

## The Limerick Printing Industry

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The author, from whose professional expertise this journal has benefited for many years, discusses the history of the printing industry in the city from the seventeenth century to the present day. The revolutionary changes in the craft resulting from the advent of the computer are detailed and an optimistic picture of the future is presented.

Limerick's first printer was a man named Samuel Terry (1673-1725), who learned his trade in London. A few pieces of Terry's work are available for viewing in the Limerick City Library. T. Brangan printed Limerick's first newspaper on May 4, 1716. It was called the *Limerick Newsletter*. Printed on half a broad sheet on both sides of the page in two columns, it carried no real local news except for an intriguing reference to a Captain Brown of the Royal Scots Battalion whom it appears "set out from hence to Rose-Grey to the great regret of the ladies of the city". Pretty salacious stuff for its time, I am sure. Perhaps this was an early stab at tabloid journalism? If so it was not successful as Brangan's paper had only one issue. Doubtless its cover price of one shilling had much to do with its short life.

During the 18th century a number of printers operated successfully in Limerick. They included Andrew Welsh, John Ferrar, John Cherry, Andrew Watson and William Goggin. The trade flourished with many hundreds of pamphlets bearing a Limerick imprint being produced. John Ferrar was probably the best known Limerick printer of that period. He was a historian who printed his own material and was the founder-editor of the *Limerick Chronicle* newspaper in 1768. The *Chronicle* has fairly miraculously managed to survive until this day. Ferrar did much of the production work himself, wrote most of the stories and even accepted advertisements over the counter. In 1781 the *Chronicle* was taken over by Andrew Watson. The Watsons became a very wealthy and influential Limerick family for several generations thereafter.

More printers emerged in the 19th century, among them the McKern brothers, William and George. The company they founded in 1806 is still going strong making it probably the oldest printing company in Ireland. The McKerns originally hailed from Scotland but once settled in Limerick the family took an active and leading part in all aspects of the commercial and social life of the city. Their women folk are reputed to have been beautiful, refined and musically talented, and were a great draw at dinner parties and other social gatherings. The McKerns lived in some considerable comfort in a house named "Rose Cottage", the ruins of which may still be seen on the grounds of Plassey Technological Park (opposite the former Wang factory), overlooking the lordly Shannon River. The McKerns were so highly respected that even though the firm has changed ownership several times in the intervening years and the last McKern left the city as long ago as 1857, the name of the company has never been changed



in deference to the founders. Descendants of William and George McKern are known to be living in Sydney, Australia and Buenos Aires, Argentina respectively.

James Buckley founded the *Limerick Leader* in 1899. Although the first issue was an abject failure, missing its first scheduled publication date, it grew steadily and by the middle of the 20th century more or less dominated the printing scene in Limerick. Although it closed its own commercial printing works some years ago, the *Leader* is now considered to be one of the top provincial newspapers in Ireland. It has been in the vanguard of many laudable editorial and production innovations in provincial Ireland.

Englishman Charles Davis was an enterprising printer who came to Limerick in 1887 to join McKerns Printing. After about ten years he decided to set up his own Electric Printing Company in Chapel Lane, off William Street, and was the first printer in Limerick to use electricity to drive his machines. Today, the founder's grandson, also Charlie, carries on his grandfather's business under his own name from Upper Henry Street. He is the current President of the *Limerick Guild of Master Printers*, an association set up within the past decade to facilitate co-operation and provide mutual support.

Very little happened as far as new printing technology was concerned for the first sixty years of the twentieth century apart from the steady increase in Litho Offset printing and the arrival of the short lived phototypesetter. I can clearly remember the bitter frustration and total disgust spat out by a retired printer who came into McKerns Printing Works in the 1970s. He was on a courtesy visit to his former colleagues. He had heard on the grapevine that a new fangled gizmo called a phototypesetter was changing everything and that the days of hot and cold metal were no more. Instead of metal slugs of type being churned out by a Linotype, phototypesetters produced the columns of the required text on a roll of bromide paper, which was then placed in position and glued onto a pre-prepared grid. This was much speedier than anything seen before. The finished grid was transferred by photography onto the offset aluminium printing plate and there was far more scope for artistic embellishment than ever before. The veteran compositor was not impressed: "Ha! Call yereselves compositors? No way, ye're only bloomin 'paper hangers!" His hard-earned craft, which took him seven years of a gruelling apprenticeship to learn was being simplified beyond belief and being hurled into the abyss of a distant time tunnel and he did not like it. Little did anyone know at that moment in time that in historical terms the days of the "paper hangers" and the phototypesetters would only last about "five minutes" because the computer would soon take over and that everything would again be changed this time beyond recognition. The compositor's art of hand setting a line of type on a composing stick had lasted for centuries but those whom we called "paste-up artists" and "phototypesetting engineers" would be redundant in no time at all. Magnificent skills, which had taken years to learn, were being summarily dismissed. As quick as the blinking of an eye almost, metal composition was a thing of the past, thrown on the scrap heap of history. Printing would never be the same again. It was quite astonishing how quickly this revolution happened. It was no wonder there was such fierce resistance put up by the highly orthodox and aggressive printing trade unions. After centuries of stability and an almost sanctified, mysterious and secret trade in which skills were jealously handed down from father to son, they were understandably bewildered by the way their ancient craft was being obliterated. However despite an initial resistance, with its associated aggravation and anguish it was accepted that there was no chance of holding on to the past.

Printing is a far different industry now, completely unrecognisable from the days when I first became aware of its mysteries as a child visiting my beloved, late father's place of work or when I entered it as a career in 1964. Almost out of the blue, and as a by-product to space exploration, in which computers had somehow learned how to talk to each other, the Internet, e-mail and desktop publishing were



developed. Today computerised digitalisation works almost at the speed of light; vast quantities of data can be processed at speeds previously unheard of. Print customers can now send the most complicated of job instructions to their print supplier via an ISDN telephone line. The job can be electronically directed to an automatic image setter or platemaker and be ready for processing in the blink of an eye without a single human hand touching it. Thousands of compositors were made redundant almost overnight. Proud craftsman had to become IT technicians as art became a process. The fabulous skills of all of those wonderful people who worked in the industry should never be forgotten. The information and communication explosion that we now enjoy came to us courtesy of them. We should honour their legacy.

Personally I have been in or around the industry for over fifty years. I have seen extraordinary changes in that time. Gloomy predictions of the decline and inevitable death of print have been doing the rounds for years but more words and images are being printed in 2001 than ever before, with or without moveable type. Despite the doomsayers there is little sign of a falloff in demand for the printed word. We simply do it differently, that is all. There was a time when McKems had one of the biggest poster departments in Ireland. The printed poster was the main means of advertising for the trade's people of the city. McKems had an enormous selection of wooden poster type, but the posters printed were sometimes so large and detailed that they had to be done in sections because we did not have enough type to print all of the copy in one pass through the machine. The type had to be dismantled and re-used on another section of the same poster. Students of history will know that the famous Irish Proclamation poster of 1916 was printed in two halves for the same reason and that it was full of flaws caused by shortage of certain characters and letters.

Every bit as noteworthy as all of the technological developments that I have seen are the changes in work practices and attitudes of highly skilled craft workers, anxious to hold on to their ancient methods. It has been a revelation to see, after a generation or two of bitter resistance, enlightened co-operation and adaptation to new systems working to everybody's advantage, especially the customers. It was a difficult notion to sell, once upon a time. The future success of a proud and ancient industry will depend, more than anything else, on that attitude continuing in the future. In former times the militancy of Limerick trade unionists was famous, the local print union was in the vanguard of many of the upheavals in the industrial "wars" that were waged locally. These fracas have been well documented elsewhere (e.g. *The Bottom Dog* chronicles) and are well worth looking into.

Learning how to cope with all of that new technology, the resultant job losses or re-training and the demands of more discerning, even aggressive, customers was not easy. Nerves were constantly on edge, rows were commonplace and an awful lot of people were forced to walk away from a trade and way of life that they obviously had pride in and enjoyed. There were many redundancies and business failures as the industry strove to come to grips with the new order. When printing changed from primarily having a production orientation to purely a business one, a terrible price had to be paid. It was a case of adapt or die. Once upon a time producing print was difficult; running the business was secondary. Not so anymore. Staying in business by making a profit is now the most difficult aspect of the enterprise.

In 1964 when I joined McKerns there were 44 names on the payroll and many others drawing part-time fees and stipends. Today there are 12 full-time employees and a small number of regular subcontractors. Thanks to technology and new work practices the output has not dropped in relative value or volume. I may regret the passing of a unique and satisfying craft but I certainly do not miss the dirty ink-stained hands, the noise, the continual lifting of heavy galleys of type, the long hours, the lack of comfort or the positively lethal and odious smells emanating from the furnace used for the melting

down and re-cycling of lead type in the hell hole at the back of our printing works in Glentworth Street. It was an economic necessity thirty years ago that every few days the used slugs of type from completed jobs and published newspapers had to be melted down for re-use. That was positively the worst job in the organisation and it was the youngest apprentice (known as the printer's devil) who had to do it. Having survived that ordeal he had proved his dedication to the trade. Thankfully this pretty horrendous process is no longer required.

For many centuries, printing was a very physical industry that required a lot of dexterity and some strength but no longer does "moving type" dominate the process of putting ink on paper. Something as simple as not having to "dress down" for work and being able to go there in your "good clothes" is remarkable to me. Everything has changed beyond the wildest of dreams and people have had to change with them. But we should not allow the names of the key figures in our colourful past to be forgotten. They were not only pioneers but indispensable conduits of knowledge too.

Until quite recently there were always only three or four printing firms in Limerick. In the past thirty years or so, as the city has grown, the number of firms operating here has quadrupled. The traditional entry barriers into the trade, complex technical expertise and expensive set-up costs have all been eased considerably. This has led not only to much greater competition than ever before, which is much to the advantage of the customer, but it also proves that printing, far from dying, is widening its base and output. Looking towards the future, the survival of printing companies will depend on their ability to seize new opportunities in the communications area of endeavour rather than the traditional "putting ink on paper" scenario though the transfer of knowledge by words, written or otherwise will remain central. The sentiments of none other than Charles Dickens towards the old craft will always hold true:

I am certain that there are not in any branch of manual dexterity so many remarkable men as might be found in the printing trade. For quickness of perception, amount of endurance, and willingness to oblige, I have found the compositor pre-eminent. The printer is the friend of intelligence, of thought, he is the friend of liberty and of freedom of law; indeed the printer is the friend of every man who is the friend of order - the friend of every man who can read.