



PORTRAIT OF A LIBRARY

The Oireachtas Library

by Maeve McNamara

For Books are not absolutely dead things, but do contain a potencie of life in them to be active as that soule whose progeny they are.

John Milton. *Areopagitica* (1644)

The image of a library is so familiar that it has become a cliché: the hushed reading room containing quiet readers supervised by bespectacled librarians. Nothing could be further from the scene in the Oireachtas Library on a busy sitting day. Deputies and Senators are dashing in requiring complex information on the spot while simultaneously the telephones are buzzing with similar requests. Sometimes, to add drama, Members on their feet in the Chamber send Ushers for references to be quoted at once. In addition there is a constant flow of traffic from officials of Government Departments who are laying documents before the Houses, staff and messengers.

This peculiar nature of the Oireachtas Library was forecast in 1922 by Senator Horace Plunkett

who proposed inquiring into the character, scope and working of the American Legislative Reference Library as a model for a specialised library to be provided for both Houses. He quoted the object of this institution as "to supply the needs of the amateur legislator in the least possible time" [Seanad Debates Vol. 1 Col. 83].

Continued inside

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(Photo by Aisling Judge)

IN THIS ISSUE

The Oireachtas Library	13
Bibliographic control of Govt publications	4
Computer software demo (Bookshelf)	4

Since 1922 the ranks of amateur legislators have shrunk and the Library now serves 226 Members (166 Dáil Deputies and 60 Senators) and the staff of both Houses. Unlike the Library of Congress, the German Bundestag and the Greek Parliamentary Library, which serve wider publics, access to the Oireachtas Library is restricted to these groups. If material in the Library is unavailable elsewhere the Ceann Comhairle may grant access to others. Of course this does not preclude co-operation between librarians and the Oireachtas Library calls extensively on the services of other libraries and in return is happy to oblige them where possible.

A parliamentary library is important because it offers a direct and impartial information service to members of the legislature who are involved both in modifying and checking national policies in areas of Government responsibilities, which appear to be ever growing, and in legislating. Parliaments are small institutions with small staffs by today's standards, but the influence of each Member can be considerable, and it is this fact which makes their information support significant. Looking beyond national frontiers, parliamentarians and their information staff also have an increasing need to understand the changes and the consequent stresses of an ever more interlocking world.

History

The earliest Members experienced much difficulty without library facilities. Sir John Keane stated to the Seanad in December 1923

"We are suffering great disabilities at present in the matter of papers and documents issued for publication. A large number of important measures are forecasted for consideration and in no case it is possible, except at great physical labour, to get hold of even the most ordinary Government reports. In one or two cases I have been obliged by an official — some Civil Servant — whom I happen to know and who has lent me documents, but in doing so always made me promise to bring them back in good time. That is not a desirable state of things, and as a permanent home seems a long way off, I suggest that the Government should provide some sort of facilities if only temporary, whereby members could consult publications and generally look up subjects for legislation".

[Seanad Debates, Vol.2 Col. 333.]

However, a Librarian had just been appointed and in 1926 a Joint Committee was established to assist and advise the Ceann Comhairle in the direction and control of the Oireachtas Library.

Having inherited the Library of the Chief Secretary, Dublin Castle, the Oireachtas Library has one of the most complete collections of United

Kingdom parliamentary papers in existence and a valuable collection of rare volumes and pamphlets of the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries. Although a young parliamentary library by European standards, most of whose libraries were set up in the early nineteenth century, the Oireachtas Library, by the stock it holds, reflects the history of the society its Members represent.

A number of items which provide a link with the Pre-Union Irish Parliament are to be seen in the Reading Room. These are the engravings and oak ruler of Viscount Pery who was Speaker of the House of Commons from 1771 to 1785 and of John Foster, Speaker from 1785 until the Parliament was abolished in 1800. The elegant Reading Room was successively the Supper Room and Conversation Room of the Dukes of Leinster; it is easy to imagine those graceful encounters under the ornamented ceiling supported by sixteen fluted Ionic pillars.

General Administration

The direction and control of the Library is vested in the Ceann Comhairle and the Cathaoirleach who are assisted and advised by the Joint Services Committee which currently consists of 9 Dáil Members and 9 Seanad Members. The Librarian is responsible for the detailed administration of the Library and reports to the Clerk Assistant of the Dáil.

Staff

Since 1976, when the Research Service was initiated, the Oireachtas Library has had a staff of 10. This is a ratio of 1 staff to 22.6 Members which is one of the lowest ratios of staff to Members in European parliamentary libraries offering research services. For example, in the latest survey in 1983, the U.K. House of Commons had a ratio of 1 staff to 5 members, Sweden 1 to 6, the Netherlands 1 to 8, Switzerland 1 to 12 and Denmark 1 to 14.

The staff falls into roughly two grade structures, a professional grade structure, including subject specialists, and a support grade structure, including clerical staff and paperkeepers. The academic level of the professional staff is honours graduate. A qualification in Librarianship is not required. All staff are recruited by the Civil Service Commission.

Library Holdings and Services

In addition to the usual services of information provision, book lending and extensive photocopying facilities, the Library incorporates a Research Service. The purpose of this Service is to provide memoranda for Members on subjects requested by them in writing and for which time is available to prepare a comprehensive reply.

The Library maintains comprehensive runs of Parliamentary publications and Government publications. The vast bulk of Government publications are laid by Departments before the Houses: the Register of Documents Laid is perhaps the core Library catalogue. The titles (in Irish and English) appear on the next Order Paper, thereby being brought to the attention of Members. In the case of certain statutory instruments Members have the option of annulling them within a specified number of sitting days; when this period has expired the relevant Departments are notified.

Departments occasionally 'place' publications in the Library, sometimes in response to a parliamentary question. This is a more informal procedure and members are informed through the Accessions List.

All the main Irish and British newspapers are filed, together with some European and international papers. A press cutting service is used extensively by Members. Staff aim to keep abreast of current affairs by indexing newspapers and periodicals, but in recent years this activity has diminished with the loss of one professional staff member. As a result staff often resort to the indexes of other libraries and are awaiting the arrival on the market of current affairs databases.

Approximately one hundred periodicals and a stock of over 60,000 books on matters of parliamentary interest, particularly law and public administration, are in stock. Since this is rather a small collection in terms of the wide-ranging demands made by Members the Library subscribes to the Trinity College Information Service which is used almost on a daily basis.

The Library is a depository library for publications of the European Communities, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development and the United Nations and also has a collection of publications of the Council of Europe and the World Health Organisation. The U.K. parliamentary output is also kept up-to-date.

Contact is maintained with other parliaments through the European Centre for Parliamentary Research and Documentation, which is directed jointly by the European Parliament and the Council of Europe. If Members desire a comparative study on some legislative or administrative matter, this Centre will arrange it. Completed studies are listed in its Newsletter and are available free of charge to national parliamentary libraries. In return the Library researches subjects for other parliaments.

Publications

The Library issues a monthly Select List of Accessions which is circulated to all Members and senior officials of the Houses. An attempt is made to have the Accession List serve an embryonic current

awareness function by classifying publications under subject headings. Feedback comes in the form of a healthy burst of requests in the week after the list is issued.

Automation

Electronic data processing, which was installed in 1987, is rather new to Leinster House. Now that the teething problems have been sorted out, the Library is exploring its possibilities. External databases are the first application. The EC databases, particularly SCAD and CELEX, are the most frequently used. The introduction of a library cataloguing and circulation system is being considered. The staff are indebted to their colleagues in the Government Libraries Group, particularly from the Department of Agriculture, for sharing their expertise in this area.

The Future?

Although the Oireachtas Library is over sixty years old, it is only in the last fifteen years or so that it has become a regular and dynamic source of information for legislators. This is partly because of the growth of the full-time politician: 139 current Dáil members are described by Nealon as full-time politicians compared to 65 in 1973. (Nealon, T. *Ireland: a parliamentary directory 1973-74*. Dublin, Institute of Public Administration, 1974; Nealon, T. *Nealon's Guide to 26th Dáil and Seanad*. Dublin, Platform, 1989).

A more vigorous approach to social and economic changes has resulted in an explosion of material to be processed. Basil Chubb in 1970 observed that after 1922 few inquiries of any depth were made into social and economic problems until recently (*Government and Politics of Ireland*, Stanford, 1970 p. 56). In the forties and fifties it was perfectly possible for amateur librarians to keep track of their publications using handwritten ledgers. This is no longer the case and the absence of a professional librarian grade in the Oireachtas Library has been identified by the staff as the most important issue to be addressed.

Finally, there is the fact that parliamentarians in different countries are being faced with similar problems as they merge their economic interests and need to learn more from each other. After 1992 the information needs of the legislator will become more sophisticated and the Oireachtas Library will endeavour to meet the challenge. Ultimately it is to be hoped that the people of Ireland and their democratic institutions will benefit.



Bibliographic control of Government publications

by Mary Doyle

Those of you working in Government libraries will find enclosed with this Newsletter "Guidelines for the submission of details of publications prepared by or under the auspices of Government Departments but not issued through the Stationery Office".

To date I have received details of publications from:

Dept of Agriculture and Food (naturally!)
Dept of Health
Meteorological Service.

Hopefully now that you all have a copy of the Guidelines there will be more forthcoming. Address any queries to me, **Mary Doyle** at the **Dept of Agriculture and Food, Kildare Street, Dublin 2. Tel: 789011 x3117.**

The National Library is currently investigating improving bibliographic control of Irish Government publications, both those published by the SO and those published by individual Departments.

Virginia Mulvihill of the National Library has had meetings with the Stationery Office with 2 aims:

a) To encourage the Stationery Office to use ISBNs on all publications. If ISBNs were used SO publications would be included in the

Whitaker's database, which would make them available to UCD, which, together with TCD, is cooperating with the National Library in the project. The SO is willing to cooperate but cannot give any commitment as to when it when it can be done.

b) To have official publications not published by the Stationery Office included in SO catalogues. The Stationery Office does not see this a possibility in the foreseeable future. This matter was brought up with the Stationery Office by the LAI SO Liason Group in 1988 and a similar response then led to the GLG undertaking to attempt to monitor Departmental publications — a project we have now begun.

The National Library would like all Government Librarians preparing lists of publications to establish a system of notification of such publications to the National Library with a view to setting up a national bibliographic database. Discussions are currently in hand and it is probable that the GLG will act as a clearing house for such notifications.

The National Library also like to be informed of all forthcoming publications and will be writing to all Departments in the near future.

COMPUTER SOFTWARE DEMONSTRATION

There will be a demonstration of **BOOKSHELF** in the Department of Agriculture and Food on the morning of **20 November 1991**. Bookshelf was one of the software packages we looked at during our software seminar in 1990. Its usefulness was limited because it was dependent on the PICK operating system. As the system has since been developed and is no longer dependent on PICK the suppliers have offered to demonstrate it again.

WANTS AND DISCARDS

An Bord Glas subscribe to the *Official Journal of the European Communities* to keep abreast of developments in their area but do not need to retain it once it has been scanned. Rather than discard it they are willing to pass it on. Contact: Bill McGarry, An Bord Glas, 8-11 Lower Baggot Street, Dublin 2. Tel: 763576

The Department of Agriculture and Food has issues of *Iris Oifigiúil* to dispose of following binding. The number of issues available varies by year but range from 1976 to 1990. Contact: John Honeyman, Library, Dept of Agriculture and Food, Kildare Street, Dublin 2. Tel: 789011 x3241.

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