

How the Bakers' library came to be 'blessed'!

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IRISH SOCIALIST

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By JOHN SWIFT

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DURING the early thirties, our union's subcommittee was promoting its social and cultural programmes; slum clearance was proceeding apace; and new suburbs of working-class dwellings were appearing in the environs of Dublin.

The long-delayed re-housing had come mainly from Labour Party and trade union agitation. The subcommittee, therefore, thought it something incongruous or illogical that the union executive should be content that the union's headquarters should still be in the slum area of Lower Gardiner Street.

The subcommittee had advocated procuring new premises that could cater for the social and cultural interests of the union members. This did not fructify till the early forties, by which time I had become general secretary of the union.

By that time, we had succeeded in getting the national delegate conference to approve motions instructing the executive to procure new headquarters. I was empowered to look around the property agencies for a suitable premises or site.

A Baptist church was on the market. Situated in Harcourt Street, a prestige thoroughfare at the time, not far from the city centre, its congregation had shrunk and apparently was no longer in a position to keep the church going.

We bought it at a moderate price, and engaged the architect Michael Scott to plan its transformation.

The church had a granite façade in pseudo-Gothic that extended seventy feet along Harcourt Street. This was replaced with a five-storey brick building. The high-roofed part of the church used for services was retained as the new building's main auditorium.

MURALS

We engaged two artists prominent at the time to execute murals on the auditorium walls. Frances Kelly took as subjects features from my book *History of the Dublin bakers*, and Nano Reid depicted labour subjects that dealt with Larkin, Connolly, O Casey and the Ralahine cooperative.

The first floor of the new structure was occupied mainly by one library. This contained around eight thousand volumes. The main section was sociological: economics, social theory, labour history, politics, and philosophy. Other sections dealt with Irish writers: poetry, drama, and other kinds of literature.

There were profile carvings in wood on the bookcases in these sections. These depicted the heads of Oliver Goldsmith, Thomas Moore, Bernard Shaw, W B Yeats, and Seán O Casey.

A special section contained books on the bakery trade. On a panel in the centre of the sociological section was a bust of Connolly. This, like the other carvings, was executed by the sculptor Hilary Heron. She was related to Archie Heron, husband of Connolly's daughter Ina.

PANELS

On the front of the premises, near the entrance, was a series of stone and gilt panels, carved by the sculptor Laurence Campbell. The carvings, as well as illustrating the bakery and milling trades, depicted worker-felons being

whipped through the Coombe under the combination laws that operated against trade unions up to the middle of the last century.

Near those panels will be seen the foundation stone of the new union headquarters, laid by the Labour mayor of Dublin, Martin O Sullivan.

At the formal opening of the premises, in February 1946, the Government was represented by Seán Lemass, minister for industry and commerce. We had decided to call the premises Four Provinces House, for the reason

that we were one of the few Irish trade unions with branches as well established in Ulster as in the other provinces.

We had invited to the formal opening guests from cultural bodies, such as the Royal Irish Academy and the universities, as well as from the Congress and the Labour Party.

When the invitations to the opening function were being decided by the executive, it was proposed that the Catholic archbishop be invited. Some of us pointed out that, being a non-sectarian body, this might be resented by some members, particularly in branches in the north.

EMBARRASSING

To meet this objection, it was decided to invite the Protestant archbishop as well. It had an embarrassing result for some of the partisans on the executive. Whilst the Protestant archbishop, Dr Barton, accepted and attended, the Catholic archbishop, Dr Mac Quaid, failed to turn up. An explanation heard later was that he declined the invitation because the function was being held during Lent.

The second floor, above the library, was known as the Guild Room, and was used for several purposes. Lectures and film shows were held there regularly. The Dublin Orchestral Players, under Brian Boydell, practised there. A ballet class for members' children also held sessions in the Guild Room.

On the floor above, the state agency Mianraí Teoranta had its offices, and on the top floor, alongside the administration offices, the International Labour Organization had for a time its Irish office, under its representative R Mortishead, later to be first chairman of the Labour Court.

By the time we opened Four Provinces House, our own orchestra had dissolved. The fall-off started when the small dance bands started proliferating with the growing jazz and pop music craze.

Having acquired some skill with their instruments in the orchestra, some of the commercially ambitious members yearned for the prestige, not to mention the pelf,

of professionalism, if only for a few hours playing at night.

The choir remained, and under the direction of Leo Maguire kept performing at our union's functions. The national delegate conferences were now being opened

with performances by the junior orchestra of the College of Music.

This college also furnished some of their top performers for our social functions. These included Veronica Mac Sweeney and Colm O Connor, pianists who have since become celebrities.

As we often had foreign fraternal delegates at these functions, we would usually have on the programme groups of Irish dancers, furnished by Lily Comerford, often accompanied by Leo Rowsome on the uilleann pipes.

Another College of Music performer with us was Kathleen Watkins, singing Irish songs to her harp accompaniment.

At this point, the discriminating reader may judge that I have gone far enough in name-dropping, the resource of the speaker or author lacking any better material. Often the writer with a paucity of ideas will turn his lack to a purgative, inducing name-dropping, even though at times the droppings are so scant of fertilising quality that nothing of harvest can be expected of them. For faltering orator or scribe, name-dropping can be propping.

The first two years of the new premises were commercially successful. Popular dancing went on seven nights of the week, and had become the project's main source of revenue.

LIBRARY

We had our own house band, led by members of our union formerly working at our trade and members of our orchestra. The band kept drawing the crowds, even when it lost two of its most competent musicians, Paddy Malone, who left on becoming general secretary of the Musicians' Federation, and Johnny Devlin, who became leader of one of the RTE orchestras.

Then suddenly this business—if not cultural—success of our headquarters was threatened. Rumours began circulating that our house was a centre for disseminating communism.

The library was the main target, not only on account of the books but for the meetings and debates held there at intervals on political topics. In the sociological section of the library there were, of course, books by Marx and Engels and Connolly. At the same time there were volumes by capitalist and other writers on the social sciences, including Adam Smith, Ricardo, Marshall, John Stuart Mill, Henry George, Tolstoy, and many others.

BOYCOTT

Soon, a general boycott of the premises was evident. Many of the societies and clubs that had made regular bookings for dances and other functions in the premises withdrew their bookings. The catering part of the premises had been doing good business with wedding breakfasts and other social functions. This also was affected by the boycott.

From the start of the project, we had been aware of criticism within the union of any activities

that might appear to question prevailing views on social issues or other contentious matters.

In this regard, our new headquarters, particularly the library, seemed a challenge. In one of the larger Dublin bakeries there was a group of our members, known as the "Parish Council", active in promoting Catholic Action.

It was considered the front of the Young Priests' Society branch which had now been established in two of our union's Dublin branches. This society, with headquarters in France, had spread among the trade unions here as well as in other countries.

Its work had been given an impetus by the encouraging patronage of Pope Pius XI. It was

this pope who made peace with Mussolini's fascist state in Italy as the price for negotiating the Lateran Treaty, which established the present Vatican City State in 1929.

Two years later, the same pope issued the anti-socialist encyclical *Quadragesimo Anno*, commemorating the fortieth anniversary of the earlier anti-socialist encyclical of Pope Leo XIII, *Rerum Novarum*. The main object of the Young Priests' Society was collecting funds to make the sons of workers priests.

Alarmed at the boycott of our union's new headquarters, in the building and developing of which much of our union's funds were invested, the national executive decided to dispose of the books in the library, and to look for tenants to take over the parts of the premises, including the main auditorium, in which functions had been run.

BLESSED

The books were sold to city second-hand book-dealers. Soon after, without the authority of the national executive, some of the officers of the Dublin branches brought in two priests one evening and had the premises blessed.

The tenant secured in 1948 was the late Lorcan Bourke, of the well-known family long associated with theatre entertainment, and related to Peadar Kearney, author of the national anthem, and the writer Brendan Behan.

During the tenancy, Eamon Andrews married one of Lorcan Bourke's daughters, and he came to take a prominent part in running the tenancy, which now took the name of the Television Club.

Recently, the tenancy was terminated, and as I write the only cultural association with the premises is the tenancy held by the Dublin Grand Opera Society, with office and use of the auditorium for rehearsals.

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Author: John Swift

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