



Inspirational and Subversive Librarians

James Quinn

It is a great pleasure and honour to be asked to speak at the launch of Deirdre Ellis-King's *Presidents of the Library Association of Ireland*, a book which does such a thorough and commendable job in recording the lives, achievements and contributions to public life of so many important librarians. Because librarians often act as the facilitators of the work of other people, their contributions can sometimes be overlooked or underestimated. This was certainly my experience during my work on the Royal Irish Academy's *Dictionary of Irish Biography (DIB)*. The DIB was a great co-operative enterprise by Ireland's scholarly community and within that community, librarians have always played a distinguished and essential role. We would not have been able to publish the nine volumes of the *Dictionary* in 2009 without the assistance of the staff of the library of the Royal Irish Academy and also of the numerous archives and academic and public libraries throughout the island of Ireland.



In our most recent batch of 'Missing persons', published in December 2015, we have taken the opportunity to add some interesting entries on librarians, namely Thomas Gay (written by Deirdre Ellis-King), Patrick Stephenson (written by Evelyn Conway), and the redoubtable Róisín Walsh (a joint effort between Evelyn and Deirdre). In addition to having distinguished careers as librarians, all three were also committed republicans, who played notable parts in the revolutionary period from 1916 to 1921. Thomas Gay was in Jacob's factory in 1916, and later served in the IRA and Free State army as an intelligence officer. Patrick Stephenson, who was president of the LAI and one of the notable figures included in Deirdre's book, was another veteran of Easter week, serving in the Mendicity Institution and the General Post Office (GPO). During the war of independence, he engaged in arms procurement, hiding large quantities of guns and ammunition in Thomas Street public library, and later became a co-founder of the Irish Communist Party. Róisín Walsh was a member of Cumann na mBan from 1915 and a well-known figure in Dublin left wing and republican circles in the 1920s and 30s. Evelyn and Deirdre very strongly bring out in their article that Róisín Walsh was not just a strong believer in achieving Ireland's political independence but also, through her work as a librarian, dedicated to changing Irish society through education and the diffusion of knowledge.

The last theme is one that runs through Deirdre's book – she clearly brings to light the socially engaged nature of the many presidents of the LAI, who initiated and developed a host of educational and cultural initiatives that touched many lives and greatly enriched Irish society. For most of the twentieth century, third level education was the preserve of a small privileged minority, and those who wished to further their education in their own time relied heavily upon the public library service. Public libraries were truly people's colleges in which ordinary people educated themselves according to their own interests and circumstances. The relatively small investment made by the state in such institutions generated a massive return in the educational and cultural benefit to the wider community, and I would contend that continuing to invest in and upgrade the public library system is one of the most socially progressive steps that any government can make.

A deep awareness of the educational, social and political functions of libraries, is I think a thread that runs through the careers of many librarians. I remember some years ago researching the life of Thomas Russell, one of the founders of the United Irishmen in 1791 and the first librarian of the Linenhall Library in Belfast, who used his position as a librarian as a cover for his radical activities. When a colleague asked me what I was researching, I mentioned that I was working on a subversive librarian. She considered the phrase for a moment and then said 'A subversive librarian – is that not something of an oxymoron?' As the librarians recently added to the *DIB* indicate, Thomas Russell was not alone, and the subversive librarian in Irish history is a more common figure than many people appear to think.

What individuals read clearly has an important role in their intellectual formation, and this intellectual formation has important implications for society as a whole. At the base of the concept of civic society lies the concept of the informed citizen. Without being informed, the citizen cannot effectively participate in the civic process and scrutinise the society in which he or she lives and hold to account those who wield power. This was very much seen in the 1790s as the United Irishmen and other reform groups sought to disseminate newspapers and pamphlets that would engage and inform ordinary people and allow them to take part in the political process. It was also recognised by their enemies and especially in Ulster, pro-government forces made it their business to burn down several local libraries and book clubs that had served as centres of discussion and radical organisation. Some decades later another nationalist movement, namely the Young Irelanders of the 1840s, put the informed citizen at the centre of their programme, and their ideals are effectively summed up in the slogan of the *Nation* newspaper – 'Educate that you may be free'. They maintained that education was one of the essential foundations in creating an informed and self-reliant citizenry, who could not alone win their independence, but safeguard it and put it to good use once it was achieved. They pressed strongly for the establishment and financing of properly appointed reading rooms which would provide a space not just for reading, but for the debate and fellowship that were central to creating an educated citizenry. Sadly, as is often the case, the reality fell short of their

ambitions, and in an era when books were generally scarce and expensive, many reading rooms were poorly stocked. On a tour of inspection in Cork, one Young Irelander wrote to Thomas Davis of the 'melancholy spectacle' of empty shelves.

This led the Young Irelanders to take on the task of providing these rooms with reading matter themselves. Central to this undertaking was the launching in 1845 of a series of books intended to provide Ireland with its own national literature, significantly known as 'The Library of Ireland'. Initially these cheap, mass-produced works – mainly history, fiction and lyric poetry – found a ready market, selling in tens of thousands, but unfortunately the venture was overtaken by the Great Famine and was finally wound up in 1848. However, although it covered less ground than its initiators had hoped, the Library of Ireland was among the most successful nationalist publishing projects of the nineteenth century, and the volumes it produced formed the basis of the historical and ballad collections in nationalist homes and reading rooms in Ireland for decades to come. And it is not too much of a stretch of the imagination to see figures such as Thomas Gay, Patrick Stephenson, Róisín Walsh, and many of the presidents of the LAI detailed in Deirdre's fine book, as acting in the Young Ireland tradition of 'Educate that you may be free'.

It is a slogan that still has resonance in the digital age. In the 1840s, individuals, reading rooms and many libraries were often faced with a dearth of information. Today the problem is often the opposite. We are so inundated with information from all quarters – official agencies, commercial corporations, media outlets, political campaigns and various interested parties, that we all suffer from varying degrees of information overload, particularly since so much of what is produced is selective, biased and intellectually deadening. Rather than adding to this problem, I think that public libraries can help us overcome it, in exercising an independent and respected form of quality control in the material they make available and facilitating readers to make informed and discriminating choices in what they read.

Before this all gets too wordy, it must be said that libraries do not exist solely for our political and civic education. They also exist to help us entertain ourselves, to nourish our existing interests and cultivate new ones. Schools and universities of course have a role to play in all of this, but it has always seemed to me that knowledge learned out of choice is sweeter than knowledge learned through compulsion. As any child (or even adult) who likes to read knows, libraries can be places of great joy. On a personal level, I well remember as a child the keen anticipation with which I would head off to my local library in Phibsborough, wondering what I would find there. Sometimes the books I took out enthralled me, sometimes not, but looking back it is clear to me that public libraries played a crucial part in my intellectual development and especially in my ability to make informed choices. The inspirational teacher is a stock figure in film and literature, and some of us have been lucky enough to know such teachers in real life, but the inspirational librarian is a rather less acclaimed figure. As Deirdre Ellis-King's *Presidents of the Library Association of Ireland* shows us, Ireland has had no shortage of inspirational librarians, and this work is an important step in recording their contributions and giving them the acknowledgement that they so richly deserve.

James Quinn, PhD., Managing Editor of the Dictionary of Irish Biography, 28 January 2016.