After completing a doctorate in Sussex University under the supervision of Walter Ledermann, Thomas Laffey joined the Mathematics Department of University College Dublin in 1968 and has remained there since. He served two terms as head of department (1986-90 and 1996-99). His principal research interests are in algebra, particularly in finite group theory and algebraic linear algebra.

He was the founding editor of the Newsletter (now Bulletin) of the Irish Mathematical Society and is currently one of the two editors of the Mathematical Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy and a member of the editorial board of three other journals.

<div style="border:1px solid blue; padding:1em; text-align:center;">

GALLERY

</div>

José Joaquim Dionísio

Professor J. J. Dionísio was for years almost a legend to me. If my memory serves me right, I started hearing about him around 1957 or 58, and later I studied carefully some of his articles in the field of Linear Algebra. It was a time when mathematical research was almost unknown in Portugal, so to read papers by one of the few Portuguese active researchers was a stimulus to my imagination. I believe it was only in 1970 that I met him for the first time, at the School of Sciences, Lisbon University.

Prof. Dionísio was an assistant at Coimbra University, where he received his doctorate in 1954, and he moved to the University of Lisbon in 1956, where he stayed for the rest of his career.

Prof. Dionísio was one of the people who had a large influence on my own scientific career. Another one was Prof. Luís de Albuquerque, with whom I was in close contact since my student days. It was through him that I received the influence of J. Dionísio, then unknown to me. Luís de Albuquerque had been his friend for a long time, and he often talked to me about Dionísio's work, which I studied long before I met him for the first time.

As a professor, Dionísio taught courses in several areas. In research, he worked mainly in Linear Algebra, although he published articles in other fields in Portuguese journals. He was a cultivated man. He gave particular attention to the History of Mathematics, teaching a course on it and contributing to the Biographic Dictionary of Authors.

I had the opportunity to be in close contact with him in the periods 1972-75 and 1984-89, when I was his colleague at the School of Sciences, Lisbon University.

Perhaps the most remarkable aspect to which I can bear witness is his influence, unknown to many, on the Portuguese Linear Algebra group. Although indirect, this influence was important.

When I graduated, I knew two people interested in Linear Algebra: Dionísio and Albuquerque.

José Joaquim Dionísio

I never knew which of them was the first to have this interest, nor their mutual influence nor even why they chose the field. I asked Prof. Albuquerque, who, as far as I can remember, did not give a complete answer, and I believe his interest in the subject came about more or less by chance. He may have become curious about matrices during his undergraduate studies. A few years after his doctorate, Albuquerque spent a year in Germany, where he studied stochastic processes. I remember him talking a lot about stochastic matrices.

Again I recall that, at the time, the situation in Portugal concerning research was backwards, very different from today. Research was seldom mentioned, or it was described as something mysterious. It is impossible to understand what was done then without first recalling the university atmosphere.

Since then, everything changed a lot, and today Portugal has an important Linear Algebra School, with groups working in several universities. Some people think I started this, but the initiators were actually Profs. Dionísio and Albuquerque. I played a role because I was clever to make the right choice for the year of my birth. Thanks to that, my role was to serve as a bridge between Dionísio and Albuquerque and the generation after me (I do not mention any names, so as not to hurt anyone: if this happened it would be solely my fault, as I am no longer following their large research output).

As I said before, it is impossible to understand what is done without understanding the time in which one lives. By today's criteria, what counts to be recognized as a mathematician is the number of publications and the quality attributed to the journals in which they appear. Journal quality is measured by the quality of published papers and vice versa. This is a vicious circle that mathematicians, not usually fond of vicious reasoning, strangely accept very well! By these criteria, or even by the international standards of the time in which they lived, the work of the two mathematicians we are referring to will, no doubt, be far from the first places in any kind of ranking. In truth, it is my judgement that neither of them discovered any important theorems. Nevertheless, they had a very important influence that lasted longer than their lives.

In those times, the Portuguese university did not have doctoral programmes (even today, by European standards, the situation is not bright) and the very notion of a supervisor did not exist. If it weren't like that, one could say that Prof. Luís de Albuquerque was my supervisor and Prof. Dionísio was a kind of indirect supervisor, and unaware of it. I corresponded with the former for many years, especially before my doctorate and during absences fom Coimbra. But not so with the latter, since Prof. Dionísio was not in the habit of answering letters. I wrote to him twice before meeting him. The first time was in 1966, asking him for advice on my doctoral studies and on a place to pursue them. My second letter to him was sent around three years later, with an invitation for him to give a talk at a small meeting I organized in Coimbra in September 1969. He didn't answer either of them. I don't know why. Maybe he found writing difficult, much as I do writing the present article.

Speaking about indirect influences, and the assessing of CV's by counting research papers, I mention another significant and little known episode. I must mention a third person who had great influence on Linear Algebra research in Portugal, probably without ever becoming aware of that. That person was Leon Mirsky. I never talked with him but we corresponded a lot. Once I went to look for him at his university, in Sheffield, but unfortunately he was away. In another occasion I saw him but did not talk to him, and I still regret this. He was giving a talk in Oxford and I was in the audience. I was very young and was too shy to address him. Well, L. Mirsky published a paper (Inequalities and Existence Theorems in the Theory of Matrices) which was expository, precisely the kind of paper that nowadays is not highly valued, not for lack of quality but because it contains no new results, even if the journal had a good ranking. That paper, which I studied carefully, discussed a range of open problems. It was a great source of inspiration, with many consequences. In fact, many papers came to be published, by me but especially by others after me, which had their roots in that work of Mirsky. That explains why the word 'prescribed' appears so often in those papers. I even believe that, without the inspiration of Mirsky's paper, the Sá-Thompson interlacing inequalities (one of the most remarkable results in Linear Algebra, whose full consequences are still to be discovered) would not have been found.

When talking about the Portuguese Linear Algebra school, the names of L. Albuquerque and J. Dionísio should always be remembered. And the name of L. Mirsky as well. I think that, of the three, only L. Albuquerque was aware of his influence.

Graciano de Oliveira