

Passing of Dr Ray Gillespie – pioneering historian at Maynooth University

A bright star in County Kildare's academic firmament was dimmed earlier this month with the passing of Dr Raymond Gillespie, Professor Emeritus at Maynooth University, who has died just three years into his active retirement.

His appointment to Maynooth in 1991 as an assistant lecturer in Irish history heralded a new approach to the teaching and researching of the subject – one that brought the previously neglected pursuit of local history into the academic mainstream. Ray – as he was known to his many friends – Gillespie has been credited in collaboration with his college colleagues in bringing a validation to the local story as a key component of the nation's wider story.

In school staff rooms throughout the country his legacy is felt through the legion of teachers who studied for their profession under his benign tutelage in Maynooth University. His encouraging and personal interest in his students was equally felt by the legion of local historians in many parts of Ireland – and nowhere more evidently than in Co Kildare – who turned to him for guidance in the interpretation of local sources and how best to publish them while maintaining high standards of presentation. He was Editor for eleven issues of the Journal of the Co Kildare Archaeological Society which brought forward scrupulously researched studies of the county.

Raymond Gillespie was born in a Belfast milieu, the only child of his parents Ernest and Annie.

His life's work was presaged when he took a first-class honours degree in history at Queen's University followed by a move south to Dublin where he studied for his doctorate at Trinity College. His affinity for the collegiate side of academic life found expression through his chairmanship of the Irish History Students Association of the time which was also the forum for another central engagement in his life – his meeting with Ms Bernadette Cunningham, who shared his history enthusiasms, and who was to become his wife of forty years.

Following brilliant post-graduate studies, he joined the Dept. of Finance where as a young civil servant he worked on banking policy including on the introduction of the Euro Currency. Subsequently he transferred to the Office of Public Works and was involved in the transformation of the university premises in Earlsfort Terrace to the imposing Government Buildings seen so frequently on television news reports.

However, his time as a government official yielded to his passion for history in 1991 when he was appointed assistant lecturer to Maynooth College – a college which itself was still navigating the transition from its historic role as a place for training Catholic seminarians to becoming a university for lay students across the widest range of disciplines.

Over the following three decades he became a central figure in the History Dept. team in Maynooth – tirelessly teaching, researching, and publishing. His published output was prodigious with his name as author for over 230 published works ranging from books to articles in peer-reviewed journals. He ranged across the full spectrum of the country's history but particularly the 17th and 18th centuries and a wide range of locations with the records of almost every county benefiting from his research skills. He was also editor of the work of other scholars in some sixty volumes of essays on history of local, national and international dimensions.

His hallmark was generosity and his concern that other scholars would have every opportunity. He recognised that early-career history students found it difficult to get their theses accepted by

publishers and pioneered a unique publishing venture with Four Courts Press whereby five or six theses were published in individual volumes each year – a series which burgeoned into a publishing phenomenon known as the Maynooth Studies in Local History.

Dr Gillespie guided and edited no fewer than 153 of the publications into print.

His commitment to providing opportunities for local historians keen to build their expertise was further evidenced by his working with university colleagues in developing the Maynooth Diploma in Local History course aimed at mature students which was taken up by adult education centres throughout the country. The Diploma in turn provided flexible pathways to Degree and Post-Graduate levels for students who juggled family and work responsibilities with their history enthusiasms.

Outside of academic pursuits he was valued for his sociable and collegiate nature being endlessly generous in sharing sources and advice with his professorial colleagues and students alike. His northern wit reverberated in the long corridors of Maynooth to where he had returned as Professor Emeritus after his retirement in 2021 when he continued to teach and correct papers.

The news of his passing following his short illness was therefore met with great sadness by the many students and contemporaries for whom he had been a ubiquitous presence in the Maynooth halls of learning.

His funeral service took place in St Columba's church, Iona Road, Glasnevin and was itself an eloquent testament of his broad-minded nature with the celebrant being Fr Paddy Jones, the homilist Bishop Paul Connell of Ardagh – a lifelong scholar friend, and Rev. Dr Laurence Graham, Minister of the Dublin Methodist Mission, reflecting Raymond Gillespie's active Methodist heritage.

The attendance at his funeral included the Maynooth History Department academic staff, representatives from the Co Kildare Archaeological Society, and members of the local history and publishing communities generally. He was interred in his wife's native locality in Co Galway.

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