

The Early Years of the Reading Association of Ireland

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This brief retrospect on the early years of the Reading Association of Ireland was prompted by the fact that there was no documented record of the origins of the association. Most members of the first national committee have died including three former presidents who passed away within the last few years. As records of early meetings, conference programmes and membership lists could not be located, the following account, of necessity, is based on personal recollections of events some of which happened almost fifty years ago. I have attempted to cover some of the highlights I recall between 1975 and 1990, the period during which I was actively involved in the national committee of the RAI. ¹

In late 1974, a few years after I took up a position at the Educational Research Center (ERC), the then Director Tom Kellaghan asked me to attend a meeting in Paris organised by the International Reading Association (IRA). At that meeting Ralph Staiger, then the Executive Director of the IRA, enquired if there was a possibility of setting up a national association in Ireland. Early in 1975 I invited a small group of five or six people to a meeting at the ERC at which it was agreed to test the waters. Two of the five, Michael Clarke and Brendan Molloy were enthusiastic and committed. We sent out an invitation letter to a meeting at St Patrick's College to ascertain the level of interest in establishing a national group with a specific interest in promoting reading. Much to our surprise close to eighty people turned up, some coming from considerable distances.

Foundation Meeting, 1975

At the September 1975 meeting held in St. Patrick's College, the following, (in alphabetical order) were elected to serve on the first committee of the RAI: John Blake (St Patrick's BNS, Drumcondra), Michael Clarke (St. Patrick's College, English Department), Vincent Greaney (Educational Research Center), Margaret Kneeshaw (Dublin City Libraries), Ann Mulholland (Dept. of Education, Psychological Services), Brendan Molloy (Dept. of Education, School Inspectorate), Tadgh MacPháidín, (Scoil Mhuire, Ballyroan), Seamus Ó hUallacháin (Dept. of

¹ I am grateful for the helpful comments provided by Finian O' Shea and Gerry Shiel.

Education, School Inspectorate), Ellen O Leary (UCD, Department of Psychology), and Desmond Swan (UCD, Department of Psychology). I was elected President and Desmond Swan vice president. Six members of the committee had primary school teaching backgrounds.

The new committee which held monthly meetings opted to organise a national conference. While it may now appear that this was a logical step to take, it was far from obvious at the time. We could not look at the experiences of other similar educational bodies in Ireland as they did not exist at the time. The Educational Studies Association of Ireland (ESAI) was founded the following year. We were also fortunate in the institutional support provided by the Educational Research Centre which continued over many years.

First annual conference, 1976

One year later on September, 23-25, 1976 we held our first annual conference. It featured 15 sessions and nine workshops. The offer of The Educational Company to fund the publication of a book based on a selection of presented papers, helped attract academics from the UK and the US. At the time many staff members at the Educational Research Centre (ERC) were engaged in a large-scale study of the effects of standardized tests, which involved collecting national level achievement test data based on tests (Drumcondra Achievement Tests) that had just been developed for Irish schools. The conference encouraged some members to focus their presentations solely on reading achievement data. As an aside, one of 1976 ERC presenters, Jim Cummins was the keynote presenter at the 2023 Dublin conference; in the interim Jim had become Professor at the University of Toronto and a leading international authority on literacy development and bilingual learning.

We established a precedent of having the annual conference opened by the Minister for Education. Richard Burke did the honour in 1976 and chaired the opening address which I delivered on a review of existing Irish research in the area of reading. Over the following years the committee opted for key literary figures to offer the opening address. These included Seamus Heaney, Brian McMahon, Brendan Kennelly, and John Montague. In an effort to promote the RAI, prominent figures in the Irish educational scene were invited to serve as chairs. These included senior figures from the Department of Education, education and psychological

departments in various universities and colleges of education, the Northern Ireland Council for Educational Research, the INTO, and RTE.

At the closing meeting, An tAthair Fiachra Ó Ceallaigh, Gormanston College, (later Auxiliary Bishop of Dublin) proposed that the association should also be known as Cumann Léitheoreachta na hÉireann.

World Reading Congress, 1982

In 1978 John Blake, Michael Clarke and I attended the World Reading Congress in Hamburg. During the course of the congress Ron Mitchell, then conference organiser for the International Reading Association, approached me about the possibility of holding the 1982 World Congress in Dublin. I was somewhat reluctant, given the major logistical issues involved and the need to accommodate a large gathering of international delegates in Dublin which at the time had a relatively small number of suitable hotels. I discussed it with John Blake and Michael Clarke, both of whom were quite keen to explore the possibility. Subsequently the RAI national committee voted in favor and the die was cast.

The national committee in the lead up to 1982 World Congress consisted of John Blake, Michael Clarke, Roddy Day, Joan Gleeson, Vincent Greaney (Organising Chairman), Noel Maloney, Brendan Molloy (President of RAI), Éamonn Ó Murchú, Alice Quinn, Bridie Quinn, and Sister Marian Walshe. It proved to be an excellent hard working committee with each member taking on responsibility and given freedom to organise and supervise the implementation of a key activity. An additional 25 people worked on a number of social committees. With financial support from the Department of Education, the INTO, the Educational Company, the Northern Ireland Department of Education, and several other agencies, a substantial program of activities around the conference was organised. The fee of £56 pounds for the five-day congress covered attendance at lectures, and workshops, meals in the college, a state reception in Dublin Castle, a concert in the National Concert Hall, poetry readings, access to the Teachers' Club, a golf outing, a limited number of tickets to the Leinster Hurling final in Croke Park, an Irish music night, and a display of Irish craft. John Coolahan presented a display of old Irish textbooks. The Department of Education published a special edition of *Oideas* (Vol 26) to honor the event.

The 1,400 participants had a choice of pre-congress institutes, workshops and presentations. The opening presentation by Seamus Heaney focused on the importance of precision in the use of words, while the final closing address by Walter McGinitie argued that uncertainty was the most valuable quality of a good teacher. In between, participants had the opportunity to listen to presentations from a large number of countries. Presenters, which included major international figures from the world of reading, covered a broad range of topics related to literacy and language development.

Undoubtedly the Congress, which was well covered by the media, contributed to the recognition of the RAI within the country. Educational policy makers, professionals involved in the preparation of curriculum and teacher preparation and a very large number of teachers from all over the country were exposed to different perspectives on developing literacy habits and raising achievement levels. At another level, the congress helped ensure that the financial status of the association was on a sound footing for a number of years. This unexpected financial bonus arose from the considerable number of delegates who opted to skip lunch, some of whom used the time to shop in the city. As the college charged only for meals consumed, the RAI benefitted greatly from the unknown persons who skipped lunch on one or more days.

We also encountered some hiccups or Murphy Law moments. The shortage of hotel rooms was exacerbated by the demand for the limited number of rooms due to the holding of another world congress in Dublin the same week. In an effort to solve this dilemma the agency that handled accommodation offered delegates the possibility of sharing rooms and also booked dormitory rooms in the college. I received a note from Eve Malmquist, the well-known Swedish academic, asking me to intervene and clarify that he was in fact male and that the offer to share a room with a female might not be appreciated by his wife. One group of tired transatlantic delegates was transferred by bus from Dublin Airport to St Patrick's College Maynooth instead of nearby St Patrick's College, Drumcondra. The national transport company, CIE which had been engaged to transport delegates from various hotels went on strike the week of the congress. Luckily their management was quick to engage the services of a private bus fleet to transport delegates from their various hotels. CIE inspectors discretely positioned inside the walls of the college coordinated the movements of the buses. For the only time in memory the plumbing

system in the college failed late one evening during the congress. Desperate measures were employed to rectify the situation.

European Reading Conference 1985

Given the acknowledged success of the World Congress, it should not have been a surprise when we were invited to hold the 1985 European Reading Conference. I was elected as President of the RAI for 1984-85. The conference was held in St Patrick's College. The Lord Mayor of Dublin, Jim Tunney, hosted an official reception at the Mansion House for the delegates. Consistent with our policy to get a prominent political figure to open the conference, we decided to invite the Taoiseach of the day Garret Fitzgerald to officiate. I used a political contact to approach Garret and he agreed to consider it. Some months later I was made aware of a memo drafted by a senior official within the Department of Education recommending that the Taoiseach should not accept the invitation on the grounds that, as the Minister of Education, Martin O'Donoghue had opened the World Congress, it would not be appropriate for the Taoiseach to open a less prestigious event. Thankfully the considered civil service advice was ignored. Garret took the invitation seriously. Before his presentation he told me that on the previous afternoon, he reviewed the sizeable book of conference abstracts while seated beside his wife in the back of the state car during a drive through the Wicklow mountains. His opening comments focused on his personal synthesis of the key core topics to be covered during the conference. He also made a plea that young children be taught to type. After the official opening he mixed with the delegates and seemed very pleased when two young female teachers asked him about a study he had conducted on the use of the Irish language. He directed them to a corner of the room and over the course of about fifteen minutes explained how he had used 1911 population censuses documents to measure the extent of Irish speaking in the pre-famine period. Some of this work had been carried by wading through census data when seated in the front of a campaign bus while going from town to town in the run up to a general election.

International Youth Congress on World Peace through Literacy, 1985

RAI was requested by John Manning, President of the International Reading Association to host the First International Youth Congress on World Peace through Literacy. It was a small, focused event and was attended by fifty eight delegates from 19 countries, one of whom was Katherine Patterson, the renowned American author of books for children and young adults, whose works include *Bridge to Terabithia*. The closing address was delivered by Sean McBride, former Irish politician and Noble Prize winner who warned of the dangers of one person, Richard Murdoch, becoming over dominant in the media. His warnings proved prophetic. Since then the Murdoch's corporation through its hundreds of media companies has espoused conservative political causes such as Brexit, supported Donald Trump and has helped influence political life especially in the US, UK and in Australia.

Book Award

In Ireland prior to late 1980s, children interested in reading for pleasure most likely read books by British authors such as Enid Blyton, Roald Dahl, C S Lewis, Beatrix Potter, Anna Sewell, or by American authors such as L M Alcott, Lewis Carrol, Richard Scarry, Dr Seuss or E. B. Whyte or by the French author Antoine de Saint-Exupéry. There was a conspicuous lack of literary works by Irish authors on Irish topics. In an attempt to address this lacuna the RAI, prompted in part by Bea Cullinan then President of the IRA at the 1984 Carysfort conference, an RAI book award scheme was proposed to promote the publication of quality children's literature in Ireland. With the change in the name of the association, in 2015 the awards were termed the Literacy Association of Ireland (LAI) awards. To the best of my recollection, the early organisational effort to establish the book work was led by Therese Day supported by Bridie Quinn and Finian O Shea, and later by Maureen Colfer and Ursula Ní Dhálaigh .

Tom McCaughern, then the RTE security correspondent, won the initial award for his 1986 novel *Run With the Wind*. Other winners included Eugene McCabe for *The Orphan Squirrel*, (1987), and Celine Kiernan for *The Poison Throne* (2009) and *Into the Grey* (2013). Over the initial years the award began gradually to attract the attention of publishers, media and young and established authors. In 2009, eighty-eight eligible books were submitted for consideration for the award. The number of annual awards was expanded to cover different age groups as well as publications in the Irish language. Two award winners were better known for their endeavours in other spheres of Irish life. George Otto Simms, the author of *Exploring the*

Book of Kells, (1989) was the former Church of Ireland Archbishop of Armagh and Primate of All Ireland, while the author of *The Story of Croke Park* (2021) was the well-known broadcaster Micháel Ó'Muircheartaigh.

In 1990 Marita Conlon McKenna encouraged by her UCD course tutor Patricia Donlon, who also served on the RAI national committee for a number of years, submitted a manuscript to O'Brien Press which had recently developed an interest in publishing children's literature. The subsequent publication, *Under the Hawthorn Tree*, became very successful in the Irish market and was eventually published in Irish, French, Dutch, German, Spanish, Danish, Swedish Italian, Japanese, Malay, Arabic and Korean. I was particularly pleased when, as a member of the IRA Board of Directors, I was asked to present Marita with the International Reading Association Award at its 1991 annual convention in Atlanta. This publication received the RAI award that same year. In 1997 consistent with its objective to promote the publication of quality children's literature in Ireland, RAI presented O'Brien Press with a special award for the high standard of its children's books. Subsequent to the introduction of the RAI book award a number of sponsors introduced new award schemes for Irish children's literature, each of which involved a cash prize.

Inservice Training

Over the course of the years RAI offered a number of lectures featuring distinguished international authorities. For instance, Marie Clay, the New Zealand clinical psychologist outlined the key concepts and implications of the Reading Recovery program designed for students who experienced difficulties learning to read and write. Ken Goodman, the key developer of the theory underlying the literacy philosophy of whole language attracted a large audience including a sizeable number who travelled from Northern Ireland to attend his Dublin presentation.

Not all RAI efforts to offer in-service type instruction to promote reading and literacy met with success. RAI volunteers responding to a 1982 questionnaire and a follow up request in the *Reading News* offered to make presentations to groups on 56 different topics. Recipient groups were expected to cover travelling expenses. The volunteers were drawn from the ranks of the teaching profession, academia, research and the Department of Education. The program was

not a success. It is not clear whether the failure of this initiative was due to inadequate promotional material, poor targeting of possibly interested groups or an overall lack of interest.

Impact

It is difficult to evaluate the impact of the RAI as many of the changes that have occurred in Ireland since 1975 have all contributed to improved literacy outcomes. These include improvements in teacher training, school staffing, pedagogy, textbooks, availability of school and class libraries, smaller classes, in-service programs and home-related factors. The limited available evidence around the time that the RAI was founded suggests that reading standards in English left much to be desired. Much of classroom time during the English and Irish reading periods was devoted to reading aloud. Recent international assessment results present a much more positive story. Irish fourth grade students were ranked among the highest scoring countries in the primary grades tested in PIRLS 2021, and 15 year old students were placed second internationally in the reading component of the 2022 PISA study.

In the interim, RAI has helped expose new generations of teacher trainers, teachers and educational officials to promising new developments in the literacy world. Its annual book award has contributed to the development of a publishing market for young readers. Through its annual conferences and newsletters it has offered incentives for researchers to investigate important aspects of literacy development based on data derived from Irish classrooms. Again through its national and international conferences and its participation in international conferences, it has helped portray Irish education as being open to new ideas and forward looking. Conferences also helped establish rich personal contacts among participants. For instance during the course of the International Youth Congress, Finian O' Shea became quite friendly with Katherine Patterson. This friendship resulted in him being invited to travel to Boston where over the course of a number of years he attended the summer institutes of Children's Literature, New England (CLNE). This group focused on the academic study of children's literature and brought together international authors, illustrators, publishers, editor, librarians, academics and aficionados to debate and discuss books for children. In turn CLNE held their 1995 summer institute at Trinity College, Dublin.

Over the years members of RAI have helped gain international reputations through their publications, presentations and involvement in meetings and committees. Few could have

anticipated in 1975 that one day members of the International Literacy Association, the international body whose primary aim is to improve reading instruction would elect an Irish person as its president. Bernadette Dwyer achieved this honour in 2018.

While it is inevitable and desirable that other bodies and agencies take up leadership in some activities formerly supported by RAI, the association can look back with some small degree of pride in what it has contributed to the improvement of literacy pedagogy and in the process help improve Irish students' reading habits and raise standards.

The LAI Executive Committee wish to thank Vincent Greaney for his efforts in compiling this rich and valuable account of the history of the RAI.