

Launch of the Irish Science Teachers Association 50th Annual Conference

Science Gallery

Trinity College Dublin

20 April 2012

Lord Mayor, Distinguished Guests, Ladies, & Gentlemen - Welcome to the Science Gallery and to Trinity College for ISTA's 50th Annual Conference.

This week is a special week in the College – we call it “Trinity Week”, and it begins on Trinity Monday with the announcement of the new Fellows and Scholars, and with the traditional Trinity Monday discourse. This year the discourse was on Ernest Walton because, I don't need to tell you, this is the 80th anniversary of the splitting of the atom by Walton and his Cambridge colleagues in 1932, for which they won the Nobel Prize in Physics.



Ernest Walton was a Trinity scholar – which means he excelled in a very rigorous undergraduate exam and was, as a result, given rooms in College and a grant. This year we had 103 scholars, which was a record number.

It is a wonderful coincidence of dates that ISTA's 50th anniversary should coincide with Walton's anniversary and with Dublin being designated European City of Science. I don't know if you realised that this very special anniversary conference was also going to coincide with the Trinity Ball, but I hope you will take as a good omen the euphoria and positivity which will very shortly be emanating from campus – hopefully not so loud that it will disrupt these proceedings!

ISTA, as much as any other organisation in this country, has done so much to promote the importance of science. I know how much you must all welcome this flagship gallery, which allows children of all ages, and indeed adults, to experience, tangibly, not only the magic of science itself, but art and science – where “art and science collide”, as we often say.

I know how truly delighted Walton would have been. He was fortunate to encounter excellent science teaching in his school, the Methodist College, Belfast, and was all his life a strong advocate of science education. Indeed he was actively involved with ISTA.

The Science Gallery is just one of the recent beacons proclaiming Trinity's commitment to science. Others include CRANN (the Centre for Research on Adaptive Nanostructures and Nanodevices), TCIN (the Trinity College Institute of Neuroscience), CTVR – Trinity's Telecommunications Institute, and our new Trinity Biomedical Sciences Institute, recently opened close by here on Pearse Street.

Trinity is proud of all its research, but there's no doubt that some of our strongest research - and certainly that which makes global headlines – is in science, in areas like nanoscience, neuroscience, molecular medicine, bioengineering, immunology, and telecommunications.

Recent exciting developments include for instance CRANN researchers working on technology that could create the flattest screen ever, using a new material, a transparent conducting oxide, which will allow the creation of completely see-through screens. There's also CRANN's recent investment from a British firm for the industrial production of grapheme, which is 200 times stronger than steel but 100,000 thinner than human hair. Then there are our immunologists' discoveries into cellular changes linked to allergies, and our ocular geneticists' research into ways of preventing macular degeneration.

These are just a few of the exciting advances being worked on here – and in other institutions, because of course we very much favour research collaborations with other universities and with industry. You will have an opportunity to hear about some of this research during the conference from the experts in their fields.

I know how hard you've worked to instill a real interest in science into your students – and with some success. The latest CAO figures reveal an 18 percent increase in applications for higher degree courses in science. In some Trinity courses, such as chemistry and earth science, the increase is over 40 percent. We are pleased to see this of course, but we do recognize the need to meet increased demand for our courses with more places and opportunities funded to ensure quality of provision.

You have laid such a strong foundation for science in your students, I want you to feel the utmost confidence that if – or when – they come to Trinity, they will be nurtured and developed to their fullest potential, and not only in the lecture room and laboratory, but outside the classroom in volunteering activities and in clubs and societies, which are more than just leisure activities but learning activities. Among the extracurricular societies of interest to science students are: the Biochemical Society, the Botany Society, the Biological Society, the Genetical Society, the Science Management Society, the Microbiological Society, the Neuroscience Society, the Zoological Society... Or students may simply prefer to join the Science Fiction society. You will have been given an interesting Yearbook at registration which has just been published by the students to showcase the scale of their societies' activities.

I know that we both want the same things for our students – that they have an intellectually stimulating and personally rewarding university experience, and that they then contribute to society. So I hope we can continue to work together fruitfully – for the good of individual students and of society as a whole. The economy can only benefit from an influx of highly educated scientists, taking leading roles in global research.

ISTA is fifty years old and can be very proud of its success. I wish you every continued success for the future and I thank you for all you have done and continue to do for science in Ireland.

I know you will enjoy the conference because I've seen the programme. I hope, if you're not too put off by the inevitable post-Trinity Ball debris, that you'll take time to visit the campus tomorrow. I recommend particularly the Old Library, which celebrates its tercentenary this year.

Thank you very much.

Provost Patrick Prendergast.