De Lacy, Hugh

by Jim Cooke

De Lacy, Hugh (1916–2010), educationalist, was born Laurence Hugh de Lacey on 2 June 1916 in San Francisco, the elder of two sons of Laurence (Larry) de Lacey (qv) (the spelling Lacy was later adopted by Hugh), a journalist and revolutionary from Enniscorthy, Co. Wexford, and his wife Mary (née Hayes), also from Enniscorthy. He was a nephew of Michael de Lacey and of Stephen Hayes (qv), both prominent Irish revolutionaries. His father, Larry, had fled to America in 1915 and began agitating for the Irish republican cause in San Francisco under the direction of John Devoy (qv). The family returned to Enniscorthy in 1925, where Larry resumed working as a newspaper journalist.

Hugh's primary education was completed in Enniscorthy. His secondary education was spread across Ireland, as his father edited various local newspapers and worked in Dublin for a time as a sub-editor for the Irish Times. In 1934 Hugh sat his leaving certificate exams, as a pupil at the O'Connell School, Dublin. After matriculation to the National University of Ireland, he studied engineering in UCD, graduating with a BE in mechanical and electrical engineering (1938) and a B.Sc. (1940) and later became a Fellow of the Institution of Electrical Engineers. Working as a demonstrator in the Royal College of Science (UCD) for a couple of years, he then spent a brief period working for the ESB and RÉ before joining the staff of Kevin Street College as a full-time lecturer in 1944. He had been an occasional part-time lecturer in Kevin Street since 1940.

In 1958 he was appointed to the twenty-member commission, chaired by the high court judge, George D. Murnaghan, to investigate the feasibility of establishing an Irish television station financed and run by a private company under a public authority. In its 1959 report the commission advised in favour of such a system. Of the six private syndicates vying to run the new station, de Lacy, along with Murnaghan and four other commissioners, considered the bid by Britain's Granada Television to be the best, but most of the commission disagreed. He suspected this was due to prejudice against the head of Granada, Sidney Bernstein, who was Jewish. The government circumvented this controversy by ignoring the commission's main recommendation and instead establishing a fully state-controlled and underwritten television broadcaster.

In a dissenting minority report to the television commission's 1959 report, de Lacy and Terence Farrell, president of the Congress of Irish Unions, had argued against adopting the 405-line standard, noting that the 625-line standard gave a better picture, especially for colour, and was used everywhere other than by the BBC. They stated: 'To adopt the 405 line system will commit Ireland to a social, cultural and political bondage to Britain and will cut off all possibility of communication with all
countries throughout the world using the 625 line system' ('Report of the television commission, reservation no. 2: reservation in respect of line standard', 53). The 405-line standard was adopted, but the BBC soon after upgraded to colour and the 625-line standard; when Dublin hosted the 1971 Eurovision song contest, Ireland, too, adopted the 625-line standard. In the late 1950s de Lacy also acted as arbitrator in a long-running dispute in the Dublin Gas Company. He engaged in work experience, including shovelling coal, to enable him to make his decision: his recommendations were accepted.

Appointed assistant principal of Kevin Street College in 1956, he became principal in 1963. As principal he modelled the Kevin Street College on the world-renowned Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT). A visit to MIT in the late 1950s had imbued de Lacy with its academic ethos of conjoint technology, humanities and physical/recreational modules. No advocate of narrow vocationalism, he believed strongly that the college should be responsible for its own academic standards. He was unwavering in pursuit of his academic vision and worked long hours in modernising and expanding Kevin Street, becoming noted within the educational sector for his eschewal of foreign junkets.

He influenced the design and oversaw the construction of the new building (1963–8) for Kevin Street College, capable of accommodating over 2,000 students, which incorporated new specialist laboratories for science and engineering, facilities for a bakery school, a large galleried concert hall and an eighteen-metre swimming pool, with a gymnasium above it. Fitting the building with coaxial cable, he set up a radio engineering and television technician courses, signalling the introduction of a range of technician courses in the technological colleges, responding to a need in industry. As in MIT, the curriculum obligated students to combine a foreign language and a business module with their technical subjects. Controversy arose when he refused to allow any leeway when two students on the optician course passed their technical examinations but failed the modern language module. They appealed this decision to the City of Dublin Vocational Educational Committee (CDVEC) before de Lacy prevailed.

In 1968 he was appointed by the government as one of the founding members of the ad hoc Higher Education Authority (HEA), later firmly established under the HEA Act 1971. As such he was involved in setting up proposed new technological institutes in Limerick and Dublin and lobbied for the transfer of the six CDVEC-affiliated colleges (including Kevin Street) into a new Dublin College, sited in Glasnevin. The Glasnevin scheme, generally known as the 'Ballymun project', was aborted, but the Limerick Institute, which he ensured operated substantially along MIT lines, opened in 1972. It was at his suggestion that the minister for education, Brian Lenihan (qv), initiated the creation in 1968 of a National Council for Educational Awards (NCEA) as a means of awarding degrees to the new college in Limerick. Yet he caused a major row by refusing to allow the NCEA to validate Kevin Street courses, arguing his college did
not need external validation. The only CDVEC college not to seek NCEA validation, Kevin Street issued its own certificates and diplomas from 1968.

Through his work on the HEA, de Lacy became friendly with William Wright (qv), professor of engineering at TCD, who was then concerned that, because of its relatively low student numbers, the TCD faculty would be amalgamated with UCD's engineering faculty. De Lacy, Wright and the provost of TCD, Albert Joseph McConnell (qv) saw that a mutual benefit could accrue and so an important collaboration began whereby TCD would award an engineering degree to the degree-level diploma students of the colleges. This arrangement gave a prestigious degree to CDVEC graduates, while TCD now had a much larger engineering faculty.

When CDVEC students of the classes of 1974/5 were about to graduate with a degree from the NCEA, then minister for education, Richard Burke (1932–2016), withdrew the degree awarding powers of the NCEA, leaving the students in limbo. TCD then expedited its negotiations and preparations with CDVEC and awarded its first set of degrees, B.Sc. (Engineering) to these CDVEC classes. Thereafter many other students of other faculties were accommodated by joint TCD and CDVEC syllabus and examinations committees, moderated by rigorous external examiners, functioning to 'recognise' (rather than 'validate') the awarding of TCD degrees. This widespread cooperation between CDVEC and TCD led in 1978 to the non-statutory founding of the Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT) – a federation of Dublin's five technical colleges – with de Lacy as its first director and chair of the executive council of DIT.

He retired as principal of Kevin Street College in 1982, having radically increased the scale, range and sophistication of its activities. By then the DIT colleges were on track to achieve further development and cohesion, and this denouement was realised in 2018 when all the six DIT colleges, with technological university status, 'TU Dublin' moved to the seventy-acre Grangegorman campus, close to the city centre. De Lacy was awarded an Honorary Fellowship of the DIT in 2004.

He had great knowledge and love for all things German, including both language and wine, and was a founder member and past president of the Kevin Street Golf Society, which subsequently became the DIT Golf Society. In 1944 he married his cousin Maura de Lacey, daughter of Michael de Lacey and Maire (née Kenny). They had two daughters before separating. After his first wife's death, he married in 1997 his former Kevin Street work colleague, Moira O'Donovan, originally from Donnybrook, Dublin. She was principal officer of the CDVEC (1980–97). Living latterly in Stillorgan, Co. Dublin, he died on 2 July 2010 in the Blackrock Clinic, Dublin, and was buried in Deansgrange cemetery, Co. Dublin.