

Seán Dineen 1944-2024

MICHAEL MACKEY AND PAULINE MELLON



FIGURE 1. Seán Dineen, 1944-2024

Seán Dineen, Professor of Mathematics at University College Dublin from 1979 until his retirement in 2009, passed away on the 18th of January 2024. Seán was a member of the Royal Irish Academy, a Head of Department and Head of School at UCD and a founding member and former president of the Irish Mathematical Society. He was a renowned expert in infinite dimensional holomorphy and leaves behind a canon of work, including scholarly papers, research monographs and undergraduate textbooks.

Seán was married to Carol and they had two children, Deirdre and Stephen, three grandchildren and three great-grand children.

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In this article we attempt to paint a picture of the colourful character and life of Seán, treating not only his mathematics but also his contribution to the wider national and international academic community.

Seán was well-known in UCD, Ireland and beyond. He liked people and liked talking and his informal manner led to an easy rapport with many although he could be very resolute in arguments with those in authority. Like much about Seán, he was surprisingly deliberate in many of his approaches. He believed strongly in community, whether that was his community in Clonakilty (about which he wrote two books) or the UCD community (for example, his enthusiastic involvement with Erasmus students coming to UCD) or wider afield. He helped build a national mathematical community in the form of the Irish Mathematical Society (and its predecessor the Dublin Mathematical Group), of which he was a founding member and whose annual conferences he attended regularly, even in 2022 shortly after he had undergone major brain surgery. Indeed, the first of the IMS annual “September” meetings in 1988 took place during Seán’s term as IMS president.



FIGURE 2. Some of the founding members of the Irish Mathematical Society, on the society’s 40th anniversary in December 2016. L-R: Martin Newell, Ray Ryan, Seán, Ted Hurley, Tony O Farrell, Brendan Goldsmith, Tom Laffey, Peter Lynch and Murrough Golden.

Seán fostered an extensive international community of mathematicians with whom he maintained strong connections throughout his life. Some flew to Dublin to visit him not long before he died, knowing he was unwell. Others travelled for the funeral and many more watched it live from an analysis conference in Korea.

Seán played a large role in his local neighbourhood of Lakelands in Stillorgan, organising the publishing of a regular newsletter and campaigning to protect it during various local area developments. He reflected deeply on matters related to Irish education and corresponded with politicians regarding these. He was adept at negotiation and diplomacy, which by his own account he learned as a child on the streets of ‘Clon’: *“To organize ourselves for games, we children divided the town into natural regions and*

each area organized itself. These divisions were organized so that we had a balance between areas, none too powerful or dominant or too weak, otherwise why would we play one another? In all walks of life you have to have reasonable expectations of winning and fairness. All this natural training in negotiations and democracy went side by side with the skills we learned in sport, how to win, how to lose, how to play as a team and depend on one another, how to be patient and how to prepare."

On going through Seán's papers after his death, we were struck by the sheer meticulousness of his planning, scheduling and organisation. He often came across as spontaneous, even laid-back, but that was built on foundations of daily, monthly and yearly achievement lists. He described earlier in his writings how at secondary school *"I always gave my full concentration to my studies while I was studying and felt, when I completed a studies session, that I could then devote myself fully to my non-academic interests, and I have always had many of these, without any feeling of guilt. I have successfully followed this approach ever since."*

EARLY LIFE IN CLONAKILTY



FIGURE 3. A young Seán

Seán felt a special mixture of belonging and pride for his home place of Clonakilty, a small town in West Cork with a population in the 1950s of about 2,500 people. He took many mathematical visitors there over the years, bringing them to his family home on

Emmet Square and showing them the local sights. In his retirement speech in 2009, he began by describing his early years in ‘Clon’ in some detail. We take Seán’s lead in this obituary and borrow from his writings throughout.

Seán was born John Hugh Dineen on February 12, 1944 in Cork city, but from early on was known only as Seán. Shortly afterwards his family moved to Clonakilty. He was the eldest of six children born to Jeremiah Joseph Dineen and Margaret Jean Connaughton. Growing up in Clonakilty during the 1950s, Seán had a childhood that seemed ordinary to him at the time but that he realised later was quite special, *“Growing up one almost automatically assumes that everyone has a similar childhood and that while there are differences these are not important, more a matter of the luck of the draw.”* He described his household as close-knit, with himself and his siblings forming a “tribe” of sorts.

His father, a science graduate, taught mathematics, physics and chemistry, while his mother taught Irish and Commerce. Together they founded St. Mary’s College in 1938, a secondary school for boys, at a time when there was no second-level education for boys available in the town.

His father passed away when Seán was nine years old, leaving his mother to manage the school and raise the six children. His mother’s resilience and dedication left a lasting impression on him. She not only kept the school running but included her children in the decision-making process, something Seán believed fostered a key sense of responsibility and involvement in them from a young age. Seán recalled the challenges his mother faced, *“It was quite difficult for my mother to manage six children, be a full-time teacher, and manage a boys’ school.”* (The school was incorporated into a new community school in 1979.)

Every summer, Seán and his siblings would help their mother maintain the school building, formerly an old fever hospital. Painting the school was an annual task, and this hands-on involvement taught the importance of community effort from a young age.

The family home was a large old Georgian house with an AGA cooker but lacking central heating and television. He remembered the practical and communal nature of their life, saying, *“The boys all wore short pants, and the socks were all knitted locally and did not, like nowadays, stay up. This necessitated the use of elastic garters, which, if too tight, left red marks on their legs. The struggle for the best seats by the fire led to the creation of a democratic rota system, an early lesson in fairness and organization.”*

Seán described life in Clonakilty at the time as simple and self-contained. The community was small and everyone knew everyone in town. The children organized their own society with its rules and seasonal activities, from marbles to chestnut collecting. Reflecting on this, Seán remarked, *“It seems that subconsciously we all knew, like salmon swimming up river, when we should do things.”*

The social structure of the town was pronounced, with clear class distinctions, and Seán and his peers accepted these as the natural order of things. Despite the small-town limitations, they found moments of excitement and curiosity: *“Religion got very intense during the mission by the Redemptorists from Limerick. Us kids would wait with bated breath for the personal visit by the missionaries to the so-called hard cases, those who were noted for not having been inside for 20 years or who were fond of the drop and we followed such sagas like people watch soap operas nowadays, would he go to mass, would he take the pledge, how long would it last?”*

In his writings, Seán recalled his upbringing with a blend of nostalgia and recognition of the profound impact it had on his life. His years in Clonakilty were marked by family support, a strong sense of community, and the challenges and joys of growing up in a small town in West Cork. These formative experiences shaped the man who would go on to have a distinguished career in mathematics.

PRIMARY AND SECOND LEVEL EDUCATION

Seán describes his father's early influence: *"When we children had childhood diseases such as measles and chicken-pox he would distract us by writing out pages and pages of sums and making some sort of game out of us children doing them."* He also said, *"I'm not precisely sure when I became interested in mathematics but by the time I was twelve I was interested. The fact that I found mathematics honest and easy helped."* Seán said of his primary school teacher, Con O'Ruairc. *"Mr. O'Ruairc had a unique way of teaching maths, especially mental arithmetic, which involved solving problems without pen and paper."* Seán remarked, *"I found, then and ever since, that once one managed to firmly embed a mathematical idea or problem in the mind, it was effortlessly carried out and insight gradually appeared."*

In primary school, Seán's sixth class classroom was shared with the "seventh class" students - those too young to legally leave school but who had already completed the official sixth class. This arrangement gave Seán an early exposure to algebra. He vividly recalled how Mr. O'Ruairc taught them to add, subtract, multiply, and divide polynomials.

After three years of second-level education at St. Mary's in Clonakilty, Seán's mother decided he should attend a boarding school to prepare for the Leaving Certificate, since St. Mary's then lacked a higher-level science teacher.

Seán went to Cistercian College Roscrea. Roscrea was a big shift for him. One of the most influential figures during this period was Fr. Emmanuel, nicknamed "Rubber" for his frequent command to *"rub it out"* whenever student work was unsatisfactory. Seán's favourite subjects at Roscrea were mathematics, applied mathematics, and English. Fr. Emmanuel introduced him to calculus, which he found fascinating and straightforward. Applied Mathematics, taught by Jack Murphy, and English, under Gus Martin (who later became Professor of English at UCD) also left lasting impressions on Seán.

BSC AND MSc AT UNIVERSITY COLLEGE CORK

Seán entered UCC to study mathematics in 1961. He enjoyed his time there amongst a strong cohort of mathematicians. His influences included books by Cantor on his theory of transfinite numbers, and by Bromwich and Dienes on infinite series, and the excellent classroom notes on analysis given by Paddy Kennedy. He described a Hamilton-esque moment, probably shared by many mathematics students, when struggling with the notion of \mathbb{R}^4 *"...as I walked down the stairs I suddenly realised and almost fell as it hit me that dimension was a mathematical and not a physical concept and that mathematics had this tremendous freedom to use concepts anywhere and anyhow it wished, provided the rules of mathematics were followed"*.

Seán continued in UCC for his MSc in 1964-1965 when he also acted as tutor to some of the undergraduate classes. He augmented his academic activities with organising student dances and acting as secretary to the student union. He had decided to do a PhD which, by default at that time, meant travelling abroad. Better financial support, and climate, meant that he accepted an offer to study at the University of Maryland.

The first week of September 1965 was a seminal one for Seán. He and several others from UCC travelled to Dublin to take the NUI exams for the MSc which also served as the examination for the travelling studentship. Staying in Gardiner Street, the roars from Croke Park for the All-Ireland hurling final on the Sunday could be heard as they tried to study for Monday's exams. This was trying for Seán who had lined out for the UCC hurling team earlier that summer, but it certainly would have been worse had Cork been playing.¹ At the end of that week, Seán travelled to America.

¹Tipperary defeated Wexford in the 1965 final.

PHD AT MARYLAND, USA AND RIO DE JANEIRO, BRAZIL

Seán's first night in the US in College Park, Maryland was spent in a police cell - after an officer took pity on him as he was too late to find somewhere else to sleep.

Maryland was a different scale to anything back home with some 250 graduate students in mathematics. The first two years of graduate training were mainly course work and reading, but there was a competitive element as well as students tried to secure a place with a thesis supervisor in their favoured area. Seán thrived academically, aided by the financial independence gained after being awarded the NUI Travelling Studentship in addition to his teaching assistantship at Maryland.

Seán met Carol Newbrough, a student of English and Education, at a friend's party, where they discovered that they lived in different apartments in the same house. They were married in December 1967 (and remained so until Carol passed away in 2021).

Seán was introduced to the work of Leopold Nachbin through a fellow overseas student, Tom Dwyer (who, in spite of the name, was Brazilian). Nachbin divided his time between his home institute, Instituto de Mathematica Pura e Applicada (IMPA) in Rio de Janeiro and the University of Rochester. Seán wrote to Nachbin saying he would like to work under his direction and would transfer to Rochester to facilitate this. Maryland professor, John Horvath, provided a letter of reference. Nachbin's suggestion was instead that Seán continue his registration in Maryland, with John Horvath as his official supervisor, but come to IMPA to work on his thesis. Nachbin was also able to arrange a teaching assistant position. This suited Seán except for the fact that his NUI Travelling Studentship precluded this employment. Seán dutifully wrote a letter to the NUI Senate explaining his intention to return home to Ireland to teach once his studies were finished and how the teaching assistant position would be of benefit in this regard. He eventually received in reply a formal typed letter advising that the Senate of the NUI had discussed the matter at great length and agreed that he could teach mathematics in Rio de Janeiro. Beneath the typed letter there was an unsigned scribbled note which said "*If this situation arises again, don't tell us about it.*" It is probably true that thereafter Seán took a slightly looser interpretation of academic rules and procedures.

Seán went to Rio in 1967 and began working under the guidance of Leopold Nachbin on infinite dimensional holomorphy, more specifically, on topologies on spaces of holomorphic functions over locally convex spaces. He returned to the US in February 1968 where his daughter Deirdre was born, after which the young family moved to Rio. Seán's PhD thesis entitled 'Holomorphy Types on a Banach Space' was submitted to the University of Maryland in June 1969 (incidentally his only publication under the name of John Hugh Dineen). He then spent the following year as an instructor at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore.

DUBLIN INSTITUTE FOR ADVANCED STUDIES

From 1970 to 1972, Seán worked at the Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies (DIAS) in the School of Theoretical Physics. He believed he landed the job because Professor McConnell thought his work on nuclear polynomials was related to Nuclear Physics, thanks to Grothendieck's terminology. DIAS, located then in Merrion Square, was an interesting and lively place. Seán recalled, "*The square itself was a private park in those days and we all had our own key to go in and play tennis and have our lunch there as we wished.*" During his time there, he interacted with staff, such as Synge, Lanczos, and O'Raikeartaigh.

UCD IN THE 1970S

Seán joined UCD in 1972. Irish universities were transitioning to a modern research culture at the time and relied on the energy and expertise of new staff returning from PhDs abroad. Seán recalled, “*Maurice Kennedy felt that teaching was the top priority but also wanted research done.*” This led to evening seminars on operator theory with colleagues, followed by social gatherings at McCluskey’s pub. These activities created a collaborative academic environment. In 1974, Seán was awarded a D.Sc. from the National University of Ireland for his published work.

Despite limited funding, Seán’s connections with international mathematicians, like those from Nachbin’s group in Brazil, helped to build a solid foundation for future growth in the department. One international collaborator wrote “*We were comrades in the early 70s when we struggled to become mathematicians researching in a new field and supporting each other by many letters and several meetings.*” Another colleague recalls “*I think I was most impressed by the numbers of visitors he had. This seemed to be entirely new for UCD. Trinity could offer accommodation to visitors... but finding money for visitors in UCD required Seán’s talent.*” It was not only Seán and those in Analysis whose research programme benefitted from these visits. For example, Tom Laffey credits Seán for suggesting a swap arrangement whereby Tom Dwyer visited UCD from Northern Illinois University for a year, while Tom Laffey spent the year working with the strong algebra group in Illinois. Tom (Laffey) said he was delighted to avail of this opportunity and that it greatly helped his career.

Seán became a professor in 1979 and held the Chair in Analysis. The story of his appointment is a colourful one, which he told at his retirement. Suffice to say, the rule ‘no canvassing’ came shortly afterwards! Seán recalled, “*The whole process took 3 months, every day going to see people, making a lot of phone calls, and at the same time teaching.*” He even remembered trying to explain his research to a veterinary professor who was giving a horse an injection at the time!

UCD IN THE 1980S, 90S AND BEYOND

During the 1980s Seán taught first-year, final year honours and MSc courses, including several engineering courses. He collaborated with Richard Timoney then at TCD on the topic of Bounded Symmetric Domains, a research interest sparked by a course (given by Wilhelm Kaup) that Seán had attended in Rio in 1978. This collaboration lasted for 12 years and produced 11 research papers. Seán was elected a member of the Royal Irish Academy in 1984.

In the 1990s, Seán contributed to developing the Erasmus exchange program in UCD, bringing many students from Europe to UCD. He noted that these students raised the standard and the atmosphere in the department. He also helped create the Mathematical Studies degree in Arts, which became important for teacher training. He was instrumental in ensuring that the Economics and Finance degree had a strong and rigorous mathematical content that challenged its students. His work in tailoring mathematics for these different student cohorts led to three undergraduate textbooks.

Seán served as Head of the Department of Mathematics at UCD from 1982 to 1986 and again from 1990 to 1994. He later served as Head of the School of Mathematical Sciences from 2006 to 2009. He also served on UCD’s governing authority where he fought hard for academic integrity in a changing university landscape. He retired in 2009 and this was marked with a conference attended by over 80 people from all over the world.



FIGURE 4. Seán's UCD retirement conference in 2009.

RESEARCH ACHIEVEMENTS

Seán's research approach emphasized collaboration and support and while he would advocate strongly for his own area of research he expected others to do likewise. He asked one slightly confused new postgraduate in the department "*So, are you studying maths or algebra?*". Seán strongly believed in creating an expansive mathematical community, stating "*None of this is possible without the support and interest of local academic colleagues*".

In the 1970s and 80s Seán, with several of his academic colleagues, worked to deepen the mathematical research culture at UCD. He collaborated with and hosted many international scholars, from Brazil, Spain, the US, Japan and elsewhere. He prioritised the development of a PhD programme in the department. His efforts contributed to a very active research atmosphere despite limited resources. He emphasized, "*We had very little money here at the time, but you don't need very much to do mathematics*". "Very little" might well have been none were it not for a scheme of producing problem books containing exercises for all modules for sale to students.

Seán's research interests were broad, including Infinite Dimensional Holomorphy, Functional Analysis, Complex Analysis, Jordan Triple Systems, Spectral Theory, Geometry of Bounded Symmetric Domains, Probability Theory, Financial Mathematics, History of Mathematics, and Mathematical Education. He collaborated with 40 co-authors from all over the world. His 540 page book "*Complex Analysis on Infinite Dimensional Spaces*" in the Springer Monograph series is a standard reference in the area with currently over 650 citations.

Seán organized regular seminars and was adept at encouraging others to speak. With Richard Timoney he co-organised and ran the UCD-TCD Analysis seminar series for close to three decades. Seán himself gave 126 research seminars in Dublin in the period 1972-2015, even maintaining a list of all his seminar titles. He organised several major conferences in Dublin during his career. It was remarkable to discover his detailed records of a holomorphy meeting organised in Dublin in 1978 and the volume of handwritten letters exchanged in organising a meeting in those pre-digital days. The



FIGURE 5. Conference uniform in Fukuoka Japan, 1999.

advent of email meant that the next large meeting in 1994 was somewhat easier to organise, although Seán still drove the conference bus! UCD changed its policy on staff requisition of university vehicles shortly after that.

Between conferences and invited lectures he records his attendance at 209 events from 1969 to 2015, mostly abroad. He also gave 15 intensive research courses over the period 1971-2000 ranging in length from 3 to 15 lectures, including five different courses at Universidade Federal Do Rio de Janeiro, three in Coimbra, three in UCD and one each in Cork, Wuppertal, Madrid and Kent State.



FIGURE 6. Ray Ryan, Seán and Pauline Mellon in 2018.

Publications. Since 1970 Seán published over 120 research articles in international mathematics journals, working with 40 co-authors. These papers are detailed below in the appendix listing his published work. His most productive collaboration was with Richard Timoney with whom he published 11 papers. Poignantly, one of Seán's last mathematical publications was his obituary for Richard that appeared in Issue No. 83 of the Bulletin.

PhD Students. Seán supervised 11 Ph.D. students (and more than 20 MSc students):

Paul Berner (1974, University of Rochester, co-supervisor Leopoldo Nachbin)
 Raymundo Alencar (1982, Universidade de São Paulo, co-supervisor Jorge Mujica)
 Thomas Barton (1984, Kent State University, co-supervisor Joe Diestel)
 Fergus Gaughran (1990, UCD)
 Pauline Mellon (1990, UCD)
 Christopher Boyd (1992, UCD)
 Ciaran Taylor (2000, UCD)
 Milena Venkova (2001, UCD)
 Pablo Sevilla Peris (2001, Universitat de Valecia, co-supervisor Domingo Garcia Rodriguez and Manuel Maestre Vera)
 Adriano Lima Aguiar (2003, UFRJ, co-supervisor Luiza Moraes)
 Cristina Radu (2008, UCD).

Books.

Complex Analysis on Locally Convex Spaces, North Holland Mathematical Studies Vol. 57 (1981)
The Schwarz Lemma, Oxford University Press (1989)
Functions of Two Variables, Chapman and Hall (1995)
Multivariate Calculus and Geometry, Springer Verlag (1998)
Complex Analysis on Infinite Dimensional Spaces, Springer Verlag Monographs in Mathematics (1999)
Probability Theory in Finance—A Mathematical Guide to the Black-Scholes Formula, American Mathematical Society (2005)
 Co-edited *Vector Space Measures and Applications I and II*, Springer Verlag Lecture Notes in Mathematics (1977)
 Co-edited *Functional Analysis Proceedings of the First Trier Workshop on Frechet Spaces*, Functional Analysis de Gruyter (1994)

In addition to the texts above on mathematics, Seán also published *Tres problemas en Analisis Infinite Dimensional*, Publicaciones del Universidad de Santiago de Compostela, Spain (1979). He also self-published two non-mathematical texts centered around Clonakilty; one "*Stones in the Wood*" was a book of (mostly) fictional short stories while "*The Texture of West Cork*" described the history, make-up and uniqueness of the place he called home.

TEACHING

Seán believed that first-year teaching sets the standard for later years and helps students develop perseverance. He stated, "*We have students who become enthused by maths when they are pushed.*" One example he shared was an economics and finance student who became so engaged with maths in first year that he pursued a higher diploma in the subject. Seán also highlighted the importance of communicating effectively, recalling his advisor, Nachbin's words: "*You could prove Fermat's Last Theorem*

in your bathroom, but if you didn't tell anyone, nobody would know. You have to communicate it." His approach was to challenge students and foster a genuine interest in mathematics. He was generous with his time and supportive of students at any level who were struggling with mathematics. He happily gave his time to children of friends and neighbours who needed help in their school mathematics and this led to an interest in the secondary level mathematics curriculum and serving on a national committee for its review. He was an active and highly effective lobbyist for the introduction of bonus points for mathematics and changed the minds of several politicians and university administrators on this issue. He was awarded a President's Teaching Award from UCD in 2002.

A defining characteristic of Seán's approach was that he was interested in all students, unlike many mathematicians interested only in stronger students. Students seemed able to sniff out his innate sense of decency and he advocated for many who found themselves academically tripped up for whatever reason. When Irish comedian Dara Ó'Briain was honoured as the recipient of the 2021 Maths Week Ireland Award for his contribution to raising public awareness of maths, he dedicated the award to Seán. It might tickle Dara to know that (years prior to Dara's gesture) as a minor act of protest at the commercial nature of the university naming its new buildings after wealthy sponsors, Seán, in one of his research articles, deliberately gave his address as the Dara Ó'Briain Centre for Science rather than the (Denis) O'Brien Centre for Science. Seán had a chuckle showing us that. (See *Studia Mathematica* 222 (1) (2014) 'Distances between Hilbertian operator spaces' by Seán Dineen (Dublin) and Cristina Radu (Rio de Janeiro).)

While Seán was renowned for his mathematics across the world, any chat with mathematicians who had visited here inevitably steered towards stories of his driving, or his smoking, or his smoking while driving. He was unfailingly generous though in driving his increasingly apprehensive mathematical visitors to and from the airport. Indeed one who came for his funeral mentioned that Seán had collected and dropped him back to the airport on something like 17 visits. Seán had a flexible interpretation of most rules of the road (including one-way road signs) and considered several feet out from the footpath a perfectly good place to park. One former student wrote on his passing that *"Seán encouraged and supported my PhD work with wit, deep insight, and friendship. He even loaned me his car on one occasion, my first ever attempt to drive on the left side of the road (it was not entirely disastrous). I recall his advice to me about it: you only need to watch out for what is in front of you. You'll be to the front of other drivers who are behind you or to your side, so no need to worry about them! Logical, a bit irreverent, and a reminder to not take things too seriously. That was just like him."* Seán didn't always call it right though. He was the last to hold out against UCD's no-smoking rules introduced in the 1990s, to the particular chagrin of David Tipple in the maths department who was vehemently anti-smoking. When caught smoking once again by an irate UCD porter who demanded his name, Sean mischievously answered "I'm David Tipple".

Shortly before he died, Seán described himself as a problem-solver. That was certainly true in the realm of pure mathematics but it was also true for many other aspects of his life. On the wet blustery day of Seán's funeral in Clonakilty, a woman told the story of how some years earlier Seán had 'gotten' a mortgage for her, when even she admitted that no sensible institution would consider lending to her, by arranging that she meet a *"fellow in a pub one evening"* (the fellow being a former student of Seán's who worked in banking). That sense of community that Seán attributed to his childhood growing up in 'Clon' was something that he cultivated to full effect in both his mathematical and his non-mathematical life.

Ní fheicimid a leithéid arís. Ar dheis Dé go raibh a hanam.

PUBLISHED WORK OF SEÁN DINEEN

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The authors were colleagues of Seán Dineen at UCD.

(Both authors) SCHOOL OF MATHEMATICS AND STATISTICS UCD DUBLIN

E-mail address, M. Mackey: mackey@maths.ucd.ie

E-mail address, P. Mellon: pauline.mellon@ucd.ie