

By Councillor  
**FRANK  
PRENDERGAST**

I CAME across a very interesting document recently. It was the yearly statement and balance sheet of Accounts for the year ending 31st December 1948 of the Mechanics Institute. It also included an account of the attendance for the year at the monthly meetings of the delegate board who helped to run the Institute. This report pulled no punches. The Mechanics Institute at that time was housed in the large Georgian house at the corner of Pery Square and Harstonge Street. The main entrance was in

# The Mechanics' Institute Fifty Years Ago

Harstonge Street while most of the rooms overlooked Pery's Square and the People's Park. There was a long single storey building built on the Harstonge Street side. This was used as an assembly hall. It was also used in its time for concerts, dances, plays and "45" card drives, which were very popular

before the advent of Bingo. There was also a very successful boxing club attached to the Mechanics for some years and many Munster and Irish Titles were won by the members mainly at Juvenile and Youth levels.

The main Georgian house had a billiard and snooker room available for the mem-

bers and included the general public on the ground floor. On the first floor there was a reading room with all the daily newspapers available for the use of retired and unemployed members. There was also what was known as an "Idle Book", where unemployed members could sign their names. When employers needed extra workers from time to time they could select from the book. This was used mainly by the building traders. There was over twenty craft unions using the Mechanics and they each rented rooms up through the house. The rents depended on the size of the room and the number of members in the various unions. Weekly or fortnightly meetings were held by most unions and union dues were paid at these meetings. Some of these meetings were to say the least of it stormy, and many of our City Councillors and indeed some of our TDs learned their "second trade" at these meetings. Changing times and work practices plus the fact that some "whizz kids" in union headquarters go the brainwave to get employers to stop the union dues from the workers pay packets. This took away the incentive to attend the weekly meetings, as there were strict sanctions against workers who let their union dues fall into arrears including losing your job, but with the new system of stoppage at source attendance at meetings dropped off and over a number of years The Mechanics Institute became a pale shadow of its former self.

One member of the Delegate Board of 1948 was James Casey, a printer. By 1948 he was a veteran member of the Trade Union movement. He had been a leading light in the famous strike of 1919, and the formation of the Limerick Soviet. When O'Callaghan, who was Mayor in 1920, and Clancy, Mayor in 1921, were murdered in their homes on the night of 7th March 1921 by the British Crown Forces, James Casey took on the onerous and dangerous job of Mayor. He was Mayor of Limerick in his own right from 1934 to 1936. He was there to welcome the victorious Limerick teams as All Ireland Hurling Champions in that era. James Casey was also very interested in the sport of boxing and more than likely had a keen interest and input into the Mechanics Institute Boxing Club. James Casey died in June 1953. It indeed seems a pity that no effort has ever been made to perpetuate his memory in his native city.

It is not often perhaps that the literary tradition of the Mechanics' Institute is fully appreciated but there was a welcome acknowledgement of their role in this area by Norma Mac Dermott, the Director of An Comhairle Leabharlanna. During her contribution to the "Public Library Policy Review" which was launched by the Minister for the Environment and local Government Mr Noel Dempsey TD on the 26th of November, she stated that the Mechanics Institute had a long tradition of providing excellent library facilities for their members.

This was certainly true of the Limerick Trades Council

which will be celebrating its bi-centenary in 2010. The date of its foundation, 1810, is particularly interesting, coming as it did nearly half-way through the existence of the notorious Anti-Combine Laws (1799 - 1824) which were designed by the British Government to prevent working men combining to form trade unions. This meant for example, that the members of my own trade - the Bakers Guild - had to meet in secret at Paddy's Hedge on the canal. There was a very strong oral tradition on this when I served my time at the Old Croom Mills Bakery in Francis Street in the early 1950's. Bakers like my late father, Sam, Jim McNamara, Jack Lynch and George Mac Sweeney told of their great grandfathers having to meet at Paddy's Hedge which ran from the Limerick side of the Locke at Troy's House on the Canal to Lower Park near the present railway crossing. This double ditch - a favourite spot for courting couples - was in common use down to the 1960's to take a short cut from the Canal to Old Park Road.

When the Anti-Combination Laws were repealed in 1825 the craft unions met regularly at No 9 Bank Place. The rent of this building, incidentally, was paid by the Bakers Guild more than most of their colleagues in other Guilds, as they were generally better funded due to the constant regular employment in their trade and the corresponding build-up of funds.

Maurice Lenihan in his "History of Limerick" is warm in his praise for the Trades Council of his day. "The congregated trades of Limerick constitute a numerous and deserving body of industrious intelligent artisans, whose news-room, library and place of meeting, the Mechanics Institute, Bank Place are very well conducted", he wrote. He says that they had been at all times "foremost in the candid manifestation of their sympathy and co-operation in the struggles of Daniel O'Connell for Catholic Emancipation and political reform". He praised them also for their efforts in the education of

their members. "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".

Bank Place was then of course the popular venue for all the major political campaigns and witnessed the city's great hostings and public marches. The Mechanics Institute moved up town later to what is now the Limerick Youth Service Office at 5 Lower Glentworth Street. The building was regularly raided by parties of Black and Tans according to the late Paddy Nealon, a member of one of Limerick's oldest bakery families.

The Institute moved later again to its present home in Harstonge Street. It originally owned the lovely stone building at the Pery Square end but this was sold by the Delegate Board in the 1960's under the Chairmanship of the late P. Finnan, a shrewd and far-seeing member of the N.E.E.T.U. the then fitters and engineering union. The reason for the sale was to meet the heavy debts on the building but the Institute retained their assembly hall for its present purposes. A feature of the red building was the fine library which survived down to the move to its location.

The records of the old craft unions were kept in strong timber chests which were stored in the basement. Some of these records, including those of the bakers especially, went back for centuries.

Sadly, however, one misguided caretaker use these for fuel for the furnace in the late 1960s and destroyed valuable historical material which could have furnished degree caps and gowns for student generations yet unborn.

Fortunately, he was stopped in his tracks when the board officers realised what he was doing. What was left of the bakers' files were deposited on my own initiative as a national officer in the 1960s in the labour history archives of UCD.

The need for library facilities is not now thought necessary in the Institute due to the free facilities in the excellent City Library, but lectures on topical issues by guest lecturers are still a feature of the Trades Council's concern for their members. Institutes - an old tradition that is likely to be maintained.

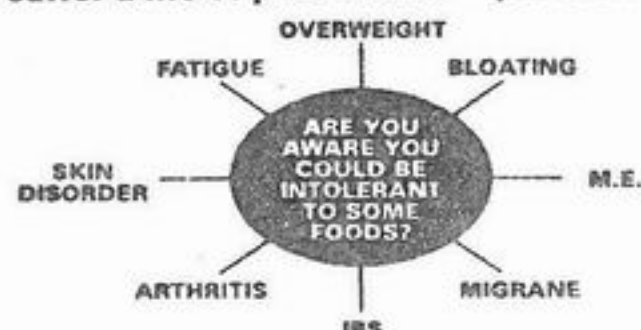


O.N.E. on parade in the mid-sixties.

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