

Trade Unions, apprenticeships and some Limerick printing firms

by Derval O'Carroll

The organisation of skilled labour is not a phenomenon of recent times and owes many of its origins and successes to those men and women who had the courage and determination to seek to improve their working lives.

As early as 1773, printers in Dublin had formed the Amicable Benefit Society which collected regular subscriptions, paid cash benefits to its members and made agreements on scales of wages. This society continued until the execution of Robert Emmett in 1803, when most of its members took up the nationalist cause as United Irishmen. It was in 1809 that some former members reassembled and formed the Dublin Typographical and Provident Society (D.T.P.S.), which is still in existence today as the Irish Print Group (amalgamated with S.I.P.T.U. in 1998).

Limerick was early in its quest for the organisation of its print workers. The Limerick Typographical Society (L.T.S.) was formed in 1819. Printing in Limerick at this time was flourishing with 60 men listing themselves as printers in the census of 1841.¹ Sixteen newspapers were established in the city between 1788 and 1850² and though many of these papers did not survive very long, their prevalence is indicative of the trade in the city, which undoubtedly led to the setting up of the L.T.S. Unfortunately, records of the L.T.S. from the nineteenth and early twentieth century do not survive, though it is probable that its leaders and members followed many of the agreements and rules put in place by the Dublin Typographical and Provident Society whose records are still extant. Paddy Butler, Secretary of the Limerick union from c.1949-69 said that the minutes of the Limerick printers' meetings were passed from secretary to secretary and unfortunately disappeared over the years.³

In 1836, the D.T.P.S. first endeavoured to form the Irish Typographical Union

with other branches around the country including Belfast and Newry.⁴ It is not clear whether Limerick joined this Union, but it is probable that they did. The Irish initiative took its lead from the British Northern Typographical Union founded in 1830, which comprised of a federation of small, local societies in England and the Isle of Man, including the well-established Manchester Typographical Society. This British movement 'arose from the inadequacy of the isolated efforts of single societies.... to stem the continued encroachments of employers and to prevent the reduction of wages.'⁵ There was at that time 'no limitation to the number of apprentices, and men were working for whatever remuneration they could obtain.'⁶

When a UK-wide union, the British National Typographical Association was founded in Derby in 1844, it resulted in the amalgamation of the four main printing unions in the United Kingdom, including the Irish branch. Though the British Northern Typographical Union was one of those amalgamated in 1844, it re-established itself as the Provincial Typographical Union (P.T.A.) in 1849. Some Irish local societies in Cork and Limerick attempted to join but Ireland was in misery and chaos as a result of the Great Famine. Between 1815 and 1854, 87,000 people emigrated from Limerick to North America and Canada.⁷ The Dublin Typographical and Provident Society reorganised itself during these years and the local societies in other towns managed to maintain a precarious existence.⁸

It was a period of much unrest in Ireland and Limerick joined the struggle for independence. In 1848, William Smith O'Brien, who lived at Cahermoyle House in Ardagh, County Limerick, was one of the leaders of the unsuccessful Young Irelanders' uprising for Irish freedom. The more widespread Fenian Rising in 1867 saw action in Kilmallock and some other

Limerick centres. Most local leaders of the people were thus more concerned and engaged with issues of political unrest at home, that issues of amalgamation with British unions took a definite back seat.

The unhappy events which occurred in Ireland in 1848 are written on a sad page of her chequered history, and can only be referred to in the language of unavailing indignation and grief. Thousands of troops filled the country. The people continued to fall beneath famine and cholera, and the workhouses were crowded beyond endurance.⁹

The Limerick Typographical Society joined the UK-based P.T.A. some time before 1879 when it merged with the Relief Association (formed to provide reciprocal wage agreements between workers travelling within union territories) to establish the Typographical Association. The T.A.'s headquarters were based in Manchester.

The Limerick group remained part of this organisation for almost one hundred years until 1964, when a merger of two long-term rival unions, the Typographical Association and the London Typographical Society formed the National Graphical Association.

Though conditions for printers were not always the same as those in Britain, the Limerick men did follow the rules and regulations of the UK-based parent body. The *Rules of the Limerick typographical society* reflect this. Paddy Butler, who was Secretary of the L.T.S. from 1949 to 1969, had the rules amended in 1962, as the same regulations had been in force for over fifty years. However, they did hold on to their original title, the Limerick Typographical Society:

The Society shall be called the Limerick Typographical Society (Branch of the Typographical Association) and shall be composed of members who have

served, or are serving, a recognised apprenticeship at case, press, machine, or monotype caster; readers; and of others engaged in the printing industry who may be considered eligible for or by agreement accept membership of this Society.¹⁰

The objectives of the organisation were as follows:

.....the regulation of the relations between members and employers, the regulation of the number of apprentices and the hours of labour, the maintenance of a fair standard of wages and of honourable and healthy working conditions.....¹¹

Membership of the union was imperative for all printers. From an economic viewpoint, it provided payment in times of strike or illness and it also guaranteed that any pay increases negotiated with employers would end up in the members' pay-packets. The union also served as a political lobby group, with many of its leaders being members of political parties.

In the early days of organised labour in Britain, a rigorous control was exercised over admission to the printers' Manchester Society in 1845:

Those who had not served a full seven years' apprenticeship to letterpress

printing was automatically excluded, and there are numerous instances of members being ordered to give notice unless certain 'foreigners' were dismissed...All legitimate printers... were expected to join the Society soon after arrival in town or on completion of their apprenticeship, and those who 'held aloof' longer than three months were fined.¹²

Printers' unions in the United States went a step further by fining its members for certain 'offences'. The Seattle Typographical Union, which was formed in 1882, carried the following stipulations in its rules for members:

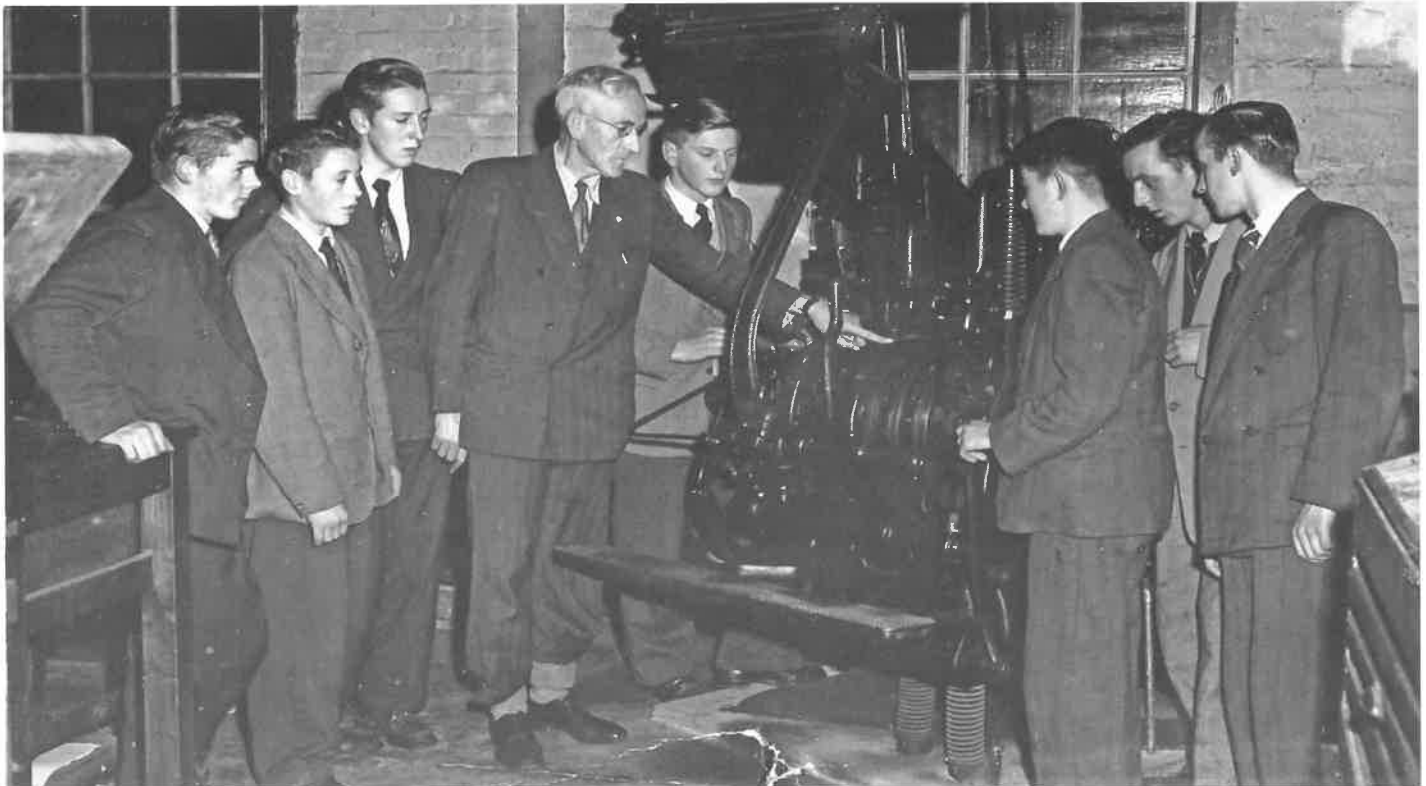
...the levying of fines for offences such as \$5.00 for appearing at a meeting intoxicated, \$3.00 for smoking non-union cigars, \$5.00 for purchasing in a butcher shop remaining open after 6p.m. or Sunday, and \$5.00 for failure to march in the Labor Day parade unless working or sick.¹³

Limerick printers were no different. The influence of the Limerick Typographical Society permeated through almost every aspect of both their working and private lives. Disputes with employers could be negotiated on a member's behalf, a subsidy was guaranteed in times of strike and printers' wives and families were

looked after in the event of them losing the head of the family. Many social outings were also organised by the L.T.S. They went on day outings to Lahinch and Kilkee in County Clare and many printers met their spouses on such trips. Non-membership meant missing out on a myriad of opportunities and benefits and it was almost unheard of not joining your fellow printers as a union member. Denis O'Shaughnessy (former employee of the *Limerick Leader* and well-known writer and historian) recalls:

Oh gosh...there'd be war, 'twould be unheard of...The union was a very strong thing in our time and ...there was half-yearly meetings and general meetings and they were big occasions. Everyone would turn out and the secretary, he'd give his expenses, and he'd be queried on every penny and there'd be ructions on points of order, technicalities... There'd be fellas, they'd maybe have a few jars before they'd come in and they'd be militant through the meeting, they'd be fighting...but 'twas a social occasion then, 'cos when it ended you all went off to the pub.¹⁴

As outlined, the union provided strike or victimisation payments, travelling relief payments, out-of-work payments, funeral payments, superannuation payments,



Joe O'Shaughnessy, printing instructor at the Limerick Technical Institute, pointing out the intricacies of the Linotype machine to apprentices, 1956. From left: Brendan O'Sullivan, Paddy O'Byrne, Denis O'Shaughnessy, Robin Flynn, Michael O'Halloran, Frank Bouchier, John Casey.



Aidan Corr



Denis O'Shaughnessy

special grade and incapacity payments and even railway fares to unemployed members. These benefits were essential in Limerick and other centres for families of printers and often helped them put bread on the table. The fear of poverty and unemployment hung like a spectre in the background, ready to strike at any moment. Something to fall back on gave printers a sense of security.

During times of economic depression, especially in the twentieth century, many printers emigrated from Ireland to Britain, Canada and the USA in search of work and were given an emigration allowance by the union to which they belonged. However they were not always successful as unemployment abroad was often as prevalent as at home. The Dublin Typographical and Provident Society received a letter from the Toronto Typographical Union in 1957:

During the last two years particularly there has been so many printers come to Toronto and Canada generally that it has now reached the point where it is impossible for us to find employment for them all...These immigrants come from England, Ireland, Scotland, Germany, South Africa, as well as from other European countries. I receive on an average of four or five letters a week from those contemplating coming here and I am now compelled to reply in a discouraging manner....The industry is quite slow at the present time and there is a surplus of printers here to meet all requirements.¹⁶

The situation in the United States was much the same at the time, with the New York Typographical Union writing to the D.T.P.S. in 1958:

We would like you to inform your members that seek employment in New York City that work at present is very slow due to the recession...The State Labor Department says printing in New York State has fallen off 1/3 per cent since January 1, 1958. Members have flown to New York City from the Dublin Typographical Association and expect to go right to work, which at the present time isn't so...¹⁷

Some printing houses however, fell out with the union over issues of pay or the apprenticeship scheme. Though he can't recall exactly why his grandfather disagreed with the union, Aidan Corr (trained as a printer but worked as a journalist with the *Limerick Leader*) recalls the severity of that dispute. Frank Corr & Sons was established in c.1880 in a basement in The Crescent, Limerick by Aidan's grandfather, who had moved from Belfast as a result of problems he encountered as a member of the nationalist movement. Though Aidan's father Joe, who took over the business, was very friendly with the majority of Limerick printers, he followed the principles of his father, and so Aidan began his working life in a non-union printing house. 'It was a stigma at the time, an absolute stigma. It was something to be ashamed of.'¹⁸ The shame stemmed from a perception among printers in Limerick that non-union houses were in some way inferior to member houses, that they did not attain

the 'standards' required to join the union. When Aidan's father died, another brother took over the company and his mother found him an apprenticeship in McKern's Printing Works in Glentworth Street. Established in 1806 and still in business today, McKern's was always a leading employer of printers in the city and also a staunch and active member of the L.T.S. Aidan began his apprenticeship on 17 December 1960, and though many years had gone by, the old stigma with regard to non-union membership remained:

...Nobody spoke to me for three months; nobody... not one of the colleagues on that print floor addressed me. I was standing up at a stone and I didn't know where to turn or what to do... And the funny thing was in time, people began to get sympathy for me I suppose, and to like me... and to take it at face value and I eventually ended up as father of the chapel¹⁹.... in that company, which was ironic.²⁰

Aidan also faced the difficulty that the foreman's son had been in line for the apprenticeship and the workers felt it was very wrong to employ a non-union member before him.

Each printing house and newspaper business had its own 'Chapel', a branch of the local printing union. These were organised groups of printers who had their own rules and regulations, parallel to those of the parent union. There have been a variety of theories put forward as to where the term 'Chapel' originated. One of the explanations is that when William Caxton (who introduced printing to Britain) returned to England in 1472, he was invited to set up his printing works in Westminster Abbey. When the Abbot was discussing forthcoming books with Caxton, it was said that they were holding a chapel meeting.²¹ Another theory suggests that because the composing of text was done at the table known as the stone, it resembled an altar slab and thus obtained the term 'Chapel'. The exact origination will probably never be authenticated, but the term has survived through the centuries.

Each 'Chapel' member was obliged to pay subscriptions towards the group and would then be looked after in times of difficulty. The 'Father of the Chapel' was

in charge and the constitution and objects of the *Limerick Leader* 'chapel' as recorded in 1961 were as follows:

The Chapel shall be called the *Limerick Leader* Chapel and shall consist of all members of the Typographical Association employed at the office... Each member shall contribute 3d. per week, casuals included, towards Chapel Funds... The objects of the Chapel shall be to see that all T.A. and Branch Rules are carried out and that all agreements between the T.A. and the employers are adhered to; and the settlements of any business disputes which may arise between its members.²²

Another important aspect of printer's lives was the apprenticeship system whereby each aspiring printer was obliged to serve a seven-year apprenticeship before he could become a fully fledged journeyman printer and earn a full printer's wage. Apprentices began their training early, often at the age of 14. Many printers believed that seven years was too long and benefitted the employers, as most apprentices would be capable of carrying out a journeyman's task in about four years, but would still be paid a trainee's wage for another three years. Each apprentice had to sign an indenture, which stated his exact wage for each of the years of the internship and also outlined a variety of stipulations that the apprentice had to adhere to:

He shall not commit Fornication or contract Matrimony within the said Term...He shall not play at Cards, Dice Tables, or any other unlawful games...He shall not haunt nor use Taverns, Ale-houses, or Play-houses, nor absent himself from his Master's Service Day or Night unlawfully, but in all things, as an honest and faithful Apprentice, he shall behave himself towards his said Master and all his, during the said Term.²³

The language in this contract between employer and apprentice is reminiscent of the apprenticeship agreements of late medieval and early modern Europe, where the contract signed between master and apprentice was more a social and moral relationship than an economic one. During this time, working men of particular trades usually joined associations called craft guilds. To qualify for membership in a guild, the aspiring

apprentice had to serve a long and often underpaid apprenticeship. The apprentice was handed over by their parents to an employer for approximately seven years and the employer committed to feed, clothe, and lodge the apprentice with his family above or behind the employer's premises in exchange for the apprentice's labour.²⁴ Though the guild system disappeared in the late eighteenth century, the rhetoric and spirit certainly remained in printing indentures.

The printing apprentice was also in charge of the 'Hellbox'. This was a type of trolley into which he collected all the used type and metal scraps which collected in the trays of Linotype and Monotype 'hot metal' machines. This term probably derives from Johann Gutenberg's time, with the notion of his allegiance with the devil. As the inventor of movable type, Gutenberg's contemporaries could not grasp the speed at which books could now be produced and how they all looked exactly the same. They thus referred to printing in those early days as the Black Art. Another possibility is that the 'Hellbox' contained all the unwanted metal to be melted down and reused - much like the unwanted souls being sent to hell.

On pay-day the apprentice was the last to collect his wages, but on the day a young apprentice completed his apprenticeship and became a journeyman, he was the first to collect his wage pack. Many customs surrounded this occasion, one of which was 'banging out' - as the new printer walked through the printing house to collect his pay, the other printers 'banged' their machinery and cheered. It was a day of great excitement in the print houses. After work, all the printers went to the pub where the new journeyman bought everyone a pint. Denis O'Shaughnessy began working in the *Limerick Leader* in 1951 and recalls collecting his first pay packet following his apprenticeship:

I went in at one pound and six shillings a week and after seven years, I came out with something like nine pound and that included two nights overtime, and I remember getting my first weeks wages as a journeyman and the smart aleck of a clerk gave it to me in pennies. So I came home with this big bag...²⁵

The apprentices bore the brunt of many jokes and Denis also remembers:

Oh yes, the jokes on apprentices were very funny. You might be in only a few weeks and some old printer would say 'Johnny, come over here, I want you to go out on a message. I want you to go up to McKern's Printing for a bucket of hair spaces.'²⁶ Of course like a fool, you went up and they all came around and you were told, 'sorry, we're out of hair spaces but would you ask Mr Killeen the foreman for a loan of the glass hammer'...so you'd be up and down all day, looking for stuff that wasn't there at all...²⁷

When he had finished his internship the new journeyman presented himself before the union of which he was a member, where representatives from all printing houses were gathered. They rewarded him with a certificate (journeyman card). This card was required every time he applied for a job in a printing house.

The late Willie 'Whack' Gleeson, a well-known Limerick printer and local historian, began his seven-year apprenticeship as a compositor with the *Limerick Weekly Echo* in 1918, when he was just 13 years of age. He joined the National Army in 1921. Returning to the *Echo* for a further 19 years, he then moved to Dublin where he worked as a proof-reader with the *Irish Press* until his return to his native Limerick in 1957. A prominent member of the Limerick Typographical Society, Willie held the post of President of the L.T.S in the late 1950s. Willie recalled his apprenticeship days:

I well remember during World War I, when apprentices to the printing craft were paid anything from 2/6 to 4/- a week, with an additional 1/- increase annually until the completion of the seven year term...a working week was 52 hours...Work - slavery would be more apt - usually commenced at 8 am...lighting the fire, operating the treadle machine,²⁸ washing the machines...(should the boss be living in the upper portion of the establishment, an apprentice could on occasion, be called on to do the shopping for dinner)...Work for him finished around 9 o'clock and when pay-day arrived, he was not rewarded to the extent of even one penny by

way of overtime...it was all in the week's work!²⁹

Conditions for apprentices had certainly improved by the time Denis O'Shaughnessy served his time, though work was still hard for the trainee:

As an apprentice we worked a 43 and a half-hour week, nine to six each day and a half-day on a Saturday, you finished at half past twelve. Started at nine, finished at six and you went on an hour's dinner break. There was two nights overtime every week, 'twas kinda compulsory, Tuesday and Wednesday nights, coming up to production for the weekend...³⁰

Because of prevailing financial difficulties among workers, coupled with an ever-increasing rise in the cost of living, many young men had to leave school at an early age in the 1950s, to help supplement family incomes. In Limerick, because all apprentices, including those in other trades, left school before the age of 16, they were required to attend the 'Tech' two nights and one full day a week. This satisfied the school authorities.

We had to go two nights a week. And you daren't miss it, you daren't miss it. Looking back on it, it was a long complicated business really. You'd just go so far and learn the rudiments of the business and that was that after three or four years and yet you were still an apprentice. There was an interesting thing too, the fact that we were under 16, we were required to attend the one day a week at school, which meant that you left your employment for a full day and went to this tech there next to the Royal...³¹

Because of the small number of printing firms in Limerick in the first half of the twentieth century there was much competition among printing families to obtain apprenticeships for their sons. Aidan Corr outlines the situation: 'There was tremendous rivalry... between the families when it came to an apprenticeship...families have fallen out over apprenticeships.'³² Printers in Limerick considered the trade a good one to be in and strove to find positions for their sons. Families were large and this meant that fathers were often faced with the possibility of finding apprenticeships for a number of offspring.

Apprentices were referred to as 'Printer's Devils', a term which came into use in the early days of printing and again, is associated with the idea in the fifteenth century that Gutenberg was somehow connected to the Underworld. Gutenberg and his co-printer Johann Fust had many helpers of a young age and these earned the nickname of 'devil'. Denis O'Shaughnessy remembers being referred to as thus:

We were what was called printers devils...you were a dog's body, you were at the beck and call of everybody. You had to sweep the floor, you had to bring metal up from the metal room up to the operators. They said 'Boy, metal!' and down you went to bring up the heavy bars of metal. You had to go on messages, you had to go all over the place, when the machines started printing you were called down to take off the papers and fold it...but at the same time you were learning a trade. But it was nothing compared to the apprentices that went years before us - not alone had they to do all that, they had to deliver the papers to customers as well.³³

Apprentice boys in the *Limerick Leader* in the 1920s and 1930s often relied on tips from those they delivered papers to, especially around Christmas time. Though they would have received a minor bonus from their employers, as trainees they were excluded from any generous Christmas subsidy. They handed out cards to their customers with the following inscription:

The Leader Boy presents his compliments, and in wishing his readers a Happy Christmas and a glad New Year would feel obliged for his usual Christmas box. (Poem) The Printer's Devil - The postman he's a welcome guest, To all men he is civil, But can't compare and do his best, To our friend, the Printer's Devil, In hail or rain, in frost or snow, on his mission he must go, To hand the news, both fresh and stale, To Leader readers without fail.³⁴

The ratio of apprentices to fully trained printers caused continuous debate in the Typographical Association throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. After the Second World War, a great deal of attention was directed towards the

selection and training of young printers. The T.A. approved a special report on the 'Recruitment and Training of Apprentices' in April 1945.³⁵

...it covered in great detail the questions of selection, indenturing, training (workshop and technical college), examination and certification of apprentices...The aim was to secure the best type of boys for the industry, to ensure a sound technical training, and to preserve and develop craftsmanship.³⁶

Though this scheme showed great potential for an improvement of the apprentices' situation, their wages were not fixed by the union until the 1950s and so their remuneration was at the discretion of each employer. Paddy Butler finished with one company mid-apprenticeship and his father, who was working for the City Printing Company in Limerick, secured a position for him there. He believes his skills at that time were equal to any journeyman, but the company only offered him 5 shillings, which was less than he had been earning in his previous employment.³⁷

Though many printers in Dublin followed work around from one printing house to another, even moving out of the city, Limerick, being smaller offered fewer opportunities. Once printers found employment with one of the leading firms, they often remained there for the rest of their working lives. Denis O'Shaughnessy recalls:

'Twas unheard of anyone to leave the *Leader*, unheard of...If you got into the *Leader*, you were on the pig's back.....And I remember one lad left and went off someplace to try something else and when he said to the manager 'I'm going.' 'What!' he said, 'are you crazy, leaving a job like this?' and of course at that time in the '50s, it was a terrible time for unemployment as well, there was huge emigration.... we didn't move around 'cos there was no place to move to unless you went to Dublin - that was like going to Outer Mongolia, going to Dublin.³⁸

The reluctance to move to Dublin was probably also fuelled by the fact that Typographical Association members were not allowed fill jobs which could



Limerick Printer's team, winners of the 1953 An Tostal inter-firm tourney (Losers' Group).
 Back, from left: Denis O'Shaughnessy, Joe Naughton, Christy Bannon, Austin Carey, Seamus Nestor.
 Front, from left: Jim Ryan, Brian O'Brien, Michael O'Halloran, Gerry McCarthy, Jack Ryan, Des Hanrahan.

Photo: Aidan Corr's Where No Barriers Prevail.

be occupied by members of the Dublin Typographical Provident Society, which remained separate from the T.A.

Fear of losing their positions stirred great deference in the workers for their employers. The majority of workers had large families to feed and though the union would grant subsidy in times of unemployment, it was not the same as a full wage. Society was still defined by class and printers would have often considered themselves a step below their employers:

I remember the directors of the *Leader* came up on the floor once or twice a year and men would nearly tremble at the thought of the directors being on the floor. And for weeks afterwards, they'd repeat what the directors said to them – it was amazing. I remember one old printer, Paddy Doyle, he was waiting for the office to open one morning and this man came along, they were chatting, he went in with him and he found out that evening 'twas the auditor had come to do the annual audit. 'And to think,' he said, 'there was I talking to this auditor.' And for years afterwards he spoke

about it, 'what about the morning I spoke to the auditor.' They were in awe of all the owners and directors... 'twas a visible thing you know, very visible.³⁹

McKern's Printing Works was also considered a secure place to work. One of Limerick's oldest surviving printing firms; it was established in 1806 by George McKern, whose family was prosperous and well known. Two of the McKern daughters reputedly had beautiful voices and were known as the 'Red Rose' and 'White Rose' of Limerick.⁴⁰ The family lived at Roselawn House in Castletroy:

...a beautiful house... the garden sloping down to the banks of the Shannon. There was famous salmon fishing in these waters and boat-loads of boys and girls would take to the water armed with fishing tackle and musical instruments...While their brothers and friends plied their rods, the 'Roses' sang arias from Handel to the salmon.⁴¹

The business was originally situated in O'Connell Street (site of Leavy's

Shoes today) but moved in 1904 to the former Presbyterian Church building in Glentworth Street. Originally built in 1765, the church proved too small for the growing congregation who moved to their new premises on Henry Street in 1899.⁴²

Members of the McKern family emigrated to Australia and Argentina in the 1830s and 1840s and George McKern died in 1857, passing the business into the hands of his son John. He was a well-liked, popular man in the city and treated his workers well. His death notice in the *Munster News* paid homage to the Limerick printer:

Yesterday morning, at his residence, Upper Catherine Street, George McKern, Esq., aged 74 years. As the head of a respectable firm in the stationery and printing trade, the deceased, throughout his life, was highly esteemed as a truly upright man of business. He lived to enjoy all the agreeable pleasures of a fond parent, having in the domestic circle been surrounded by a numerous and affectionate family to whom the loss of an attached and devoted father is

irreparable but for the consolation that he died the death of the righteous, trusting in the Lord.⁴³

The business was passed down through the remaining members and in the 1920s was sold out of the McKern family. In 1942 it was bought by the Morris family of Dublin, who owned Fodla Press in Dublin. One brother also set up the Ormond Printing Company in Dublin with Oscar Traynor who led the Dublin Brigade in the burning of the Custom House, Dublin in May 1921.⁴⁴ Though it again changed ownership in 2010 to the Flynn family, in deference to 'the enterprise and trail-blazing qualities of the founders'⁴⁵ the name McKern has never been changed.

In 1937 McKern's attracted praise from the local press with regard to their calendars:

...copies of these calendars have been submitted to us and both from the viewpoints of artistry and utility they reflect the greatest credit on the workmanship of Messrs McKern...and when it is considered that these are the products of local workers exclusively, a glance at the products will show that in this respect at least Limerick has nothing to learn from anybody.⁴⁶

McKern's also printed the *Limerick Weekly Echo* newspaper and Aidan Corr recalls:

It was probably the only provincial paper...produced totally from monotype. To produce a paper from monotype when you were on deadlines, you had the handling problem, you had the setting problem - you had all sorts of problems that can go wrong with a newspaper and still that paper came out each week. It was a tribute to the craft of the people who were there.⁴⁷

The handling problem Aidan Corr refers to is the fact that the Monotype machine casts single pieces of type. If the type was dropped while moving the lines from the caster to the printing press, the whole job would have to recast, thus losing valuable time. The spilled type was thus indiscriminately mixed on the floor and earned the nickname 'Pie'.⁴⁸ The system also required two machines (one for composition and one for casting), which doubled the chance of a mechanical

difficulty occurring.

Paddy Butler finished his apprenticeship in 1945 and joined McKern's. He became foreman of the company and remembers how they were the experts in poster production. He recalls the craftsmanship needed to produce such jobs:

McKern's had a fantastic poster department. At that time, there was a great trade in posters for dances and all-night dances; they called them Cinderella dances... they were the only crowd that used specialise in what they called four-sheet posters. You'd have to do the poster in four squares, forty by sixty (inches), all wooden type.⁴⁹

As already outlined, the *Limerick Leader* was a major employer of printers in Limerick and many passed their working lives on its production. The first issue which appeared on the streets of Limerick on 9 August, 1889, was actually produced by a music printing firm, McNamara and Brunard as the *Limerick Leader's* press was not ready to roll on time.⁵⁰

The history of this family-owned newspaper has parallels with national history. The editorial in the first issue includes the following lines:

This journal is intended to be the faithful organ of the National Party in both counties. It will be conducted to the best of our judgement and ability upon the lines laid down in the programme of the Irish National League...⁵¹

Vocal on its opinions of political affairs, two editors of the paper were jailed for libel in 1890 and again in 1902. John McInerney served a nine month sentence for publishing an editorial attack on a man who had taken over the farm of a previously evicted tenant in 1890. In 1902 editor Jeremiah Buckley wrote of his support of two protestors against landlordism, who had been sentenced to imprisonment. He was sentenced to ten months, but had it reduced to one month on appeal. His editorial had quoted with approval the words of one of the offenders, Sam Woods:

In my opinion the most effective way to carry on the war is to make it hot for every landlord, evicting landlord, emergency man and grabber

in the vicinity. You may be passing revolutions till you are black in the face unless you make it hot for these gentlemen.⁵²

The paper had its difficulties throughout the years, even being reduced to six pages during World War II, but it emerged prosperous again in the middle years of the twentieth century. In 1952 it bought over the *Limerick Chronicle* and in May 1965, it changed to rotary printing. In 1969, it installed a lithographic and process engraving plant. Despite much competition from newer Limerick news-sheets over the years, the *Limerick Leader* has remained strong.

In 1957, Paddy Butler moved to the composing room of the *Limerick Leader*, after leaving McKern's. He finished his working days at the paper as the 'Reader', a position that has disappeared in today's newspaper industry. The 'Reader' was responsible for checking a proof of the final copy before it went to print. Many older printers today lament the loss of this position and comment how today's newspapers suffer greatly, with not only spelling mistakes, but incorrect hyphenation, justification, grammar and photograph captioning. This is without doubt attributed to the absence of the human eye on the text before the printing presses roll.

Paddy's memories are of good camaraderie among the workers, and of many outings arranged by the 'Chapel', often subsidised by management.⁵³

The *Leader* was always that step ahead of the rest of the city. They invested continually in materials and machinery and their standards were high and respected...The jobbing department was particularly busy, producing a miscellany of magazines, commercial work and dance posters and the entire operation was run with a professionalism which was refreshing.⁵⁴

Though McKern's and the *Limerick Leader* were the main employers in the printing trade in Limerick, a number of other firms were in existence in the city in the first half of the twentieth century. Davis Printers, (still in existence today as Davis Design and Print), was set up around the turn of the nineteenth and

twentieth century by an enterprising printer who came from Bedford in 1887. He was initially employed by McKern's, but soon set up the Electric Printing Company, which was situated in Chapel Lane, off William Street. He was the first printer in the city to use electricity to drive his machines. His son Charlie took over the business from his father and is best remembered in local printing and trade union circles as the man who printed the Limerick Typographical Society's newspaper during the printers' strikes in the city in 1923 and 1937-38.

O'Connor and Company, located at 123 O'Connell Street, (site of a Subway outlet today) was another printing firm operating in Limerick in the early twentieth century and Paddy Butler recalls the early days of his apprenticeship working there:

'Twas a very, very small office, everything was by hand and there was only one compositor there, which meant I had to be on my toes.... one compositor and one apprentice. There was one machine-minder⁵⁵ downstairs and three of us upstairs.... one man working a treadle machine, day in, day out and down at the back downstairs was a bookbinding department.⁵⁶

The Second World War broke out while Paddy was working with the firm, and while other printing houses were severely affected, O'Connor's tried to keep their heads above water by obtaining printing contracts from the Limerick Steamship Company. The Condensed Milk Company (formerly Cleeve's) in Limerick was exporting hundreds of tonnes of canned condensed milk to the British forces in the trenches, through the Steamship Company, thus resulting in large numbers of ledgers and documents for record purposes. As O'Connor's was not a large enterprise, however, it was seriously affected by paper rationing and received a very small quota. Though the business was there, the firm could not stay afloat and closed down in 1944.

Trade unions remain an important part of workers' lives today, but it is unlikely

that the same strength of their influence will ever again be felt, as was the case in earlier centuries. Though seven year apprenticeships for Limerick printers are no longer a requisite, memories of their training days remain alive in the minds of those who spent their working lives providing news and knowledge for an information-hungry Limerick public.

Endnotes:

1. *Census of Limerick city*, 1841.
2. Robert Herbert, *Limerick printers & printing*, (Limerick, 1942).
3. Interview with the late Paddy Butler R.I.P., 7 February 1999, (hereafter cited as Paddy Butler).
4. Irish Print Union, *Cló*, Vol. 4, No. 5, (Oct./Nov./Dec. 1987), p. 24.
5. A.E. Mussen, *The typographical association; origins and history up to 1949*, (Oxford 1954), p. 33.
6. *Ibid*, p. 33.
7. http://www.websters.ie/commercial/the_royal/the_book/section2a.html.
8. Mussen (op. cit.) p. 69.
9. Maurice Lenihan, *History of Limerick*, (Ed.) Cian O'Carroll, (Dublin 1991), p. 509.
10. Limerick Typographical Society, *Rules of the Limerick typographical society*, (Limerick 1962), p. 2.
11. *Ibid*, p. 2.
12. Mussen (op. cit.) p.28.
13. *75th Anniversary Diamond Jubilee Seattle Typographical Union Commemorative Book*, No. 202, 1957.
14. Interview with Denis O'Shaughnessy, (hereafter cited as Denis O'Shaughnessy).
15. Mussen (op. cit.) pp. 470-5.
16. Irish Print Union, *Míósacháin Na gClóadóirí*, Vol 7, No. 2, (Feb. 1957), p. 3.
17. Irish Print Union, *Míósacháin Na gClóadóirí*, Vol. 8, No. 6, (Jun. 1958), p. 8.
18. Interview with Aidan Corr, (hereafter cited as Aidan Corr).
19. Head of a branch of the local printing union, made up of members of one printing firm.
20. Aidan Corr.
21. Irish Print Union, *Míósacháin Na gClóadóirí*, Vol 7, No. 4, (Apr. 1957), p. 4.
22. Typographical Association, *Rules of the Limerick Leader chapel*, (Jul. 1961).
23. Indenture of Richard Bardin, 6 November 1913.
24. <http://renaissance-faire.com/index.html>.
25. Denis O'Shaughnessy.
26. Small piece of metal rule placed between letters and words to justify a line of type.
27. Denis O'Shaughnessy.
28. Foot-operated printing machine, used mainly for small handbills and flyers.
29. W.W. Gleeson, 'Some Limerick print workers' in *The Old Limerick Journal*, (Autumn, 1987), p. 8.
30. Denis O'Shaughnessy.
31. Denis O'Shaughnessy.
32. Aidan Corr.
33. Denis O'Shaughnessy.
34. *Limerick Leader* 'Newsboy's Card'.
35. Mussen, p. 458.
36. Mussen, pp. 458-9.
37. Paddy Butler
38. Denis O'Shaughnessy.
39. Denis O'Shaughnessy.
40. Dorothy McCall, *When that I was*, (London 1951), p.197.
41. *Ibid*, pp. 196-7.
42. Sean Spellissy, *The History of Limerick City* (Limerick, 1998) pp. 231-2.
43. *Munster News*, 26 September, 1857.
44. Derval O'Carroll and Seán Fitzpatrick (ed.), *Hoggers, lords and railwaymen*, (Dublin, 1996), p. 14.
45. *Irish printer*, (April, 1998), p.34.
46. *Limerick Chronicle*, 12 January 1937.
47. Aidan Corr.
48. Probably derived from the idea that all ingredients are mixed together before baking a pie.
49. Paddy Butler.
50. Hugh Oram, *The newspaper book, A History of Newspapers in Ireland, 1649-1983* (Dublin, 1983) p. 84.
51. *Limerick Leader*, 9 August 1889.
52. *Limerick Leader*, 22 October 1902.
53. Paddy Butler.
54. Aidan Corr, 'Paddy Butler - The Leader Reader' in *Irish Printer*, (May 1994), p. 30.
55. The man (or woman) who fed paper into the printing machine and ensured it was running smoothly.
56. Paddy Butler.

This article used material from an MA in Local History (NUI Maynooth) thesis entitled *Aspects of Limerick's Printing Past* (1999) by **Derval O'Carroll**. A native of Limerick and graduate of UL, Derval was manager of the National Print Museum, Beggars Bush, Dublin, from 1996 to 2000 and is currently Head of Operations and Administration at the Chester Beatty Library, Dublin. She was also researcher and co-editor of *Hoggers, Lords and Railwaymen - a history of the Custom House Docks area of Dublin*, published in 1996.