

CONNECTIONS, by Conan Kennedy.

The Scientist, De Selby, and Flann O'Brien.

Edward J Conway was a distinguished Irish biochemist. He is not forgotten. An institute is named after him in UCD, the university with which he was associated. In these very pages in recent months his work was summarised by the paper's scientific correspondent. It was much to do with (we learnt from Mr Reville), 'asymmetric distribution of positively charged atoms'.

And no, I'm not quite sure what that means either. However, moving right along, something in the brain does connect me now to the works of Flann O'Brien, to his books *The Third Policeman* and *The Dalkey Archive*, and to his character the scientist De Selby. I am reminded of O'Brien's notion that, through the migration of atoms between man and bicycle, one becomes partly the other, and likewise. And well might all this come into my mind, because there are significant connections between those fictional matters and the UCD biochemist.

Professor Conway lived in Dalkey, in a house at Coliemore Harbour known as Colamore. After his time there it became an hotel, the Colamore Hotel. And readers may well remember that the characters in O'Brien's *The Dalkey Archive* spent an inordinate amount of time in a Dalkey pub known as the Colza Hotel. Well, a weak enough connection, one might protest. But there is slightly more to it than that. Actually a lot more to it than that.

Conway had a daughter, May Conway. May married a Joseph Conan. From a long line of Dublin tailors, he was son of one Walter Conan (pictured here), the founder of the eponymous tailoring firm well known for the hiring out of academic gowns. (It still trades to this day under the name of Phelan Conan). Walter was a cousin of Arthur Conan Doyle, he of Sherlock Holmes. And, less importantly perhaps, a kinsman of this present writer.

And the connection between this family, and Conway, and the works of Flann O'Brien? Well, Walter was not just a tailor. He was a polymath, a serial inventor of

scientific devices and serial founder of companies to exploit his ideas. His inventions ranged from a type of post box to a system of incandescent gas lighting. And somewhere along the way he also invented a device that came to be known as *The Conan Fuse*. This became the basis of the depth charge used by the British Navy in the 1st WW.

The notion of a depth charge and underwater explosive activities may ring a bell in the literary mind. And a louder bell may ring when we learn that Walter's brother lived in a house overlooking Dalkey's Vico Road. That same brother, Alexander, was founder of a swimming hole along there known once as the Vico Men's Bathing Place. Walter tested his explosive devices in the rocky depths of that Vico Men's Bathing Place.

So far so getting interesting. As mentioned, Flann O'Brien created a character known as De Selby in his Dalkey Archive. De Selby lived in a house overlooking Dalkey's Vico Road. De Selby had an interest in explosives, and carried out underwater experiments somewhere around the Vico Men's Bathing Place.

Yes, very interesting. But *there's more*, as they say.

Among his multifarious business interests, Walter Conan was involved in a quarrying business in Jobstown. No doubt his explosives interests helped in this line of work. He was actually chairman of the company, which was known as... De Selby Quarries. A defunct operation now, though a housing estate in that area does commemorate the De Selby name.

So how did this all come about, this mysterious connection between the scientific works of Conan and the literary endeavours of O'Brien? The notion of the migration of atomic particles, the relationship between real and fictional inventors, the similar names and locations?

Appropriately enough, the answer appears to be...drink.

Both Joseph Conan and Flann O'Brien were hard drinking men. They moved in the same hard drinking circles. From that fact we can only surmise, but with little doubt, that Joseph regaled his drinking companions with anecdotes about both his father and his father-in-law. The father, a somewhat eccentric inventor, an explosives expert, running a business called De Selby. And the father-in-law, a university academic of world renown, specialising in particle physics.

Time and memory and the writer's mind did the rest. Such is the way we get connections.

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