

KIERAN BYRNE  
MECHANICS' INSTITUTES IN  
IRELAND, 1825-1850

movement  
prompted by  
UK:  
- IRL aware  
of educ.  
movements

State participation in education has, for the most part, attracted a central focus of attention in Irish educational historiography. Thus it has transpired that while the national system of elementary education, the intermediate board, the universities and various government reports and acts have all fallen under the scrutiny of one author or another the history and contribution of voluntary bodies have been poorly represented and understated. Consequently the study of the history of Irish education is victim of an imbalance which blurs a cogent perception of developments in the aggregate. Since critics of educational historiography confine their remarks principally to allegations of insufficient political and social context this partiality is frequently overlooked. This paper will consider and evaluate the mechanics' institute movement in Ireland, a voluntary enterprise which set an important precedent for subsequent state involvement and in the interim pioneered a new trend in the Irish education tradition.

In 1825 a general movement was made in this country for the establishment of institutes for the instruction of the artizan or mechanic, as he was then known, in scientific principles underlying his trade. Entitled mechanics' institutes, this departure is significant for a number of reasons. Firstly, the movement, not of Irish origin, was an extension of the parent movement in

Voluntary  
stepping  
stone to  
state  
involvement  
1825  
general  
movement  
instruction  
of artizan  
mechanic

## MECHANICS' INSTITUTES

London - 1824

Great Britain<sup>1</sup> and in this way is an indication of the extent to which educational developments elsewhere were closely monitored and imitated in Ireland. Secondly, there is the rapidity with which this occurred; scarcely had one year elapsed since the inauguration of the London Mechanics' Institute<sup>2</sup> than a similar idea was mooted in Dublin, and by 1825 institutions had been established in other urban centres, notably Armagh, Belfast, Cork, Galway, Limerick, and Waterford.<sup>3</sup> Thirdly, there is the question of causation and function. Undoubtedly the era of the industrial revolution in Britain proved a fitting and obvious birthplace for the enterprise. Ireland, at first appearances, would seem an almost alien environment. On closer examination, however, there is a substantial body of evidence to discredit that view.

Although industrialization on a par with that of England was not the Irish experience nonetheless it did awaken a response. It created a concern on the part of some, at least, that the nation must not be left behind in this new drive for prosperity. While an educated work-force elsewhere was recognised as a power by which industrial advancement might be sustained, in Ireland it was regarded as a power by which it might be initiated. Therefore, as the pace of industrialization quickened the role of education assumed grander proportions. Prior to this with the founding of the Royal Dublin Society in 1731<sup>4</sup> the study of science and improved methods of agriculture was initiated, and with this precedent to hand there gradually emerged a na-

Dublin - 1824  
Armagh  
Belfast  
Cork  
Galway  
Limerick  
Waterford

Indust. Revolt  
in UK ✓

Ireland?

Indust. in  
UK prompted  
a response in  
Ireland.

Educ  
centrality in  
Ireland →  
initiate industrial

✓ checked  
educ might  
sustain develop

<sup>1</sup> See M. Tylecote, *The Mechanics' Institutes of Lancashire and Yorkshire before 1851* (Manchester, 1957).

<sup>2</sup> See T. Kelly, *George Birbeck (Pioneer of Adult Education)* (Liverpool University Press, 1957).

<sup>3</sup> J. W. Hudson, *The History of Adult Education*, 2nd ed. (London, 1969), p. 236. Institutes were founded in other centres also not cited by Hudson, Carrig-on-Suir, Cashel, Coleraine, Tipperary, Wexford.

<sup>4</sup> See H. F. Berry, *A History of the Royal Dublin Society* (London, 1915), or T. de Vere White, *The History of the Royal Dublin Society* (Tralee, 1955).

Influence  
of RDS  
movement



mechanics  
drew on spirit/  
support/personnel  
of R.D.

Infrastructural  
develop of mid 19<sup>th</sup>  
↓  
needed:  
(a) architects/  
engineers  
but also  
(b) artisans

Mechanics believed  
had a key role in  
this. 11  
Evening classes  
employers  
motives:  
(a) less crude  
workers  
(b) encourage  
more firm  
commitment 2  
work.  
① orderly work  
force.  
② completion of  
contract

tional network of scientific societies and institutions. In this way Ireland was merely keeping pace with the universal emergence of popular scientific study.<sup>1</sup> It would be from this spirit that mechanics' institutes would subsequently draw a degree of inspiration, support and in some cases personnel. On the industrial front, as observed, there is certainly less to report, yet developments here should not be dismissed too readily. During the first half of the nineteenth century with the introduction of an improved transport system of canal, road and rail, significant improvements were taking place in the country. Furthermore, provision was being made for more advanced public health facilities and land reclamation. Such enterprise had implications not only for architects and engineers but also for the artisan upon whom the responsibility of interpreting these various designs and plans fell.<sup>2</sup> In respect of such skill it was believed mechanics' institutes had a key role. Of equal significance, perhaps, was a more pragmatic consideration on the part of employers. Mechanics' institutes might in their own way elevate the work-force to aspirations less crude and base than combination. Evening classes and self-instruction were therefore encouraged for reasons that were not always motivated by good will or philanthropy alone. Institutes might encourage a more firm commitment to work, a temperate, orderly work-force and consequently the efficient conclusion of contracts within the specified time. Additionally they might break 'idle Monday' and spawn a new generation of workers suitably converted to the prevailing ethos of bourgeois economic rationale.

The motives, then, that inspired the founding of these institutes were as various as the ways in which the individual institutes originated. Labour historians have sometimes held out the hope that here at last could be found the germs of the intellectual march of organised labour. This view can hardly be sustained.

<sup>1</sup> T. Kelly, *A History of Adult Education in Great Britain (from the middle ages to the twentieth century)*, (Liverpool, 1970), pp. 112-17.

<sup>2</sup> See *Engineering Ireland 1778-1878*, Exhibition Catalogue, (School of Engineering, Trinity College, Dublin, 1978).

organising  
labour  
↓  
reality!

versus 'goodwill'

stained. The working classes were constituted of such stratifications as non-skilled, skilled and master at its simplest.<sup>1</sup> These elements did not always make for the easiest of cohesion since the skilled and master tradesman coveted this distinction jealously. It was to these latter two that mechanics' institutes directed foremost attention, and in some cases it was from them that the original impetus came. Although the non-skilled worker was not denied membership, management of the institutes resided with the skilled and professional subscribers. The original idealists of the movement had advocated that management be left in the hands of the mechanics, with the professional supporters acting in a pastoral capacity only.<sup>2</sup> Such idealism was portrayed in few institutes. The Dublin mechanics' institute, initiated by mechanics themselves, was anxious to seek the support and advice of scientific and other individuals. It was, however, indicated that two thirds of management would comprise mechanics.<sup>3</sup> But this did not provide a blueprint for other institutes. The situation varied regionally. The Cork mechanics' institute was first considered at a meeting of the Cork Literary and Scientific Society<sup>4</sup> and from there, through the medium of the local press, a public meeting was called.<sup>5</sup> This rather middle class origin is further verified by the fact that within three days of the public announcement over one thousand pounds had been subscribed for the venture.<sup>6</sup> The subscription list reveals the extent to which the merchant class

management  
of institute by  
skilled/professional  
members  
✓ original  
idealism  
mechanics themselves  
would manage  
+ supported only  
by prof. members

idealism  
perceived only in  
a few institutes  
not adopted  
in Dublin but  
not in other

Cork  
example of  
prof./middle class  
management

Cork:  
influences of  
Merchant  
classes

<sup>1</sup> E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (Pelican Books, London, 1968), pp. 9-11.

<sup>2</sup> *Cork Constitution*, 7 February, 1825, *To the Proprietors of Large factories*.

<sup>3</sup> *Freeman's Journal*, 15 September, 1824, *Dublin Mechanics' Institute to the Proprietor of the Freeman's Journal*.

<sup>4</sup> Details of this meeting are recorded in the diary of Richard Dowden which is available in the Day papers' collection at the archives of the Cork County Library.

<sup>5</sup> *Cork Constitution*, 9 February, 1825, *Mechanics' Institute*.

<sup>6</sup> *Cork Constitution*, 11 February, 1825, *Cork Mechanics' Institute*.

"bourgeois" idea



mechanics  
draw on spirit/  
support/personnel  
of RDs

Infrastructural  
develop of mid 19

needed  
architects/  
engineers  
but also

b) artisans

Mechanics believed  
a key role in  
this

evening classes  
employers  
motives:

(a) less crude  
workers

(b) encourage  
more firm  
commitment 2  
work.

Orderly work  
force.

Completion of  
contract

tional network of scientific societies and institutions. In this way Ireland was merely keeping pace with the universal emergence of popular scientific study.<sup>1</sup> It would be from this spirit that mechanics' institutes would subsequently draw a degree of inspiration, support and in some cases personnel. On the industrial front, as observed, there is certainly less to report, yet developments here should not be dismissed too readily. During the first half of the nineteenth century with the introduction of an improved transport system of canal, road and rail, significant improvements were taking place in the country. Furthermore, provision was being made for more advanced public health facilities and land reclamation. Such enterprise had implications not only for architects and engineers but also for the artisan upon whom the responsibility of interpreting these various designs and plans fell.<sup>2</sup> In respect of such skill it was believed mechanics' institutes had a key role. Of equal significance, perhaps, was a more pragmatic consideration on the part of employers. Mechanics' institutes might in their own way elevate the work-force to aspirations less crude and base than combination. Evening classes and self-instruction were therefore encouraged for reasons that were not always motivated by good will or philanthropy alone. Institutes might encourage a more firm commitment to work, a temperate, orderly work-force and consequently the efficient conclusion of contracts within the specified time. Additionally they might break 'idle Monday' and spawn a new generation of workers suitably converted to the prevailing ethos of bourgeois economic rationale.

The motives, then, that inspired the founding of these institutes were as various as the ways in which the individual institutes originated. Labour historians have sometimes held out the hope that here at last could be found the germs of the intellectual march of organised labour. This view can hardly be sustained.

<sup>1</sup> T. Kelly, *A History of Adult Education in Great Britain (from the middle ages to the twentieth century)*, (Liverpool, 1970), pp. 112-17.

<sup>2</sup> See *Engineering Ireland 1778-1878*, Exhibition Catalogue, (School of Engineering, Trinity College, Dublin, 1978).

Organising  
labour  
✓  
Reality!

Verano "Gaelic"!!

"Pangloss" idea

stained. The working classes were constituted of such stratifications as non-skilled, skilled and master at its simplest.<sup>1</sup> These elements did not always make for the easiest of cohesion since the skilled and master tradesman coveted this distinction jealously. It was to these latter two that mechanics' institutes directed foremost attention, and in some cases it was from them that the original impetus came. Although the non-skilled worker was not denied membership, management of the institutes resided with the skilled and professional subscribers. The original idealists of the movement had advocated that management be left in the hands of the mechanics, with the professional supporters acting in a pastoral capacity only.<sup>2</sup> Such idealism was portrayed in few institutes. The Dublin mechanics' institute, initiated by mechanics themselves, was anxious to seek the support and advice of scientific and other individuals. It was, however, indicated that two thirds of management would comprise mechanics.<sup>3</sup> But this did not provide a blueprint for other institutes. The situation varied regionally. The Cork mechanics' institute was first considered at a meeting of the Cork Literary and Scientific Society<sup>4</sup> and from there, through the medium of the local press, a public meeting was called.<sup>5</sup> This rather middle class origin is further verified by the fact that within three days of the public announcement over one thousand pounds had been subscribed for the venture.<sup>6</sup> The subscription list reveals the extent to which the merchant class

management  
of institute by  
skilled/professional  
members  
✓ original  
idealism

mechanics themselves  
would manage  
+ supported only  
by pro professional

idealism  
present only in  
a few institutes  
not adopted  
in Dublin but  
not in other

Cork  
example of  
prof./middle class  
management

Cork:  
influences of  
Merchant  
classes

<sup>1</sup> E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (Pelican Books, London, 1968), pp. 9-11.

<sup>2</sup> *Cork Constitution*, 7 February, 1825, *To the Proprietors of Large factories*.

<sup>3</sup> *Freeman's Journal*, 15 September, 1824, *Dublin Mechanics' Institute to the Proprietor of the Freeman's Journal*.

<sup>4</sup> Details of this meeting are recorded in the diary of Richard Dowden which is available in the Day papers' collection at the archives of the Cork County Library.

<sup>5</sup> *Cork Constitution*, 9 February, 1825, *Mechanics' Institute*.

<sup>6</sup> *Cork Constitution*, 11 February, 1825, *Cork Mechanics' Institute*.



ourful scientific lecturers and this not only in Ireland. He did not go unacknowledged and was appointed to the chair of Natural Philosophy at the newly founded London University in 1828.<sup>1</sup> If of no other significance this provided a formal recognition of the Irish scientific tradition, one that has scarcely been acknowledged by historians past or present. Between the months of May and September of 1825 Lardner continued to lecture at the Dublin Institute.<sup>2</sup> This course, *Elementary Principles of Mechanics as related to the Practical Arts*, concluded with six lectures on the *Steam Engine*.<sup>3</sup> This latter theme was of such popularity as to draw what was described as 'several hundreds' to the rooms of the Dublin Institute in Sackville Street.<sup>4</sup> It is highly ironic to note that at the termination of the course Lardner, in tones that are indicative of the times, remarked:

'I cannot but feel proud in having been among the foremost to burst the banks, which have so long confined those great reservoirs of science, the universities, and to direct their waters over a soil at once so fertile and so extensive.'<sup>5</sup>

In November of 1826 Lardner lectured to the Cork Mechanics' Institute on the steam engine and with similar success,<sup>6</sup> previous lecturers being Edmund Davy and Professor Tisdall of the Royal Cork Institute.<sup>7</sup>

Furthermore the institute in Cork hoped to have an annual syllabus of lectures courses drawn up. In this way some continuity might be assured but more importantly, subjects viewed by management as essential to the interests of industry were given

<sup>1</sup> Dictionary of National Biography Vol. 11., pp. 586-88.

<sup>2</sup> Freeman's Journal, 12 May, 1825, Dublin Mechanics' Institution.

<sup>3</sup> Report of the Proceedings, op. cit., p. 7.

<sup>4</sup> Freeman's Journal, 18 August, 1825, Mechanics' Institution—Lectures on the Steam Engine.

<sup>5</sup> Freeman's Journal, 14 October, 1825, Dublin Mechanics' Institution.

<sup>6</sup> Dowden Diary, op. cit., p. 11.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., pp. 9-10.

a permanent and compulsory status. Thus the syllabus proposed lectures on 'health and the checking of contagion', 'the use of machinery', 'glass making', 'brewing and distilling', 'tanning', 'soap-making', 'the selection and arrangement of building-materials'.<sup>1</sup> From this outline it is clear that the Mechanics' Institute hoped to meet the demands of the adjacent industrial environment since many of the industries mentioned were prominent in the city's hinterland.<sup>2</sup>

Unfortunately, however, the eloquence with which the movement's objectives were articulated was insufficient to sustain the new enterprise. By 1828 institutes at most centres were in decline. Reasons for such an outcome are difficult to establish and remain obscure. No doubt the novelty of the enterprise gained a support that subsequently proved ephemeral. Expectations were too high, too much was promised too soon and the movement fell victim to its own propaganda. Adverse criticism from employers was another impeding factor. It was feared an educated work-force would increase its wage demands. One extremist declared these institutes illegal, and portrayed a literate mechanic as a subscriber to radicalism and revolution.<sup>3</sup>

Viewed from another standpoint the movement was introduced at a time of great political excitement in Ireland, with O'Connell harnessing support for his Catholic Emancipation campaign. The politics of the day, election meetings and speeches coupled with the congenial interest of the Irish populace in matters political may have rendered scientific lectures, self-instruction and concentrated reading far too mundane by comparison. That the lecture method presumed a literacy that may not always have been forthcoming is another factor worthy of consideration.

Throughout all of this as if in defiance the Cork Mechanics'

<sup>1</sup> Laws and Regulations of the Cork Mechanics' Institute, op. cit., p. 15.

<sup>2</sup> See W. O'Sullivan, *Economic History of Cork City from the Earliest Times to the Act of Union* (Cork, 1937).

<sup>3</sup> Freeman's Journal, 17 October, 1825, Armagh Mechanics' Institute.

1828:  
= decline.  
why?  
difficult to  
but ① novelty  
② expectations too high  
③ criticism from employers  
④ fear of educated work force  
political env  
+ military

popularity of lectures

failure

abit too ambitious!

Cork compulsory subjects to facilitate industry: e.g. machinery, glass making, soap making etc.



Institute endured. With an existence that was nothing less than precarious the institute moved from its original accommodation at Patrick Street to new premises at Cook Street in 1830.<sup>1</sup> By this time, however, severe financial difficulties were being experienced, and trimming its sails to the prevailing winds lectures were de-emphasised in favour of the library and reading-room facilities.<sup>2</sup> Richard Dowden, the library secretary, believed 'the institute would gradually aspire in whatever way the library is managed'.<sup>3</sup> Further attempts to offset the financial difficulties saw the day school for apprentices and the sons of members and the drawing classes placed on an independent footing, both to be maintained by the payments of pupils.<sup>4</sup> So exhausted were the funds by 1836 that additions to the library had to be curtailed.<sup>5</sup>

It is not without a certain degree of paradox, therefore, that as the Cork Mechanics' Institute declined fitfully, elsewhere institutes were re-established and original bodies were emerging anew.

This revivalist phase, also experienced in Britain,<sup>6</sup> may be explained through a number of contexts. Reference was again made to foreign educational strategies. Popular education was finding a more complete expression in the national system of elementary education established in 1831, subsequently providing a wider degree of literacy. Moreover it encompassed an industrial aspect in its agricultural education programme.<sup>7</sup> By the 1840s Ireland was witnessing new impulses which brought the whole issue of practical education before the nation with renovating vigour. In this respect the role of the Royal Dublin

<sup>1</sup> Dowden Diary, op. cit., p. 15.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 30.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 24.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 30.

<sup>5</sup> *Cork Evening Herald*, 5 February, 1836, *Cork Mechanics' Institute*.

<sup>6</sup> Tylecote, op. cit.

<sup>7</sup> See D. A. Akenson, *The Irish Education Experiment, The National System of Education in the Nineteenth Century* (London, 1970).

Society must again be acknowledged. By the beginning of the nineteenth century this society had fashioned for itself a prestige and an esteem which placed it among the foremost of scientific societies internationally. In 1836, as a result of a select committee of enquiry, the Royal Dublin Society was directed to expand its brief and embark upon a provincial lecture scheme.<sup>1</sup> Here was an attempt to diffuse a knowledge of the sciences and arts throughout the country. Applications might be made to the newly formed provincial lecture committee, whose duty it then became to commission a lecturer for a course as desired by the party applying.<sup>2</sup> This departure was of considerable aid to the endeavours of mechanics' institutes. They were now financially assisted in securing lecturers of an eminent order by parliamentary funds. Not surprisingly the scheme from its initiation was overburdened with demands. It was in this capacity that Robert Kane and Edmund Davy, cousin and former assistant to Sir Humphrey Davy of the Royal Institution, London, lectured at the Clonmel Mechanics' Institute in 1842<sup>3</sup> and 1843<sup>4</sup> respectively. The revivalist phase of the mechanics' institute movement in Ireland was characterised by a coalition of intellectual and social reform. The Galway Mechanics' Institute was re-established as a second safeguard to the objectives of the Temperance movement and membership was confined to those who had pledged themselves to that ideal.<sup>5</sup> Any member found in breach was to be reported to the

<sup>1</sup> Report from the Select Committee appointed to Inquire into the Administration of the Royal Dublin Society with a view to the wider extension of the advantages of the annual Parliamentary grant to that institution and to whom the return of the Charter, Rules and Regulations of the Dublin Society was referred; 1836 (445) XII. 355, Q.2964, p. 283.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. VIII.

<sup>3</sup> *Tipperary Free Press*, 20 July, 1842, *Clonmel Mechanics' Institute*.

<sup>4</sup> *Tipperary Free Press*, 18 January, 1843, *Clonmel Mechanics' Institute*.

<sup>5</sup> *Connaught Journal*, 13 February, 1840, *Galway Trades Temperance Society and Mechanics' Institute*.

Society must again be acknowledged. By the beginning of the nineteenth century this society had fashioned for itself a prestige and an esteem which placed it among the foremost of scientific societies internationally. In 1836, as a result of a select committee of enquiry, the Royal Dublin Society was directed to expand its brief and embark upon a provincial lecture scheme.<sup>1</sup> Here was an attempt to diffuse a knowledge of the sciences and arts throughout the country. Applications might be made to the newly formed provincial lecture committee, whose duty it then became to commission a lecturer for a course as desired by the party applying.<sup>2</sup> This departure was of considerable aid to the endeavours of mechanics' institutes. They were now financially assisted in securing lecturers of an eminent order by parliamentary funds. Not surprisingly the scheme from its initiation was overburdened with demands. It was in this capacity that Robert Kane and Edmund Davy, cousin and former assistant to Sir Humphrey Davy of the Royal Institution, London, lectured at the Clonmel Mechanics' Institute in 1842<sup>3</sup> and 1843<sup>4</sup> respectively. The revivalist phase of the mechanics' institute movement in Ireland was characterised by a coalition of intellectual and social reform. The Galway Mechanics' Institute was re-established as a second safeguard to the objectives of the Temperance movement and membership was confined to those who had pledged themselves to that ideal.<sup>5</sup> Any member found in breach was to be reported to the

<sup>1</sup> Report from the Select Committee appointed to Inquire into the Administration of the Royal Dublin Society with a view to the wider extension of the advantages of the annual Parliamentary grant to that institution and to whom the return of the Charter, Rules and Regulations of the Dublin Society was referred; 1836 (445) XII. 355, Q.2964, p. 283.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. VIII.

<sup>3</sup> *Tipperary Free Press*, 20 July, 1842, *Clonmel Mechanics' Institute*.

<sup>4</sup> *Tipperary Free Press*, 18 January, 1843, *Clonmel Mechanics' Institute*.

<sup>5</sup> *Connaught Journal*, 13 February, 1840, *Galway Trades Temperance Society and Mechanics' Institute*.



42  
evident in Lectures + Libraries

management and expelled from the institute forthwith.<sup>1</sup> This social aspect had further implications. Institutes moved away from their orthodox objective of scientific instruction to embrace a more diverse programme. Not only was such change evident in the contents of lectures but in the contents of libraries as well. Although institutes still favoured the scientific subjects others of a more literary nature were entertained. Further characteristics distinctive of the movement's second phase were the encouragement of female membership, and in two institutes at least the appearance of a female lecturer.<sup>2</sup> Library contents had invariably been a contentious matter in mechanics' institutes. On the one hand were the purists who had deemed the introduction of newspapers and journals a compromise of the movement's educational and a-political, a-religious stance. On the other hand pragmatists argued that recreational literature was an essential inducement to those reticent to indulge in serious scientific study. Once enlisted, however, it was hoped a more enlightened attitude would prevail amongst original sceptics. This pragmatic influence found currency in all institutes but not without some repercussions. In the Dublin Mechanics' Institute much acrimony was caused by the presence of *The Natural History of Monks and Monkies* and *The History of Prostitution* whose disgusting plates and indecent prints 'shocked and offended' many members.<sup>3</sup> The allegation was further made that of the twenty periodicals admitted to the reading-room only two, *The Dublin Review* and *Duffy's Magazine*, might be read by Roman Catholics without causing considerable embarrassment.<sup>4</sup> However, it would appear that these were isolated incidents and not characteristic of institutes generally.

<sup>1</sup> *Connaught Journal*, 4 June, 1840, *Mechanics' Institute*.

<sup>2</sup> See *Tipperary Free Press*, 13 June, 1849, *Clonmel Mechanics' Institute*, and *Freeman's Journal*, 14 March, 1859, *Dublin Mechanics' Institute*.

<sup>3</sup> *Freeman's Journal*, 19 August, 1853, *Dublin Mechanics' Institution*.

<sup>4</sup> *Freeman's Journal*, 14 March, 1854, To James Haughton, Treasurer and Trustee of the Dublin Mechanics' Institute.

Literary  
influence in  
library

call 4 enlightened  
Hicks  
by attack  
by history of  
monks

female  
mem.

43  
Lectures, library, reading room, & now class

In addition to lectures, library and reading room, institutes now began to organise evening classes. By this strategy it was hoped to secure a basic knowledge in a number of key areas. Thus in 1844 at the annual general meeting of the Dublin Mechanics' Institute Robert Kane advocated the necessity of class instruction as a vital corollary to the institute's campaign.<sup>1</sup> Teachers at the school were requested to furnish the management with an annual report.<sup>2</sup> Between the years 1846-1860 twenty-six different subjects were taught. Although the nucleus of these consisted of scientific subjects—Arithmetic, Drawing, Geometry, Mensuration, Natural Philosophy,—other subjects—French, Greek, History, Irish, Latin, and Music—featured. In 1847 the Drawing class catered for 108 pupils, the Mathematics class 110 and the French class was attended by 76 pupils.<sup>3</sup>

The institute was also moving forward on a number of other fronts. Lectures were not suffered to endure neglect during the 1840s. In 1845 four courses of lectures were delivered. The content of these is representative of the combined literary and scientific syllabus which prevailed: Phrenology, Criminal Jurisprudence, Pneumatics and Elocution.<sup>4</sup> In 1847 a newsroom was opened, where newspapers were sold at half price. On average 150 people visited here weekly each paying 1d. on admission.<sup>5</sup> Meanwhile the library continued to expand. In 1846, 300 new works were purchased, and in November of the same year a Mr. Alexander McCaul was appointed registrar and librarian to the Institute.<sup>6</sup>

June 22nd 1838 can be designated the date of the official

<sup>1</sup> *Freeman's Journal*, 11 January, 1844, *Mechanics' Institution Annual Meeting*.

<sup>2</sup> *Freeman's Journal*, 15 January, 1846, *Mechanics' Institution*.

<sup>3</sup> *Freeman's Journal*, 12 January, 1848, *Mechanics' Institute, Royal Exchange*.

<sup>4</sup> *Freeman's Journal*, 15 January, 1846, op. cit.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> *Freeman's Journal*, 30 November, 1846, Notice—*Mechanics' Institution*.

evening  
classes

Dublin  
Inst  
classes  
Science &  
Art

evidence  
of French  
language  
with  
and just  
recognition  
of value



1838: 2nd phase of Dublin Mechanics Inst.

BYRNE

opening of the Dublin Mechanics' Institute (second phase). On that Friday evening amid great enthusiasm at the Royal Exchange Mr. McCullagh, a founding member, described the scepticism with which the whole idea was at first greeted. It was generally believed that '...it is quite impossible, the people are gone mad so utterly with political strife, that you may as well give up the attempt, for it is impossible'.<sup>1</sup> The initial membership consisted of 280 and by the end of the year this had grown to 813. This figure increased to 2,803 by 1850. Although this growth was consistent, one notices a falling off during the Famine years 1846 and 1847.<sup>2</sup>

By 1850 also the institute after much exertion and an arduous fund raising campaign had purchased the former Princess Theatre at Lower Abbey Street for a sum of £300.<sup>3</sup> A further sum of £400 was expended on alteration.<sup>4</sup> Thus from its humble beginnings in a room at No. 50 Jervis Street and subsequently to rented accommodation at the Royal Exchange, the Dublin Mechanics' Institute second phase had become firmly rooted in the educational life of Dublin City.

Generally the mechanics' institute movement in Ireland has either been pronounced a failure, or completely overlooked. Not infrequently are such conclusions reached by the application of a task-achievement analysis. Thus one author has it that mechanics' institutes might have been the beginning of technical education in the country, but that they were not.<sup>5</sup> This contention is based upon the fact that institutes did not achieve their declared objective of instructing the artisan in the underlying principles of his trade. In respect of this there can be little

<sup>1</sup> A Full and Correct Report of the Speeches Delivered on the occasion of opening of Dublin Mechanics' Institution, on Friday Evening, June 22nd., 1838 (O'Brien, Dublin, 1838), p. 16.

<sup>2</sup> Freeman's Journal, 6 May, 1851, Dublin Mechanics' Institute.

<sup>3</sup> Freeman's Journal, 11 July, 1848, Mechanics' Institute.

<sup>4</sup> Freeman's Journal, 1 November, 1848, The Mechanics' Institution.

<sup>5</sup> T. J. Durcan, History of Irish Education from 1800 (with special reference to manual instruction), (Dragon Books, Bala, 1972), p. 127.

## MECHANICS' INSTITUTES.

dispute. Lectures were the least suitable means by which such a plan might be accomplished. Any attempt to transmit theoretical knowledge through such a medium presumed a foreknowledge that was not always in evidence. Although it was argued that lectures were merely stimuli by which a further desire for knowledge might be awakened, even this was overambitious and unrealistic.

Moreover, lecture themes varied in the extreme. Lack of organisation and professionalism was another weakness. Lecture content, it seems, relied more upon the availability of lecturers than on any other consideration. The philosophy of self-education became exaggerated. On the one hand, directors promised the success of a Watt or a Stephenson, and on the other, members believed, to be soon disillusioned, that attendance at lectures would render them completely proficient in the theory of one skill or other.

It is difficult to establish how innocent of doctrinaire intentions the Irish institutes were. What is clear however is that one may not generalise. The Dublin and Cork Institutes did display inclinations towards moral conversion and social control. The rhetorical middle-class swagger of their declared ambitions and official speeches testifies to this. These made manifest the many contemporary assumptions; the value of education, the evils of alcohol, the essentiality of machinery. For employers educational promotion was represented as analogous to the use of profit against capital loss. It may be tempting to interpret this as a situation where labour was yet again to be exploited by the forces of capitalism. But this would be an unfair portrayal and inconsistent with the prevailing attitudes of the day.

The Irish industrial environment such as it was in the nineteenth century differed sharply from that of England, and this not only in terms of volume; also absent were other outstanding elements: factory industrialization, population growth, urbanization, social diversity and a varying social philosophy. In the English context, then, social control directed through education was a

②. further readers / 45 independent with?

60 opinions

③. unrealistic

lect. themes too distant

④. Available of lect.?

⑤. self educ.

moral & social control of Dublin

W.K.

Capitalism? - no comparison to UK

Irish industrial env. ✓

UK.

only growth of Institutes 1838 1850

Institutes beginning of technical education?

①. Lectures made required a few members.



the part of the established order. With an emphasis on the formation of the correct ideas mechanics' institutes might therefore be in the interests of proprietors who had so much at stake. In Ireland the diagnosis was different. Industrialization did not pose the same threat but that it might do so doubtless motivated some. Yet this was only revealed in the larger urban centres of Dublin and Cork. Here it was combination which provided the potential danger. The Dublin mechanics' institute sought to achieve an atmosphere of co-operation between mechanic and proprietor. Subsequently Robert Kane identified mechanics' institutes and evening lectures as means by which the youth of the country might educate itself rather than becoming involved in politics, marching and drilling.

In the provincial centres institutes were founded without the slightest spur from doctrinaires or any other *a priori* influences. Mechanics' institutes were seen as obvious answers to the problems of the day. Working class decadence and ignorance mainly attracted the eye. In all of this the nineteenth century tendencies towards social reform and humanitarianism should not be overlooked.

Finally we turn to the social content of mechanics' institutes. In the absence of minute books and other appropriate documentation this is not easy to quantify. From the evidence that is available however a number of trends do emerge. The disparate nature of Irish industry is reflected. Membership was constituted of such various elements as tradesmen or mechanics, builders, clerks, bookkeepers, shop-keepers, shop assistants, adolescents who had graduated from the national schools and men and indeed women who held science in esteem and wished to indulge themselves. To survive, mechanics' institutes could not direct sole attention to any one of these sub-groups. To do so meant a curtailment in membership and therefore subscription. For example, in Cork, where the industrial needs of the

<sup>1</sup> Report from the Select Committee on Scientific Institutions (Dublin), with the Proceedings, Minutes of Evidence, Appendix and Index; 1864 (495).XIII. i.

Industrial  
rev.  
not evident  
Cork/  
Dublin

Social  
content?  
evidence  
this scale.

Kane:  
educ  
politics

Membership!  
middle  
class

community were given priority, the institute could not be sustained. It was too confined in approach and failed to attract membership from other spheres in the economic and commercial life of the city outside those directly connected with industry. On the other hand, the Clonmel Mechanics' Institute was far more pragmatic, realising the diversity that existed in the town membership should be sought and encouraged. The Institutes' syllabus was appropriately devised. Significantly the first lecture at the Clonmel Mechanics' Institute was entitled *Natural Philosophy and Agricultural Chemistry with the application of chemistry to the Arts and Manufactures*.<sup>1</sup> Thus the Clonmel Institute endured longer and was not without some considerable achievements by the end of the nineteenth century when, interestingly, the building was renovated for the purposes of a technical school under the newly formed Department of Agriculture and Technical Instruction.<sup>2</sup>

In terms of aspiration the institutes were middle-class in tone and orientation. Sometimes they were vehicles of upward social mobility and for mechanics maybe evidence of a new presence. However, to cast them in a middle-class mould is not to diminish their attractiveness. It may be argued that many of the great educational enterprises of the nineteenth century, London University, the civic universities, the Queen's Colleges, were all of this new force—the middle classes. To view mechanics' institutes in the same light is no injustice, no exaggeration.

Instit → middle classes

vehicles of upward mobility  
middle class like 19<sup>th</sup> London Univ  
univ, queen's colleges.

Cork:  
membership  
confined to  
industry  
✓ Clonmel  
that encourages  
diversity

Clonmel  
superior  
D.A.T.

<sup>1</sup> Tipperary Free Press, 5 February, 1842, Clonmel Mechanics' Institute.  
<sup>2</sup> C. Webb 'Technical Instruction in Clonmel' *Journal of Agricultural and Technical Instruction*, Vol. XI., No. 4 (July 1911) p. 688.