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Ronan as educator: teacher and academic leader

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Ronan arrived at the University of Glasgow in 1972 by a quite circuitous route. He did his first degree, a BA in Geography, at the University of Durham before returning to Scotland (Ronan was born in Edinburgh) to undertake doctoral work at the University of Aberdeen. Unusually at that time, Ronan completed his PhD in three years, perhaps a foretaste that Ronan was destined to be more than an average academic. From Aberdeen, he took up subsequent lectureships in Dublin and then the Glasgow School of Art where he lectured on town and city planning. In 1972, Ronan was appointed Lecturer in Geography at the University of Glasgow, where he spent the remainder of his academic career, subsequently being promoted to Senior Lecturer in 1988, and then Professor in 1997. Ronan formally retired in 2010, but the term 'retirement' can be only loosely used about Ronan, because all it meant was that the University no longer paid him, but he continued to remain active in writing, editing, publishing and postgraduate supervision. However, it is for others in this Special Issue to reflect on these aspects of Ronan's wonderful academic career. For me, the task is to reflect on Ronan as the educator, and to offer some thoughts on Ronan as a teacher and academic leader.

During his 38 years in the Department, and subsequently School, Ronan taught across all four years of the undergraduate programme, he taught on various Master's programmes and still found the time to supervise over 30 PhD students, many of whom went on to their own distinguished careers both in academic and non-academic life. One of his main contributions during this time was to the second-year course, now entitled Geography-2, but entitled Higher Ordinary for the first couple of decades of Ronan's time in Glasgow. He taught much of the basic Human Geography in Geography-2, but, in addition, taught for many years the Statistics labs. Ronan liked to keep quiet that whilst in Dublin he had enrolled for, and passed, a Postgraduate Diploma in Statistics. This was enough to keep him entrenched in the Statistics component of second-year for many years longer than was the norm. Compared to his massive contributions to second-year Geography, Ronan's contributions to the first-year course (now Geography-1 and before that Ordinary Geography) tended to consist more of cameo performances, but they were still significant.

However, it is in the Honours years where Ronan will be best remembered by hundreds, perhaps into the thousands, of undergraduates. During his time, he delivered two main Honours Option courses which will be long remembered by students, unsurprisingly in Urban Geography and in Political Geography, which ran in alternate years. These were unfailingly popular choices for students. It would, however, be fair to say that for those students who wanted to be stretched academically, both these courses were ideal, but for the more middle of the road student, these courses could be challenging. Ronan, though, spent as much time with this latter group of students as he did with the former, as he was committed to all students working and performing to their maximum potential. Sometimes, some of Ronan's final examination questions for these courses could be quirky and could provide rare entertainment at the examination questions approval board, an internal board in the department to which all examination questions are to be submitted and approved, before being sent to the external examiners in the next part of the process. One of those questions

from the mid-1980s has for some reason stuck in my mind: “An Englishman’s home is his castle, a Scotsman’s home is his council house. Discuss”. They do not make them like that anymore.

As well as his undergraduate teaching commitments, Ronan was always a key contributor to postgraduate Master’s programmes. There had been no tradition of postgraduate programmes in Geography until the mid-1980s, although the Department had been delivering Master’s programmes in Topographic Science since the late 1960s. In 1988, two Master’s programmes were launched by the Department, Applied Population Analysis, headed by Alan Findlay, and Regional Analysis, headed by Arthur Morris, and Ronan characteristically threw himself into both, whereas other colleagues, perhaps more sensibly, opted into contributing to one or the other. When these programmes were replaced by a more generic Master of Research (MRes) in Human Geography programme, Ronan was once again heavily involved.

Given the amount of classroom teaching that Ronan undertook, it might be tempting to draw the conclusion that he was just a dry theoretical lecturer, but nothing could be further from the truth. Ronan was committed to the notion that “getting out there is a crucial part of Geography”, as he liked to keep telling generations of students. But he didn’t just talk the talk, he did indeed get out there and walk the walk – quite literally on many occasions. His urban walking tours of Glasgow for Honours students became the stuff of legend. He was never happier than when walking and talking students through Glasgow. His favourite haunts were not just the grand Victorian centre of the city or the redeveloped Merchant City, but the Barras and especially Paddy’s Market, both of which might be politely described as the informal sector of the city economy. Students were also taken to some of Glasgow’s housing schemes on the periphery of the city to meet local community groups and activists, and to experience first-hand some of the challenges that people living there faced on a daily basis.

But in addition to these walking safaris, as Ronan sometimes called them, Ronan participated in, and frequently led, week-long residential field classes, especially at second year level, and then subsequently at Junior Honours level. The second year field class went to Weston-super-Mare and then Bath, with Ronan initially as one of the teaching team, and then as field class leader, for his first few years in the department, to be subsequently replaced by Swansea as the location for the next 20 years. And for many of those years, Ronan was there. In later years, he was part of the Junior Honours field class to Malta and subsequently Mallorca. Ronan always enjoyed being in the field. I still retain a vivid memory of a Swansea field class, perhaps in the early 1990s, when one of the stops for the students as a group was Townhill which gives a wonderful view from its high vantage point of the city of Swansea directly below and then of the grand sweep of Swansea Bay beyond that. Townhill is also one of the more deprived areas of Swansea, and as Ronan was waxing lyrical about the urban landscape of Swansea, an elderly man walking his dog came to join us at the edge of the group of 60-odd students. When Ronan had finished, the man congratulated Ronan but then offered to talk to the students a bit more about what Ronan had not said. A pivotal moment for any lecturer, it has to be said. But Ronan grasped the moment and engaged in a wonderful dialogue with the man for 20 minutes or so about the housing conditions and everyday challenges of living in Townhill. Ronan’s sure (and human) touch came to the fore. Truly memorable.

I had the pleasure of sharing Ronan’s company on many of these field classes, a companionship that was always a pleasure to be part of. In the 1980s and 1990s, the department had a very close and productive relationship with the Department of Geography

of the University of Dar es Salaam in Tanzania (which continues to this day, albeit on a smaller scale). Large numbers of staff, postgraduates and undergraduates from both institutions participated, and Ronan was one of these. The opportunity to immerse himself in the non-Western city of Dar es Salaam was one Ronan relished, and I have vivid personal memories of spending many hours, especially in the evenings, with Ronan discussing and debating with Tanzanian colleagues issues related to the urban planning challenges of a rapidly growing city.

As a teacher, Ronan was unfailingly generous with his time for students. He enjoyed having students around, and he especially enjoyed stretching students to reach their full potential. Indeed, his commitment to students can be seen further by his role as, firstly, Advisor of Studies in the Faculty of Social Sciences (as it then was), and then, subsequently, as Chief Advisor. He undertook these roles for 23 years. Given everything else that he was doing, I have no idea where he found the time.

Given what has been written above about Ronan's commitment to teaching, and what is written elsewhere in this Special Issue on Ronan's research, writing, editing and postgraduate supervision, it may seem remarkable that Ronan had the time to make a major academic leadership contribution. He did, and it is to this that I now wish to turn.

One of the consequences of being in post for 38 years is that change and development in the department becomes intertwined with change and development in Ronan's career. Ronan was determinedly a departmental person and he was not only a witness to changes over that time, but a key player and leader in those changes. One of the earliest opportunities for Ronan to show leadership was a major revision of the Honours curriculum in the mid/late-1970s. The review was instigated by the newly-arrived Professor of Geography, Ian Thompson, who was appointed in 1975 from the University of Southampton. It may be an understatement to say that Ian was surprised by the huge teaching loads he found in the department and he very quickly put in place a review with the aim of streamlining the Honours curriculum and reducing teaching loads to create the time for staff to engage more fully and effectively in research performance. In particular, students at that time were required to do two Honours options in each of the Honours years, and each of these options was 120 hours in teaching length. Every staff member was expected to teach an option and some of the classes consisted of only half a dozen or so students (a typical Honours class at that time was about 25-30 students). In addition, Honours students were required to do two dissertations, one a Regional Study which was a geographical description and analysis of a 30 by 30 mile area/region of their choice, and the second was a Systematic Study which bore some resemblance to what might be understood as a dissertation these days. The reason behind this arrangement was that up until the early 1970s, it was not possible to do a single Honours degree in any subject in the Faculty of Arts, and at that time about 60-70 per cent of Geography students were registered in the then Faculty of Arts (this figure today is about 15-20 per cent), and the rest in the Faculty of Science. Departments got around this regulation by offering two degrees, in Geography's case, these two degrees were in Systematic Geography and Regional Geography, hence the need for two dissertations. Even though the Faculty of Arts had recently abolished this requirement, the Department of Geography had not yet taken the opportunity to reflect this change. This was Ronan's moment which he took with a couple of other like-minded colleagues.

The result of the review was that Honours students now had to do six 40-hour Option courses over the two Honours years, a physical geography core course and a human geography core

course in Junior Honours, and an advanced Seminar course and a dissertation of 10-12,000 words in Senior Honours. The two core courses in Junior Honours were replaced in the mid-1980s by Geographic Thought and Geographic Techniques. Although there have been modifications and changes, some of them very significant, over the intervening period, the fundamental structure of the Geography programme, although not its content (happily), is very similar to that developed by Ronan *et al* all those years ago.

It would, of course, be remiss not to mention Ronan's period as Head of Department from 1998 to 2002. The department by this time had become the Department of Geography and Topographic Science, soon to become the Department of Geography and Geomatics. Although Ronan was a willing candidate to become Head, and undertook the role with a calm authority, it was at times difficult for him, as he would admit from time to time. It did not help that he had a less than helpful Dean of Faculty who, bluntly, made life difficult for Ronan. That was where Ronan's calmness and unflappability served him, and the department, well. I can still remember a 'crisis' meeting called with the Dean, perhaps in the last year of Ronan's headship, which included Ronan and the then other three professors in the department. To say that there was no meeting of minds between the department and the Dean barely captures the mood of the meeting and tempers were frayed, but I clearly remember to this day Ronan's calmness whilst all around him were in danger of losing their heads. It was a delightfully typical Ronan performance.

However, although these two examples of Ronan's leadership, and there are plenty of others untold here, are important to the story, Ronan played a much longer-term game which became very much intertwined with the history and development of the department post-1986. To understand this involvement requires some context. The year 1986 was the first Research Selectivity Exercise, as it was then called, which subsequently became the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) and now the Research Excellence Framework (REF). This involved a 1-day visit to the department, and every other department in the UK, by an eminent subject specialist. On the basis of this one-day visit, every subject area in the UK was given a score of A*, A, B or C. Geography at Glasgow was given a C rating. It was one of only four geography departments in the UK to receive this rating, and, even more critically, it was one of only two departments in the University of Glasgow. Suddenly, Geography at Glasgow was extremely vulnerable and the hawks were definitely out and about.

It was against this background that Ronan and four other colleagues, all younger staff (or early career staff in today's parlance) decided to act, as much as anything to save our careers, as one of the Gang of Five so cheerfully put it at the time. There was a tinkering of the undergraduate curriculum, largely at first and second year level, but some at Honours as well, to reduce teaching loads. Two research groups were established to focus research activity and to encourage collaboration within the department, these being the Applied Population Research Unit and the Environment and Development Research Unit. Ronan's intellectual inputs to both units were invaluable. Two Master's programmes were set up, Applied Population Analysis and Regional Analysis, and both attracted a modest but steady stream of postgraduates into the department and resulted in an increase of the postgraduate research community.

In 1988, the department offered to host the annual IBG conference in Glasgow in 1990, at a time when the conference was held every January in a different host university in the UK. We recognised that this would be a huge amount of work, but saw the conference as an

opportunity to showcase geography at Glasgow, not only to the wider geography community in the UK, but also to the University of Glasgow management. Once again, Ronan was absolutely to the fore, and the conference was hugely successful, being the first IBG conference (or RGS-IBG conference as it is now) to exceed 1000 participants, the previous biggest up until then being 700.

Without doubt, the 1990 IBG conference in Glasgow was a major turning point for the department, and especially so within the University, and Ronan's role cannot be underestimated. The result was that the University started to invest again in the department, albeit modestly at first, and the first academic appointments for 11 years were made, with Jim Hansom, David Evans and Trevor Hoey, followed shortly by Paul Routledge, Jo Sharp and Chris Philo. The department was now becoming increasingly confident and was now moving forward, with Ronan continuing to be one of the leaders of its progress. He was involved, along with Chris Philo, Jo Sharp and Paul Routledge in organising another massively successful conference, the Entanglements of Power conference in the mid-1990s, which raised the profile of geography at Glasgow within the geography community, not just in the UK but internationally. It was another pivotal moment.

And so it went on into the 2000s until Ronan's retirement in 2010, with him continuing to play a central leadership role in the department's, now school's, progress and performance during that decade. The ultimate accolade came with the REF2014 outcome. Bearing in mind that in the first Research Selectivity Exercise in 1986, the Department of Geography had been at the bottom of the class, so to speak, in 2014 it had risen to be one of the top research departments in the UK, and in the quality of outputs section of the overall submission, it was top in the UK. It had been quite a journey over the 28 years from bottom to top, but let us be in no doubt that Ronan was one of the central players throughout with his leadership. There were many other players as well, as Ronan always acknowledged, but he was there from the grim days of the 1980s onwards cajoling, encouraging and leading. It has been a long road, but Ronan can rest easy in what he has achieved. There can be no finer tribute.

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