

University Of Limerick Oral History Project

Interview Transcript : Harry Lawlor

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I.: Harry, thank you very much for speaking to me today, in connection with the ULOHP, the University of Limerick Oral History Project in this, the fortieth anniversary year of the University. You were one of the first class of students in the then NIHE, can you tell me about yourself and how you came to NIHE Limerick?

HL.: Yes, I can. I was living in Limerick during my formative years and I was at school in the Crescent College in Limerick. After I left school I worked in a bank in London. It was owned by the House of Fraser group, Harrods bank, for two and a half years, earning, you know, eleven pounds fifty a week I think I started on there. And I was there for two and a half or three years, if memory serves me right. During that time I went to the South London School of Economics, for some reason, and I just got an inclination to go back to college. I heard that NIHE was opening so I applied to a number of colleges, but my preference was to come to Limerick and go to this new college. And I'm afraid it wasn't for phenomenally academic reasons, it was because my home was in Limerick. Economically it made more sense to live at home, the money that I saved I could use for running my motor bike or drinking pints of Guinness or whatever. But primarily I suppose it was the luxury of home, having the facility of eating apple tart and cream, real cooked food and having your laundry done, and all the things that one takes for granted, when you're nineteen or twenty or twenty-one, and that is why I chose NIHE. I flew back for an interview, and I was interviewed by, if memory serves me right, Ed Walsh, Leo Colgan and Roy Hayhurst, three of them. And I was technically a mature student although I'm sure I wasn't in any way mature. And luckily enough they gave me a place here.

I.: What did you apply to do in NIHE?

HL.: I applied to do a Business Studies course but I didn't really mind. You know, I just wanted to go to college. I had worked in a bank but I wasn't phenomenally committed to any particular course in life. I would have done European Studies or anything else they offered me. There were only five faculties I think at the time so the

choice was limited. And perhaps they gave me a place because, I think it was Roy Hayhurst - there were a number of stories I remembered about Roy Hayhurst, some of them I could tell, and some of them maybe not - he asked me what would I do if I didn't get a place at NIHE? And I don't have a great memory but I remember these little sparkles ... And I had heard somewhere the previous year, had read somewhere, that another Limerick man, another Crescent boy, Richard Harris, had been interviewed by Lydnsey Anderson, I think, the Director of ... I think it was Lyndsey Anderson ... of his first movie, which we all, us Limerick lads knew, *This Sporting Life*, because he was a big hero. He was asked the same question, so I gave his answer to Roy Hayhurst. I said I would buy a little tent and pitch it on his front garden and not leave until he let me in. So maybe it was that threat that got me in.

I.: Ok, so you enrolled in Business Studies here?

HL.: I left London on my motor bike the morning before the opening, or the inauguration here, and I rode the motor bike, west, I suppose, to Rosslare, and had a delay in Cork because they wanted me to pay import duty which I wasn't going to do and which I didn't have with me anyway. So after a couple of hours they let me go and I got home, had a bath, we didn't have showers in those days, had a bath, changed my clothes and came out here to enrol.

I.: Did you have friends who were starting here as well?

HL.: No, not really. I knew some of the people that were starting here, but not many of them, and didn't have any friends from school. Most of the people here enrolling were eighteen and I was twenty one, and I know it sounds ridiculous now, but eighteen year olds and twenty one year olds were somewhat a different age. It was a bigger gap than it would seem now.

I.: What are your memories of the first few weeks here?

HL.: I loved it. I didn't have to get up at seven o'clock every morning, travel an hour on the train to get to work at quarter past or half past eight and stay there till half past five, and then get a tube or a train back to where I lived in north London. So it was phenomenal. I do remember thinking, and I can't tell whether it was year one or year

two or whatever, but I do remember thinking that when the students went on strike, I neither agreed or disagreed, but I remember thinking ‘my god, how can you strike, this is luxury! Amazing!’ In your second or third year term, or your second year, you had learned how to accumulate your tutorials in Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday perhaps, and maybe only have one on Friday, so you could have a three day weekend, and that was, there was very little to strike about!.

I.: So for you coming from the world of work, this was a wonderful life?

HL.: For many reasons. Not only for, you know, not having to do five days a week and be out of the place you were living for probably fifty hours a week, fifty or fifty five hours a week, with travelling as well, but the staple menu of beans and toast was now off the schedule and I was eating home made food. For the first time in my life, I appreciated mothers and what they do for their children, perhaps did not appreciate them enough, but I still appreciated them, the food and the luxury, and the laundry service and the love that comes with that was phenomenal.

I.: How did you find the first lectures?

HL.: God you know what, I’m picking at memories ... I thought they were interesting. There was a plethora of interesting characters here. And the lecturers were very much like what I would consider, although I didn’t know at the time, but what I would consider in retrospect, tutorials. You’d have, there was what, twenty, twenty-five doing Business Studies, so it was like a small tutorial. Our tutorials were like three, four, five, six people, so it was almost one to one teaching. I don’t know whether we appreciated it, or whether we used it to great effect, but I enjoyed it. Guys like, over the years, like Peter Walk, Professor Brigeesh, Terry Moran, Leo Colgan, Roy Hayhurst, and I’m sure I’m forgetting to mention loads more, but they were all to us, very interesting characters and very worldly characters, and you know, somebody who was twenty one years of age at the time, kind of was awe inspired.

To give you an example, sometime during year one, I was in Limerick city, with a friend of mine, Peter Ireton, who was from Castletroy, who is one of the chaps in Bothar, one of the main chaps, and we were in O’ Connell St. and Roy Hayhurst was

walking down along O' Connell St. and he came over and said 'Hello, chaps, how are you?' and we said 'fine, thank you very much indeed', and we chatted for a while and then he said to us, he said, 'tell me chaps, I wonder' -of course we thought he had a terribly, terribly awfully English accent, but of course probably in retrospect it wasn't Chalfont St. James, but we thought it was terribly, awfully!. He said 'tell me chaps, I wonder where someone could buy fresh broccoli?' And this was 1972, maybe '73, but I'd guess '72; and I looked at Peter and he looked at me, and we both recognized immediately that none of us knew what broccoli was!. Broccoli was not on the menu in Ireland in 1972 -'73, so we knew it was either fish, meat, vegetables, something you eat, or maybe something from the Engineering world! So we sent him up to Limerick market to look for some fresh broccoli on the basis that if it was a sprocket for a bike he could get it, and if it was meat or veg. or fish, he might get it, but we hadn't heard of broccoli, so from that point of view and from that context, you know, one would have been in awe of these chaps.

Peter Walk was from California, I mean good God, you know, everybody in California had to be amazingly interesting. And he drove a left hand side, a left hand drive Mercedes, that he brought from California. Good god, you know, the man was god! And he knew all about computers, they were new things anyway, I think it was Fortran and Cobol, the two languages that he was trying to teach us chaps, little chance he had, but however, he was amazingly interesting. Terry Moran was married to a Russian woman. You know, 1972, you weren't sure if Russian women, you know, had their breasts in their front or their back, they were like aliens, it was amazing! And you know, married to a Russian woman, it was exotic. Nobody would have known where Moldovia is ...

I.: You got to know the staff members very well?.

HL.: Yes of course you did, and the interaction was, the ones that had a pint with you had a pint with you. Down in the Hurlers, before the Stables opened, yeah, you got to know them well.

I.: Were people on first name basis?

HL.: Yeah, they were, they were, yes. I mean you probably called Roy Hayhurst Professor Hayhurst, but pretty well, certainly socially on a first name basis. But it was all a learning curve and for them as well, I'm sure. I mean any of them that had lectured before in colleges weren't used to a faculty of twenty five kids, it was, you know, like, something like a large Irish family.

I.: Did you participate fully in student life, sports, social activities as well as academic pursuits?

HL.: Probably not, or probably yes, because everything was being formed anew in a new college. I did some debating in the Phil. Soc. and we had a - you should ask Jimmy Storan about this and Jim Lee, if you interview them - we had a culture society called the Beer Kellar society, because there were beer cellars in Plassey House downstairs in the basement. Doing cultural projects, which was mostly using the bit of a grant we got to buy pints. But I suppose you know, the powers that be here knew that; I don't imagine we were fooling anybody. But it was great fun. The debating society was pretty good fun, I debated with Charlie Sharkey who became one of our leading Irish poets, and although Charlie learned to speak English when he was twelve or fourteen, his collection of words in those days would have made our vocabulary like a little useless box of beads. He had a very good command of the English language and of course was fluent and an amazing command of the Irish language. He was a good debater, and in a way he tutored the debating team, took the lead there, and it was interesting, debating against other universities, who were very high and mighty and that.

I.: Do you remember the official opening in September '72?

HL.: I guess I do, because I have photographs of it. I think I have, I had photographs of it. It was just a kind of a haze. It's funny you know, all we had was Plassey House and some pre-fabs, but it was still, I do remember still being, wondering where everything was, and how in Gods name, I must have been so stupid, everything was in Plassey House or the pre-fabs! But the library was downstairs in Plassey House, and the Language Laboratory was either downstairs or on the second floor. The main

lecture theatre was the East Room, so, you know, I kind of have a vague memory of it, of the euphoria of it.

I.: So you saw a lot of changes then in your four years here, you know the initial tiny campus of just Plassey House expanded rapidly with the building projects?

HL.: Yeah. But I think really all that was, the only major building that was finished, which is huge really, is the building that Plassey House is connected to, which is the 'L' shaped building beside it, that building was going on all the time over there. It was used by the Engineering faculty by the time I was leaving and that was it. It just encircled, it just made a big quad behind Plassey House.

I.: Did you do Coop?

HL.: I did. I did two Coops I think, if I remember. I did the first Coop and worked with Declan McDaid's dad. Declan was here as well, he was a first year student. Declan McDaid's dad worked in a factory out in Askeaton, they used to make aeroboard. I forget their name but they probably still make aeroboard out there, I think they probably do, but Deccie's dad was there. I suppose he inveigled the owners of the factory to take students from the NIHE, and I went out there and worked for probably three months if I remember. And the next one I did was probably the one that shaped my decision, I don't think it's not a decision, you fall into these things; it shaped the career that I fell into. I worked with the Irish Dairy Board in Leek in Staffordshire, in what is now known as Kerrygold, it was Adams foods at the time. And I spent three months over there. Leo Colgan was obviously the connection there. Leo had been working in, had been an accountant with RTE before he joined NIHE and Brian Joyce who was the Managing Director of the Irish Dairy Board, or who worked with the Irish Dairy Board, I think, had also, either had worked with RTE, or was a great friend of Leo Colgans, so quite a lot of NIHE students got work with the Irish Dairy Board, or Adams foods in Leek. So that was the dairy business and you know it may not be coincidental then that I fell into that eventually.

I.: Did you benefit from Coop then, you thought it was a good idea?

HL.: Yes, I think it is good, I think it's a good idea now. I do remember the first time I went into Adams Foods, stroke Kerrygold, there was a car park and there was two or three Granadas, and a Rover 2000 and a Jaguar or whatever and I thought god this must be a great industry, I'd love to get my foot into this one! But that was a bit of a false impression, but there were a lot of Irish people working in Adams in Leek, so it was a really jolly time, a good laugh, good crack in there.

I.: And, as you say, it probably initiated your future career?

HL.: Well it probably got me into ... I applied for a job in the Economics department in the Irish Dairy Board after I finished college and I got a job in their Commercial department, because I didn't know as much about economics as the chap who got the job, who was ... had I known then what I know now, I wouldn't even have applied! Because Nicholas Simms got the job and he went on to be the Chief Economist and he was a rare genius, or is a rare genius. But they gave me a job in their commercial section and after, I don't know, maybe six months or a year, I saw all these guys travelling around, you know to exotic places like Birmingham and Liverpool, Leeds Bradford, and some of them further afield to Holland and Belgium and France and Italy, and I thought now that would be nice. So I applied and got into their sales area and then did a good bit of travelling around Europe and spent a little time in Italy. I was supposed to be going to live there, and I just, kind of, it was the nice side of the dairy industry, or as my brother in law, who farmed at the time out in county Limerick used to say: 'not only am I paying your wages, but I'm buying you pints as well!'. .

I.: Can you tell me about the struggle for recognition of NIHE degrees?

HL.: I can't. Honestly can't. I never had any struggles, because I never, I'd say since the day I left school, you'd get your first job, and you put down your qualifications in your first job, first job you get, and nobody ever asked me for my qualifications from then on. I didn't go from the Irish Dairy Board to EBM bank, to IBM, to Apple, you know, where they're looking at your ... I went from the Irish Dairy Board and left them with one of their senior guys and went to set up a new company and left them after four and a half years and set up my own company. So you know I never had

occasion to have to use the qualification from NIHE, to any extent, because you know, you don't ask yourself where you studied and I don't think it's that important anyway, I think once you, you know, once you go out and you have your first job, either you make a name for yourself or you don't. And you know, you carry on from there, and you know, in my case I just struggled on. Again if I knew now what I knew then, I wouldn't have opened my own company because I'd have been afraid of my life. But you fall into it and you struggle on and you swim against the tide, and you have to pay the rent so you keep going.

I.: So you weren't involved in the student protest and in the student strike around the granting of degrees from the NUI?

HL.: No.

I.: You didn't participate in that?

HL.: What year was that?

I.: That was in 1975, 1976, the first graduation then was delayed by a year. Do you remember your graduation?

HL.: I do. My mother was there, my father was there and my girlfriend was there. It was a big day out and I remember it was an absolutely beautiful day. The sun was shining, it was in the grounds, as far as I remember, it was in the grounds, and it was just - I think, you know the family went off and celebrated and had a meal out somewhere. I was working at the time I think.

I.: You went straight into employment; did most of your class go straight into employment?

HL.: I guess so. It wasn't the era where you did your world travel, twelve months around the globe, you know. Poland and Czechoslovakia, as it was then and Hungary were very far away places, now they're two and a half hours with Ryanair, but they

were exotic places, Yugoslavia and places like that. Professor Brigeesh was from the other side of the world.

I.: What are your abiding memories then of your student days here?

HL.: They were very happy for starters, but that may be, you know I was also very happy at school. Some of my colleagues from school have horrendous memories and obviously didn't enjoy it. I did, and I certainly enjoyed my time here. But then again, although I certainly wasn't mature, I was an 'eegjit' at twenty-one years of age, I was probably equivalent to a twelve year old today, but I probably was a smidgen more mature than I was at eighteen. And I had transport, I had a motor cycle for the first couple of years, and then I think I worked in the UK all that summer and that. I used to work weekends with Dan Ryan Rent a Car, and I got, you know, a huge amount of money together, like thirty or forty quid, and I bought an old car from my brother in law, so I had a Mini Minor in year three here, and I was a student with a car. And the first year of course was terrific, because I had worked for two and a half, three years, I had money. I had saved up six or seven hundred pounds. I think when I left the bank I was earning eighteen pounds, ten and eleven pence or whatever, but I was working five nights a week, because I knew I wanted to come back to college, I worked five nights a week in a pub, in the 'Schooner Inn' in Finchley and that not only prohibited me from spending money on those five nights but I also got paid and got fed, that was a hugely important thing in those days as well, it was a pub and a restaurant.

I.: You lived at home all the time you were in NIHE?

HL.: Yes, I did. I wouldn't have thought of leaving. I had left, when I was eighteen, it was great to leave and have all the freedom that an eighteen year old wants. And then when you've beans and toast for three years, you've no problem living at home, it was fine. So I was lucky I didn't stay there until I was thirty-three!.

I.: And finally, you've retained a lot of the friendships that you made in NIHE?

HL.: Yes, but not regularly. I mean it was great to meet all the guys at the celebrations last September, the forty year celebrations, and you know, we all knew each other.

But I had a ... relationships, with friends outside of NIHE when I was here, which were, you know from being, from living in Limerick. But yeah there was a sort of gang of us, four or five or six of us who used to hang around together. No, I haven't been in regular contact with them, but we would still be very friendly. And even since the celebrations we would email each other, you know, or some of us would email each other on the basis that we exchanged our email numbers or addresses or whatever. But other than that, its kind of 98 per cent that you went away and lived your own life and did your own thing.

I.: You mentioned that some of you worked in the Simon community together?

HL.: They weren't ... they were school friends ... that were still living in Limerick while I was here.

I.: The Bothar group?

HL.: The Bothar group was the four of us, three of us, who worked in the Simon community and another old school friend who just happened to get together for some particular reason, it may have been some school reunion or whatever, and we just thought that we hadn't done too much for the previous twenty years. And we were trying to think of something to do, for fun. Bothar is a non-religious organisation and it's predominantly a happy fun organisation that does a lot of good. But it's the four lads who originally got together and decided to do something; would not, you couldn't consider them fundamental religious maniacs or anything. There mightn't be a bit of religion between the four of us!. It's good fun, it's very rewarding. Give, give, give.

I.: How do you feel about the University of Limerick now?

HL.: I think it's phenomenal. I think it's absolutely phenomenal. As a site, it's amazing. I think it's a phenomenal site, architecturally and functionally and aesthetically; as an American guy from Georgia said to me one time about Hilton Head, in typical American form, he said: 'Hilton Head is very architecturally compatible'! I could use the same Americanism about NIHE. My kids didn't go

there, my kids went to UCC and UCD. I've two girls, but coincidentally they're both here now, as we speak. Holly, who's twenty five, is doing a Masters in Project Management in the Kemmy school and my eldest daughter, Anne, who's thirty, she started last September in the medical school to do the graduate medical programme. So they didn't follow in my steps but eventually they came back to the University. And nor would I have encouraged them, in that they do their own thing, but it's a nice coincidence that they are both back here as we speak.

I.: All right, thank you very much.

HL.: A pleasure.