

## LIBRARIES AND REVOLUTION IN IRELAND

Good afternoon, Ladies and Gentlemen. This afternoon I will speak on Libraries and Revolution in Ireland. At first glance the topic of my talk may seem either arcane or stereotypical – either a reclusive researcher’s pet subject or a jaded speaker’s glib contribution to an annual conference. I hope it is neither; and that what I may say has relevance to all of us who work in an independent subscription library.

Most of the libraries which comprise the Association of Independent Libraries were founded around the late 18<sup>th</sup> century or early 19<sup>th</sup> century; and generally share a common history and purpose. Founder members sought self improvement and the improvement of society in which they existed. We were founded in interesting times.

Anna Brooks and Bryan Haworth, in their history of the Portico Library in Manchester had this to say of the period of its foundation:

“The French Revolution had led to an outburst of interest in radical literature, which was also now seen as a threat to the stability of the state. All over the region in the 1790’s subscription libraries became embroiled in the fight between the radical reformers, and those determined to defend the status quo at any cost.

Throughout the nation booksellers and printers of reform literature were jailed. The Manchester Reading Society was known as a ‘Jacobin Library’. In Manchester in 1793, the Magistrates ordered the seizure of all their libellous and rebellious books.’

Our histories run parallel. The Belfast Reading Society was founded on 13 May 1788. It exists today as the Linen Hall Library. Its early members comprised radical reformers and defenders of the status quo: as did the Cork Library, founded in 1803, the Newry Literary Society, founded in 1768, the Portaferry Literary Society founded in the same year, the Newtownards Society for Acquiring Knowledge founded in 1789 (the year of the French Revolution) and the Ballynahinch Reading Club, founded in 1790.

I will concentrate on the Belfast Reading Society. In 1792 new members began to join the society, among them Henry Joy McCracken who was a founder member of the United Irishmen, a parliamentary reform movement until 1795 when it became a clandestine revolutionary movement. In that year a resolution of the society was passed in favour of Catholic Emancipation – not something close to the heart of King George III.

In 1793 the President of the Society wrote to Lord Charlemont concerning the Belfast Reading Society. He wrote:

“I was early disgusted by an attempt of some of our profound statesmen to render it a political as well as a scientific society, in which they were with some difficulty baffled...”

Obviously, political tensions existed in the Belfast Reading Society from the outset. A year later the members passed a further resolution:

“Resolved that the meaning of the fourth paragraph of the preamble of the laws of the society is not to prevent the purchase of books on theological and political subjects, but to prevent discussion of them in the society.”

In this way Reading Societies became political societies; something which was happening throughout these islands. John Robson, author of *Proofs of a Conspiracy Against all the Religions and Governments of Europe, carried on in the Secret meetings of Free Masons, Illuminati and Reading Societies*, expounded the clearly held view of the malign influence of Reading Societies in this time of revolution. He wrote:

“I have seen a very remarkable work [on the French Revolution]. The author confirms all I have said...He shows that a formal and systematic conspiracy against religion was formed and zealously prosecuted by Voltairs, d’Alembert and Diderot, assisted by Frederick 11, King of Prussia; and I see that their manner of proceeding has been the same as that of the German atheists. Like them they hired an army of writers; they industriously pushed their writings into every house and every cottage. Those writings were equally calculated for inflaming the sensual appetites of men, and for perverting their judgements. They endeavoured to get the command of the schools, particularly those of the lower classes, and they erected and managed a prodigious number of circulating libraries and Reading Societies.”

So, libraries and reading societies were important players in the dissemination of revolutionary literature. In the Linen Hall Library is a set of manuscripts called the Joy

Manuscripts – from the family of Henry Joy, Barrister. One volume contains a number of printed poems – seditious poems. One such – *The Exiled Catholic's Lament* – has the manuscript note above it:

“This and the preceding were among the most popular of all the various songs circulated among the lowest classes of labourers and workers about 1795, to spirit them on to Revolution and Rebellion in the Northern part of Ireland...”

A second item was an anonymous poem entitled *The Downe Convention*. It has the manuscript note:

“By Councillor Sampson, since banished by Government.”

The 1798 Rebellion in Ireland saw members of the Belfast Reading Society on opposite sides in the conflict. Henry Joy McCracken, a committee member since 1794, led the insurgents at Antrim, and was hanged in High Street in Belfast for his pains. Thomas Russell, the Society's second librarian, was jailed in 1796 for his political activities, and released only in 1802. He involved himself in Emmett's Rebellion of 1803 and was hanged in Downpatrick.

On the loyalist side, the Rev. Dr William Bruce, 2<sup>nd</sup> President of the Society, was the last Yeoman guard on the Long Bridge from Belfast into Co. Down when the British forced marched to the battles of Saintfield and Ballynahinch. Such loyalty undoubtedly saved the Society's library from destruction in the aftermath of the rebellion.

After 1798, that intimate involvement with Revolution ceased. Succeeding generations of librarians in the Linen Hall Library archived the many subsequent rebellions and revolutions and “Troubles” which beset Ireland – the Young Irelanders in 1848, The Fenians in 1867, the 1912 Anti-Home Rule Campaign of Edward Carson and James Craig, the Easter Rising in Dublin in 1916, the Civil War 1919 – 21 and the Partition of Ireland in 1921. None was more thoroughly archived than the recent “Troubles”, and now the Peace Process in Northern Ireland.

Since 1969 the Linen Hall Library has collected the printed out-put of all sides of the conflict in Northern Ireland. Some 350,000 single items have been collected, many have been catalogued and all have been used by researchers, historians, journalists, authors to try to understand and explain the Irish situation. The posters of the “Troubles” have formed an exhibition which toured the United States and Ireland to great acclaim.

Such is the work of the Linen Hall Library; to collect, archive, catalogue and make available our collections. In library terms this is not revolutionary, for I know that we, in the Independent Library sector, must think innovatively of our role in the knowledge that we face shared challenges in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Responding to these challenges may be seen as a revolution in our role, our work patterns and our ethos.

The introduction of coffee shops and retail outlets in our libraries would have been thought of as revolutionary 50 years ago. Today, it is expected by our public. It means

the possibility of added revenue and sustainability for our institutions.

We are now caught up in a different kind of revolution, which is global, and affects each one of us in our daily work, in our leisure time and in our view of the world. The largest revolution in our world, not just in Ireland, in England, in Scotland or in Wales is the revolution in Information Technology. Our catalogues have increasingly gone on-line. All it takes is money, the technology and know-how. We mostly have a web site promoting our services and wares. Increasingly, our users expect to have remote access to our collections; and we must respond positively to these expectations.

The revolution must then be in our thinking. In the Linen Hall Library we have been discussing, as have all libraries in Northern Ireland, digitization of material. Pilot schemes proliferate. Queen's University Belfast have a number of projects, the most interesting from my point of view is the digitization of Irish Periodicals through the American facilitation of JSTOR. This allows users to interrogate a large number of titles by key word and have the relevant article displayed on screen.

Independent subscription libraries need to generate income to survive. Our collections are our collateral, and we must embrace the IT revolution to exploit, in the most benign meaning of that word, those collections. From archiving the printed record of political and social revolutions we must now participate in our own revolution – of thought, of enterprise and of innovation.

Ladies and Gentlemen, thank you for your attention. I hope some of what I have said has made sense.