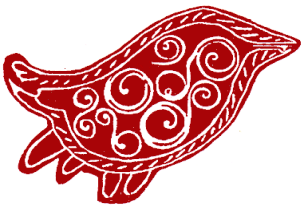
Journal of the Cork Historical and Archaeological Society

www.corkhist.ie



Title: The Royal Cork Institution. Part II: 1826-1849

Author: MacSweeney, Margaret and Joseph Reilly

Journal of the Cork Historical and Archaeological Society, 1957, Vol. 62, No. 196, page(s) 77-94

Published by the Cork Historical and Archaeological Society

Digital file created: February 29, 2016

Your use of the JCHAS digital archive indicates that you accept the Terms and Conditions of Use, available at http://corkhist.ie/terms-and-conditions/

The Cork Historical and Archaeological Society (IE-148166, incorporated 1989) was founded in 1891, for the collection, preservation and diffusion of all available information regarding the past of the City and County of Cork, and South of Ireland generally. This archive of content of JCHAS (from 1892 up to ten years preceding current publication) continues the original aims of the founders in 1891. For more information visit www.corkhist.ie.

This content downloaded from www.corkhist.ie

All use subject to CHAS Terms and Conditions

Digital content (c) CHAS 2016

The Royal Cork Institution*

Part II: 1826—1849

(Continued from Vol. LXII. No. 195, pp. 22–36)

By MARGARET MacSWEENEY and JOSEPH REILLY

The minute book of the RCI opens when Edmund Davy was about to leave Cork to take up the professorship of chemistry in the R.D.S. His departure was made the occasion for some changes. It was proposed to take over for the uses of the institution: . . . 'the three front rooms (second story) of the house on the South Mall',[1] and it was agreed that: '. . . the offices of Superintendent, Secretary and Assistant Treasurer be united at a Salary of £100 late Irish currency from and after the 1st January 1827.'[2] It is impossible to judge whether the rooms referred to were those in which Davy worked or whether he actually lived in the building. Probably not, for a resolution of the managers in June 1826 that:

> The suite (the three front rooms) in the second story of the House on the South Mall be allotted to the general purposes of the Institution, from and after Mr Davy's departure from Cork[3]

brought a lengthy and reproachful letter from a Dr Thomas Taylor M.D.,[4] who was Superintendent of the RCI and domiciled in the South Mall premises. He uses the terms, 'severe hardship,' and 'degraded state . . .' to describe his position if his drawing-room is taken from him. He further explains that he has gone to considerable expense to furnish it as a reception room for distinguished guests of the institution.

The managers yielded on the question of the drawing-room. '. . . The two front rooms occupied by Mr Davy . . . shall for the present only be allotted to the purposes of the Institution.' They added however that: 'They would suggest that in the case of a lecturer being appointed Secretary it shall be distinctly understood that upon any question affecting the offices of the institution coming before the Managers, or upon any other occasion when they consider it delicate or expedient, he shall withdraw.'[5]

There is some acerbity in this directed at either the departing Edmund Davy or Dr Taylor, who succeeded him as secretary. As professor of chemistry he was succeeded by Dr James Apjohn, an M.D. of Dublin University.

* This title will be abbreviated throughout to RCI

[1] RCI Min. Book, p. 4.

[2] ibid., p. 6.

[3] ibid.

[4] Some seven years earlier (1818) William Thompson (cf. footnote 16, part I) had levelled scathing criticism at the Superintendent of the RCI. Whether Dr Taylor was the same person is not certain.

[5] RCI Min. Book, p. 13.

This content downloaded from www.corkhist.ie
All use subject to CHAS Terms and Conditions
Digital content (c) CHAS 2016

Inquiry

Almost the last duty performed by Davy as secretary was to draw up a letter to his Majesty's Commissioners of Inquiry into the State of Education in Ireland requesting that the commission should:

> As your memorialists did on the first day of November 1824 humbly request .... inquire into and report upon the state of the Royal Cork Institution.[6]

The letter concludes:

> your memorialists beg leave to state that they are now most anxious for the inquiry, trusting that on the fullest investigation the Institution will be found worthy of your favourable report previously to the next session of Parliament.[6]

It is not too much to say that this document set the bell tolling for the RCI. In September 1826 a commissioner—Mr Franklin Lewis[7]—visited the institution. In 1827 the grant was cut down to £1500 and the agricultural activities had to be curtailed. The reason for the reduction was conveyed to the managers as follows:

> Dublin Castle, 31 December 1826.
>
> Gentlemen,
>
> I am commanded by the Lord Lieutenant to acquaint you that it having been deemed unnecessary to continue the Grant to the Farming Society of Ireland it is upon the same principle judged inexpedient to support those Farming Societies which are maintained through the Cork Institution and that consequently the Grant made to you will not exceed £1500 for the year 1827
>
> I have the honor to be, Gentlemen,
> Yr most obedient humble servant,
> Henry Goulburn.[8]

The managers, much concerned resolved that:

> The secretary be directed to write to Sir Nicholas Colthurst and to Mr Hutchinson, the Members of Parliament for Cork, soliciting their support in Parliament of the claims of the Institution.[9]

The professorships were no longer regarded as permanent posts for in May 1827 Dr Apjohn was invited to: ' . . . deliver a course of lectures on the same terms as last year '.[10]

In November 1827 an estimate of £1800 was submitted for the year 1828-'29. It was reduced to £1500. In consequence a plan to dispose of the Botanic Garden was discussed.[11]

[6] RCI Min. Book, p. 16–17.

[7] ibid., p. 21.

[8] ibid., p. 45.

[9] ibid., p. 48.

[10] ibid., p. 57.

[11] Eventually the purchaser of the lease was Father Mathew, later the great temperance advocate, and the Garden became the site of the first public cemetery in Cork, in face of some opposition. See O'Connell, W. M. D. J., *J.C.H.A.S.*, xlvi (1941) 66.

This content downloaded from www.corkhist.ie
All use subject to CHAS Terms and Conditions
Digital content (c) CHAS 2016

The Botanic Garden

The garden in spite of its usefulness had been a source of some embarrassment to the managers. The experiments conducted there were little likely to be understood by the poor and ignorant of Cork in 1827. There had been pilfering of young apple trees and an unpleasant incident when the curator, trying to apprehend a petty thief in the night, accidently discharged a gun which he was carrying and shot the intruder dead. 'These events drew upon him (the curator) necessarily an expenditure of about £8.[12]'

This dispassionate account of summary (and capital, however accidental) punishment overtaking a minor criminal serves to illuminate the period in a way that more routine entries in the minutes fail to do. Illumination, in a more prosaic sense, was the subject of a short minute at about this time and also marks changing conditions, it reads :

> Dr Cantillon gave notice that he would move on the next day of Meeting that the Lecture-room, staircase and laboratory be lighted with gas.[13]

The managers agreed, with the proviso that the change was not to cost more than £20.

Insecurity

The agricultural committee protested vigorously against the refusal of the managers to reappoint a lecturer in agriculture[14] after the grant had been cut but the managers stood firm. Lectures continued in chemistry, natural philosophy and natural history. The RCI had become narrower but easier to maintain on its reduced income. There was some discussion about courses of lectures to be substituted for those on agriculture ; mathematics ? geography ? The managers were slow to decide, but ready at the suggestion of Dr Woodroffe, and at no expense to the institution, to give the use of the lecture-hall to a Mr Uppington for a course of lectures on Electricity and Elocution. Electricity was still a scientific wonder in the eighteen-twenties. Why, in this instance, it was linked with elocution must remain a mystery.

In October 1828 the secretary, Dr Taylor, went to Dublin Castle to wait on the chief-secretary, Lord Francis Levison-Gore :

> In order to state to him the present usefulness of the institution and its strong claims to a continuation of that public support it has received from Parliament for twenty-one years and to give whatever explanations the Chief-Secretary may require.[15]

Dr Taylor, on his return, reported that the chief-secretary had replied that :

> The continuation or reduction of the present Grant depended upon the determination of the Chancellor of the Exchequer, to whom he would forward the paper delivered in, at the same time he declared that the Irish Government could have no wish but to support so useful an establishment.[16]

[12] RCI Min. Book, p. 42.
[13] ibid., p. 78.
[14] ibid., p. 77.
[15] ibid., p. 106.
[16] ibid., p. 108.

This content downloaded from www.corkhist.ie
All use subject to CHAS Terms and Conditions
Digital content (c) CHAS 2016

This reply encouraged the managers so much—it is difficult to say why—that there was talk of instituting a course of lectures on practical astronomy, and some discussion of the advisability of once more appointing permanent professors of chemistry and natural philosophy.

The lectures in chemistry after Dr Apjohn's departure in 1828 had been conducted by a local medical man, Dr Denis B. Bullen, who was later to play a prominent part in the preliminary efforts to have provincial colleges established, and who became the first professor of surgery in Queen's College, Cork.

Other financial bothers lowered. In March 1828 the managers had received the following letter:

> Cork March 3 1828
>
> Sirs,
>
> Inasmuch as you have by no means carried into effect your undertaking to expend considerably over a sum of £1500 in making lasting and valuable improvements upon the Premises which you hold under me, I have to inform you that I shall expect payment of all Rent and Arrears of Rent, subject to which you became tenants thereto, any accomodation hitherto granted by me having merely proceeded from that unconditional understanding.
>
> I remain Sirs,
> your most ob. st,
> Richard L. Jameson[17]

Later in the year their own lawyer[18] advised the managers that they must pay all arrears of rent or abandon the premises in spite of an agreement entered into with the above Richard L. Jameson. The item 'abatement of rent' on the account sheet for 1826-27 will be remembered in this connection.

In August 1828 the agricultural committee dissolved since:

> Having recommended measures to the managers that have been omitted they are not aware of any duty left them to perform and unless the managers point out to them duties and business they conceive the meetings of Agricultural Committees to be without an object.[19]

In spite of their difficulties the managers were quick to administer a snub to the Mechanics' Institute, when the vice-president, Mr Keleher, wrote:

> . . . requesting that the next course of lectures on Chemistry of the Royal Cork Institution be delivered at the Hall of the Mechanics' Institute. The Secretary was instructed to inform Mr Keleher that the managers could by no means comply.[20]

Later, in January 1829, they showed a more co-operative spirit when:

> A letter was read from Dr P. Kehoe applying on the part of the Directors of the Cork Mechanics' Institute for certain chemical apparatus to enable Dr Bullen to deliver a course of lectures on chemistry at that place.[21]

[17] RCI Min. Book, p. 90.
[18] ibid., p. 111a.
[19] ibid., p. 101.
[20] ibid., p. 105.
[21] ibid., p. 121.

This content downloaded from www.corkhist.ie
All use subject to CHAS Terms and Conditions
Digital content (c) CHAS 2016

On this occasion they permitted the loan of the apparatus given proper security for its return. The library and other facilities were still available and the RCI continued to provide a useful place of meeting for city committees.

In September 1828 it was :

> . . . Resolved that it is expedient to allow the Governors of Charitable Institutions a room of Meeting at the Institution upon application to the managers and provided that the Meetings are without prejudice to the objects of the institution.[22]

In December 1828 the axe finally fell on the Botanic Garden when :

> . . . A letter was read from the Chief-Secretary, Sir Francis Levison-Gore, desiring an Estimate of the Expenditure . . . for the following year but stating it to be His Excellency the Lord Lieutenant's desire that there should be no estimate for the expenses of a Botanic Garden.[23]

A letter from the curator of the garden, James Drummond, commented on this ' melancholy intelligence.'

> . . . I have served the Institution for more than twenty years. I have spent in your service the best years of my life . . . All the property I possess in the world consists in the plants which belong to me in the Garden, if I am forced to part with them precipitately, the little that is left to me will be sacrificed . . It would be ruinous for me not to have the ensuing summer to prepare for removal. I understand the method of discharging yourselves from the rent of the Botanic Garden recommended by Counsellor Connell who was consulted is to assign the premises to a pauper. Now my request is that you will assign the premises to me ; thus you will enable me to hold the Botanic Garden as long as time is wanting for disposing of the plants in the most advantageous manner. If this request is agreed to I will have no objection to supply the Botanic Lecturer with such specimens as I may have under cultivation as heretofore, so long as I continue in the premises without any charge.[24]

Drummond's dilemma was solved in traditional Irish manner (though in fact he was a Scotsman) by emigration. In January 1829 the committee to which the letter of Mr Drummond was referred . . . (found) . . .

> . . . that Mr Drummond, having presented the testimonials which the Secretary was directed to furnish him with, has obtained the permission of His Majesty's Government to proceed as a Settler to the Colony to be formed at Swan River on the West Coast of New Holland That he has received orders to join the conveying vessel on the 7th March . . That he has been necessarily engaged in the collection of his property and has been selling by auction his duplicates of Plants in the Botanical Garden. That he has given the most scrupulous attention and care for the preservation of the property of the Institution and has not only left single specimens of all the Plants therein cultivated but . . . has left standing some very valuable Beech Hedges and large plants which were exclusively his own property.[25]

The committee, which in the humourless manner of committees observed no incongruity in commending Drummond for not uprooting his hedges, also recommended that he be paid six months salary and that the property in the Botanical Garden be forthwith advertised for sale.

[22] RCI Min. Book, p. 102.
[23] ibid., p. 112.
[24] ibid., pp. 112–113.
[25] ibid., pp. 120-121.

This content downloaded from www.corkhist.ie
All use subject to CHAS Terms and Conditions
Digital content (c) CHAS 2016

Sir Thomas Deane, architect of the U.C.C. buildings, is mentioned in the minutes about this time when it was resolved: '. . . that Mr T. Deane be requested to have the East wall of the Lecture room repaired.'[26]

Withdrawal of Grant

For some reason the managers felt more confident in the summer of 1829. In July of that year Dr Denis Bullen, who had been acting in a temporary capacity, was elected professor of chemistry. A month later the following communication was received:

Dublin Castle, 31 July 1829.

Gentlemen,

I have to inform you that the Lord Lieutenant concurs in the recommendation of the select committee on the Irish estimates in the following passage:

" That the committee, having fully considered the circumstances under which the grant was originally sanctioned by Parliament cannot but advert to the fact that although the amount of subscriptions in the first instance may have justified the aid which has been afforded to the Institution, the amount of subsequent subscriptions has been utterly inadequate to the purposes for which the grant was intended. They therefore recommend that the Vote be diminished by one half in 1830 and should cease in 1831; leaving to the Government to consider the propriety of proposing limited Grants, for a specified time, in the case of other towns in Ireland, but not exceeding the private subscriptions which shall be actually raised for scientific purposes."

And in pursuance of which the grant which will be recommended to Parliament in aid of the Institution will be diminished by one half of its present amount for the year 1830.

I have the honor to be,

Gentlemen,

Your most obedient humble servant

F. Leveson-Gore.[27]

The real reason for this government frugality one can only guess. The reason given for the withdrawal had been operative during the whole of the RCI's existence and successive administrations had authorised the expenditure of approximately £40,000 on it during the preceding twenty years. It was after mid-century that education received the public support which in modern times has grown to be its sole, or practically its sole, sustenance. The narrowed but long-continuing activity within the RCI is a measure of the independent spirit which animated citizens before the state became as shelteringly paternal as it is today. But the blow nonetheless was crushing and cynical in its suddeness.

Writing to his friend, Mr Gilbert, in 1801, Humphry Davy expressed his fear that the Royal Institution, London,—which his own genius was later to make one of the world's most renowned scientific establishments,—would become an arena of party politics.[28] His biographer adds in a footnote: ' In

[26] RCI Min. Book, p. 127.

[27] ibid., p. 144.

[28] Paris: *Life of Sir Humphry Davy*, Colburn and Bentley, London, 1831, p. 117–118.

This content downloaded from www.corkhist.ie

All use subject to CHAS Terms and Conditions

Digital content (c) CHAS 2016

England, politics so constantly mix themselves up with all our institutions . . . every new society is viewed with jealousy and party spirit.'

The RCI was not a ' new ' society, but surely party spirit was at spring tide in Ireland in 1829. Yet factors other than ministerial or Castle malevolence were probably involved. The letter (quoted in part 1) from Thomas Fitzgibbon protesting against the method of appointing managers, and the strictures of William Thompson, cannot be altogether discounted.

Hincks

The situation brought the following letter from Hincks, then in Belfast.

Belfast 23 Sept. 1829

Dear Sir,

I am favoured with your letter of the 16th received yesterday—if my power were equal to my inclination I should gladly exert it for the benefit of the Cork Institution ; but I am not aware, under all the circumstances, that it is in my power to render any service.

The Resolutions of which a Copy was enclosed to me appear to proceed, either from hostility to the institution or from despair. I was not prepared for the latter, and I am willing to believe that a temperate examination of circumstances would remove the former. I regret the language used towards the Managers, but I suppose it to be the result, not of malice, but of misconception which might be removed. I was for twelve years the confidential, active and I will say the disinterested servant of the Institution. I feel myself responsible for the Charter, bye-laws and expenditure of the Institution during that time ; and I do not shrink from the responsibility. I am willing, on oath or otherwise, to vindicate every measure, and I feel confident that I can convince, by documents or statements that the measures adopted by the Managers were adopted on good grounds, were the best under the existing circumstances and were designed purely and honestly for the diffusion of useful knowledge without regard to personal interest.

I do not say that wiser measures might not have been adopted ; but I fearlessly say that more honest ones could not, greater zeal and diligence could not have been used nor could stronger marks of approbation have been expressed than by persons of all parties not only resident in Cork, but by visitors from almost every part of the British Empire. I am sure the same integrity has continued but I should suppose not the same activity. I for my part cannot see why all that is attainable and really useful may not be procured under the present charter, obtained with great labour and at much expense. If the Proprietors, actuated as I trust they will be by a disinterested desire of advancing knowledge will give up their privileges, make some necessary alterations in the Bye-laws, and then with combined efforts lay before Government a true statement of past circumstances I cannot help entertaining a hope that a portion of the Grant sufficient for useful purposes will be permitted to continue, because I believe the present recommendation founded on an erroneous notion of the terms on which the Grant was originally given, from confounding Sir John Newport's intentions with Lord Oriel's actual measures, which may be established from documents that ought to be in existence.

The Resolutions appear to me to propose an act of suicide which I do not yet see the necessity of—but if the Proprietors are selfish or indifferent, if the case is hopeless, and no other way presents itself of preserving the Collections etc. . . . I shall rejoice in their being transferred to any other Body, which, with energy will promote the grand objects of a diffusion of knowledge. Let not however the Proprietors be too hasty in such a transfer—with best wishes for the great object all should have in view.

I am, etc.,

T. Dix Hincks.[29]

[29] RCI Min. Book, pp. 15-17.

This content downloaded from www.corkhist.ie
All use subject to CHAS Terms and Conditions
Digital content (c) CHAS 2016

The letter has been quoted in full because it is so characteristic of Hincks in its energy, its optimism and its evocation of the gods of the nineteenth century, zeal, diligence, grand objects, etc. The resolutions which, according to Hincks, proposed an act of suicide were based on the following report:

> 1. That the only income which will be available to the Institution after the Parliamentary Grant is withdrawn is the Interest on the funded property and the annual subscriptions to the library, and they are totally inadequate to the Expenses of the Establishment on its present scale.
>
> 2. That the Rent of the Premises at present occupied by the Institution is entirely disproportionate to any income it has, or is likely to have, and as there is no probability of a reduction of the Rent so as to meet its reduced means, we recommend that these Premises be given up as soon as possible and that the Effects of the Institution be removed to some other situation.
>
> 3. That the Institution is now arrived at that crisis when the Proprietary must determine on one of the following courses:
>
> 1. By a further money contribution and by annual subscriptions to support the Institution in the principle of the Charter and Bye-laws, or
>
> 2. To sell all the effects of the Institution at the end of the year 1830 and divide the produce between the 202 Proprietors, or
>
> 3. To make a Gift of the Books, Minerals, Casts, Philosophical apparatus etc. etc. to any other Association of persons (in trust for the City of Cork) who will undertake under any other designation, and upon any plan, subject to the approval of the Proprietors, to form a new Establishment for the advancement of Science and for the diffusion of useful knowledge among the citizens of Cork.
>
> Signed G. Callaghan,
> Wm. Clear,
> Thomas Dean,
> James Woodroffe.[30]

The report was brought before the extraordinary general meeting of proprietors called on 6 October 1829 to consider the situation. It was resolved at this meeting—an outsize one with an attendance of 48—that the collections of the RCI were available . . .

> . . . for the promotion of General Science and the diffusion of useful knowledge under such form and designation of Establishment as the Citizens of Cork as well as the Gentlemen of the province of Munster may suggest for the consideration of the Proprietors.[31]

It was also resolved that:

> A Committee consisting of Mr Crawford Jun., Mr G. Callaghan, Dr Bullen, Mr Clear, Mr C. Beamish, Mr Jas Lane, Mr Fagan, Mr Daly, Archdeacon Thompson (be formed) to confer with Dr Bullen Jun. upon the proposition which he has so ably laid before this meeting of incorporating on this institution some system of useful and scientific Education and also to consider any other suggestions that may be offered to them and to submit to the Proprietors . . . the result thereof.[32]

[30] RCI Min. Book, pp. 150–151.

[31] ibid., p. 17.

[32] ibid., p. 18.

This content downloaded from www.corkhist.ie
All use subject to CHAS Terms and Conditions
Digital content (c) CHAS 2016

A College

At first the idea was to have collegiate status and the power to grant degrees conferred on the Royal Cork Institution, after enlargements of staff and premises. This project came to nothing, though for many years it remained the managers' aim. In 1829, however, no inkling of this future defeat stayed the exertions of proprietors and managers in their endeavours to save their establishment. The minute book records appeals to parliament and a loyal address to the king.[33] His majesty graciously consented to become a patron of the institution—but failed to loosen his ministers' tightened purse-strings.

The professorships became honorary, as did the offices of secretary and treasurer. Proprietors in 1830 relinquished their right of attendance at lectures. The lecturers were now to be paid not mainly, but solely, by the proceeds of the sale of tickets. The price of admission to the courses was about 7/6.[34] The courses became intermittent; they ceased. From 1830, when the grant was cut to £600, proprietors and managers were agitating strongly for a grant of the old custom house. This was the solid, double-winged building, erected in 1724 as a custom house, and still standing (now as part of the School of Art) on Emmet Place, which was Nelson Place in 1830. Their request was curtly refused by the government in June 1830.[35] The managers reiterated their demand in a lengthy memorial to the lord lieutenant (the duke of Northumberland) in October 1830:

> . . . His Grace expressed himself most favourably disposed to assist our application . . . but being ignorant of the intentions of the Lords of the Treasury, could give no pledge on the subject.[36]

Such activities as were continuing in the RCI were not running smoothly. There is a record of a protest by Dr Bullen, hon. professor of chemistry, against the right of the proprietors to demand transferable tickets to the lectures.[37] And though in a letter to the Castle[38] the proprietors had expressed their willingness to relinquish their right of attendance at lectures, in reply to Dr Bullen they concede only that:

> . . . willing to do everything in their power to promote the views of Scientific Gentlemen they will give Dr Bullen the use of their apparatus, chemicals etc. . . . the price of the premiums proposed to be given to the pupils shall also be paid from the funds of the institution.[39]

Memorial 1831

In August 1831 a lengthy memorial went to the Castle. It sketches the

[33] RCI Min. Book, pp. 24-25.

[34] ibid., p. 183.

[35] ibid., p. 170.

[36] ibid., p. 178.

[37] ibid., p. 184.

[38] ibid., p. 166.

[39] ibid., p. 184.

This content downloaded from www.corkhist.ie
All use subject to CHAS Terms and Conditions
Digital content (c) CHAS 2016

institution's achievements in its twenty-eight years of existence, draws attention to the want of:

> . . . a Collegiate establishment . . . in which the middle classes may obtain, on cheap and easy terms, a scientific and practical education, intermediate between the elementary system of the grammar School and the more expensive and higher instruction of the University.[40]

It stresses the fact that the RCI was the only incorporated Body, south of Dublin:

> . . . consisting of persons of every sect and denomination without any invidious distinction whatever, which could serve as a basis for erecting such Collegiate Establishment.[40]

It emphasises the peculiar advantage of Cork as a centre for such a college. In it is recorded the proprietors' gratitude for the government's grant to them of the old custom house and also their gratification that:

> . . . Parliament has placed at your Excellency's disposal the sum of £30,000 for Schools and Education in Ireland.[40]

The last is probably connected with the establishment of the national board of primary education. Other interesting points in the memorial are: a suggestion for a School of Civil Engineering: '. . . for which there is no School professedly in the Empire.' And the claim:

> . . . that the City possesses particular advantages for a great School of Medicine, in its extensive Medical and Surgical Establishments, as well as in the facilities afforded for the study of practical Anatomy, that the South of Ireland has been heretofore almost entirely dependent for Professional Education upon the Colleges of Scotland and France, for which immense sums of money have been annually drawn—the money thus expended would be fully adequate for the support of a creditable and most extensive school, provided the City obtained Collegiate privileges equal to those enjoyed by Edinburgh, Glasgow, Aberdeen and St. Andrews.[41]

There is a dignified rebuke to the government for:

> . . . the withdrawal of that fostering support which local efforts to improve the condition of this exhausted country require.

And the memorial closes with a plea to the authorities to:

> . . . promote the foundation, and secure the existence of an Academical Institution from which all spirit of party is excluded, and for the support of which your memorialists as well as the inhabitants of the City and Co. of Cork and whole Province of Munster are willing heartily to second the beneficence of Government.[41]

The document reveals a certain confusion of aims. The managers evidently had not quite decided whether they desired an establishment of university status or an academical institute. While they awaited the result of their appeal they busied themselves with the matter of the old custom

[40] RCI Min. Book, p. 195.

[41] ibid., p. 196.

This content downloaded from www.corkhist.ie
All use subject to CHAS Terms and Conditions
Digital content (c) CHAS 2016

house which, in spite of what they had stated in their communication, had not yet been bestowed upon the RCI. Finally, in June 1832, the building was granted to then. It was then in very poor repair. In September 1832 there is a record of the managers offering a complimentary address to the Rt. Hon. Thomas Spring-Rice, (secretary to the treasury) in gratitude for his help in obtaining the old custom house for the institution. He was also elected an honorary member. Mr Spring-Rice, having expressed the civilities customary on such an occasion, continued that :

> . . . he was glad to find that the grant of the Old Custom House was likely to effect the object contemplated namely the keeping together the various collections and property of the establishment. . . . He had known and visited the Institution in its infancy and had always viewed it with a friendly and anxious eye . . . he bore testimony to its past usefulness and could not refrain from expressing considerable gratification in adverting to that passage in the address which held out the hope that the Institution may be made still more useful in the extension of practical education.
>
> . . . With regard to the Parliamentary Grant he assured the deputation that its withdrawal from the Institution, and from the other Establishments in Ireland which had been totally or partially deprived of it, was not caused by a parsimonious spirit on the part of His Majesty's Government, but solely by the feeling that something was wanting on the part of these several bodies to entitle them to its continuance. He instanced the Belfast Institute which had had its Grant renewed and increased. . . . if our institution was made as useful as it might be by the extension of practical education, not only to its immediate neighbourhood, but also to the whole province of Munster and South of Ireland . . . Government would . . . aid its well directed efforts . . . and afford it pecuniary assistance commensurate with its exertions and usefulness.[42]

The distinguished visitor was afterwards asked whether the managers could feel secure in their tenure of the old custom house and he replied in the affirmative. The record shows that the managers also used the occasion to suggest :

> . . . the desireableness of establishing a College at Cork, (and) it was pressed upon Mr Spring-Rice by several of the Deputation that without the power of conferring degrees our Institution was comparatively useless and that contrasting the circumstances of Ireland with the public provision for the higher branches of education in England and Scotland, it was just and reasonable that eight millions of people should no longer be restricted to one University, and that University containing only one College. This outstanding anomaly was readily admitted by Mr Rice.[43]

The proceedings closed with a hope on the part of the deputation that :

> . . . as an Irishman and enlightened statesman his (Mr Spring-Rice's) powerful aid would not be wanting to the accomplishment of an object of such vital importance not only to the inhabitants of Cork but to the population of the South of Ireland generally.[44]

Even after this the managers had a little further trouble before they obtained possession of the old custom house. One reason for the delay was

[42] RCI Min. Book, pp. 215–16.

[43] ibid., p. 216.

[44] ibid., p. 217.

This content downloaded from www.corkhist.ie
All use subject to CHAS Terms and Conditions
Digital content (c) CHAS 2016

that several bodies in Cork had applied for the useful old building. The governors of the South Charitable Infirmary wanted it for a general hospital,[45] the board of health for the ' paupers of the Green-coat Hospital,'[46] even the barristers appointed under the Reform Act to register freeholders wanted a room there to carry out their task.[47] However, in October 1832 the RCI moved its collections from the South Mall to Nelson Place. The transfer of the precious casts was accomplished under the direction of John Hogan as already stated.

Memorial 1833

In 1833 the managers prepared another lengthy memorial to parliament. It was on the lines of the former one save that it boldly suggested :

> . . . founding an University on the plan of Edinburgh upon the Cork Institution, which instead of injuring Dublin will only tend to the improvement of that College by the salutary emulation that must necessarily arise from a competition between the different systems of education . . . [such an establishment] will be so enduring a monument of the paternal and enlightened views of the present administration, that a Grey, a Brougham and a Rice will hardly reject an opportunity that a Pericles or a Wyckham would have considered it their greatest glory to have embraced.[48]

The resources of the RCI were enumerated. It was pointed out that the collections had been assembled at considerable cost, yet :

> . . . the Proprietors with distinctive generosity are willing to devote (them) to so valuable a purpose as the promotion of any approved plan of Collegiate education.[48]

It was further emphasised that such an establishment as the RCI was ' utterly inefficient ' unless it had the power to grant degrees, its current ' depressed situation ' being evidence of this fact. It was suggested that :

> . . . among the different modes of public provision the appropriation of a small portion of the fund to be derived from the sale of Church property at once offers an ample and legitimate application which cannot fail to meet with general approbation.[48]

James Roche was empowered to entrust this document to the Rt. Hon. Thomas Spring-Rice M.P., and instructed to :

> . . . exercise his discretion in submitting such a statement as shall not only express his own views of the subject but shall also exhibit the sense of the Managers as to the anomaly of calling upon individuals in an impoverished and devoted Country to come forward with private subscriptions in aid of a public establishment, which except to a very few offers no prospect of pecuniary reimbursement ; and is directly opposed to the policy of every other Country in Europe—England and Scotland included ; which endows with a public fund, sufficient means of general instruction, at all events for the upper and middle orders, and gives a proportion

[45] RCI Min. Book, p. 192.

[46] ibid., p. 209.

[47] ibid., p. 219.

[48] ibid., pp. 235–236.

This content downloaded from www.corkhist.ie
All use subject to CHAS Terms and Conditions
Digital content (c) CHAS 2016

especially in Scotland, of a vastly more liberal character than of *only one University* for not less than *eight millions* of people ! . . . the peculiar exigency of the whole South of Ireland and the general deficiency of public instruction for the middle orders would in common policy and justice indicate that the Government of the country should no longer delay to take active steps in a matter of such vital necessity ; which the Managers doubt not Mr Spring-Rice will admit is one of the many instances of utter neglect or jobbing monopoly that has reduced Ireland to its present lamentable condition, and which they indulge the sanguine hope that it is the ardent wish of his Majesty's government without any further pernicious procrastination as far as possible to correct and amend.[49]

James Roche was also to :

. . . communicate with their (the Managers') Secretary, Mr Clear, in such a way as to regulate them in their remonstrances with Government and to avert the impending ruin of the valuable local establishment committed to their keeping.[49]

This 1833 memorial had no more success than the earlier one. The page which records the close of the memorial records also the managers' gratitude to a Councillor Bennett who had declined to accept a fee for advice on the conduct of negotiations for the Nelson Place premises. There was evidently a good deal of friendly co-operation with the managers, but not sufficient financial support to maintain the institution.

The RCI 1833-1838

This period can be briefly summarised. It was one of continual difficulties: bothers about finance, cutting down of the periodical literature and other amenities, deputations to the local M.Ps. to obtain their good offices with regard to remission of rates and taxes on the old custom house. Some lectures were still given in the institution but mostly it would seem in connection with the local schools of medicine. In 1835 there was an effort to arouse public interest :

Resolved : That as soon as final arrangements are made for the fitting up of a lecture room, we inform our fellow-Citizens by public advertisement of the steps we have taken and the measures in contemplation, to obtain the delivery of cheap courses of Lectures, and that lists be placed in various public places to receive the names of such as are willing to avail of such mode of instruction for themselves and families, in order that the Board may be enabled to ascertain how far the public are inclined to aid them in their desire to extend the usefulness of the Institution.[50]

A few months later a circular was drawn up calling upon :

. . . the Public and the friends of education to come forward and aid the Managers in their efforts to make the advantages which the Institution was capable of affording more generally available, particularly in patronising Lectures in Science . . . an advertisement to be published in the News Papers, to the same effect.[51]

[49] RCI Min. Book, pp. 234–6.

[50] ibid., p. 270.

[51] ibid., p. 272.

This content downloaded from www.corkhist.ie
All use subject to CHAS Terms and Conditions
Digital content (c) CHAS 2016

All this was done, but the public was as indifferent to the fate of the RCI as Lords Grey and Brougham had been to the opportunity of emulating Pericles and Wyckham. And, like a coda in this song of decline, are recurrent records of the piecemeal sale of the proprietors' funded property to keep the institution going in some fashion.

Lack of Public support

The apathy of the public requires more explanation than the apparent capriciousness of the government in withdrawing the grant. The Castle was notoriously unpredictable in its administration, but the fact that an institution which had done such excellent work for nearly thirty years and had enlisted the patronage and interest of the most influential citizens of Cork city and district in 1803 should lack popular support in its hour of difficulty raises questions. Local conditions differed little from those that had prevailed in the opening years of the century. There were the same county aristocracy, the same small, prosperous, merchant class, much the same commercial interests, though the boom of the war years had given place in the twenties to a post-war depression. But there were also the same underprivileged majority, the same burning agrarian problem in the surrounding countryside, and Catholic Emancipation, the most debated issue since the Union, had been replaced by the three main issues of the later nineteenth century in Ireland ; land, tithes, repeal of the Union. Emancipation had not as yet resulted in any important transference of power. Thomas Davis had not as yet risen at the Historical Society, Dublin University, to remind a section of young Ireland : ' Gentlemen, you have a country.' ' We have known you as yet but in our sufferings and in our wrongs' said Daniel O'Connell in his speech against the Coercion Act of 1833, which placed the whole country under martial law. The words may have found an echo in many a Corkman's mind when the RCI issued its appeal for public support. The same troubled background could have abated the enthusiasm of the wealthy landowners whose names are prominent on the list of founder members.

Thomas Davis wrote as follows to a friend when he visited Cork in 1843 for the meeting of the British Association.

> The Association meeting was successful for its science both to natives and strangers ; but because the Repealers and the educated shopkeepers of Cork sustained it, the county Conservatives declined to join it, so the number was only six hundred instead of fifteen hundred as had been usual.[52]

Eight years earlier possibly some of the county conservatives had already begun to draw aside from middle-class pretensions to culture, and the middle-class themselves may have been dissatisfied with an institution which provided intellectual entertainment rather than recognised professional or technical training.

[52] *Short Life of Thomas Davis*, by Charles Gavan Duffy, p. 127.

This content downloaded from www.corkhist.ie
All use subject to CHAS Terms and Conditions
Digital content (c) CHAS 2016

Managers' Aims and Popular Aims

The objects of the RCI could be covered by anything from organised technical education to the work of an institution of full university status, or by a combined research and social centre of the type of the Royal Dublin Society, where teaching was to some extent subordinate to other functions: more of a club than a school. There seems little doubt that Hincks and the founder-proprietors had it in mind to establish an academy of some sort (such as the Belfast Academical Institute), but the RCI, with its library and other facilities, attracted many menbers who were more interested in it as a place of meeting, and a centre for activities of a more or less private nature, than in its rigidly academic usefulness. While the institution was receiving the parliamentary grant its managers kept the educational end in view. But the two aims were somewhat incompatible. The demand for a second university arose from an increase in those entering the professions. It had both a religious and an economic drive behind it.

Provincial university colleges would provide higher education for students from a wider social range than could hope to attend Dublin University, and, it was hoped, without religious tests. Interdenominational and sectarian animosities in the nineteenth century rendered difficult the co-operation of different groups even for praiseworthy and useful ends. The fog of distrust was thicker perhaps in the sphere of education than anywhere else.[53] It may be judged that there were many in the RCI who wished to avoid such controversies, even if it meant sacrificing the teaching functions of the institution; who were willing to see it become a club rather than cope with the problems of developing it into an establishment with power to grant degrees. And there must have been many who realised that a much more extensive foundation was required to satisfy the provincial demand for higher education. This interpretation of the public's apathy finds support in the enthusiastic welcome accorded by all sections of the community to the efforts of the Munster Colleges committee between 1838 and 1845.

Memorial 1835

The last attempt to have collegiate status conferred on the RCI came in 1835. In that year the lord lieutenant, the earl of Musgrave, visited the institution and received an address which had embedded in its loyal phrases the following appeal:

> . . . The period they (i.e. the managers) feel is arrived and the presence of your Excellency affords an auspicious opportunity of expressing it, as equally their own and the concurrent wish of the public, not only of recalling by a strenuous effort the spirit and action of the institution but by infusing new elements of usefulness into the system and of enlarging its range and extending its capabilities by imparting to it the more comprehensive character and advantages of a Collegiate foundation for which it possesses the most complete available facilities.[54]

[53] See e.g. the history of King's College, London and that of the Queen's Colleges in Ireland.

[54] RCI Min. Book, pp. 276–277.

This content downloaded from www.corkhist.ie
All use subject to CHAS Terms and Conditions
Digital content (c) CHAS 2016

His Excellency was :

> . . . not insensible to the advancement of your general interests though as to anything more precise . . . he could not on that occasion be expected to convey direct assurance.[54]

After this the managers settled down to make the best of things. The minute book records their struggle to maintain the building in repair, to rent their lecture-room (not a very good one) to the teaching doctors and visiting lecturers. It was still available free to lecturers who devoted the proceeds of the sale of tickets to charity. During this period there were lectures on elementary astronomy, chemistry, English literature, geology, phrenology in fact on anything and everything. The proposal of Dr Caesar to build an anatomical room was however rejected ; ' . . . It being considered objectionable to have an anatomical dissecting room on the premises of the institution.'[55]

One entry seems to sum up this dreary period.

> The Managers having been informed that a living heron having been presented by Mr Foott of Gortroe, and a conversation having consequently arisen on the expediency of purchasing food for living animals in the present very limited state of our funds ; it was resolved that the Eagle, which we have had for some years and the above-mentioned Heron, be both presented to any scientific body who may desire them ; or that they be otherwise disposed of as the Secretary may think best.[56]

Decline

That was in 1838. So the heron and the eagle were liquidated and, as an educational body, the RCI faded away. From 1838 to 1849 the minutes of the institution are less copious than earlier ones, those of the eighteen-forties consisting of little more than the names of those who attended the monthly managers' meetings or the annual general meetings of proprietors. The records still show the election of committees, the admission of subscribers to the library, the transference of proprietors' shares, permission to draw from the casts, and the collections continued to be enlarged by many gifts of mummy heads, curious weapons, fossils, ogham stones, books and maps. The drain of capital continued however and the managers had to let part of the premises and restrict the library facilities in an attempt to meet the situation. That the members were not idle in the service of education is shown by a study of the preliminary efforts towards the establishment of the Irish provincial colleges. The committee formed in Cork in 1838 had an outstanding success in its efforts to lay the foundations of university education in Munster. It scored an even more notable triumph by welding, though temporarily, many groups and interests into a well-directed unanimity. The fascinating story of that movement and of the chief personalities concerned with it such as William Smith O'Brien and Sir Thomas Wyse belongs rather to national than to local history. Cork readers will find much of interest in

[55] RCI Min. Book, p. 328.

[56] ibid., p. 309.

This content downloaded from www.corkhist.ie
All use subject to CHAS Terms and Conditions
Digital content (c) CHAS 2016

two publications,[57] one contemporaneous, concerned with the movement, and in a series of articles by Professor Denis Gwynn in the *Cork University Record*.[58] An account of the movement has no place here. It must be emphasised however that the spirit that animated it, the very arguments used in the appeals and memorials, had emanated from the councils of the RCI which also provided the committee's most energetic members, as comparison of the names in the minute book with those on the committee clearly shows.

British Association

There was a faint stir in the RCI in 1843, the year the British Association met in Cork. In December 1842 a committee was appointed . . . . to take into consideration the present state of the institution and to report if any advantageous change could be made for its advancement.'[59]

The committee reported that '. . . . (the provision of) a suitable lecture room is indispensable and should command the earliest attention of the Managers.' To procure the necessary funds the committee suggested:

(i) a circular addressed to the proprietors and the public soliciting subscriptions,

(ii) opening negotiations with the government to ask a small annual grant, 'to promote the objects of the institution by giving regular courses of lectures to the public,

(iii) calling on the County, City and Borough Members to co-operate with the President.[60]

In September 1843 the following committee was formed to prepare a memorial to the lord lieutenant asking for a renewal of the grant. It may be noted that these were the same gentlemen who were active on the Colleges Committee with the exception of Dr Cantillon: James Roche, Daniel O'Callaghan, M.P., Major Beamish (on behalf of the Public), Dr Harvey, Dr Cantillon. These efforts, like earlier ones, proved fruitless.

The brief records of the RCI during the eighteen forties might seem to be connected with the depressed conditions prevailing at that time, particularly as the briefest coincide with the bad years 1845-1849. Reference to the minutes of the Cuvierian Society, which are copious for the whole period, shows rather that the institution had narrowed to become a private scientific society. Comparison of the names in the two minute books shows that the same persons were active in the society as in the institution, and that its monthly meetings were held in the RCI library.

Thus, after its eclipse as an educational body, the RCI continued to function as a social centre, as a scientific, particularly a medical, library, as the custodian of such art treasures as Cork possessed, and as the centre to

[57] *Speech of Thomas Wyse, Esq., M.P. on the extension and improvement of academical, collegiate and university education in Ireland . . . at Cork . . . November* 1844, *with notes* . . . (Simpkin Marshall & Co., London, Hodges & Smith, Dublin, Bradford & Co., Cork. 1844). Wyse, W. M. *Notes on Education Reform in Ireland* . . . (Waterford, C. P. Redmond & Co., 1901)

[58] Summer 1947, Christmas 1947, Summer 1948, Summer 1949, Easter 1952.

[59] RCI Min. Book, p. 334.

[60] ibid., p. 335.

This content downloaded from www.corkhist.ie
All use subject to CHAS Terms and Conditions
Digital content (c) CHAS 2016

which a Corkman of outstanding talents might look for patronage. Perhaps the interest in science stimulated by its work contributed to its downfall. After twenty-five years, the demand, not only for a second university, but also for increased technical instruction had become so insistent that only a whole series of new establishments could adequately answer it. When, in 1849, it was proposed to establish a School of Design in Cork the proprietors immediately voted unanimously to donate £500 to the project and to house the new school in the institution premises.[61] This establishment served the city for a further thirty years or so thus linking the RCI as firmly with technical and vocational education as with university education.

Conclusion

The RCI, as well as being an interesting example of an early experiment in scientific education was partly inspired by, and partly competing with, the developments which about the eighteen-thirties began to trace out the pattern of higher scientific education as it exists in Ireland today. By 1835 it was becoming clear to the managers that when collegiate facilities came to the provinces it would not be in an establishment founded on the RCI. Then to prevent a waste of the library, collections, and of the energy, vision and pioneer enthusiasm of which its work had been the expression, they organised the Cork Cuvierian Society, which flourished for forty years.

The reasons why the institution disappeared as a teaching and research centre after about quarter of a century and lasted for forty years as a cultural society may be summarised : (i) it was too advanced, in the context of its situation and time, to command lasting state or popular support ; (ii) it provided no degree or diploma ; (iii) it exhibited a confusion of aims and engaged in too many activities. The first disadvantage is the leaden influence which oppresses all innovators. The second was a grave defect. It could have been, but was not, remedied by legislation. The third was more the fault of the times than of the RCI authorities. It is easy to condone in a period when fluidity rather than form was characteristic of education everywhere.

The members, in spite of the sometimes vague and even muddled phrases in which they expressed it, had a clear and firm conviction of the value of higher education, particularly higher scientific education. Whatever criticism may be levelled at the administrative details of the establishment—and that is all that has come down to us from even its severest critics—it proved of inestimable value in the city. If a metaphor is permissible, it was a battery which provided illumination consuming itself in the process. All in all, it represented a very fine effort, expressive of a social consciousness and conscience which the modern welfare state has rendered less necessary, but certainly not less to be admired. Its pioneering and those concerned with it are worthy of grateful remembrance in Cork.

[61] RCI Min. Book, p. 49.

This content downloaded from www.corkhist.ie
All use subject to CHAS Terms and Conditions
Digital content (c) CHAS 2016