

# Records of the Literary and Historical Society

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## **Records of the Literary and Historical Society**

### **L&H Minutes, Soc2/3, 296-297**

#### **Entry for February 27, 1915**

While the conversation between Stephen Daedalus and his friend Lynch in James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* raises many aesthetic points of interest, a more mundane question might arise as to why the pair must walk away from the University College, their place of study, before they can access a library. The answer to this puzzlement is touched upon in this month's *From the Archives* document: an extract from the minute book of the Literary and Historical Society of University College Dublin.

Joyce, after whom UCD's main library on campus is named today, is not only one of the College's most celebrated alumni, but was also an active participant in the L&H Society, twice running for the position of auditor, albeit twice unsuccessfully. He is by no means the only past member to have won renown outside of university life; indeed, there is much truth in Michael Tierney's assertion that the old Physics theatre in 86 St Stephen's Green, where the L&H debates took place, was the room where many of the most "renowned politicians and public speakers of modern Ireland received their early training in the indispensable arts of oratory, persuasion and the management of men." The L&H helped to foster such significant and diverse personalities in the origins of the state as John Dillon and Thomas MacDonagh, while other past members went on to play significant roles in the nation that was to emerge: former auditors include a President (Cearbhall Ó Dálaigh), several government ministers, chief justices and prominent judges; John A. Costello joins rank with Joyce as an unsuccessful candidate for the Auditorship.

The eminence of these members reflect the status of a society whose origins are closely tied with John Henry Newman and the University he helped to establish. It was Newman who summoned and presided over the first meeting of the Historical, Literary and Aesthetical Society, as it was then known, either in 1855 or, more probably, in 1856. Newman's involvement was in keeping with his belief that a university would achieve its educational aims if it simply "brought a number of young

men together for three or four years, and then sent them away”, even if it “had no professors or examinations at all”. The various incarnations of the University were reflected in the membership of the L&H, which initially featured a small number of Irish students, as well as continental grandees and English converts to Catholicism, such as Henry Slingsby Bethell, the Society’s first President. As the University fell under the umbrella of the Royal University and the influence of the Jesuits, the society began to be dominated by old Clongownians, most of whom were studying Law or Medicine. Finally, the establishment of the National University of Ireland in 1908 saw a broader influx of students so that, by 1915, the older members of the Society were primarily drawn from Jesuit stock, while the newer entrants reflected a greater variety. These years also saw the gradual emergence of female students in the Society, whose presence and voice, though not universally welcomed, were nevertheless heightened by the concurrent growth of the women’s suffrage movement.

In spite of these many changes, the L&H maintained its original function as a debating society. The minutes for the 1914-1915 session record that 47 members spoke in 17 debates on a number of topical subjects: motions discussed at the beginning of 1915 include the suggestions that “Great Empires are destructive of the spirit of nationality”, that “questions of war and peace should be submitted to a referendum” and that “Ireland is overeducated”. Despite the discussion of such weighty issues as war and nationality, it was the seemingly less provocative subject of funding for the National Library which led to the biggest controversy of the year.

In February 1915, the British Treasury made known its intention to withhold state grants for libraries, art galleries and museums for the rest of the year and possibly for the rest of the war. This jeopardised the annual sum of £1,300 received by the National Library for the purchase of books, magazines and newspapers. The decision led to an outcry from a portion of the estimated 800 daily users of the library, with letters sent to national newspapers from Trinity College lecturers and priests. Fr Patrick Dinneen, described the Library as a “common refuge” for “the student... the professional man, lawyer doctor, engineer, politician, and the business man”. He also referred to it as the “de facto library” of the National University- while the College had its own library, such was the meagre supply of material that students instead

flocked to Kildare Street, as attested to in a letter which appeared in the *Irish Times* (2 February, 1915), in which the correspondent bemoaned the “complacency and indifference displayed by these young men” who spent their time in the Library rather than the British Army. Not all opposed the students’ presence: the association with the University College was, in fact, actively encouraged by Thomas W. Lyster, the Director of the National Library at the time. Such was the importance of the Kildare St. library in these years that Eugene Sheehy would later refer to it as to the “real Alma Mater” of UCD students.

It could not, therefore, have been much of a surprise when, on the evening of the 27th of February, the issue was brought up in the L&H by Mr Frank J MacCabe, who put forward the resolution that “this society strongly protests against the withdrawal of the usual libraries grant of £1,300 for the purchase of new books for the National Library, as such a withdrawal will mean serious loss and hardship to the students of Dublin.” The resolution was to be sent to the Chief Secretary of Ireland, John Redmond and the press. The Auditor, James R MacDonnell, a clerical student from Newfoundland, stated that the motion was “out of order”. After what seems to have been a heated exchange, MacDonnell left his seat. Cecil Lavery, being the most senior council member, took over the chair and the motion was again discussed before being amended with George Maguire’s addition that “the society further wish to point out that owing to miserable pittance granted to this University that the National Library is practically the only one open to students of this University”. The amended motion was carried by 13 votes to 9, but this would not be the end of the matter.

On the 6th of March, it was moved that the controversial resolution be rescinded on the grounds that it was “illegal” as it had been ruled out of order by the Auditor. The motion was defeated by 12 votes to 9. A week later, the correspondence secretary received a communication from the Auditor tendering his resignation. It was decided to send a deputation to ask him to reconsider. However, on the 20th of March, the deputation reported that the Auditor could “not see his way to re:consider his decision”. His resignation was duly accepted “with regret”. A month later, both McCabe and Maguire would also resign their positions in the Society. According to the reminiscences gathered in the *Centenary History* of the L&H Society, the resignations would seem to have had little to do with concern for the welfare of the

National Library and more to do with disruptions caused by the schism between the older and newer groups of students. In the case of JR MacDonnell, Cahir Davitt suggests that he simply “developed other interests... found the duties of the Auditor irksome and... engineered the occasion of his exit from the Society”.

Whatever MacDonnell’s motivations, the whole episode would appear to have been a case of “much ado about nothing”. Although the National Library’s grant seems to have been briefly suspended in April, the *Irish Independent* later reported that it had merely been reduced by £400, which, painful as it undoubtedly was, nevertheless could have been much worse- the National Gallery, for example, lost the entirety of its £1000 grant. In any case, the financial loss did not deter UCD students, who continued to avail of the Library services and continued to attract the chagrin of *Irish Times*’ readers. In February 1916, a letter appeared in the paper complaining about the seats being occupied by “lusty young fellows” whose “general appearance indicated many hours spent on the football or hurley field”. It was suggested as a remedy that the Library ban all men of military age.

While thus only providing a brief glimpse into the issues of library funding during the War, the minutes of the 27th of February and indeed the entire collection of minutes of the L&H Society nevertheless complement Joyce’s bildungsroman (which was being serialised in the *Egoist* at the time) as an insight into the minds of the young, middle-class educated Catholics who would be so influential in moulding the Irish nation over the next century. While the incident in question might be seen as somewhat trivial, it nevertheless displays the confidence and assertiveness of the L&H members, while MacCabe’s motion and the support it received suggests an impatience with any perceived subjugation under the status quo. These young men and women were not afraid to make themselves heard and, in the Old Physics Theatre of 86 St Stephen’s Green, they gained the skills of oratory to ensure that they would be.

Colm O’Flaherty  
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February 2015

Transcript

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27th Feb 15.

An ordinary general meeting of the society was held in the College on this date the Auditor in the chair. After questions the Auditor called on Mr F.J. MacCabe to move the resolution standing in his name “That this Society strongly protests against the withdrawal of the usual libraries grant of £1,300 for the purchase of new books for the National Library, as such withdrawal will mean serious loss and hardships to the majority of students in Dublin. Copies of the resolution to be sent to the Chief Secretary for Ireland, Mr John Redmond, to the Dublin morning & evening press.” The Auditor called for the motion & said it was out of order. Mr F MacCabe & Mr Lavery the seconder of the motion objected. The Auditor categorically asked Messrs Lavery & MacCabe did they refuse to accept his ruling. They answered “Yes until he heard them on the point.” The Auditor then left the chair. The chair being vacant it was taken by the senior committee man present. Mr MacCabe submitted his motion & was called on to proceed. Mr G Maguire seconded the motion. Mr A. MacCabe proposed the following amendment “That the society further wish to point out that owing to the miserable pittance granted to this University that the National Library is practically the only one open to the Students of this University.” Mr Mooney seconded & the proposer & seconder accepted the amendment. A further amendment proposed by Mr Kunan was rejected. Messrs Higgins ~~Binchy~~ & O’Brien spoke against the motion. On the motion being put it was declared carried by 13 votes to 9.

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Mr Michael Dwyer then took the chair & called on Mr Mooney to move. “That the later policy of O’Connell was conceived in the best interests of the nation” There followed in debate Messrs McGrath Binchy Lavery Keenan, F MacCabe, Fogarty A MacCabe & O Duffy Miss Hogan & Miss Hamett. The motion on being put was rejected. A note of thanks having been passed to the chairman for presiding the meeting terminated.

Cecil Lavery.

3rd March.

[In margin] signed subject to Mr Maguire that he objected to the ruling of the Senior Member of Committees ruling after the Auditor left the chair.

C Lavery

27th Feb

A Committee Meeting was held in the College on this date the Auditor in the chair. There were also present Miss Hogan, Messrs MacCabe O'Brien Maguire & Binchy. The objection of Mr Gerald Maguire to the Auditor taking the chair after the senior member of committee had done so & the meeting commenced was considered. It was decided to uphold Mr Maguire's objection. The proper procedure is stated on page 15 of Palgrave's Parliamentary procedure.

Cecil P Lavery

6 March 1915

27<sup>th</sup> Feb 15.

An ordinary general meeting of the Society was held in the College on this date the Auditor in the chair. After questions the Auditor called on Mr F. J. Mac Cabe to move the resolution standing in his name "That this Society strongly protests against the withdrawal of the usual Librarian's grant of £1,300 for the purchase of new books for the National Library, as such withdrawal will mean serious loss and hardships to the majority of students in Dublin. Copies of the resolution to be sent to the Chief Secretary for Ireland, Mr John Redmond, & the Dublin morning & evening press." The Auditor called for the motion & said it was out of order.

Mr Mac Cabe & Mr Lavery the seconder of the motion objected. The Auditor categorically asked Messrs Lavery & Mac Cabe did they refuse to accept his ruling. They answered "yes until he heard them on the point."

The Auditor then left the chair. The chair being vacant it was taken by the senior committee man present. Mr Mac Cabe submitted his motion & was called on to proceed. Mr G. Maguire seconded the motion. Mr A. Mac Cabe proposed the following amendment "That the <sup>Society</sup> further wish to point out that owing to the miserable pittance granted to this University that the National Library is practically the only one open to students of this University." Mr Mooney seconded & the proposer & seconder accepted the amendment.

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6/3/15

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Beal Lavery.  
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<http://www.ucd.ie/archives/html/university/l&h.htm>

Further Reading:

Gordon Bowker, *James Joyce: A Biography*, London, 2011.

Frank Callanan (Ed.), *The Literary and Historical Society 1955-2005*, Dublin, 2005.

Donal McCartney, *UCD: A National Idea: The History of University College, Dublin, Dublin*, 1999.

James Meenan (Ed.), *Centenary History of the Literary and Historical Society of University College Dublin, 1855-1955*, Tralee, 1955.