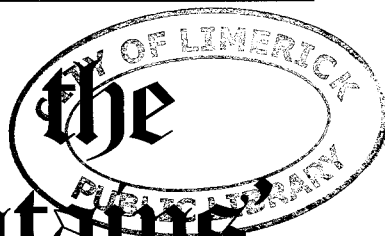


# 'Bringing books to the fields and very Mountains Limerick County Library service 1935-55



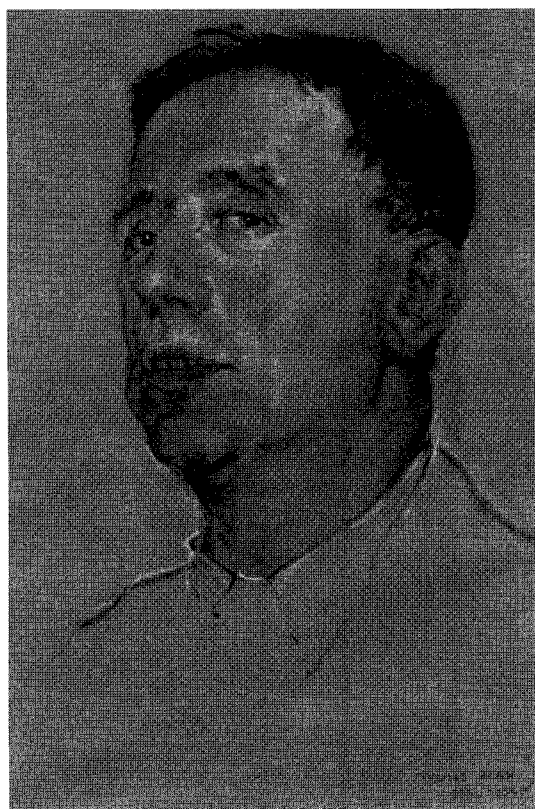
**P**rior to 1935, the Limerick library service was not county based. The rural districts of Newcastlewest and Rathkeale had established libraries under the Public Libraries Act of 1902. They were helped by funding from Andrew Carnegie, the wealthy Scots-born philanthropist, who provided grant aid. Fourteen Carnegie libraries were established in Limerick county during the period 1907-1917. These Carnegie libraries have been well documented by Devlin and others.<sup>1</sup> However, they fell into disuse due to lack of adequate funding, poor management and also because the Carnegie United Kingdom Trust began to support a county-based service. Legislation in 1925 led to county councils becoming library authorities. In 1935 a Wicklow man, Daniel Doyle, was appointed the first county librarian of Limerick. He had worked with the writer/librarian Frank O'Connor in Wicklow library service. He at first had to report to a library committee, as from 1925 up to 1943 the county council managed the fledgling library service through this body and it had the final say on library matters. With the coming into operation of the County Management Act, 1940, the powers exercised by county library committees since 1925 were transferred to the county managers.

The establishment of a county library infrastructure during the period 1935-55 and the delivery of a book-lending service for the county were tackled with enthusiasm, hard work and zeal by the newly-appointed librarian. One of the first objectives he had for the library was the securing of a headquarters for the county service. The Strand Barracks was first mooted as a possibility, but he settled on temporary accommodation, which was secured at 105 O'Connell St. Limerick.<sup>2</sup> In October 1939, the headquarters was moved to a building in Sarsfield Street and these premises were open daily for the purpose of lending books to county residents. This rather officious distinction between county and city library borrowers lasted up until the 1970s. This lending library served the

by Margaret Franklin

large population living immediately outside the city boundary. Daily issue of books from the central stock in this building was estimated at 250 volumes.<sup>3</sup>

Disaster was to strike the fledgling service in February 1944, when the county headquarters was burned in a fire and with it about 9,000 books plus most of the organisational 'hardware' which had aided the efficiency of the service. New premises were then required to house the library headquarters, the administrative offices and the district branch library. According to the annual report of 1944/45 this branch was reopened in temporary premises with a stock of 2,000 books.<sup>4</sup> It was decided to separate the branch work completely from the work of the head-



Daniel Doyle as President of the Library Association of Ireland

quarters and a branch librarian was appointed in charge. The activity of this branch encroached on the office space used for the general headquarters administration work, which was in a very small room at the rear of the branch library. The branch library moved to rented premises in Henry Street (where Jack Fitzgerald Electrical is now located). Doyle then moved the headquarters to the upper portion of the county council offices at 71 O'Connell Street, Limerick. This space was suitably shelved and equipped to meet the immediate needs.

From the biennial report of 1950/52, it is revealed that the library headquarters was again totally inadequate.<sup>5</sup> Thousands of books had to be carried by hand up and down stairs to the third and fourth floors of the 71 O'Connell Street building. In 1953 the council purchased 58 O'Connell Street, a building owned by Christies coach builders. The building was completely re-designed and had a floor area of almost 5,000 square feet. In January 1954 the Limerick district branch, which had been housed in Henry Street since the fire in 1944, was transferred to new quarters in the front portion of the new building. This branch had its own entrance and carried a stock of 7,000 volumes. The county book reserve transferred here in August 1953 and the administrative offices the following October of that year. The headquarters and branch library cost approximately £5,000 and was financed out of revenue.<sup>6</sup> The county library service still operates out of this building pending the opening of a new library headquarters in the suburb of Dooradoyle.

By 1952, Dan Doyle had a number of significant improvements made to the fledgling county library service, which can be listed as follows:<sup>7</sup>

*April 1950* – Newly built branch at Abbeyfeale opened.

*July 1950* – Site accepted as gift from the relatives of the victims of the cinema fire for the building of a branch library at Drumcollogher.

*August 1950* – Newly built branch at Glin opened.



An early mobile school library

November 1950 – Branch library opened in rented premises in Foynes.

February 1951 – Athea branch library re-equipped and re-stocked.

April 1951 – Newcastlewest branch re-designed and equipped.

August 1951 – Limerick district branch re-painted.

October 1951 – Negotiations begun for the acquisition of a site for a library in Adare.

October 1951 – Free site accepted from Muintir na Tíre for the building of a branch library at Ballingarry.

November 1951 – Kilfinane branch library had to close due to problems with the lease.

March 1952 – Askeaton library alterations completed.

March 1952 – Repairs made to Rathkeale library.

March 1952 – Caherconlish library begun.

By now, Doyle declared that there were 110 distributive points working – the branch libraries, the library centres and the special collections, which were in secondary schools.

The librarian, Desmond Clarke, visited the county in 1956 and gives us some useful information on the building of some of these branches.<sup>8</sup> The Abbeyfeale branch cost £1,270 and was financed from the local loans fund. This library was similar in design to all the other new branches. It consisted of:

*one large bright and airy room measuring 24 by 18 feet and containing an adult and juvenile library with a stock of 2,900 volumes, of which 500 are for juvenile readers. The building is a mass concrete structure with a flat asphalted roof. There are high-level windows*

*around the room, fluorescent lighting, and a bright colour scheme of cream and red. The book-stacks around the walls are, as in all the new branches, six foot high, and good framed prints add to the amenities. There is a built-in charging desk at the entrance.<sup>9</sup>*

The Glin branch was obtained on a long lease from the Knight of Glin.<sup>10</sup> The building was 19 by 16 feet and had approximately 2,000 volumes.<sup>11</sup> It was opened in August 1950 and had a book stock of 1,376 items.<sup>12</sup> The library remained in this building until the late 1970s, when it was transferred to the Glin bridewell/courthouse. According to the 1950/52 annual report, Glin book issues had risen from 388 in 1937 to 2,377.

Newcastle West library, the biggest in the county, was reorganised in 1951 and this library has always had a special position in the library service. It had its origins in the beginning of the century in a small collection of books given to the local Courtenay school by Monsignor Hallinan. When Lennox Robinson went to west Limerick in 1915, he secured a free site from the Earl of Devon in the Market Yard. Plans were drawn up by James D. Leahy of Cullenagh and the building was completed in 1916.<sup>13</sup> In 1920 the local R.I.C. and military 'went berserk over the shooting of Constable Masterson, and shot up the town, burning amongst a lot of other buildings the Carnegie library.'<sup>14</sup> The library lay in ruins for a few years and rebuilding commenced in 1924. James D. Leahy died before its completion and the work was completed by John F. Ambrose.

In December 1947, the county council had adopted a new library plan and it went into operation on the 1st of April, 1948. The plan was to be a five year one and its principal points were as follows-

- (a) To divide the county into twenty-four library districts each with its own branch library and supplementary distributing centres. The book stock for each district was to be fifty books per hundred of the population.
- (b) Books of an educational nature were to be supplied on demand. This was a rather broad statement to make but the intention was to 'get the right book to the right person at the right time'.<sup>15</sup>
- (c) Lectures and advertisements were to be to stimulate intellectual interest and to make people aware of the extent of books available to them.
- (d) A children's library was planned under a specially trained librarian.
- (e) The art collection was to be extended to all branch libraries and schools.
- (f) A gramophone library was to be provided at all branch libraries where a demand exists.
- (g) Study groups were to be encouraged.
- (h) Local history museums were to be provided at branch libraries.

The biennial report of 1954/56 states that nineteen branch libraries were being maintained while two further libraries, at Hospital and Ballingarry, were being built. Progress towards completion of the five year plan was made throughout the period 1948/53 – new branches had been opened in Caherconlish, Dromcollogher and Shanagolden. There is no surviving evidence to explain why Doyle's proposed local history museum collections did not become established in the branches, but it may possibly be explained by lack of finances.

The dynamic and charismatic personality of Dan Doyle was central to the development of the county Limerick library service.

He was born on a county Wicklow farm that was run by his mother, as his father was usually away at sea as a seaman. His father drowned while Doyle was still quite young, but nevertheless Doyle retained a love of boats all his life. During his time in Limerick he would annually take the headquarters library staff on boat trips up the Shannon. This kind of involvement in the off-duty lives of his staff was not unusual and it was recounted that he was very caring towards members of the library staff.<sup>16</sup> He attended De La Salle secondary school, where he said the education must have been good because 'now that I am sixty-five, I'm still curious, still learning, still wanting to learn and still able to let the soup boil over'.<sup>17</sup> Dan Doyle said, reflecting on his times in Limerick, that he was sent in March 1935 'to Limerick with a new broom to use in the west and a mission for the east,' that is, he had to reorganise the Carnegie libraries and establish a service in the rest of the county. He saw himself very much a pioneering individual, who stated that:

*the object of the county library is to bring its books within the reach of readers scattered all over the county in small towns and villages. Indeed, it might almost be said to bring the books to the very fields and mountains for it had been found that the most outlying districts are precisely those which are able to profit to the best advantage from the system provided by a county library scheme.<sup>18</sup>*

Doyle was an excellent communicator as well as being an outgoing gregarious individual. He would appear to have been very hard working and kept very busy in his job. His competence in his work may in part explain how a high number of his staff went on to become county librarians in their own right. Martin McCabe from Castleconnell became county librarian in Monaghan, Maurice Flynn from Abbeyfeale became county librarian first in Wexford and then Limerick city. Pdraig Ó Maidin became Cork city librarian, Jim Fogarty, Kilkenny county librarian and Helen Kilcline was appointed county librarian in Roscommon. Dolores Doyle (no relation) succeeded Maurice Flynn in Limerick city. Dan Doyle himself was succeeded in 1972 by his assistant, Roisin de Nais.

Doyle was astute enough to cultivate a good working relationship with the management of the county council, especially with P. J. Meghen, the first county manager.

Meghen was very pro library development. He also shared Doyle's interest in rural community affairs and Muintir na Tire. They worked very closely together, at times in partnership and sometimes in almost a symbiotic relationship, which benefited the development of the library service hugely.

Meghen was unable to drive, so he travelled to Muintir na Tire events with Doyle.<sup>19</sup> There may have been an element of quid pro quo here, as Meghen was the



Roisin de Nais

final arbiter of the library budget. Dan Doyle would appear to have shared Meghen's values and philosophy. In a paper he delivered at a Muintir conference in Ennis, Doyle spoke about the need to support 'the improving of community life, creating in the community an atmosphere of Christian harmony and good-will which will be congenial to the fullest development of personal life.' His paper was given full page coverage by the *Limerick Leader* which would suggest that he was seen as an influential figure in the local communities.<sup>20</sup> Doyle has also been described as a man of strong Christian faith and he was a member of the third order of Franciscans.

Dan Doyle had a consummate interest in the arts and spearheaded the acquisition of an art collection for the county library service. He believed that paintings had an educative value as 'silent witnesses to the twilight and skill of man'.<sup>21</sup> Doyle initiated a system of distribution and exchange of these pictures through the village and town network of libraries. Lectures and exhibitions about the pictures were also organised. The acquisitions included works by Irish artists such as Harry Kernoff and Fergus Ryan. The Limerick artist Sean Keating, Charles Lamb and William Leech were also purchased with the assistance of a 50% subsidy from the Arts Council. The pictures were hung in the branch libraries and rotated from time to time. Doyle was very much fulfilling the role of arts officer for the county by spearheading the purchase of artwork.

Doyle was also one of the leading lights in Feile Luimni and the production of stage plays 'as Gaeilge'. What now seems like a fairly innocuous innovation was his pioneering of the lending of gramophone records from the district branch library at the city headquarters from 1940s to the 1950s. 'It was decided to stock only serious works, such as symphonies, concertos, sonatas, overtures and chamber music.'<sup>22</sup> The music library

initially cost forty pounds and an annual expenditure of fifty to sixty pounds.<sup>23</sup> This was a unique service in a public library in this country at that time. Doyle made arrangements for combined art and music exhibitions to be held in various centres in the county and these exhibitions were accompanied by lectures and commentaries. It continued to function in the early 1950s, but technical reasons such as the changes in the methods of recording and the introduction of L.P.s created difficulties for this service.

A poetry circle was also started and fortnightly meetings were held during the winter. As well as cultural activities at the branch in Limerick city, Doyle also began to promote a series of public lectures throughout the county.

Study groups were also facilitated at this time and special library collections were made available in places such as Kilmallock, Ballylanders, and Clouncagh.

Doyle was a very successful community librarian and he advanced the cause of the public library in Limerick. His legacy is still evident throughout the county. He was very much a pioneering luminary both locally and nationally, becoming President of the Library Association of Ireland in 1964. He continued to advance the cause of the public library service throughout the 1960s with a new plan (1962) which invested more in schools libraries and a mobile library service. He retired to Camas in Connemara in 1972.

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