



The Linen Hall Library

Samantha McCombe

Samantha, the twenty second Librarian¹ of the Linen Hall Library in Belfast, takes us on a whistle stop tour of 229 years in the history of the city's oldest Library. She gives an overview of its historic collections, and reflects upon recent achievements including becoming an accredited museum.

Introduction

The Linen Hall Library is a membership library in the heart of Belfast city centre. Described by the poet Michael Longley as 'the soul of Belfast', it is renowned for its Irish and local studies collection, ranging from comprehensive holdings of Early Belfast and Provincial printed books to the Northern Ireland Political Collection, the definitive archive of the recent 'troubles'. The Library also boasts the largest collection of material relating to the poet Robert Burns outside of Scotland, and the Theatre and Performing Arts Archive; unique collections which reflect our rich cultural heritage. The Library team answer around 5,000 collection and research queries per year, with student, academic and citizen researchers visiting from Europe, Australia, Canada and the United States. The Linen Hall also has a high profile as a centre of cultural and creative life, offering a varied programme of events ranging from monthly exhibitions to readings, lectures, book groups, language classes, and genealogy workshops. It is also a four-star visitor attraction and welcomes tourists on daily tours of the building and exhibits. It is a vibrant and exciting space; crammed full of knowledge and alive with history; the Linen Hall's history and collections is intrinsically linked to the story of Belfast and the Library has a pivotal role to play in understanding all of Northern Ireland's past.

¹ Samantha is the first female Chief Librarian. Ed.

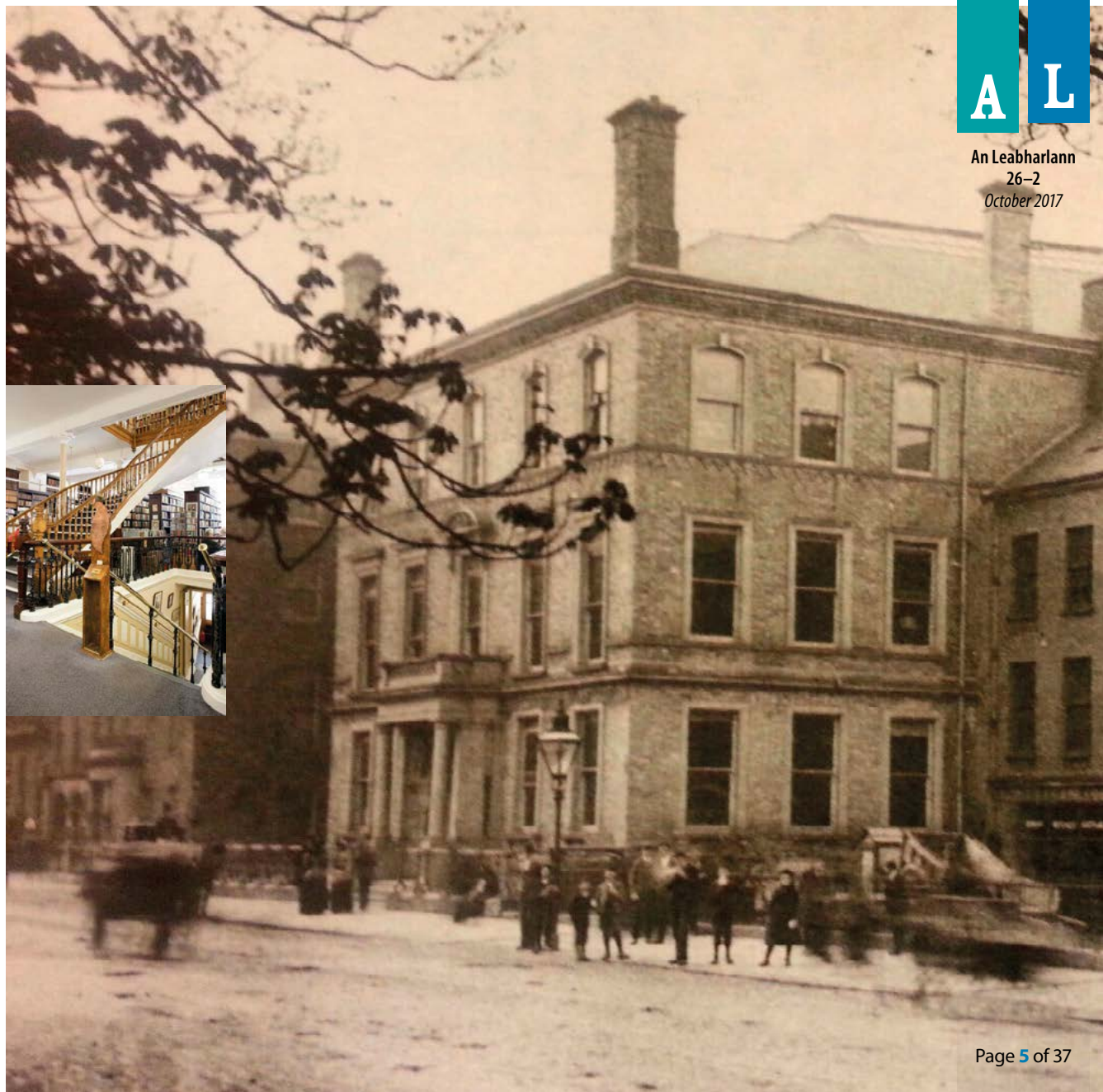
History

The Belfast Library and Society for Promoting Knowledge – the official name of the institution more commonly known as the Linen Hall Library – developed from the Belfast Reading Society which was founded on 13th May 1788. It is the oldest Library in Belfast and the last subscription Library in Ireland.

As outlined in *A History of the Linen Hall Library 1788-1988*², the Society was a local expression of a widespread British, European and North American movement for self-improvement. Such reading societies sprang up in many cities, towns and villages and were particularly influenced in Ireland in the latter part of the 18th Century by the principles of the American and French revolutions. They were also influenced by the spread of literacy among the classes, the rapid growth in the production of books, and the high cost of those books.

From its beginnings, the Belfast Library and Society for Promoting Knowledge was an institution whose central aim was to run a subscription Library for the benefit of its members. In common with other institutions such as the Manchester Literary and Philosophical Society and the Birmingham Library, the society and library was, and to a certain extent still is, financed, managed and administered by its members.

The Belfast Reading Society was founded by a group of 'worthy plebeians who would do honour to any town, [of whom there was] not among them one of higher rank than McCormick the gunsmith or Osborne the baker. The stated object of the Society was 'the collection of an extensive library, philosophical apparatus and such productions of nature and art as tend to improve the mind and excite a spirit of inquiry'. It appears from



² John Killen, 1990, Linen Hall Library

the minute books of the Library that there were some fifteen founding members, and signatories to the original rules of the Society included Roger Mulholland, a builder and architect, who was the Society's first President, and Robert Cary, the first Librarian.

The original rules referred to the terms of membership, the government of the society and the due care of books, including 'an obligation to pay the cost or value of any book injured, lost or not returned to the society'. Some things never change!

The Society moved around Belfast from various taverns, to Robert Cary's house, and premises in Ann Street, before settling in the White Linen Hall in 1802. And there it remained until 1888 when the Countess of Shaftesbury stated her intention 'to render void the leases granted by her predecessors in respect of the White Hall and the surrounding grounds'. Vacant possession of the Hall was inevitable and new premises had to be secured. The new premises were a block of buildings at the corner of Donegall Square North and Fountain Street, a former linen warehouse, and, from 1892, where the library has been housed until the present day. The White Linen Hall is now the site of Belfast City Hall and there are excellent views of it from the windows of the Library.

Compiled by the first Librarians and by leading members of the society early catalogues give a window into the reading habits of the late 18th Century – the 1793 catalogue of 140 books describes solid, self-improving and thought provoking texts; still the central tenets of the collections today.

While Robert Cary was the first Librarian, Thomas Russell is arguably the most famous. Born in County Cork in 1767, he joined the army, serving in India. On returning to Ireland he met and became firm friends with Theobald Wolfe Tone. In 1791, while his regiment was stationed in Belfast, he met and was influenced by such men as Samuel Neilson and Henry Joy McCracken. Russell was forced to sell his commission and he became increasingly involved in the revolutionary politics of his friends and was a founder member of the Society of United Irishmen.

Thomas Russell was elected Librarian in 1794. At this time, he was a regular contributor to the *Northern Star*, the newspaper of the United Irishmen and in 1796 he published 'A letter to the people of Ireland on the present situation of the country' setting out his argument for Catholic emancipation. His political activities came under increasing government scrutiny and in September 1796 he was arrested in the Library rooms. Russell was held in prison until 1802. Upon his release he became involved in Robert Emmet's rebellion of 1803 and was tried, and executed for treason at Downpatrick in County Down on 10th October 1803.

Collections

While the role of Librarian of the Linen Hall has evolved since the time of Thomas Russell, at its essence is the custodianship of the collections – 18th century ethos with 21st century delivery. My touchstones are preservation and accessibility, and the terms are not mutually exclusive. I am the champion of the collections and it is my responsibility to ensure they are celebrated.

As a membership library members are the lifeblood of the Linen Hall and as such the Library has an extensive general lending collection for the benefit of its members – of which there are approximately 2,700. Crime fiction is particularly popular with Ian Rankin being the most borrowed author in the last two years. But the Library's strength lies in its Irish & local studies collection, with fantastic resources to support genealogy and the study of family histories, and strong Irish language and Ulster-Scots collections. The Library's most valuable book is a first edition of *Ulysses*; while the oldest book in the collections is *De Anima* a medico-philosophical treatise from 1490 which concerns health and wellbeing.

The Linen Hall also benefits greatly from housing the National Collection of Northern Ireland Publications (commonly known as NIPR) (<http://www.nibooks.org/>). In lieu of a national library sited in Northern Ireland, NIPR aims to identify, collect, preserve and make available for public consultation, every book, pamphlet, periodical and report published in Northern Ireland since January 2000. Housing the NIPR collection at the Linen Hall is a natural fit and

is another way in which the Library contributes to the preservation of our literary heritage.

The Linen Hall's specialisms lie in having the definitive archive of the 'troubles', the world renowned Northern Ireland Political Collection, and an expansive Theatre & Performing Arts Archive which benefitted greatly from digitisation (www.digitaltheatrearchive.com).

Since taking up post in September 2015, my focus has been on understanding the collections and getting up to speed with the Library services provided. In order to set a strategy for the Library services it was important to understand what was being done well, benchmark against analogous organisations, and identify the areas which required attention – including the accessibility and visibility of the collections, cataloguing and storage of materials, records management and documentation.

This process crystallised into a number of strategic priorities and objectives to celebrate the collections. This included formalising a collections policy, caring for the collections in line with best practice with fit for purpose archival storage. It is both a privilege and a responsibility to be responsible for the custodianship and preservation of the collections for future generations so prioritising the security of stock and optimising space management were



the Library was able to digitise the archives of a number of writers who were born or grew up in Northern Ireland. Freely accessible, the Northern Ireland Literary Archive (www.niliteraryarchive.com) begins in the late 19th Century with the work of Sir Samuel Ferguson, and includes letters, manuscripts, and typescripts of, among others, Louis MacNeice, Robert Greacen, WR Rodgers, Sam Hanna Bell and Joan Lingard. The project is testament to the Linen Hall's position as a repository for literary heritage.

It was a particular highlight during a recent visit to the Library by the President of Ireland, Michael D Higgins, to show the President an original manuscript from the archive of Sir Samuel Ferguson alongside the digitised copy.

essential. We are not alone in dealing with ever growing collections in a listed building – and rededicating space to celebrate the collections and programming the use of that space.

It has been pleasing to bring our collections out from behind locked doors in safe and controlled environments and to interpret and bring them to life by telling their stories.

A key strategic objective of the Library is to utilise digitisation as a preservation and accessibility tool. And thanks to funding from the Department for Communities

Museum Accreditation and Current Developments

The Linen Hall recently achieved a long held ambition to be an accredited museum. This was a significant achievement which involved a tremendous amount of work and industry to ensure the Library's practices and procedures, disaster preparedness and emergency procedures, environmental controls and documentation all met the strict standards required for accreditation.

The museum accreditation process concerned three pillars of the Linen Hall collections: Early Belfast and Provincial Printed Books (c. 4000 volumes), the Gibson Collection of Burns and Burnsiana (c. 1,500 volumes of poetry, with pictures, jugs, plates etc.), and the Northern Ireland Political Collection (c. 350,000 printed items and ephemera).

The Library has a comprehensive collection of early Ulster printing. In this aspect, the Library has benefited greatly from the benevolence of our membership. In particular, John Anderson, Honorary Secretary to the Library from 1873-1902, was a pioneer of local bibliography. His Catalogue of Early Belfast Printed Books (1887) is a treasure of the Library. The Provincial Printed Books collection covers the rest of Ulster, and includes the earliest printing from major centres such as Derry, Newry and Strabane.

The Gibson Collection is the largest collection of material relating to Robert Burns outside of Scotland. Amassed by Andrew Gibson, a Governor of the Linen Hall, it was bought for the city of Belfast for £1,000 in 1901, and donated to the Library. The collection includes items donated by Burns's great-granddaughter Eliza Everitt, and contains the first printing of Burns in Belfast (1789, James Magee), and copies of his own books. At the most recent Gibson Memorial Lecture Dr Carol Baraniuk of the University of Glasgow described the collection as "utterly compelling".

The final museum collection is the Northern Ireland Political Collection. In 1968 the then Librarian Jimmy Vitty was handed a civil rights leaflet in a city centre bar. He kept it and brought it back to the Library. Since then the Linen Hall has sought to collect all printed material relating to the 'troubles' and the collection has grown to some 350,000 items including books, pamphlets,

leaflets, posters, manifestos, press releases, newspapers, journals and periodicals. It is a unique collection; collected contemporaneously it is the definitive archive of the 'troubles' and peace process.

The Northern Ireland Political Collection is currently front and centre with the Linen Hall's largest digitisation project, the Heritage Lottery, Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, and Ulster Garden Villages funded Divided Society project.

Launched in August 2016 by the then First Minister Arlene Foster, the project aims to expand the boundaries of the physical library by digitising a significant section of the Northern Ireland Political Collection, concentrating on posters and periodicals from the 1990s. The decade that saw Nelson Mandela freed and elected President of South Africa, the break out of the first Gulf War, Harry Potter exploding onto bookshelves, and the appearance of the Euro was also the fourth decade of the 'troubles'. This was a historically significant period of momentous change in our recent history and included peace talks, the Downing Street Agreement, two ceasefires, all party talks, and negotiations which led to the Good Friday Agreement, and the subsequent referendum. Hundreds of journals published by government, political parties, community groups, pressure groups, charities, and paramilitary organisations, are being digitised along with c. 1000 posters, all of which will be made available via the Divided Society website, thus further preserving our cultural heritage. A team of cataloguers is adding metadata for each digitised image ensuring every article can be found and retrieved by users. The website will be curated with themes focusing on discreet aspects of the period. Within each theme there will be categories which will allow for browsing and easy navigation of the vast amount of information the resource will contain. Full text of articles will be retrievable and presented alongside descriptive, technical and administrative metadata.

The project also includes an intergenerational reminiscence project. Intergenerational work with younger and older members of community groups across Northern Ireland has taken place. During these sessions

participants talked about their personal experiences, lasting legacies, hopes for the future, personal losses, and life changes. These memories and experiences have been collected with group and individual interviews being recorded and added to the Library's archives. Transcripts will be available from the Divided Society website along with short audio clips.

Having developed links with the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment to reflect the new topic of 'Northern Ireland during the 1990s', the project will also produce educational toolkits, making the collections at the Linen Hall all the more relevant, and helping us engage with the next generation of users of the Library. During development workshops with schools, pupils have enjoyed learning about the importance of the Good Friday Agreement, the visit by President Bill Clinton, and the first days of the Northern Ireland Assembly. The toolkits will be available in hard copy and to download from the Divided Society website.

Finally, there is the curation and production of two exhibitions – the first very successful exhibition was launched in August 2017 and focused on the social impact of the 'troubles'. Daily searches, bomb alerts, and no-go areas – all part of the everyday experiences of ordinary people from all walks of life living in 90s Northern Ireland were captured in the 'We Lived It' exhibition. Revealing oral histories described the day to day reality of living in the midst of the conflict – described as an 'extraordinary normality' – alongside the display of an array of social history items from the Northern Ireland Political Collection such as key rings, badges, and t shirts branded with slogans and logos from the period.

The second exhibition is scheduled for January 2018 and will focus on political cartoons and how art and humour were used to depict and explain the conflict. The website will also launch January 2018 so watch this space! (www.dividedsociety.org)

Conclusion

Acknowledging the challenging financial environment in which we operate, the Linen Hall Library as a charity will continue to seek to survive and thrive; embracing changes in technology, research and information services, seeking to continue to diversify our income, while remaining true to our history and principles, purpose and core collections. Please do consider supporting us through membership, taking a tour, coming to an event, and following us on Facebook and Twitter.

 [/LinenHallLibraryBelfast](https://www.facebook.com/LinenHallLibraryBelfast)

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