

## Laurel Hill Coláiste FCJ – History and Evolution (1935- 2009)

In 1935 the F.C.J. Sisters Limerick undertook a new and very important educational initiative with the founding of an “A” School at Laurel Hill. The restoration of the Irish Language was a central component of the new Irish Free State Policy. Financial incentives were being offered for teaching all subjects through Irish and examinations were weighed in favour of candidates who answered through Irish. This policy was continued by the Fianna Fail Government in the ‘30s. To encourage Secondary Schools to give a more prominent place to Irish than just providing it as a school subject three types of Secondary Schools were recognised - Grade A, Grade B (B1 and B2) and Grade C. Irish was to be the official language in both A and B schools but in A school all subjects (other than English) were to be taught through the medium of Irish whereas in B School it was to be used only in some. In Grade C School Irish was just taught as a subject with English the medium of instruction.

“A” schools were burgeoning up everywhere and it was very important that there would be one in Limerick. Approaches had been made to the sisters c. 1934 by Mr. Tadhg O’Tuama, a Dept. of Education inspector who was very eager that they would take it on and there was also a coterie of interested parents whose children were being educated ‘as Gaeilge’ in primary schools.

The arrival of a young nun to teach in Laurel Hill in 1934 was providential - Sr. Benigna O’Donoghue. She was the right person at the right time with her fluent Irish and love of the language and its culture. Discussions continued between Sr. Benigna and Tadhg O’Tuama who found what he was seeking “vision courage and extraordinary professional approach. (Fís, misneach agus ‘cur chuige’ gairimuil) the attributes that were needed to “found” a school. Sr. Benigna was very enthusiastic and eager to undertake this mammoth task and was appointed as principal (Príomh Oide), a position she held until her retirement in 1972.

Though not a native Gaeilgeoir, Mother Benigna was a fluent Irish speaker and believed that Irish was and should be a living language. Her father grew up in a part of Kerry where Irish was spoken and was fluent in Irish. Mother Benigna was born in Dublin and reared in Cork. It wasn’t until the deaths of both parents in 1920 that Sr. Benigna and her brother Seán as young teenagers went to live with their paternal Aunts and Grandmother near Killarney. Here with their father’s family Benigna experienced Irish all around her in everyday use. She was sent to the Loretto Sisters in Killarney for a term or two but owing to transport difficulties it was decided to send her as a boarder to the F.C.J. convent in Newtownbarry (now Bunclody). There she was taught Irish by a brilliant Irish scholar Sr. Bernardine Quill. Her summers were spent in Kerry and she also attended the annual Coláiste Samhraidh i mBail ‘n Scéilg where she was enthralled by the beautiful sounds and musical quality of the Irish language. Her teacher was inspirational Andrias O’Muimhneacháin “an fear ba chairéisí ar urlabhraíocht dar casadh riamh orm”(S.B. 1985). Her Irish was further enhanced at U.C.D. where she studied Irish, English and Latin. Her Professor of Irish was none other than Dr. Douglas Hyde – founder of Connradh na Gaeilge and later to become the first President of Ireland, whom she describes as “fear cneasta grámhar agus an chaoin. Ach bhí smacht aige ar an rang”.



Dublin at the time was buzzing with cultural nationalism and literary talent abounded – O’Casey, Yeats, Joyce, Patrick Kavanagh. There was no shortage of clubs and societies and Sr. Benigna entered fully into the cultural and social diversions of U.C.D. and Dublin life and enjoyed them all. But the F.C.J.s and Bunclody were not forgotten and having completed her Higher Dip. in Education she

entered the F.C.J.s in 1930. Following her profession in May 1934 she was assigned to a teaching apostolate in Laurel Hill.

### **An Scoil “A” 1935**

The school started with just 50 students – a mixture of day girls and boarders and with just four classrooms assigned to the project on the ground floor of the “C” school. A written guarantee had to be given to the Dept. of Education that the two schools would be kept separate. To make sure that all the demands were being complied with Tadhg O’Tuama would make daily visits to the school, sometimes arriving in the morning before prayers and assembly to inspect the Roll Books! It was a daunting task but Mother Benigna had all the credentials to make it succeed and great support from the convent and a small dedicated team of teachers mostly nuns who were able to teach through Irish and committed themselves with enthusiasm to brushing up on their oral Irish by annual visits to Ballyferriter.

Not only was Mother Benigna Principal but also taught (fulltime) Irish, Latin and R.E. – 36 teaching periods over a 5½ day week! She took school assemblies daily. Her timetables were meticulously handwritten and she supervised games (mainly hockey) after school. She led by example and never spoke a word of English. Her mantra was “beatha theanga í a labhairt”. She was truly inspirational and succeeded in instilling in the students a great love of Irish and learning and encouraged them to use their talents fully.

“I worked like a slave” she says of herself in those early years. The students’ ultimate fluency in Irish was the result of very hard work on her part translating text books for them during the holidays and writing them out by hand. “It was like the days of the monks and the monasteries” (S.B. 1985).

Sr. Breda O’Farrell F.C.J. who was a pupil in the early years said in an interview “my memories of the school were extremely happy ones. Challenge was always there in the quality of excellence asked of us” and on Mother Benigna – “nothing short of excellence satisfied her and we strove for it on the whole because we saw she did too – no homework was ever left unmarked or even postponed and was often commented upon with humour”.

There was a special book called the Marks Book and at a special weekly assembly students were lauded for their achievements and were thrilled when they received the much coveted **DUX** for their efforts.

There was a very limited range of subjects only Irish, English, Maths, Latin, French, History and geography, but as more space became available when the “C” school moved to a new building in the 1950s Art, Domestic Science and some science subjects were added. Some students were even taking maths at honours level in the Leaving Cert, which was very unique in Girls’ schools at that time.

The religious ethos was maintained and the F.C.J. traditions and feast days of the nuns were celebrated. The 8<sup>th</sup> of December was very important with its procession and Child of Mary Ceremony. In addition Mother Benigna also presided over weekly sodalities. The highlight of the schools religious calendar was the crowning of Our Lady in May by the outgoing 6<sup>th</sup> years – a tradition which has become synonymous with Laurel Hill and prevails to the present day.

The invoking of St. Brigid as a Special patron of the “A” school was initiated by Mother Benigna and also survives in the school to the present day.

The students’ talents were explored and the extracurricular was encouraged. Mother Benigna had a love of drama from her U.C.D. days. She had a flair for production and learned much about dramatic technique from Mother Genevieve McDonald.

In the **Limerick Chronicle** reference is made to a show performed by the “A” school on St. Patrick's Day 1936. “Gleann na Sídhéog” a drama acted by the young pupils and a comic sketch - “Ruairí Reanraidhthe” by the seniors and Irish stepdancing. “Limerick people are fortunate in having in their midst a school like Laurel Hill, where their children have constantly before them the highest ideals and where they are taught by act and word love of the faith which Patrick brought and love of their country and its language”.

The Schools' Drama Festival was founded in the mid 40s and in 1945 **The Palm** which was the top award was won by the school for the best performance “An Solas so bhFuinneog”. There are also numerous references to students competing and winning prizes in numerous competitions e.g. **Feis Tuadhhumhan** and later **Féile Luimní**.



The school had its own song **Cnoc na Labhras Abú** and its own school magazine **An Labhras Glas** written in Irish and all by hand! The 1941 edition contains an article in a diary format over a two months period from mid October to the Christmas holidays and refers to participation in the **Oireachtas** on Lá na nÓg where the school received great accolades from both the Taoiseach and an Seabhach. The very first entry records jubilation in the school having defeated Villiers at hockey another great match with LPYMS etc – preparing for the Christmas show (“Hiawatha” that year) and counting the days to Christmas. Just a flavour of the school and its activities. Lots of creative writing, poetry etc all contributed by the students themselves.

A random look at the first 50 years of an Scoil “A” as seen through the eyes of the newspapers demonstrated that the school has been actively involved in the dramatic and cultural life of the city while providing a rounded education to its pupils. And the academic work did not suffer. Reference is made to the awarding of several University Scholarships and Limerick Corporation Scholarships, the Pearse Scholarships and other 1916 Commemorative Scholarships on several occasions.

The last decade of Mother Benigna's tenure of office was to bring major changes with the Government's **Investment in Education** a policy which included generous grants for school buildings for the first time, followed by free post primary education coupled with a free school transport scheme. In 1967 both schools entered the Free Scheme (up to this Secondary Schools were fee-paying). The F.C.J.s always progressive built a new “A” school extension complete with modern classrooms, a library specialist rooms (Art, Languages and Geography) and two new Science Laboratories. The specialist facilities would be for shared use with the “C” school. The new school was opened and blessed in 1969 and the school was now ready for the anticipated increase in numbers. In 1962 there were 96 students and by 1971 that had risen to 180.

Mother Benigna was very proud of this project and the following is an excerpt from a farewell tribute written by a student on her retirement in 1972:

“She built it up from its infancy and has seen it emerge from the dark grim building it used to be into one of the most modern well equipped schools in Munster”. Her legacy was not however in bricks and mortar but she had been architect, engineer and builder of a strong and successful Scoil”A, a school with a fusion of an Irish and an F.C.J. ethos the perfect prototype for her successors.

The next three Principals were all F.C.J.s and significantly all past pupils of an Scoil “A”, Sr. Dolores Mulholland (1972-1976), Sr. Catherine Geary (1976-1989) and Sr. Patricia Binchy (1989-1994).

### **Sr. Dolores (1972-1976)**

Sr. Dolores a former teacher at **The Hollies** an F.C.J. - All Girls School in Manchester and a classical scholar was appointed to succeed Sr. Benigna as Principal in 1972, while also teaching Latin.

It was a challenging time, school numbers already escalating got a further impetus with the raising of the school leaving age to 15 in 1972. It marked the beginning of the ascendancy of lay teachers on the staff. The ratio between lay and Religious was approximately 50:50 but sadly a number of nun colleagues were due to retire and the decline in vocations to the religious life necessitated a further recruitment of staff. Sr. Dolores was very successful in procuring an excellent cohort of young graduates of various disciplines but all with fluent Irish. Hitherto the teaching of languages and the humanities had been paramount but with increasing demand for Science and Technology in a changing Ireland the F.C.J.s availed of the financial inducements being offered to fit out laboratories and employ Science Graduates. The school was able to offer the three Sciences now through Irish to Leaving Cert. The numbers taking these subjects rocketed – a unique factor in an all girls school and a trend which has been sustained ever since. Science at Junior cycle became a core subject.

Up to this teachers taught but Teacher Unions were actively seeking a voice for their members in the schools following the **Ryan Tribunal** and the principle of teacher participation in the running of schools was conceded with the introduction of Posts of Responsibility on a seniority basis. Management was in the hands of the F.C.J.s with the local Rev Mother as School Manager and two F.C.J. principals one in both “A” and “C” schools. The Vice principalship however would be available to lay staff. In 1974 Anne Mordan was appointed Vice Principal a position she was to hold for the next twenty years. The other posts were A and B Posts.

The harnessing of parent participation also came about with the setting up of the first Parents’ Advisory Council (1975-1976) which became a powerhouse of support to both schools running many very successful fund raising social and fun events such as the school cycle-runs, later the school walks, Fashion Shows and Luncheons, the Golf Classic, the School Show and undertaking many very successful educational initiative such as Drug Awareness Programmes, Speakers on various topics of interest to Parents and Students, Mock Interviews etc.

Though the academic side still reigned supreme the F.C.J.s believed in the importance of physical education “mens sano in corpore sano”. Hockey continued to predominate in the sports and the winning of a **The Munster Senior Cup** two years in a row in the early 70’s was no mean achievement, but with two fulltime PE teachers on the one campus and student numbers soaring better sports facilities were needed. In 1975 an **All Weather Hockey Pitch** and in 1976 a fine **gymnasium** were welcome new resources for the use of both schools.

But the greatest resource to emerge from this period was the acquisition of a group of dedicated teachers possessed of many skills and talents in debating and music who were to become the nucleus of a strong and steady team who were to give the school great stability and continuity as it evolved over the next three decades. The participative approach of these years was eventually to evolve into partnership and community.

### **Sr. Catherine Geary (1976-1989)**

Sr Catherine returned to an Scoil ‘A’ in 1976 to teach French and some classes of R.E. and in 1975 she was appointed Principal on the retirement of Sr. Dolores. She had spent 16 years as Principal of an F.C.J. all girls school in Paris which no doubt equipped her well for dealing with the Irish teenagers of the ‘80s and their parents. She inherited a thriving school and a team of Postholders with a very strong work ethic and the support and companionship of a very progressive and circumspect Vice Principal.

Sr. Catherine's chosen and preferred mission was the education of youth. She encouraged the students to develop all their talents. She believed in true F.C.J. style in a broad education and particularly in the engendering of cultural confidence. She was very pro Europe but believed strongly in maintaining our own national identity. She was extremely committed to the development of not only the Irish language but also our Gaelic Culture and heritage. The Gael Linn debates and Slógadh activities were up and running. It was fortuitous that there were so many talented teachers with a variety of creative skills so generous with their time and Sr. Catherine supported and encouraged them all.

In 1981 the Senior team came first in the **All Ireland Gael Linn** and **Ogra na hÉireann**. In 1983 in **Slógadh Náisiúnta** they won top prizes for their performance of 'Oliver' as Gaeilge and also firsts in mime and in creative writing and in 1985 they received six first prizes and consequently scooped the Sciath Slógadh which was given to the most talented and versatile school in the National Finals. 1985 was the **International Year of Youth**. A 6<sup>th</sup> Year Singing Group won first prize for their composition **Éamh**, which earned them a trip to Luxemburg. It would be impossible to itemise all their competitions. **Slógadh** was a fantastic platform for showcasing student creativity – essays, projects, creative writing, journalism, music, drama, arts and crafts. There was huge participation in the school and it was wonderful to see the busloads of happy students heading out to these events. It was bringing Irish and education out of the classroom.

The revival of the **School Musicals** came in 1979 with a magnificent performance of **Joseph and the Amazing Technicolour Dreamcoat** given by "A" and "C" school students and the shows were to become an annual event which has survived to the present day with only one three year hiatus. It's a huge undertaking loved by all students, their parents and the public.



Sr. Catherine was a Gallic Gael! In the early '80s French Irish exchanges were also set up- a parent and staff initiative encouraged by Sr. Catherine with orals imminent for Leaving Cert. French was and is a core subject in Laurel Hill. The students had been taking the oral option at Intermediate level since 1973. German was also added to the curriculum in the late '80s.

In 1985 the school celebrated its **Golden Jubilee** (1935-1985). The **Annual Year Books** had been a joint 'A' and 'C' school publication but a special 'A' school only commemorative issue was published in 1985 with magnificent contributions from students past and present, staff and management. A Special Mass was celebrated by the Bishop Dr. J. Newman, representatives of Church and State, F.C.J.s and many others present with **Sr. Benigna** as guest of honour. 200 invited guests including some of the original class of 1935-1937 attended a reception afterwards in the school. Sr. Benigna made a moving speech. Her love of Irish and the school was undiminished despite the passing years.

Sr. Catherine loved music and was very keen to introduce it as a subject which she did gradually. She added a new dimension also to **Lá le Bríde** celebrations by inviting visiting performers on a number of occasions to entertain the students and add to their musical appreciation e.g. a Piano Recital by pianist Veronica MacSweeney, a concert by **Clannad** and a performance of Irish and classical music by a group from the **School of Music**. Irish traditions were also added to the beautiful **Lá le Bríde** and masses with a procession of first year students displaying their St. Brigid crosses made by themselves. In 1988 the setting up of a School Orchestra and a School choir was a dream fulfilled for Sr. Catherine.

In the early 80's initiative was always encouraged whether by teachers, students or parents. The introduction of Bridge was also a parent/Teacher initiative. It was added to the curriculum for First



Years in the late 80s. Coaching was and is done at weekends by parents and friends of Laurel Hill and later the students set up their own Bridge Club.

These years were a time of great collaboration between the Principals and staffs of both schools as many of their projects were joint ventures. One such was the employment of school secretaries and caretakers now grant aided followed by the building of a common reception area with offices and photocopying services etc. and a meeting room – a resource long overdue. Even much of the in-house professional development of the staffs was a shared experience.

1986 brought the closure of the Boarding School. It was a sad occasion regretted by all. It was also a great loss to the PPU for whom it had been the hub for their annual September Reunions. The boarders had played an important part in the dynamic of the Scoil 'A' and brought a great diversity of culture. The gradual phasing out 1981-1986 meant that there was no dramatic drop in school numbers which were now at an all time high of 365 which necessitated the employment of extra teachers. In 1989 the students published a special school magazine as a farewell to Sr. Catherine and in an interview given to the girls she praised the marvellous voluntary work of the staff their dedication to their teaching and their friendship and support. When asked if she had one further wish for the school what would it be. Her reply was "it would be more participation in Hockey and games" - a wish that was to be realised in the years to come.



### **Sr. Patricia Binchy (1989-1994)**

Sr. Patricia Binchy took up office on Sr. Catherine's retirement in 1989. Unlike her F.C.J. predecessors Patricia had come directly from the Irish F.C.J. school in Bunclody, where she had spent the previous decade teaching mainly Irish and French. She had been taught Irish and Latin by Sr. Benigna. Coming back to one's alma mater as Príomh Oide while a number of your former teachers are still on the staff could have been a daunting task for some but not so for Patricia. There was always a special welcome for past pupils and especially for Patricia who had an impeccable record and had been a joy to teach.

Each Principal brought her own individual and unique style of leadership. Patricia though of very gentle demeanour was to be a very capable, effective and caring Principal and introduce many progressive features to the school.

The first hurdle facing her was an onerous one with the engineering and negotiation of the **Great Move** in September 1989 when the 'A' school and 'C' school exchanged buildings. The 'C' were to inherit most of the 'A' school and the now redundant boarding school and convent. Sr. Patricia had also to take on the building of an extension. It was a difficult time for all. On the plus side was the acquiring of a very fine bright and comfortable staffroom and the school was now much more self contained.

The age of the P.C. had arrived but Sr. Patricia can certainly lay claim to being the first to introduce it to what was now no longer the Scoil 'A' but Laurel Hill Coláiste F.C.J. She also initiated and executed the computerisation of the School Administration which had huge advantages.



Another challenge this time to the status quo of the school came with the Department's introduction of a 3 year Junior Cert

programme followed by a Transition Year and with only 2 years to Leaving Cert. There had always been a 6 year cycle with 4 years to the Intermediate Cert. After much debate and consultation the consensus was the retention of the 4 years to Junior Cert. by placing the Transition Year in the First year. Sr. Patricia was successful in negotiating this and a derogation was agreed by the Dept. of Education which enabled the school to operate a very successful Transition Year for first years tailored to suit the needs of an all Irish school where most of it's students do not come from all Irish schools.

1990 – The revival of the Annual School Magazine “**An Labhras Glas**” was an initiative that came from the 5<sup>th</sup> year students themselves. It gave a great platform for the students to develop their writing, creativity, artistic talents and business acumen on an annual basis with the support and expertise of members of staff.

The school's first **Newsletter** also dates from this period. It was the ‘brainchild’ of the Vice Principal Mrs. Anne Mordan and faithfully produced by her until her retirement in 2005. The myriads of events and activities taking place in and out of school were often going unnoticed but would be of interest to the whole school community. It was a huge success and added greatly to the sense of community and the morale of the school.



The academic side of the school also flourished with learning made more palatable with Language Days and festivals and German and French Breakfasts and 2 students won the title **Linguists of the Year** 1991 and 1992, which earned them trips, one to Germany and the other to Brussels. There were visits to live theatre “**King Lear**” and “**The Merchant of Venice**”. Debating in English continued and 1993 the **Concern Debates** were introduced. Senior Geography students continued to collect old newspapers for reuse as animal bedding and donated their hard earned money to good causes of their own choice while junior Geography classes enjoyed a day out in the Burren. Senior History delved into the city archives and science students competed in the Aer Lingus young Scientist competition. On a sad note 1991 saw the last of Leaving Cert Latin, a casualty to changing demands. In March 1994 having won all before them the **Senior Gael Linn** debaters deservedly won the coveted **Craobh na hÉireann** in the Gresham Hotel. In 1991 and 1994 the school came first in the **All Ireland Bridge Pairs** and in the **All Ireland Schools Bridge Championships** in Galway.

There was also a great social dimension to Bridge. On Valentines Day 1993 68 girls played Bridge guests of the Glenstal Boys. In September 1992 on the music front a **Madrigal Group** was set up composed of 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> year students. The choir and orchestra were winning all around them in a veritable circuit of Ireland and in May 1992 all music successes were celebrated in a magical Summer Concert before an audience of enraptured parents and staff.

In 1994 a mixed choir of 30 students visited the school from F.C.J. Paris. They entertained the students and their families.

On the academic front the achievements were remarkable e.g. in 1992 alone with 11 out of the 20 Galway University Scholarships awarded coming to our Students. As well as one entrance Scholarship to U.C.C., and one to U.C.D. and one Zonta Scholarship to U.L.

A culture of care had always prevailed in the school but it took on a new emphasis with the introduction of the term **Pastoral Care** which coincided with Sr. Patricia's stewardship. It was easier to implement in a small school like the Coláiste. An awareness of the less well off and deprived in

society was also cultivated e.g. the **Vincent de Paul Association** and the **Tuesday Club** were revived in September 1989. The 6<sup>th</sup> years and their R.E. teachers ran an annual Christmas Party for the elderly and later this changed to being a party for underprivileged children. Their social interpersonal and spiritual development was catered for also e.g the annual weekends away with the R.E. teachers in Muchcross and Spanish Point. Lottery Day as it was known in Sr. Patricia's school days in the Scoil 'A' continued annually with its new title **Lá na Misiún**, a day of fun and games for students and staff where all sorts of events to make money for the missions were explored.

Staff development was always a priority with the F.C.J. sisters. In 1994 Sr. Patricia and a number of staff members attended an **International Education Workshop** for all European F.C.J. schools in Ushaw in the north of England where the main topic for discussion was "**A Philosophy of Education for F.C.J. Schools**". As always the F.C.J.s were forward planners and the above philosophy was to provide an excellent blueprint for school planning in the future by lay management in the F.C.J. schools.

In 1994 Sr. Patricia's talents were needed in other F.C.J. apostolates but in her short reign the school had evolved further as a centre of excellence and a very caring place.

### **Mrs Anne Mordan (1994-2005)**

In 1994 Anne Mordan was promoted to the position of Acting Principal and subsequently in 1996 was officially appointed Príomhoide of Laurel Hill Coláiste F.C.J. the first non F.C.J. to serve in that capacity.

Anne had come to Laurel Hill in 1971 as a young science graduate in Mother Benigna's time. She had been a very proactive and dynamic Vice Principal since 1974 and had worked with all 3 previous Principals who had always respected her opinion and acknowledged her invaluable contribution. She had also played a major role in the design and development of the school. Mrs. Hilda Raftery, who had been teaching in Scoil 'A' since 1962 and an 'A' postholder since 1971, joined Anne as Vice Principal, later deputy. With their combined experience and love of the school they made a very effective management team.

This period started with the 150<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the coming of the F.C.J.s to Limerick in 1844 and the opening of their first school in Laurel Hill in 1845. On the morning of "**Aifreann Oscailt na Scoile 1994**" the Provincial of the F.C.J. order, Sr. Katherine O'Flynn visited the school and later gave the homily at the Mass. The pupils planted a tree in the convent grounds as a sign of hope in the continued growth of the sisters. A special PP re-union was held that year with mass followed by a Galla luncheon in the Gym – 400 PPs attended. The musical that year was aptly chosen "The Sound of Music" and the Parent Council produced a magnificent **Anniversary Souvenir Programme** of the show. In February there was a special mass of thanksgiving in St. John's and the year long celebrations culminated in a **Gala Concert** performed by 'A' and 'C' pupils in UL Concert Hall 24<sup>th</sup> February 1995. It was edifying to see the whole school community involved at different stages in the planning and success of the celebrations – the F.C.J.s, the School Management, the Staff, the PPU, Parent Council and Friends. This showed a strong sense of community was evolving.

This was a period of great curricular changes with the introduction of new syllabi and subjects involving re-training and in services. But a different type of in-service took place in Portlaoise in 1995 when the message of Ushaw was shared with the lay staffs of all F.C.J. schools in Ireland at an in Service/conference. **D'Houët Ireland** where the history and educational philosophy was discussed. With the arrival of lay management in their schools, the sisters were anxious to preserve their ethos.



The preservation and practice of the F.C.J. ethos and the spirit of the foundress were high in the priorities of the new lay management at Laurel Hill Coláiste who were also very committed to continuing their links with the F.C.J. sisters. The school Mission Statement composed in this period reflected this.

The betterment of the school and its facilities were essential if the school was to continue to provide its expansive and all round education. Anne was determined to create a school fit for the Millenium and she convinced the Trustees in 1996 of the need for moderisation of the school infrastructure and the provision of enhanced amenities. The result was the massive 1997 extension which gave the school a spacious all purpose Halla Bheinín, the magnificent Via d'Houêt, lockers for each student and a state of the art front of house reception area comprising front office and a boardroom.

The development of IT for students progressed with the provision of a computer room and the purchase of PCs. Computer Studies were also added for juniors. In 1997 it was back to school for the staff with computer lessons. PCs were also provided in the staff room and broadband was installed.

This was a time of major challenge and change in schools with the demands of the Education Act of 1998. Anne's organisational skills and partnership approach were to prove invaluable in the race to meet the demands of school planning. Codes, policies and statements were carefully formulated and documented with the support of middle management. The whole staff was involved at different stages. Parallel with this came the PCW, a major review and analysis of the school had to be undertaken prior to the upgrading of all posts of responsibility and the reframing and redistribution of duties. An in-house management structure was now up and running at senior and at middle management. It was a huge step in the evolution of partnership in education.

A major milestone in the history of the school was the setting up of a **Board of Management** in 1997 with representation from staff, parents and F.C.J.s. In 1999 the first **Student Council** was established in the school with its own liaison teacher. This was a culmination of the commitment towards partnership espoused by the F.C.J.s over the preceding years.

Leadership had always been encouraged among the students not only with the election of 4 Head Girls each year but also students established and ran a huge variety of committees. An Cumann Gaelach, Library, Magazine, Environment, Music, Bridge, Sport, Coisde Cabhrach and in Easter 2003 a new School Debating Society. The new **Student Council** not only represented the needs of the students in the school but also took on several humanitarian initiatives for example in tandem with the **Parent Council** a food collection for the **Children of Chernobyl**. They also sponsored an athlete in the **Special Olympics**.

Another high point was the celebration of the Birth of Christ. The **Millenium Celebrations** started with a superb performance of **Jesus Christ Superstar** aptly chosen to mark the 2000 Anniversary of the Birth of Christ (it was the 21<sup>st</sup> consecutive production of the annual school musical). On 9<sup>th</sup> December 1999 all three F.C.J. communities (the F.C.J. sisters and both schools) concelebrated a **Liturgy of Light** – an unforgettable and moving experience – directed by Micheál O'Riain. And in January 2000 a special Millenium photo-shoot which captured the entire cohort of students in one mega group. A beautifully framed end product holds pride of place on Via d'Houêt.

The final celebration in October 2000 was the unveiling of a magnificent painting commissioned by the F.C.J.s **Lumen Christi** portraying the F.C.J. charism and executed by the Art teachers in their Limerick City Schools and the launching of a CD of music and song from all their Irish F.C.J. schools (up to 400 students and their music teachers participated in this).

The physical wellbeing of students was well catered for on the sports field. Since the early 90s both schools had set up separate hockey teams. Sister Catherine's final wish was now granted with soaring participation – the school was now fielding 12 hockey teams and winning all around them. Snr. A panel won the **Munster Plate** for the first time in 1996 and the **Sinéad Bussoli Shield** in 1995 and 1996. In 1997 the U-14 won the **Munster Minor Cup**. In 1998 the U-15 A Team won the O'Brien Cup. The U-16 won the **Munster Junior Cup** for the first time ever in 1996. In 1999 Senior Bs won the **Munster Cup**. In 2000 Junior As won the **Munster Cup**. In 2002 the Senior As won the Munster League. In 2005 Junior As won a double the **Munster League Cup** and **Munster Junior Cup** and for their performance and conduct "**The Fair Play Trophy of the Year**". In golf a brilliant duo took first in the **All Ireland Schools Golf Championships** three years in a row '98, '99 and 2000. Tennis usually took pride of place in the last term and in 2005 a team from the school won the U-19 **Munster Tennis Championship**.



The students were certainly challenged to develop their greatest potential with the choice of activities available. In 1996 the **50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Féile Luimní** attracted huge participation and the students swept the boards in the **Labhairt na Gaeilge** and many of them performed in the Gala Concert for the President in UL. In 1997 the **Environmental Group** won the **Tidiest School in Limerick Award** from Limerick Corporation – a plaque for Via d'Houët and €500 for the school.

The Bridge players were also very successful but it was the huge participation in the game that made it so unique - 80 girls on average playing every Saturday and many of them kept it up for life. In 2001 **The All Ireland Pairs** was played in the school for the first time and in 2003 the first prize was won by L.H. Col.

The students artistic and cultural education was also catered for with visits to galleries, museums, exhibitions (local and national) and even exhibiting some of their own work in **EVA** (Limerick). On the social side the **Annual Debs** had been continued and the highlight of 5<sup>th</sup> year was the school tour to places like Stratford-on-Avon, London and Paris, activity weekends such as to the **Killary Adventure Centre** was relished by 3<sup>rd</sup> years annually and the 1<sup>st</sup> years annual **Activity Day** in Killaloe.

But the hard work of teaching was maintained and students were well motivated at all times. One of the hallmarks of F.C.J. education is that it is always broader than the requirements of the syllabus. And the results each year bore testament to the thriving academic side of the school. In '97, '98 and '99 the students received a triumvirate of **Howmedica Scholarships to UL**. In 1997 the entire Junior Cert. class were awarded 'A's Irish and in 2001 and 2002 the school reaped **4 German Scholarships (Junior Cert.)** and **7 Trinity Exhibitions** on the Leaving Cert. results. The above is only a flavour of the awards coming to the school year after year.

## Music

The school had also been enriched by the school choir and orchestras (senior and junior) but undoubtedly the 2 highlights of the choir in this period deserve mention. 1996 it was awarded first place in **The Telecom Éireann 1996 School Choir Competition** where only the top 12 choirs in the country were eligible to compete. The winning performance in the **National Concert Hall** was one of the most exciting and pleasurable occasions in the history of the school – and secondly in 2002 when they were invited to sing with the Internationally renowned **Vienna Boys Choir** in the Concert Hall

U.L. and billed as follows “.....the choir of 125 female voices aged 12-18 are recipients of many major awards and are past winners of the **Cork International Choral Festival, Féile Luimní, Sligo Feis Cheoil** and the **National School Choir Competition** and conducted by their director Orla Colgan-Ahern”. It was a magical performance. The **L.H. Col. Orchestra** also won the **Dorothy Mayer Cup** at the **Feis Cheoil** in 1997, 2000 and 2004. With this overflowing of musical talent in the school music certainly deserved to be added to the Leaving Cert. subjects available in the school.

### **The Presidential Visit 2004**

The visit of **President Mary McAleese** to the school on the 20<sup>th</sup> January 2004 was one of the proudest occasions ever in the school’s annals. The President had accepted an invitation to come because of her great love of the Irish language and culture. Representatives of the F.C.J.s local community shared in the celebrations including the late Sister Emmanuel Grant F.C.J. who was about to celebrate her 100<sup>th</sup> birthday at the time. The whole event was as Gaeilge and in her own fluent Irish the President publicly lauded the Irish ethos and achievements of the school. She engaged in a lively Q & A session with the students chaired by the then Captain of the Debating Team. She was enthralled by the musical talent, solo piping, renaissance chamber music, traditional music and the **School Choir**.

In 2005 Anne Mordan retired after a lifetime of dedicated service and left behind a legacy of a strong and vibrant 21<sup>st</sup> century school.

It was truly a “fin de siècle”. This was a watershed period in the history of Laurel Hill and the F.C.J.s marking the end of direct management of the school by the Order. They had embraced full partnership with the instigation of a **BOM**, which would share with the F.C.J. sisters – trustees of the school, - responsibility for the aims and traditions of Catholic Education in their schools.

It was also a climax of the evolution of COMMUNITY but with broader connotations, which had been evolving at Laurel Hill as a result of the great companionship, faithfulness and sharing of talents between F.C.J. sisters, staff, parents and past pupils around school activities and events and now copper fastened by full recognition of partnership in education – ní neart go cur le chéile!

### **Ms Aedín Ní Bhriain 2005**

Ms. Aedín Ní Bhriain was appointed Príomh Oide in 2005 and was the first Principal to be appointed by the B.O.M. Aedín was a post pupil and had spent her previous teaching career in both the Voluntary secondary sector and the V.E.C. teaching German and French and had also been involved in middle management. Her appointment augured very well for the Irish ethos of the school. Coming from a background steeped in Irish culture and heritage she had as a student had contributed immensely to the Irishness of the school in the many Slodagh activities and Gael Linn Debates of the ‘80s and had starred in all the school musicals. She received a “Céad Míle Fáile” from her former teachers. Aedín settled in very quickly and was very appreciative of the advise and support of the Deputy Principal during her first year.

The cabling for the IT infrastructure had been completed so Aedín continued with the on-going computerisation of the school. A major initiative was the upgrading of the IT facilities with the installation of a new server and the purchase of new PCs for the computer room. She was committed to the enhancement and modernisation of teach methods by investing in data projectors and laptops for use by teachers in some of the mainstream classrooms. Financing of projects like these was made possible by the money from the **Annual School Walks** and the generosity of the Parents’ Annual voluntary contributions.

The work of school planning continued and the collaborative approach was maintained. Aedín's keen logical mind and a strong and supportive middle management team formulated further documentation required by the **Education Act of 1998**. It was also a busy period consolidating the work of subject planning and appointing subject co-ordinators in all subject areas. Spanish was added to the school curriculum. A further review of duties of Postholders led to the introduction of Year Heads a new initiative in the school.

Student activities and their various Cumainn continued with a new addition a school film club where as well as learning the art of film making students were also taught acting, directing and production skills.

Music in the school continued to reign. There was a noticeable renaissance and expansion however of the Irish traditional music activities with the formation of newly titled groups like **Draíocht** and **Splancaithe** and the advent of new competitions. In 2006 "they gave a polished and heart warming performance" when they performed with the school choir at the opening of the **World Downs' Syndrome Swimming Championships** in UL. - In March 2007 they performed in the City Gallery. **Draíocht** also participated in music workshops organised by **Gael Linn** and as guest musicians they entertained the delegates at the **Comhdháil Náisiúnta Gaelscoileanna** held in Limerick in November 2007. In 2008 the traditional group **Splancaithe** won the **Grand Prix** at the **All Ireland Final of Scléip** held in Athlone.

The choir sang in the Holy Thursday Liturgy in **St. John's Cathedral**, which was televised live in 2005 and in 2007 they had the privilege of singing with Anthony Kearns, the Irish Tenor in a concert of Irish songs and melodies in UCL.

In sport hockey reached unprecedented heights with continued huge participation. In 2008 the Munster Senior Cup returned to Laurel Hill for the first time in 34 years. Their supporters, - teachers, fellow students and past pupils numbering in their midst many of the 1974 winning team were ecstatic with the pride and joy. The team then went forward to represent Munster in the Kat Russell All Ireland championships where they won the **Bronze**. L.H. Col. F.C.J. were proud to accept the "**Hockey School of the Year Award**" for 2008.

Camogie ('A' and 'C') was started in the school in 1982 and had continued since. In 2007 the Snr. Team made it to the semi final of the Limerick League. It was however a great honour when one of their stalwarts in the team (and also a great traditional musician!) was selected to play in goals in the Limerick Senior 'B' team in the All Ireland Championships. Gaelic Football was added to the field sports 2008. Students also competed in Gymnastics, Athletics, Rowing etc. at very high levels. In 2007 a young 4<sup>th</sup> year student was selected for the **Irish Gymnastic Team** for the **World Championships**. Another won the gold in the All Ireland 300m. In 2009 2 students were selected for the Irish U-18 Rowing Panel. And in the same year the School Chess Team scooped the coveted title of **Munster Schools' Chess Champions**.

In 2008 three Snr. Bridge Teams qualified to represent Munster in the U-20s Interprovincial in Belfast.

This is only a microcosm of all the other sports activities and achievements 2005-2009.

All students were encouraged to use their unique talents.

### **Extra Curricular Activities**

The **Concern** and **Gael Linn** debates continued for the students. In 2008 senior students took part in a **Cuise Irish Poetry Competition** and the 5<sup>th</sup> years went to Cork to see **Macbeth**. Science and History classes tested their knowledge in Limerick City Quizzes and the Juniors Civic Class made a visit to the

Dail. The 5<sup>th</sup> years headed further south on their **Annual Tour** this time to Barcelona where they were educated in their history of art and culture by the wonders of Gaudi and Dali. And the school had it's first ski trip that year!

### **Academic**

The students high standards were maintained in this arena. Two new scholarships of a different nature in 2006 – a Leaving Cert squash player was awarded a **Trinity College Sports Scholarship**. In 2008 a student received a **Science Foundation of Ireland Scholarship** and also in 2008 the students were the recipients of 4 TCD Entrance Exhibitions. None of this would have been possible without the hard work of a dedicated teaching staff.

In September 2007 the very first **Whole School Evaluation** took place and also an examination of 4 specific subjects – Irish, English, Science and Home Economics. It was a very challenging time for Deputy Principal Mr. Pat Byrne, who was Acting Principal at the time and indeed for the whole staff. The Report was extremely positive and the excellence of the school was acknowledged. Certain recommendations were made which are being currently considered by the BOM.

The year 2008 was the 150<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the death of the foundress of the F.C.J.s – **Marie Madeleine d'Houet**. To celebrate this students from F.C.J. schools worldwide gathered in Paris. The idea originated with the parents of students attending the F.C.J. school Notre Dame de France in Paris. L.H. Col. was represented by two staff members and three students. The highlight of the celebrations was the mass celebrated in the magnificent Notre Dame Cathedral. A new link was forged between international F.C.J. youth. The Jubilee was celebrated later in the year in St. Joseph's church an event organised by the 3 F.C.J. Limerick schools (2 L.H.s and Bruff) and both F.C.J. communities. Following a beautiful liturgy everybody was invited to L. H. Col. for refreshments and a veritable reunion took place – another great renewal of “companionship”.

The religious formation of the students has held its pride of place in the school. In 2008 a Seachtain na bPaidreacha was organised in the L.H. Col. by the Co-ordinator of the Faith, Development Programme which had been successfully running in the school since 2003. It was a joint initiative by the Mercy Sisters, F.C.J.s and the Redemptorists and it complimented the excellent teaching of Religion in the school. Sadly it came to an end in 2009. A group of 5<sup>th</sup> year students travelled with the co-ordinator to Brazil at Easter 2008 where they did voluntary work on a Redemptorist Development Project. It was a very worthy cause “caring for those deprived” (Philosophy of Education).

The retirement of seven of the school's senior teachers since 2005 has led to a change in the age profile of the staff. Their going has also caused a change in the dynamic of the school. This cohort of teachers had made an indelible contribution to the school since the '70s (and earlier) and played a huge role in the evolution of the school as a very caring place and as a centre of excellence. But a school cannot remain static. A new band of young teachers bring with them fresh ideas, new talents, energy and enthusiasm.

75 years ago, the F.C.J.'s confidence in the young 27 year old fledgling teacher Sr. Benigna led to the establishment of an Scoil “A”. Today also the F.C.J.s can have confidence in the future of the school in the safe hands of a young committed Principal who mirrors Sr. Benigna's own vision, courage and extraordinary professional approach. - The school has indeed come full circle.

Hilda Raftery                      2009