

CONNECTIONS, by Conan Kennedy.

Stanford University, and University College Dublin.

No doubt there are many connections between these two eminent seats of learning. Academics love getting together with each other and, as regards conferences and sabbaticals and far flung skites in general they leave the average Irish county councillor in the ha'penny place. It's all in the cause of learning, and we can see the results around us.

But way back then in sepia times there arose another, a more peculiar connection between Stanford and UCD.

It began in Dublin's Russell Street.

Near Mountjoy Square and at the back of Croke Park, this was and is an ordinary enough street. An ordinary street, scruffy even, it hasn't changed. But much of it is demolished, and there are nice newish houses called Behan Square. Because? Because Brendan Behan was raised at number thirteen.

In the 1880's a young orphaned woman lived in lodgings at number ten. A visitor to her there was this young man, an English medical student, one Francis Howard Humphries. Studying in the Rotunda Lying-In Hospital for Women, as it was then called, he visited the young orphaned woman for amorous encounters. She, also a student, hadn't always lived in Russell Street. Of independent mind, she had travelled around quite a bit, and had first met Francis Howard in Palestine. And they had later got together in Brussels when he was studying there. She was in actual fact engaged to another man throughout this period, but life and love are a complex weave. Very complex indeed. Francis Howard married someone else, Ethel Marrion Hesketh. He then hightailed it off to Honolulu and went into medical practice. He spent many years there, ending up as Superintendent of the Insane Asylum and senior staff physician at Queen's Hospital.

Meanwhile!

In 1885 a university had been founded in California by the railway magnate and politician Leland Stanford and his wife Jane Lathrop Stanford. It was founded in memory of their dead son, also Leland, and the university complex officially opened in 1891. As

we now know, this university has grown to be a major world institution of education. It has produced in its time 18 Nobel Prize laureates. The founders of cutting edge companies such as Hewlett Packard, Sun Microsystems and Google are all Stanford graduates.

Leland Stanford died in 1893 and his wife Jane became, in effect, the ‘owner’ of the university. This was not entirely satisfactory. She was batty. She interfered with the hiring of academics with whose politics she disagreed. She banished motor cars from the campus. She didn’t like naked women, and banned nude models from the art classes. She didn’t like women in their clothes much either and, though Stanford had always been a coeducational establishment, she curtailed the enrollment of women students. Her fear was that they’d ‘take over’, and that a female dominated university would not be a fitting memorial to her dead son. Then, in a major leap of lateral thinking, she prevented the erection of a university hospital lest people got the impression that the university was an unhealthy place.

Yes, batty. But the records, being more polite than myself, merely describe her as having become ‘increasingly disturbed’.

In 1905 she went on holidays to Honolulu, and took ill.

Enter Dr Francis Howard Humphries.

The patient died.

Humphries and his colleagues decided that she had been poisoned, by strychnine.

This diagnosis did not go down well at all with the authorities back in Stanford. It looked bad. In fact it looked as if the same Stanford authorities had by some means ‘done her in’. They sent teams of specialists over to Hawaii to counteract the bad impression such a diagnosis would create. These specialists went to great efforts to rubbish the diagnosis, casting aspersions on the local doctors, describing them as ‘a bunch of hicks’.

But Francis Howard was very far from being a hick. He left Hawaii soon after and pursued a very distinguished medical career in England. And a modern published analysis of Mrs Stanford’s case does appear to confirm his diagnosis, although whether she died by suicide or murder can not now be established.

And the connections between all this and UCD?



Yes, that young orphaned student there in the Russell Street lodgings was Mary Hayden, of whom I have written before, and could very well write again. In later years she was to be a formidable figure in the woman's movement, a friend of Padraig Pearse and confidante of the good and the great of the new Ireland. She was to be one of the founding forces in the establishment of UCD, and a professor there for many years. Her life took her very far from Russell Street. But the connections remain. The gaslit glow of those times lives on in her diaries.

*conan.kennedy@gmail.com*