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Clonmel Mechanics Institute

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When the Clonmel Mechanics Institute was established in 1842 there were already over 200 such institutions in Britain and Ireland.¹ They were the inspiration of Dr. George Birbeck, a Yorkshire philanthropist, who in the year 1800 initiated a course of lectures for those mechanics of Glasgow anxious to acquire information on scientific matters.

A mechanic at that time referred to an artisan or workman who used a machine in his employment. Though the Institute was to be for the benefit of the working classes, it was inspired and supported by the upper and middle classes and was destined to remain so.

On 2 April, 1845 Charles Bianconi, as Mayor of Clonmel and President of the Institute, laid the foundation-stone of the building in Anglesea Street now known as Mulcahy House. The management was vested in a committee of 15 — one-third professional men, one-third employers and one-third mechanics.

The Mayor acted as President and its patrons included such dignitaries as Lord Lismore, Earl Glengal, local members of parliament and the resident clergymen of all denominations. It had the support of the business interests in the town, in particular, the Society of Friends, who saw it as a means of encouraging a more efficient and committed workforce and thereby improving the commercial life of the town.

The Institute was financed by the subscriptions of the members, by donations and bequests, and it was customary for the mayor to make a contribution of £5. Membership was conferred on those who paid 12 ¹/₂p per quarter in advance, and life membership was offered to those who donated £5 or books over the value of £8.

The objectives of the Institute were “to direct a taste for Scientific knowledge” and “to afford the artist and the mechanic the means of aiding their practical skill, by the elucidation of Science, and of calling forth the energies of their minds to Invention and Improvement.”² According to the rules of the Institute, these objectives were to be achieved by “means of a Library, Reading-room, Schools and suitable Lectures.”³

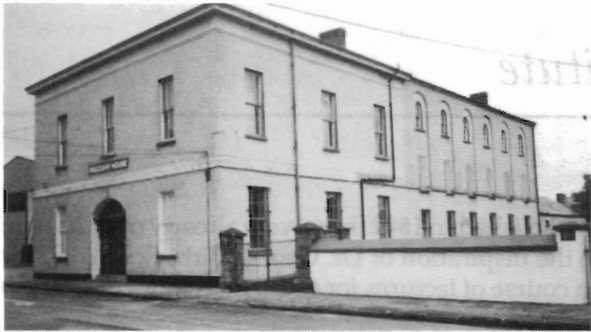
The organisers were not only concerned with the intellectual improvement of the lower classes, but also saw the Institute as being an instrument of social change and religious toleration. It was to be “a neutral ground where creed and class could meet” in a cordial atmosphere.⁴ It was also hoped that, through education, the mechanic might “raise himself to that position in the social scale to which his genius and industry naturally entitle him.”⁵

In pursuit of these objectives, the Committee first set about establishing a suitable library, and the rules were very specific in this respect. “The Institute being exclusively devoted to the diffusion of Scientific Information; Newspapers, Works of an acknowledged Theological or Political character, or such as have an immoral tendency” were not acceptable.⁶ The number of volumes purchased or donated grew steadily from 1,400 in 1845 to 3,500 volumes in 1875.^{7&8}

It was a facility much availed of, judging from the annual borrowings with loans totalling 7,602 in 1844.⁹ A member was entitled to take out one book at a time, the duration of the loan depending on the size of the book. The library committee were busily engaged cataloguing, imposing fines and checking the condition of borrowed books.

Initially, it boasted of having standard works in science, architecture, natural history and general literature on its shelves. Later, due to popular demand, more popular library books were added. Newspapers and magazines, which were originally excluded, were provided in the Reading Room by the 1850s.





Mechanics Institute, Clonmel

The lectures played an important part in the early life of the Institute, and Clonmel succeeded in attracting some of the leading scientific figures of the era. Many of them were attached to such venerable institutions as the Royal Dublin Society and the Society of Arts, London.

In some cases a course of lectures was given by the same gentleman, such as those delivered in the Assembly Rooms of the Clonmel Courthouse by Professor

Robert J. Keane, founder of the Dublin Mechanics Institute.¹⁰ The concluding one dealt with the steam engine, a relative novelty at the time.

Initially, the lectures appear to have been strictly of a scientific nature, and the opening one given by a Mr. Foley had the formidable title "Natural Philosophy and Agricultural Chemistry with the application of Chemistry to the Arts and Manufactures."¹¹ By 1849 lectures of a more literary flavour such as "Readings from Hamlet" appear to have become acceptable.¹²

It would appear that later on the Institute had difficulty in attracting suitable lecturers, possibly because of lack of finance. We find mention of local people like Mr. Bagwell giving a talk on his "Travels in America"¹³. In the early days the lectures were given in the Assembly Rooms of the Clonmel Courthouse when the Institute was still under construction.

The next undertaking by the Institute was the provision of an Evening School made possible by the erection of their new premises in Anglesea Street in 1845. The School, placed under the supervision of Mr. William Keane, opened with an enrolment of 64 students and an average attendance of 24.¹⁴

In 1850 Patrick Weston Joyce was appointed to run the school. He was later to win fame as an author of standard works relating to the history, topography and music of Ireland. The enrolment of 1875 gives an idea of the appeal of the school. It included 21 shop assistants, 10 tradesmen, six labourers, two servants, one clerk and two indefinable, education being provided at one penny a week.¹⁵

The year 1850 saw the opening of the Day School, which was placed under the supervision of the Commissioners of National Education.¹⁶ This body paid half the salaries of teachers and inspected the school. The courses provided proved to be the most elementary because the majority of the pupils had such a low standard of education.

In 1854 a School of Art came into being under the Inspection of the Science and Art Department of South Kensington Museum. It was visited regularly by an officer of that department, who awarded prizes of medals, books etc.¹⁷ This school proved to be the most successful of the three, and there are constant references to the outstanding achievements of its pupils.

The period 1842-54, although it included the years of the Famine, was a highly successful one for the Institute. Demand for enrolment in the schools was so great that the committee set about raising money to extend the building. The work commenced in 1850 and was completed three years later with the addition of three rooms to the front of the building, into which the Reading Room and Library were transferred, with the large room overhead being used as a museum.

In 1850 the future of the Institute looked bright. It had a modern, extensive building which housed three schools, a library, a reading room, and provided a stimulating lecture programme. Unfortunately, a closer look shows a far different picture. First of all, the finances of the Institute were far from secure. It was never a self-supporting venture and depended far too much on voluntary contributions.

There are references in the minutes to salaries of teachers being in arrears, the gas supply threatened with being cut off and various other demands by creditors.¹⁸⁻²⁰ On one occasion a collection had to be made throughout the town to prevent its closure.²¹

Another area of concern was declining membership. The Institute got off to a promising start, with membership of 211 being recorded for the first year 1842-1843²². Two years later it rose to 369, including 35 women, the highest figure ever recorded for the Institute.²³

There are constant complaints in the annual reports that the Institute was not getting the support it deserved from the people of Clonmel. The membership was decidedly middle class, and it was most disappointing that it failed to attract the interest of the mechanics of the town, the very people it was designed to serve. By the end of the century, when it was handed over to the Corporation, only one mechanic could be found among members.²⁴

The Day and Evening Schools suffered as a result of this fluctuation in numbers, and there are numerous references to one or both being closed and later re-opened. One of the reasons put forward for this failure was that low-wage earners could not meet the subscription fees. In the year 1857, when labourers in Clonmel earned from six to seven shillings a week and carpenters earned three shillings a day, a membership fee of ten shillings was an imposing sum.²⁵ Under such circumstances it was inevitable that the Institute became the domain of the middle classes.

What was perhaps of far greater significance was the doctrinaire and self-righteous approach adopted by the founders towards the mechanics. It was more designed for moral conversion and crowd control than for providing a realistic education. It failed to cater for the needs of those who had to endure long working hours and suffered the deprivation of having a low standard of education. The library books were largely unsuited to those who had scarcely a basic education, and the lectures pre-supposed a basic proficiency which did not exist.

Every effort was made to preserve a high moral tone and to promote harmony within the various sections of the community. Political debates were not tolerated. All books of a religious or political nature, as well as those considered to have an immoral tendency, were banned from the library. The committee refused to let the lecture hall to theatre companies for plays and concerts, on the grounds that it would be a desecration of the purpose for which it was intended. Smoking and any disorderly conduct would be met with expulsion.

However, it was not long before a more liberal attitude had to be taken. This was brought about by the pressure of some members who became openly critical of management policy. Newspapers and various journals were admitted to the Reading Room. Included were *The Times*, *Tipperary Free Press* and *Clonmel Chronicle*.²⁶

More popular works of literature were included in the library; theatricals were held in the Lecture Room, and the lectures themselves were given a broader appeal. These developments reflect what was happening in Mechanics Institutes elsewhere. They no longer confined themselves to instruction in scientific matters, but became more social and literary organisations.

Considering this trend, it is hardly surprising that by 1853 a Literary Society should spring up within the Institute, enabling members to conduct discussions on the many excellent texts in the library. A further development were the Penny Readings introduced in 1859 and inaugurated by the then President, Alderman Woods. These consisted of lectures in general subjects by eminent men, and also by prominent citizens, to help spread an interest in the arts and literature amongst the townspeople.

In 1873 this one-time subsidiary of the Clonmel Mechanics Institute took over the original parent body. Henceforth, it was to be known as the Clonmel Literary Institute; but to the people it affectionately remained "The Mechanics." The parent body had failed to attract the support of the mechanics for which it was intended, a fact which was admitted in the changed constitution. It now hoped "to diffuse a knowledge of the Arts and Sciences among all classes and not just "the operative classes."²⁷



In spite of all its difficulties, the Mechanics Institute had the distinction of being the only one in the provinces to keep its doors open uninterruptedly — “Oft doomed to death, But fated not to die.” An article published on Mechanics Institutes in the *Irish Quarterly Review* 1855 said of Clonmel that “there is an Institute of which its supporters may feel justly proud”, and of its Evening School “perhaps in Ireland there is not another school of a like character to it.”²⁸

Its schools and lectures provided opportunities for those who could meet the challenge. It left the town a well-stocked library, a flourishing art school; but, most important of all, it left a building and facilities for the future development of technical education in Clonmel.

As a result of the Agricultural and Technical Instruction Act of 1899, the Clonmel Corporation took over the Institute and set up a committee to establish a scheme for technical instruction in the town. The building was renamed the Central Technical Institute. As a result of the Vocational Education Act of 1930 there was a further change of administration. The newly-formed Tipperary S.R. Vocational Committee now assumed responsibility for the provision for technical education in Clonmel.

The building continued to serve as a school until 1964, when an increase in pupil members forced the authorities to abandon it. It is now under the control of the St. Vincent de Paul Society. They renamed it Mulcahy House and use it as a night shelter, as well as providing accommodation for local organisations and societies.

FOOTNOTES

1. *Tipperary Free Press*, 1 January 1842. (hereafter *TFP*).
2. *TFP*, 8 January 1842.
3. 3rd annual report of Clonmel Mechanics Institute, 1845.
4. *Ibid.*, p.5.
5. *TFP*, 19 January 1842.
6. 3rd annual report of Clonmel Mechanics Institute, 1845.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 6.
8. 1st annual report of Clonmel Literary Society, 1874, *Clonmel Chronicle*, 30 January 1875. (hereafter *CC*).
9. 3rd annual report of Clonmel Mechanics Institute, 1845, p.7.
10. *TFP*, 20 July 1842.
11. *TFP*, 5 Feb. 1842.
12. *TFP*, 4 May 1847
13. 25th annual report of Clonmel Mechanics Institute, 1867.
14. 3rd annual report of Clonmel Mechanics Institute, 1845. p.7.
15. 1st annual report of Clonmel Literary Society. *CC*, 30 January, 1875.
16. *TFP*, 24 July 1854.
17. 30th annual report of Clonmel Mechanics Institute, *CC*, 17 January 1872.
18. Extracts from the minute books of Clonmel Mechanics' Institute, p. 247.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 63.
20. *Ibid.*, p.76.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 91.
22. *TFP*, 18 January 1843.
23. 3rd annual report of Clonmel Mechanics Institute, 1845, p.6.
24. Annual report of the Commissioners of Donations and Bequests, 1899.
25. Poor Law Commissioners report, 1857.
26. 29th annual report of Clonmel Mechanics Institute, *CC*, 28 January 1871.
27. Rules and regulations of Clonmel Literary Society, *CC*, 29 December 1873.
28. *Irish Quarterly Review*, (June 1855), p. 281.

