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Rockwell Reminiscences

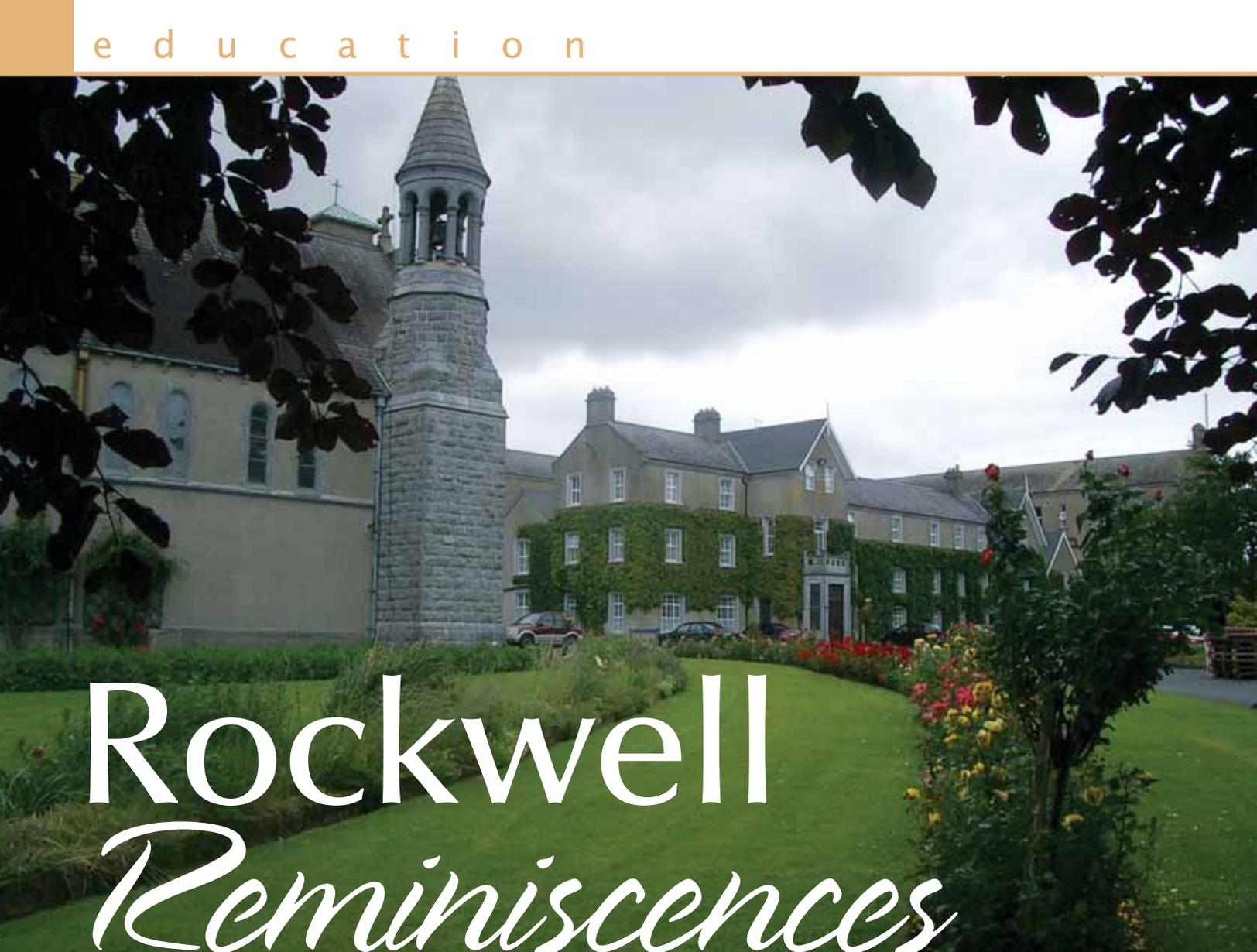
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Rockwell

Reminiscences

IRELAND

Those of us who attended Rockwell College during the late 1940s faced a challenging curriculum and a disciplined lifestyle. We also enjoyed a cornucopia of cocurricular activities: debating societies, theatrical productions, a student termly (*The Rock*), arts and crafts, and a wide choice of rugby, rowing, cricket, hurling, gaelic football, handball, basketball, tennis, boxing, track and field. *Mens sana in corpore sano* might well have been the school motto. And, of course, bolstered by the sodalities, the Legion of Mary and the annual Redemptorist-delivered retreats, it was all designed to ensure our salvation.

My first weeks in Rockwell were sheer misery. A naïve thirteen-year-old from a rural village of about 300, suddenly I was thrust into a college population approach-

ing twice that size. The laurels easily acquired at my local National School soon lost their sheen as I found myself in larger classes of peers apparently better prepared. During a visit to the office of the Dean of Studies, much to his embarrassment and mine, the loneliness and bewilderment peaked and I dissolved into tears. By Christmas, however, I had begun to enjoy my new life, and when I had to leave Rockwell five years later it almost broke my heart.

In retrospect I realize that the richness of my Rockwell experience derived largely from the fellowship of my classmates and their enduring friendship. It derived no less from the intangible, scarcely definable atmosphere created by the Spiritan community. The prefects, the brothers, the priests, who taught, coached, advised and administered the college, were all ultimately our

teachers. Our learning extended well beyond the classroom, to the sports field, the theatre, the debating hall, even the mildly subversive *Rock* room.

As one who has taught at each level from primary to post-graduate, and from my experience as a student, I believe that it is our secondary (high school) teachers who most affect our formation. Many of my Rockwell teachers I recall with respect and affection: laymen “Pontius” O’Connor, “Snags” Walsh, “Mac-ey” Farragher; prefects Jim Delaney, Bernie Murphy, Tom Rock, Paddy Sheridan; Brother Benedict Tobin. Several of the priests were in various ways influential, but the three Spiritans who, individually and collectively, epitomized the Rockwell experience for me were Dr. Maurice Curtin, Father Tommy Nolan and Father Reginald F. Walker.

Finbarr Gallagher

Dr. Maurice Curtin CSSp

Dr. Curtin was our Dean of Studies; it was in his pristine office that, as a Rockwell novice, I had broken down and wept. The man exuded *gravitas*. His directives were intoned in a Gregorian-Limerick hybrid. “You will now proceed, **in ranks and in silence**, to your respective dormitories.” His own deportment was impeccable. His silent, rubber-soled gliding, which had earned him the soubriquet “Pussy”, permitted him to surprise many a miscreant. No one had ever seen him run.

As a Latin teacher Dr. Curtin occasionally relinquished a shy smile for an adroit Horatian turn of phrase. Usually demanding, he could sometimes be surprisingly tactful. Once when, confronted with translating a difficult passage of “unseen” Latin prose, I resorted to vague circumlocution, he merely urged, “Try to be less flowery.”

It was Dr. Curtin’s practice to interview each student twice in his final year. After my second counselling, I returned to the Sixth-Year Study Hall. A while after my classmates had left for their dormitory, in ranks and in silence, I, charged with delivering essays to some of the prefects, emerged from the Study Hall and entered the Long Hall leading to the marble staircase. As I did, I caught sight of Dr. Curtin, his back to me, scanning the noticeboard. About halfway down the hall — we boasted it was the longest hall in Ireland — I sensed that someone was following me. It had to be Dr. Curtin, and I knew he would not shatter the great silence by calling out to me. Without looking back, I increased my pace, lengthening my stride, intent on making him run.

I was half-way up the marble staircase at the end of the hall when I felt a light hand on my shoulder. “One moment, please,” he panted, *sotto voce*, “Something I omitted to mention. **Avoid mediocrity!** That is all.” Even then I knew that moment was indelible. More than half a century later when I visited Dr. Curtin, I recalled the incident, confessing my impish sprint; confessing, too, that I hadn’t always lived up to the principle he had so enduringly implanted. He smiled, indulgently.

Fr. “Tommy” Nolan CSSp

“Tommy” was my English teacher for my final four years at Rockwell. By conventional criteria he might have been labelled

Short History of Rockwell College

On the death of Francis Libermann in 1852, his close friend and colleague Ignatius Schwindenhammer was elected Superior General. He was Libermann’s choice for the position as his vision and philosophy were in tune with those of his predecessor.

Schwindenhammer served twenty nine years in the office. This was a period of great growth in the Congregation of the Holy Ghost. New missions were begun, the majority in Africa. New branches were established in European countries. And in these years no fewer than thirty colleges were founded, an average of one every year. Nineteen of these were in the “home countries”, Europe and the U.S., while eleven were in “mission territories”, most of these in Africa.

In 1860 the Spiritans established a beachhead in Ireland by opening Blackrock College outside Dublin, followed shortly in 1864 by Rockwell College in County Tipperary. The annals of the Spiritans in those years include this quote, “Regarding the foundation of colleges and other works in Ireland, Germany, the U.S. and Portugal, it was the personal desire of the late Fr. Libermann to see the Holy Ghost Fathers (Spiritans) spread to these countries.”

Rockwell College was developed on a 380 acre estate near Cashel, Co. Tipperary, donated by a rich French businessman, Nicholas Thiebault, who lived in the residence there which had earlier been a country home of Lord Waterford.

The school flourished quickly as a boarding school for the sons of the farming and merchant families of Munster. This area in southern Ireland was one of the centers of the growing movement seeking political independence for Ireland and the parents and staff of Rockwell would have been generally sympathetic to this vision. It is not a coincidence that Eamon de Valera, a leader in the 1916 rebellion, who was later President of Ireland, was on the teaching staff of Rockwell.

Rockwell, unlike many other private colleges in Ireland at the time, actively participated in the movement to revive the use of the Gaelic language and over the years has produced many graduates who are fluent in their native tongue.

The summer-school program in Ireland is widely known and generated great publicity when Fr. Des Reid acquired a hot-air balloon. Camp Rockwell, as it is now called, included both residential and day-camp programs as well as an English-language program for overseas students.

Rockwell also produced such notable figures as Liam O’Flaherty, the novelist and short-story writer, and Patrick Hillery, another President of Ireland. The academic, professional, athletic, cultural, ecclesiastical, artistic and athletic life in Ireland and especially in Munster, is enriched by many Rockwell alumni.

The Rockwell of today, coeducational and largely a day school, continues to preserve the traditions and values of the past, an era so well caught by Finbar Gallaher in his Rockwell Reminiscences.



Photo courtesy of Irish Spiritan Archives

The longest hall in Ireland.

incompetent: his eye-contact was confined to an individual or two in the front row; the rest of us could chat quietly, read newspapers or write letters to girlfriends. But we rarely did. So passionate was his love of literature, and so eager his efforts to open our eyes and ears to its power and beauty, that we avidly eavesdropped on his *tête-à-têtes*.

For the weekly essay he allowed us a choice of as many as a dozen topics, sometimes inviting us to submit either an essay or a poem. I can still recite the first poem I wrote for him, the heavily clichéd “Only a Faded Flower” and my elation on reading his hyperbolic comment: “As good as anything in the *Golden Treasury*, and better than some.” The essay topics were announced Friday, the essays written over the weekend and submitted Monday. Tommy returned them the following Friday, regaling the class with the latest bloopers (unattributed) and reading aloud to us the purple passages (attributed). We vied to avoid the former, and to be cited among the latter.

Even more remarkable than his encouragement of our creative efforts was Tommy’s transformation of the potentially dull process of parsing and analysis into something stimulating and exciting. He once gave us the lengthy opening sentence of Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, challenging us to identify its principal verb. We spent a whole class searching for it, until one of us suddenly shrieked, “My God! It’s the bloody imperative!” I do not doubt that Tommy sowed the seeds of my later pursuing a PhD in English, and I surmise the same is true of others, including my classmate and still close friend, Father John D. Geary CSSp who this year, at age 75, successfully completed his PhD studies at the University of Toronto.

Fr. Reginald F. Walker CSSp

Probably the most influential figure of my Rockwell days, and thereafter, was Father Reginald F. Walker, inevitably nicknamed “Johnny”. As the only new Rockwell student boarding the midnight mail from Kingsbridge station (September 1945), from that moment he took me under his wing. All but one of my Rockwell years he was my Irish teacher. He was in charge of both the 5th-year and 6th-year Debating Societies, of which I was auditor; coach of the cricket XI, which I vice-captained; faculty-adviser to *The Rock*, which I edited. For him I acquired, as did my parents, the utmost respect and an enduring affection.

As my unofficial mentor Father Walker did not hesitate to intervene if he thought I might be heading in the wrong direction. Fond of a good pun himself, he nevertheless suggested to me that my addictive punning could be symptomatic of a predilection for sound over sense. When, under the influence of Edgar Allan Poe, I had published in *The Rock* some gruesome verse, he tactfully steered me away from such adolescent morbidity.

In Religious Studies classes, his impressive qualifications as a published Church historian, his suavity, his articulateness were such that we seldom questioned even the pre-Vatican II Jansenistic nonsense pervading much of what masqueraded as religious instruction in those days. (One Retreat Master, not Father Walker, gleefully admonished us that every adolescent sexual fantasy caused the Blessed Virgin to blush.)

Father Walker’s lightly worn erudition, his wit, his sense of humour greatly appealed to me. Although he seldom, if ever, explicitly recruited me, it was largely with him as my inspiration that, in 1950, I entered the Spiritan Novitiate, Kilshane. Four years later, when I had decided not to renew my vows, he visited me at Kimmage Seminary. I expected an attempt to dissuade me from leaving. Instead, having ascertained that I had given the matter mature thought, he proffered me advice, spiritual and practical, on coping with the transition from seminary to workplace. His advice proved sound. It was by following one of his practical suggestions, about what should be included in a resume, that, several years later, I landed my first job in academia.

A Rockwell paradox

Today, sometimes sad, sometimes amused, I ponder a curious contradiction. Those admirable Irish Spiritans, individually and collectively, in the spirit of the time, strove to impose on their charges a strict conformity to current doctrine. However, the courses in Catholic apologetics, the formal debates, the informal discussions were also developing in us a scorn for rationalization and a keen nose for fallacies. Ironically, our clerical mentors were forming minds later capable of challenging some of the calcified tenets then being drummed into us.

When, in the early 1960s, Pope John XXIII launched the Second Vatican Council, many of us rejoiced at this rekindling of openness and hope in the Church. But the euphoria was short-lived. Pope John XXIII’s successors appear to have abandoned the notion of *ecclesia semper reformanda*. In their determination to turn back the clock, they have forbidden even discussion of some initiatives for change. That is hardly the way of the Holy Spirit. It was certainly not the Rockwell way. ■

Finbarr Gallagher has retired from his position as professor of English at Trent University, Peterborough, Ontario.