

University of Limerick Oral History Project. (ULOHP)

Interview: Professor Ken Wylie.

18 May 2011

I.: Thank you very much Professor Wylie for speaking to me today. If you'd like to introduce yourself first of all, please?

K.W.: Well thank you for inviting me and I'm flattered to be interviewed in this way. Ken Wylie- I won't bore you with my childhood and all that stuff, which was quite interesting but we won't have time. I can start with work. At the age of fifteen I started work in a large Belfast Engineering Company as an office boy and later became an apprentice fitter. By internal examination I was upgraded to design draftsman and worked in that capacity for perhaps two years. As a result of going to night college I obtained, it's called a Higher National Certificate which you probably never heard of, but it allowed me to matriculate to Queens University, who changed the regulations at that time to facilitate people who had more unusual backgrounds. So I matriculated to Queens in 1964. Not all that old; I'd worked for six years at that stage, but I was still only twenty-one, and the normal intake of students was maybe seventeen or eighteen so I wasn't much older. I completed my degree in Mechanical Engineering in Queens in 1968 and then made a career change and went into the chemical industry.

I worked for Countaulds in Carrickfergus, which I didn't enjoy very much. It was run by ex-army colonels, and there were only two people in the management team who were Irish, myself and somebody else. I didn't like it but had an opportunity of going back to Queens to do a PhD which I completed in 1971 and then became a contract assistant lecturer. It was a fixed term contract which came to an end in '73, and I badly needed another job. I had two young children then, I think they were aged two and one. I saw an ad. in the *Irish Times* for this place called NIHE in Limerick and I applied for a lectureship. I was the very first mechanical engineer to be appointed. Then I made the journey from Bangor, Co. Down in August 1973. I think in retrospect it was probably quite a brave decision to come to Limerick because my background was kind of

evangelical Protestant, in Ian Paisely mode!, and few of those people would actually have gone to work in the Republic of Ireland. But I had never, in spite of the best efforts of my parents, any concept of sectarianism and was very excited that in Limerick I might rediscover my rural roots. I'd been brought up in the middle of a bog in County Armagh!.

I.: What was the nature of your employment in the NIHE?

K.W.: In 1973, I started off as a lecturer in Mechanical Engineering and actually in 1978 I left NIHE and went to work in Trinity for one and a half years. I didn't like Trinity and was delighted to return to NIHE roundabout 1980 when I was appointed as a Senior Lecturer in Mechanical Engineering. In that capacity, I started the Mechanical Engineering degree programme and then I became then Head of the Department of Mechanical and Production Engineering which was quite a big Department. I think there were thirty two academic staff, seventeen technical staff and before the end of the MPE we had fifty research workers which at that time was quite an achievement. Then that Department split up and I became head of a new Department of Mechanical and Aeronautical Engineering. I was able then to start a degree programme in Aeronautical Engineering which gave me a lot of satisfaction.

And then I retired early at the age of sixty, I'm now sixty-seven so that's seven years ago. The nature of the University changed and there was then a big research dimension. I had spent my whole career doing development stuff and when I ceased to be Head of Department I hadn't any research to fall back on. I began to feel very ill at ease as I had employed some people who had an awful lot of research I'll name one in particular, Mark Davies. At the time I retired he was bringing in one and a half million in research funding, and he was turning out about five PhDs a year, and I was senior to him as Professor. He was Associate Professor, so I felt my job wasn't tenable any more so I left. Leaving the University of Limerick nearly broke my heart as I really enjoyed teaching and I think I got closer to students as I got older which is extraordinary, But I had to go as teaching constitutes only part of the Professional function.

I.: What were facilities like when you came to work here in 1973? You must have seen huge development and huge changes just even in the physical development of the university.

K.W.: Well, when I came here in 1973, there was only the White House and there were Stables and that was it. I was trying to remember how many staff were employed here then, I know all the academic staff had their coffee break in the mornings in what's now the little interview room in Plassey House. We fitted into that, we fitted into that very easily. I had a laboratory in the stables and I remember giving lectures in the White House in the East Room. There was a very diverse group of staff but I'm only going to talk about the academic staff to keep the confusion out of it. The academic staff were a very diverse group. The guy who was heading up electronics was called John Alexander, who sadly is dead now. He didn't stay with us very long in the NIHE but he had been a high flying academic and had presented at least one paper to the British Royal Society, which in British academic circles, is extremely prestigious. And then, side by side with him, there were members of staff who, I'd have thought, had very little academic credentials but they had been hired because their skills were perceived to be of benefit to the local industrial environment. I think in those early days Ed. Walsh didn't respect academic qualifications as much as he did later on in his career. He was then much more interested in the mission of the NIHE in supporting industrial development.

I do remember there was a big social dimension. I can remember there were parties every week in somebody's house. I think, as a group we were kind of, introverted. We worked together, then we had a drink together and then we partied together at the weekends. I remember the Colgan parties, you know Leo Colgan, the Colgan parties were great and they were not introverted. The Colgan parties were in the form of sing songs usually; musical evenings; and he would bring in people from Shannon Development company and Mary Immaculate and the local community, as well as selected people within the University. Whereas the parties which were hosted by the English members of staff, and there was quite a lot of English people, they were completely introverted. And I think they more or less lived out of one another's pockets. I don't think that I was very much

part of the introverted set. I bought a house which was well away from the university and within a year I was playing soccer for the local pub. Indeed my wife, in spite of her very different background, was training the choir in the local Catholic church and playing the organ in the local Catholic Church ! so we weren't all that introverted. But an awful lot of people were and they just mixed with one another.

I think the relationships the staff had together ... probably wasn't all that healthy and inappropriate relationships developed. There was one member of staff who divorced his wife and married the wife of a colleague. There were other relationships didn't actually lead to divorce. One relationship at that time led to one member of staff being hospitalised because he found his colleague ... in a ... compromising position with his wife. He gave him a very severe beating. We also had very informal relations with students. I think when I arrived there were only fifty students and the students were pioneers and I suppose the members of staff felt they were pioneers. So in addition to having parties with staff, we had parties with students as well. Indeed there were some inappropriate relationships with staff and students, which I took a very dim view of at the time, and still do. In fact, in one case, there was two childhood sweethearts who were fellow students and they broke up because a male member of staff went off with the guy's girlfriend. There was quite a lot of that sort of thing and I ... I didn't really like it.

I can tell you one funny story, which describes well the relationship staff had with students. It was all first name terms. I remember giving a lecture, maybe in the second year I was here, giving lectures on Tribology which is very mathematical and there was a problem about the pressure distribution around a sphere rotating in a viscous flow, and in order to solve that you need to generate a triple integral. I was able to do that and I asked the class did they have any questions? I should have said earlier that it was so informal, we actually used to smoke! Students smoked in class, and so did the staff. So I said 'do you have any questions?' and Jim Ryan from Nenagh put his hand up and Jim wasn't noted for asking very intelligent questions. I said 'yes Jim?' He said 'Ken do you have a light?'!! -laugh - So that describes very well the type of relationship we had with students.

I must say Ed Walsh often pays tribute to the very early staff and the contribution they made to the growth and development of the NIHE, and on with the University of Limerick. I wouldn't fully agree that all the academic staff deserved his tributes to tell you the truth. There's a number of people, I would mention who made great contributions including Leo Colgan, Oliver McCarthy, Paddy Doran, Barry Macken, Dan O' Neill, Michael Hillery, Eoin McCann, Ted Little, Michael Wallace and probably many more people. I'm kind of sticking with the academic staff. But while there were a number of great people there were a number of absolute gobshites as well whose contribution to the development of the NIHE, I'd say was negative.

I.: In what way?

K.W.: Well I don't think they contributed anything. Some were disruptive ... You get a feeling when you work with people ... who were genuine people, and who were not, and I think some of them were ingenuine.

I.: And did this affect do you think the quality of the teaching, and the quality of the programmes being run?

K.W.: No, there was Ed. Walsh's vision of things and that was the dominating influence throughout the NIHE. I don't want to dwell too much on the negative, I'm just saying there were people who I didn't like and didn't trust, and there were an awful lot of people whom I liked very much and respected.

I.: Ed Walsh's vision for the university was very much tied in with contributing, I think, to the local community; you've mentioned it already there, contributing to the industrial needs of the local community, did you share that vision? Did you share that vision? Did you see yourself in Engineering and later as head of Department as contributing to that local community?

K.W.: Oh yes, I think that vision was shared by the NIHE staff. The interaction with

industry certainly suited my own background in that I had considerable industrial experience. I think we were very enthusiastic missionaries. We brought the message to schools and exhibitions. We talked about the vision in work; we talked about it after work; and it was a dominating thing.

I.: There was a newspaper headline of the time that ‘this Institute will be unique’. Did you share this view and how did you see the proposed Institute as unique?

K.W.: Oh I certainly agree that the NIHE was absolutely unique. The existing universities at the time were kind of like ivory towers. I think they had little or no interaction with enterprise, and from an Engineering perspective anyway if the Engineers in the existing institutions weren’t employed by Bord na Mona or the ESB, then they were emigrating. And graduates from the NUI in Engineering went in large numbers to the United States and to Great Britain. The NIHE on the other hand was absolutely dedicated to interaction with industry and as I said earlier, I think that formed part of staff recruitment policy in the early days. In matters of detail, the reason the NIHE was absolutely unique was that we had Cooperative education, which was actually frowned upon by the other universities. They used to say ‘well your courses are not four years; the degree course isn’t four years, its only three years and a bit’. They discounted the value of the Cooperative education experience. We were unique in other aspects; we had a trimester system while other universities just had end of year exams, and not only had we a trimester system with exams three times a year, we had more continuous assessment. We had modules instead of courses, we had credits instead of percentages. And then they used to say that we had a concentric approach to education, did anyone else mention that?

I.: Yes

K.W.: We nearly achieved concentric education. Take the engineering position, after two years, you became a technician and after three years you were like an engineering technician and after four years you were a fully fledged engineer. We did have two year certificate programmes, three year diploma programmes and four year degree

programmes and we had transfer mechanisms from diploma and certificate to degree. And again, the established universities took a very dim view of that. They kept harking back to what the qualifications of the students were, vis-à-vis the Leaving Certificate. So it was difficult to get over that hurdle. But yes, the Institute was absolutely unique, in the beginning, distrusted by the public, completely distrusted by the academic community and the rest of the country. That was a hurdle we overcame eventually.

I.: You mentioned that you went out to schools to attract students?

K.W.: Yes we did, we did. That was always an essential part of what we did, and we would be in touch with the career teachers, and go out and talk to students. Tell them what was different about the NIHE, what was better about the NIHE and try to encourage students to come here.

I.: What was your experience or how would you describe your experience of working in the NIHE? Because you continued for a long number of years and witnessed the NIHE recognised as a university, so you must have seen a lot of changes as well, during your employment here

K.W.: Oh yes, well I loved working here, in NIHE. I loved the type of students we had here. You tended to get a lot of rural students. I told you earlier, I worked for a little while in Trinity and Trinity seemed to me to be full of Dublin 4 students, who would throw paper darts at you and pennies and all sorts of things. That never happened here, rural students were very well mannered, rural students seemed to me to be a lot more mature. As I said earlier, I absolutely loved the students and enjoyed them more and more as I got older. I loved the nature of the developmental work here. We were designing courses, designing laboratories and I enjoyed the wheeling and dealing and facilitating acceptance of courses through the National University of Ireland and after that with the NCEA. I did an awful lot of wheeling and dealing in getting recognition from the Mechanical Institute of Engineers for our degree programme. We obtained recognition very early on and that still applies now. I enjoyed the interaction with industry which

arose out Cooperative education. It was, for me personally, a wonderful opportunity to be there for the birth of a university and to do all the things associated with it. It was a privilege to do that. So my experience of working in NIHE and the University of Limerick is extremely positive and I wish I could do it all again in the next life. But there isn't one!

I.: If I ask you what you consider to be one of the most significant developments at the University of Limerick?

K.W.: Sorry?

I.: Can I ask you what would you consider to have been the most significant developments at the University of Limerick?

K.W.: Well could I ... I'll just start with Limerick itself, maybe, because it has changed out of all recognition since 1973. When I came to Limerick, Limerick was actually falling down, literally. I mean in Patrick St. there were very tall buildings and they were supported with wooden pylons so the buildings wouldn't fall on top of pedestrians. I remember thatched cottages out towards Thomond Park, which were not quaint. I mean they were falling down and there were weeds growing out of the thatch. That would have been perhaps the way people came in from Shannon Airport coming here for interview and God only knows what they thought of the place. It was not an attractive city.

Socially at the time, there was an absolutely bizarre organisation which was run by the Catholic Church to help pregnant girls who were single. And in that organisation, these pregnant girls were taken, because it was a disgrace, from their homes and put into the homes of affluent people who lived a hundred miles away, and then they would operate as servants, maids and whatnot, until their babies were born. Then they would give their babies up for adoption and they'd go back home again and pretend they'd been on holiday or visiting relatives and they were never pregnant at all. And it was a kind of a status symbol in Limerick for affluent people to have girls of this type. I know the Colgans did, and the O' Neills did and I think the Walshes did as well. And I often wondered in retrospect did they think they were behaving with a great deal of charity or in retrospect, did they think they were behaving with a complete lack of charity? . I



would take the latter view. So that was the way society was then, it was completely and utterly different. Contraceptives were a big issue. You couldn't buy condoms in Limerick I think until about 1978, when they opened the Family Planning Clinic in Thomas St. So ... I opened the first family planning clinic in Limerick!

I.: you did?

K.W.: In a very informal way. Now I still had family in Northern Ireland so I went up and down all the time. I used to import condoms and I sold them out of my office! I had several knocks on the door by several members of staff – so I actually know the whole sexual history of early members of staff. I wouldn't betray any confidences but I would say while Ireland beat England at rugby this year and also beat them at cricket; in the early '70s, the Irish certainly beat the English sexually! No doubt about that. And I'll tell you a funny story about condoms. On one of my visits to the North, I bought three gross, which is quite a bulk of condoms, three gross, and it was illegal to import them except for your own use and I was stopped by the customs. They said, 'will you open the boot sir', and I had got these things on the very last lap, because I had got them cheap from a technician in the Royal Victorial Hospital in Belfast. So these boxes were on top of the suitcases, and the kids were yelling out the window, and the customs man was agog and he said 'Sir, are these for your own use, sir?' And I said 'of course they're for my own use, and I'm not going to be back here for a month!' So he just burst out laughing and I remember looking at him in the mirror, and he was still doubled down ... he was still doubled down laughing!

So anyway, that's all in 1973, and thereafter, and now Limerick has been rebuilt and I think it's a gorgeous city. The standard of building is great. There's no more discrimination against single pregnant girls and you can buy condoms anywhere, you nearly get them in crackers. Getting onto the university. The university has now matured out of all recongnition. We are no longer regarded with suspicion by the other universities and by the public. In fact, a lot of things which were started in the NIHE have now been copied by the universities, who previously treated us with great

antagonism. I saw an ad. about three years ago for UCD, and we would have regarded UCD as the arch conservative enemy, and UCD were advertising courses; not courses, modules, would you believe. And students could pick their own modules and design their own course. And even UCD introduced some type of Cooperative Education programme which would have been ... absolutely unheard of. There's also been a great growth in research work here compared to the '70s when the research output from staff was very, very limited indeed.

I.: Finally, I suppose, Dr. Ed Walsh founding Director and later President, said in a newspaper interview in 1970 that 'the success of the Institute of Higher Education depends on it providing something in tune with the needs of the country. If it does this it will be successful no matter what it is called, no matter what pre-conceived notions people have'. Do you believe the NIHE and later the University, succeeded in this aspiration and how?

K.W.: Yes, yes, I think the NIHE has exceeded all our expectations. I think it even has exceeded Ed. Walsh's expectations. I think in 1972, that Ed. Walsh believed the established universities would never address the needs of the country. I think that's why he wanted to employ people with industrial experience to address industry's needs. But I think that as industrial expansion progressed in the country, Ed Walsh's thinking evolved ... in line with the progression of industrial expansion, so that perhaps in the 1980s, Ed Walsh and other people here, saw the value of university research and believed in the fact that industrial research changed the nature of industrial expansion within Ireland. Changed it from being mainly manufacturing to more of an Rand D base. So we began to promote research more and more at the University of Limerick. The setting up of campus companies was encouraged and we developed industrial research centres and so on, and served the needs of industry in that way.

And indeed all of this was copied by the other universities. So the other universities had on campus companies, they had research centres and had people working for PhDs in areas that were of genuine value to industrial expansion. And the nature of industrial

expansion indeed changed very much, and we now have lots of firms that have established research and development in Ireland. That would have been an absolute dream come true for Ed. Walsh. I think he never dreamt that all the other universities would row in with the University of Limerick, with the same concepts. So I think the contribution of Ed Walsh shouldn't be underestimated, in dragging the whole university sector into the twenty first century and supporting industry in such a wonderful way. I think the contribution of the universities to the nature of industrial development in Ireland has been absolutely immense. The Celtic Tiger should be thankful to the Universities! and indeed to the Institutes of Technology as well for the contribution they have made. I just hope that we haven't now lost everything! While the country's broke, at least the nature of industrial development means its not going to change very much. And I hope that the University of Limerick and the other universities continue to turn out brilliant young PhD students to contribute to the Research and Development operations of the firms in the country.

I.: Thank you very much.

I.: Can you describe what you consider to be the most significant development at the University of Limerick?

K.W.: Well the university has become much more universal. We now have music and medicine and we probably have a lot of things now that I don't know about! But I think the most significant development in NIHE is the campus. I think the campus is absolutely magnificent. I have two sons who married Americans and they live in America, and as a result of that we have American visitors in our home. The first place I bring them to is the University of Limerick. I bring English people out here. I bring anybody who doesn't know Limerick, to the University of Limerick campus. It is absolutely magnificent and it's an absolute joy to walk across the pedestrian bridge and go into county Clare where the campus has expanded to that side of the river. I'd just like to finish up by paying a great tribute to Ed. Walsh's vision. He was a young man of just thirty years and had an

office down in town with Anne Sadlier. He came out here and he looked at Plassey House which had holes in the roof and the run down stables. He signed a cheque without the approval of the Department of Education, to buy Plassey House, the Stables and all the adjoining lands. To have the vision to do that and the courage to do that from one so young, and to give us such a fantastic campus, is a wonderful tribute to the man.

I.: Thank you very much.