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## **The Mechanics' Institute Limerick**

### **By Frank Prendergast**

#### **Background**

"The concept of the Mechanics' Institute had its roots in the ideas of the French Revolution and the actuality of the Industrial Revolution in the British Isles.<sup>1</sup> Jeremy Bentham and his colleagues in the Philosophical Radical Movement in England espoused the ideal and the practical of both revolutions. They believed that education was the best way to effect the basic utilitarian concept of "the greatest good of the greatest number."<sup>2</sup> To this end the London Mechanics' Institute was formally opened on the 2<sup>nd</sup> of December 1823.<sup>3</sup>

The extent to which there was regular contact between the craft unions in Britain and Ireland, and how closely educational developments elsewhere were monitored here, can be gauged from the fact that within less than a year later the same idea was mooted in Dublin. In the year following again, 1825, similar institutions had been set up in Armagh, Belfast, Cork, Galway, Limerick and Waterford. Mechanics Institutes were also established in Carraig on Suir, Cashel, Coolerraine, Tipperary and Waterford.<sup>4</sup> When the Clonmel Mechanics' Institute was established in 1842, there were already over 200 such institutions in Britain and Ireland.<sup>5</sup>

It can hardly be a coincidence that this was the year following the lapsing of the notorious Anti Combine Laws, (1799-1824) on which was based the programme of "legal persecution of Trade Unionists as rebels and revolutionists during the first twenty years of the 19<sup>th</sup> century".<sup>6</sup>

#### **Establishment Support**

Nevertheless, the Institutes attracted ready support from employers and political and religious establishments. It was the belief that an educated body of tradesmen would enhance their employments' competitive advantage as well as their own moral uplifting and would lead them to a pre-occupation with more worthy ideas than combination and therefore to the promotion of social order generally.<sup>7</sup> There were other views, however, also, some employers feared that an educated workforce would increase its wage demands and lead to radicalism and revolution.<sup>8</sup>

Membership was offered to all that could afford to pay and "lecturers were instructed to keep their language simple and their explanations so clear as to be easily understood by the ordinary mechanic".<sup>9</sup> In general, while non-skilled workers were



not denied membership the Mechanics Institutes was mainly patronised by craftsmen who had campaigned for them in the first instance.<sup>10</sup> Kieran Byrne points out, however, that by 1828, many of the institutes were in decline, the reasons for which were obscure and he speculates that "the lecture method presumed a literacy that may not always have been forthcoming". While this may have been one such reason, it can be argued very forcibly by anybody directly involved with the craft unions and the Mechanics' Institutes that very often there was a much more fundamental factor at work. This was the difficulty in getting the various unions to pay their dues and rentals on time. This was especially true in times of economic downturn in the economy when they found it difficult to get the dues from their unemployed members.

### **The scene in Limerick**

This was certainly the scene in Limerick in the experience of this writer. Regular debates took place at the Mechanics Institute in Pery Square every time the secretary, notably, the late M.P. Finnan (N.E.E.T.U.) argued for an increase in subscriptions to meet rising costs. A very strong tradition in one of Limerick's oldest trade guilds, the Bakers, was that they very often had to pay the rent of the Mechanics Institute in Bank Place and Glentworth Street in times of general hardship. They could afford to do this because the public relied more heavily on bread for their sustenance in hard times which of course, meant more work for the bakers who were therefore, often described by other trades as the "goold (gold)-finders".<sup>11</sup>

This oral tradition has been more recently confirmed by Michael V. Spillane in his, *Two Centuries of Popular Education 1700-1900*, MA thesis work, 1973. He says, "although the Mechanics Institute in Limerick was formed in 1825, it never reached its full potential due to a chronic shortage of money. It was unable to provide lectures for members, had no apparatus or equipment and in time its main activity was principally limited to reading, through the agency of the small library attached and the purchase of some two or three newspapers".

He relied for this information on the evidence supplied to the Select Committee, 1835-1838, part I, p. 378, by Dean MacNamara, P.P.Bruff. It applied with equal force to the scene, obtaining in the Mechanics Institute Pery Square, down to the 1970's when the library was housed in bookcases in Room 3. The unemployed members and their friends came there each day to read the newspapers which were supplied gratis in the days before television by the nearby city library across the road.

It must have had its ups and downs in its early days in line with what was reported to be the case with Mechanics Institutes elsewhere.<sup>12</sup> An address to the "mechanics and trades of our city", delivered on the 19 of December 1857, at the Athenaeum (Cecil Street) by the Honourable William Smith O'Brien Esq., and presided over by Mr. O'Regan, the President of the Congregated Trades of Limerick was described as an "inaugural lecture". The audience included a distinguished gathering of representatives of the



church, local government and the legal professions who showed the learned speaker, "manifestations of the most universal applause".<sup>13</sup>

Maurice Lenihan mentions this aspect of the Mechanics Institute in his epic *History of Limerick*, where he said, and "its news room library and meeting room at Bank Place are very well conducted". He had warm praise too for the tradesmen's efforts in the area of education. "Lectures have occasionally been given at the Mechanics Institute and it is highly creditable to the public spirit of the congregated trades that they have been able, even in times of depression and difficulty, to support an institute which is calculated to confer many advantages on its members".

### **Limerick's Ancient Craft Families**

These members came from families who were synonymous with the various crafts and trade in Limerick, in some cases for centuries, and were recognised in that capacity by the entire community.

A notable example of this tradition was that of the Clohessy family who were stonemasons in Limerick for centuries. They are first mentioned by the celebrated 17<sup>th</sup> century physician and property investor Dr. Thomas Arthur in his, 'A true account of what I spent in building my stone house in Mungret Street in the south suburbs of the citty of Lymerick since the 17<sup>th</sup> day of August in Anno Domini 1620'. This author has a copy of the full list in his possession. In his customary detailed expenditure of his entire costs of this venture, he gives a breakdown of all the wages to the craftsmen involved. He leaves us the names of some of the stonemasons he hired, viz, Cormack O' Cullenane, James O'Byrrin (Byrn), John O'Byrrin, William MacArthur, Kahir O'Connor, David O'Clochossa (Clohessy) and William and Edmund Ruse (red-haired).

It will be noted that the Clohessy's were recorded in the Irish version of their names. The late Tom Clohessy, stonemason, recalled to this author that twenty-nine members of his family had worked as masons on the building of St. John's Cathedral in 1846. Tom was the last of his family at the trade and lived at Tower View Villas, New Road. The late Bishop, Dr. Jeremiah Newman had him employed for six years in the pointing of the doorway and front pillars of the Cathedral in his last years as a stonemason.

Before their move to Bank Place, which was then the popular venue for all the major political campaigns, great hosting and public marches, the unions were forced because of the Anti Combine Laws, to meet in secret at Paddy's Hedge on the canal.<sup>14</sup> This was a double ditch, which ran from the city side of the lock at Maddens Bridge to Lower Park near the present railway crossings on the Old Park Road. It was a favourite spot of courting couples and was used as a short cut down to the 1960's, from the canal to the Old Park Road.

The Institute moved uptown later on to what is now the office of the



Limerick Youth Service at No.5 Glentworth Street. This building was formerly owned by the Roches, a wealthy merchant family, whose famous hanging gardens close by, were a great attraction for visitors to the city.

In later times as the Mechanics Institute the building was raided regularly by the notorious Black and Tans, according to the late Paddy Nealon of 33 Keane Street, Killalee a member of one of Limerick's oldest bakery families.

The Mechanics' Institute moved later on to No. 6 Pery Square, a large Georgian House at the corner of Pery Square and Harstonge Street. The celebrated Hungarian composer Franz Liszt is reputed to have been a guest there of Major Thomas Phillip Vokes, Chief Magistrate of Police for Limerick and head of the County Constabulary during his visit to Limerick in 1841.

The unemployed members of the various trades signed an idle book there where employers could recruit them at short notice. The Mechanics Institute in Limerick, at any rate was always referred to as "the Bars" apparently because the idle members would meet at the iron railings outside the building.

The unions kept their records in big timber boxes, like sea chests, in the cellar. These records, notably those of the bakers, were centuries old and some of them were beautiful examples of copperplate handwriting. Unfortunately, one misguided caretaker, a Mr. O'Brien, was using these invaluable sources of labour and social history as fuel for the furnace, to heat the building. The author of this article became aware of this and brought it to the attention of the Secretary of the Delegate Board, the late M. P. Finnan of N.E.E.T.U. He was one of the most dedicated officers and trade unionists in the long history of the Mechanics Institute and had the practice stopped. The remainder of the bakers' files were deposited on loan in the Irish Labour History Archives of U.C.D. in the 1976, by this writer who was then a national officer of the Irish Bakers' Confectioners and Allied Workers Union. The deposit consisted of 45 items including minute books, ledgers etc., spanning 150 years.

The Delegate Board decided to sell the beautiful Georgian Institute in the 1960's, to meet the heavy debts on the building, but it retained the adjoining Assembly Hall in Harstonge Street, for its present purposes. The library was disposed of as part of this relocation and the Fire Brigade staff acquired the magnificent billiard table.

The need for a library no longer applies what with the advent of computers and the era of information technology. The Institute still is home to the Limerick Council of Trade Unions (1810) as it has been since its establishment almost two centuries ago. Guest lectures are a regular feature of its meetings on issues of concern to the unions' members thereby maintaining their founders' pioneering role in the whole area of technical education, a tradition that is likely to be long continued.

#### Footnotes

<sup>1</sup> Morton R. G., *Mechanics Institutes and the Attempted Diffusion of Useful Knowledge in Ireland, 1825-1879.*

<sup>2</sup> Ibid

<sup>3</sup> Ibid



- <sup>4</sup> Hudson J.W., *The History of Adult Education*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (London 1969) p.236 cited in *Mechanics Institutes in Ireland, 1825-1850* by Byrne Kieran, *Proceedings of the Education Studies of Ireland Conference Dublin 1979*, Galway University Press p.32.
- <sup>5</sup> *Tipperary Free Press*, 8<sup>th</sup> January 1842 cited in Clonmel Trades Council, Ahern, Michael *Tipperary Historical Journal*, 1991.
- <sup>6</sup> Webb S and B, *History of Trade Unionism (1920)* p. 25 cited in *The Worker and the Law*, Wedderburn, K.W. Lord 3<sup>rd</sup> edition Penguin Books 1986, p. 515.
- <sup>7</sup> Byrne, K. op. Cit. P.36.
- <sup>8</sup> *Freemans Journal*, 17<sup>th</sup> October, 1825, Armagh Mechanics' Institute, cited in Byrne K. op. Cit. P.39.
- <sup>9</sup> Byrne K. op. cit. p. 37.
- <sup>10</sup> Byrne K., op. cit. p.35.
- <sup>11</sup> Mac Sweeney, George, R.I.P. McNamara, Jim R.I.P. and the author's father Sam Prendergast (R.I.P) in some conversation with the author c. 1955, all members of old Limerick baking families.
- <sup>12</sup> Byrne, K. op. cit. P. 39.
- <sup>13</sup> Internet
- <sup>14</sup> Lynch, Jack, R.I.P., MacNamara, Jim R.I.P., MacSweeney, George R.I.P. and Prendergast, Sam, R.I.P. all members of the Limerick Bakers' Union in conversation with the author c. 1955.

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