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## Law School on the Liffey: My Experiences at Trinity College, Dublin

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# Law School on the Liffey: My Experiences at Trinity College, Dublin

Janet Sinder

**SUMMARY.** In 1996, the author lived in Dublin, Ireland, while researching Irish legal history. During that time, she developed a relationship with the Law School at Trinity College, Dublin which has allowed her to return there to work on the Law School's Web site and to teach online legal research to the students and staff. In addition to discussing her experiences, the author provides basic advice for living and working overseas. [Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-342-9678. E-mail address: <getinfo@haworthpressinc.com> Website: <<http://www.HaworthPress.com>> © 2000 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.]

In 1996, I was lucky to be able to spend four months in Dublin, Ireland, researching Irish legal history. Since then, I've been invited back four times to the Trinity College, Dublin School of Law, each time for about ten days.

My first trip to Dublin was possible because all librarians at the Duke Law Library with Continuing Appointment (our University Libraries' version of tenure) are entitled to request up to four months of release time for a special project. I became interested in Irish legal history a number of years ago after editing a bibliography on the subject for *Law Library Journal*.<sup>1</sup> I decided to request release time to write an article about the sources for researching Irish legal history.

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The only libraries in Ireland that will support extensive research in law and history are in Dublin, so the choice of which city to visit was clear.

My first step was to write to the law schools at Trinity College, Dublin and University College Dublin, enquiring about the possibility of becoming a visiting scholar; unfortunately, neither school has this type of program. The head of the Law Department at Trinity (law is an undergraduate degree in Ireland, as it is in the United Kingdom and elsewhere) did offer me some unofficial connection with the law school, the opportunity to give a talk to the faculty, and even to put me up in the Trinity Guest Rooms for my first few nights in Dublin. This, combined with its more central location in the city, made my choice to work at Trinity an easy one. Both universities were willing to provide me with a "Reader's Ticket" to the library and an e-mail account.

During my four-month stay, I tried to become as involved as I could in the life of the Law School. I discovered that in Ireland the law school and the library are two entirely separate entities. There is no Law Library, as such, instead there is simply a law collection in the main university library. At Trinity, there is a librarian who devotes part of her time to law, but it is a far cry from the extensive law reference staff I was used to. Another shock to the system was how crowded the library is when students are studying. The first six weeks of my stay coincided with the time when students study for exams (held only once a year), and I was warned that although I would be given a Reader's Ticket for the library, this would not guarantee that I would find a seat.

Posted in the library are numerous signs warning that if you leave your seat for more than fifteen minutes, someone else is entitled to take it. While it was always easy to find a seat in the morning, I became very adept at buying and eating lunch in fifteen minutes so as not to lose my precious space. Space is so tight that many students study in chairs with desks attached, placed in front of the stacks, so that you had to ask them to move in order to retrieve a book. Fortunately, by mid-May the students began to leave, and for the rest of my stay, the library was virtually empty.

As mentioned by Nancy Carter in her article,<sup>2</sup> Trinity closes its library for two weeks each July. During that time, I worked at the National Library of Ireland, another interesting experience. To use the library, you must first apply. Once permission is granted (this happens right away—no waiting period), your photo is taken and you are given a laminated ID card. Each day, upon arriving at the library, you sign in,

leave all your belongings except paper and pen in a locker with a guard (yes, even your purse must be locked up), and walk upstairs to the reading room. There, for every book or journal, you fill out a card and give it to the librarian. It is then retrieved by a page and brought to your desk. But while the workings of the National Library seemed to come from an earlier time, I did note that it was much more encouraging of the use of laptops in the library than was Trinity (Trinity's posted rules for laptop computers were dated 1993).

While I was welcomed to Dublin by the law faculty at Trinity, I had no real status at the university. This meant that I could not check out books from the library or use most of the facilities. However, the law librarian arranged for me to have an e-mail account (one of my most crucial acquisitions), and one of the law faculty wangled a membership for me in the Senior Common Room (for £8/month, you can have coffee, read the newspaper, chat with other members, and generally hang out in very opulent surroundings right in the center of the college; membership is open only to faculty and senior staff).

In spite of my lack of "official" status, I became a rather constant fixture in the law school. One reason was that the law school served for a while as my only point of contact with the world back home (it took six weeks to have a phone installed in my apartment) and a place to receive faxes. I would have been completely lost without this and my Trinity e-mail account in the days before Hotmail and Internet cafes.

Since I knew no-one in Dublin and was working independently, I had no real colleagues. I took every opportunity to become involved in various law school activities. One of the first was a conference on film making in Ireland, where I worked at the registration table. I also attended a lot of receptions during the summer and even judged moot court arguments. Several law schools hold summer programs at Trinity, and Trinity law faculty teach courses in these programs.

While I thoroughly enjoyed working at Trinity, I was surprised at the lack of resources in the law school and, in particular, at the almost complete non-use of technology. While the university had a Web site, the link to the law school sat inactive; the law school had not really thought much about developing one. A few of the faculty used Lexis, but it was expensive and limited. They had a Westlaw contract, but, at the time, it was useful only when they were interested in American materials.<sup>3</sup> Coming from Duke, I've been spoiled by our extensive

access to technology, and am also aware of the uses to which it can be put. I was determined to bring the light of technology into the “darkness” of the law school.

### ***THE TRINITY LAW SCHOOL WEB SITE***

Naturally, before my four months were up, I had fallen in love with life in Dublin and was anxious to find a way to return, even for a short while. Over a farewell lunch with the head of the law school, William Binchy, I mentioned that I thought it was very important for the law school to have a Web site, even one without a great deal of content. I followed this with a suggestion that I could come back some time in the near future to help the school set up their site. At the time, I did not have a lot of experience with the Web, but I had supervised the beginnings of the Duke Web site and thought putting up relatively straightforward information about the school and its staff and courses would be feasible in a short period of time. Prof. Binchy agreed, and we later decided I would come to Trinity in mid-December after classes had ended at Duke.

I envisioned myself holding meetings with the staff and acting as a consultant, after which they would know what they wanted on their Web site and how it should be structured. They would then develop the contents of the site, perhaps with the help of a graduate student to do the coding. Alas, my naivete about the way things worked set me up for a rude awakening.

I arrived in Dublin about two weeks before Christmas and realized immediately that the Irish take the Christmas season, which includes all of December, extremely seriously. It is imperative to meet up for a drink with everyone you’ve ever known; there was little time to think about “virtual” matters like Web sites. After several days at the law school, with not much to do, I was given some material to put on the Web. So much for my vision of myself as the consultant bringing together the great ideas of others into an expression of the spirit of the law school. Instead, I designed some simple Web pages and typed in and coded the material myself.

While the visit turned out very differently from what I had imagined, several good things resulted from it: the Web site was up and running before I left, and I had talked myself into another trip back to Dublin within the year, this time to do something I was more suited

for-training students and staff to use Lexis and Westlaw. It also taught me yet another lesson in trying to make the best of any situation: It was better to create a simple Web site than to leave Dublin with no Web site at all. I was also able to train someone at the law school to make changes on the site after I left.

Though it might be thought that anyone at Trinity could have done what I did, in a law school where the small staff is very busy, and no one has free time for additional projects, it sometimes takes an outsider to come in and get a project off the ground. Not only did I create the Web pages, but I also had to spend hours sitting in the offices at Information Services, get access to the server, learn how to put files on the server, and download front end software for law school staff to use (at the time, I was using AOL Press, which was free, but took a long time to download over the Internet).

The Trinity law school Web site remains in existence; I redesigned it in the autumn of 1998. All of the changes this time were made via FTP, from North Carolina. The staff at the law school would like to maintain the site themselves, but they are already overwhelmed with their regular business, and their technological resources also make it more difficult.

If you do find yourself in the position of creating or maintaining a Web site for another organization, make sure it's simple. The site should be set up so that someone without much experience or equipment can easily take it over. This means minimizing the use of graphics that will have to be changed. Since updating will be a problem, design a site that is not very time-specific, but that includes mainly general information. Don't assume that people in that organization will be able to use "simple" front end software to maintain the site. This software may be too expensive, and it usually does not run well on low end machines.

### ***LEXIS AND WESTLAW TRAINING***

After my Web experience, I was happy to return to Trinity to do something for which I was far better trained. Since 1997, I've visited the law school each October to teach classes in Lexis and Westlaw. I go to Dublin for a week while Duke is on Fall break, and each year I've done a bit more teaching than the year before. In addition to Lexis and Westlaw, I've taught a few classes in legal research on the Inter-

net, although that is becoming less necessary. Students are more familiar with Web searching, and I can simply give them a handout of good sites for legal research.

The first two years I taught only the LL.M. students and staff; this past year I also taught classes on Lexis to undergraduates. Trinity began an LL.M. program in the autumn of 1997. It attracts many Irish students and some students from Europe, Australia, and even the U.S. It is a one year program similar to the LL.M. programs U.S. schools have for foreign students, although students specialize in a particular subject and are taught separately from the undergraduates. The undergraduate students are more like our law students, although they begin at a younger age. The law degree is a four year program at Trinity, and a three year program at other Irish universities

One thing my time at Trinity has taught me is to be completely flexible in how I teach. At one time or other, I've done the following: (1) taught in a computer lab where the students could use the computers and my computer was projected on a screen; (2) taught small groups of students at two terminals that, if we were lucky, would both have access to Lexis/Westlaw at the same time; and (3) taught Lexis in a lecture format where the students could see a projected computer screen, but would never have any hands-on training.

The use of Lexis and Westlaw in Ireland is completely different from what I am used to. It is only in the past few years, when Westlaw decided to enter the European market, that the law school has received any kind of price break on a searching contract. At the present time, the school has one Westlaw password for students, which is used only by the post-graduate students. Trinity now has a Lexis contract that provides individual passwords for all of its law students and for the teaching staff. Two terminals are located in the library, and the LL.M. students have two terminals they can use in their student lounge. These two computers are for Lexis, Westlaw, the Web, and e-mail, and are connected to the university's network.

The use of computers for research is not ingrained in the students the way that it is in the U.S. Therefore, the students are less anxious to learn about Lexis and Westlaw. They do not use it for job searches, and it is more difficult to explain to them why they would want to use it. Whereas in the U.S. I would expect almost every student to turn up at a class where they could learn to search online, in Dublin only a small proportion did.

**ADVICE FOR WORKING OVERSEAS**

My first piece of advice would be, if you want to do something, ask for it, and be persistent (but not annoying). I would never have gotten the opportunity to work at Trinity if I hadn't convinced the head of the law school that I could provide something they needed (even if they didn't realize beforehand that they needed it). Although there are certainly other people in Ireland who could have created the law school's Web site, or who could come in to teach Lexis and Westlaw, no one else offered to do it. Convince the people in charge that you will be able to save them work.

Be flexible (I think all of the articles in this text offer the same piece of advice). I am by nature an inveterate planner, but when dealing with life overseas, I try to go with the flow as much as possible and to accept that everything will indeed work out in the end. Each year I'm a nervous wreck because my departure is only weeks away, and I still don't know how or what I'm going to be teaching. In 1999, I discovered ten days in advance that I would be lecturing on Lexis to the undergraduates, something I'd never done before, and I was asked to prepare a four-page handout for them. I was told that I would be able to demonstrate Lexis on a computer in the lecture hall, but previous experience told me to bring overheads with screen shots as a backup in case the Internet connection failed. (I was pleasantly surprised that the classroom computer was probably the best one I worked on anywhere in Ireland, and the Internet connection worked perfectly.)

This was a contrast to the previous year when the two computers for the LL.M.s were hooked up to the Internet approximately 5 minutes before the first training session was scheduled to begin. The building we were in was under renovation at the time, and the computer lines were temporary. Fortunately, I was the only one who seemed at all panicked by the situation.

I've also had to allow a lot of time to get things organized once I arrive. Don't assume that things will be done in advance, because the people you've asked to do them probably don't have time, and they certainly don't have that much motivation to do things until you are there in person asking about them.

Assume that the resources anywhere you go will not be as good as they are in the U.S. and that everything will be done differently. When I taught Lexis and Westlaw in a computer lab in 1997, I had to sit with

someone from the university's I.S. department while they loaded the software onto the network for that classroom and also had to arrange for telnet access for the lab to be turned on just for the few hours I was teaching (most undergraduates at Trinity do not have access to the Web outside the university's site unless a faculty member approves their request for it, and telnet access is turned off for all the public computer labs). While everything worked out in the end, it involved numerous phone calls to arrange everything and hours spent waiting for someone to have time to work on the problem. It's worth the time and effort to be as nice as possible to all I.T. personnel; they are always very busy, and you are creating even more work for them.

Teaching overseas also involves knowing how the educational system works and what the students will need to do. Students in Ireland do much less research than American students, and they do not work on law journals. Therefore, it required some thinking and asking around to decide what aspects of online research would be meaningful to them.

### *LIVING IN A FOREIGN LAND*

Apart from work life being exceedingly different, living in another country really is a foreign experience. Even a country that seems as much like the U.S. as Ireland does (they speak English, don't they?) is completely different. Some chores were very easy (getting a library card at the public library, opening a bank account), and some were truly eye-opening (getting a telephone where no phone lines had been run to a brand-new apartment building in the center of the city; dealing with the police after being burglarized).

Spend as much time as you can preparing before you go. You don't want to spend your time overseas worrying about things at home. While it's not mandatory that you open a foreign bank account (you can get all the money you need via an ATM), I found it very helpful. If you have to pay utilities, you can have them direct debited rather than leaving a deposit. It's also an easy way to deal with any checks you may receive in foreign currency. And at the end of your stay, most banks should be able to give you your balance in a check made out in dollars.

Determined to live as much as possible like a native on my first trip, I began looking for an apartment as soon as I arrived in Dublin. It's not

always easy to find a short term lease, and I discovered that offering to pay slightly more than the asking price for rent opened up many more possibilities. I could hardly believe that I would be “bargaining” to pay more than the asking price, but living overseas is stressful enough. It’s worth spending a bit more to make life a little easier. And while I had joked before leaving about the hovel I’d be living in, coming face-to-face with some real Dublin basement flats made me realize that was not the life I was cut out for. Experiences such as this are a reason to have a cushion of money to rely on when overseas.

Go out on your own and meet people, even if you’d never do that in the U.S. If you’re cautious at first, go to tourist locations and talk to other Americans. They’re sure to be envious that you’re living there, while they’re only visiting, and will want to know everything about life in another country. After you’ve mastered the art of talking to your compatriots, you can move on to the locals.

Keep in touch after you leave. This is simple to do with the advent of e-mail. You never know when the opportunity will arise for you to return, and it’s wonderful to have friends in another country.

Finally, be prepared to enjoy yourself. One way to make yourself see disasters in a humorous light is to write about them. I sent an e-mail letter back to my library every week and tried to turn all of my frustrations with the way things worked into anecdotes. Now I can read those e-mails (which someone collected in a notebook for me on my return) and enjoy only good memories of my experience.

## NOTES

1. See Barbara Pawloski, *Gaelic Law in Early and Medieval Ireland: A Bibliography*, 79 *Law Libr. J.* 305 (1987).

2. See Nancy Carol Carter, *Law School Abroad: Ghiberti to Guinness*, *Legal Ref. Serv. Q.*, Vol. 18, No. 3, 2000, at 15.

3. Westlaw has just added a number of UK case databases, the most comprehensive of which is UK-RPTS-ALL. Westlaw also offers access to the *Legal Journals Index*, the comprehensive index for UK and Irish journals in the LJI database.

