by a two-person board: Professor

Ian G. Macdonald, FRS (the overall Head of Department) and Professor Fritz Ursell, FRS (Head of the Applied Mathematics group). One cannot but admire the *seriousness of purpose* that two such eminent people would be bothered to interview twelve people for a mere one-year post. It was the *only* interview I ever had at which I was invited to go to a blackboard and actually explain certain matters to them.

I had a very agreeable year there, but I always knew it was going to end, until... in the summer of '73 a permanent staff member declared that while he didn't want to give up Mathematics, he nevertheless wanted out (unpaid) for a year, and I was asked to stay on for a second year.

By such quirks of fate is one's life determined...

---