



OPENING MINDS

LIBRARY, ARCHIVE & MUSEUM

The Linen Hall Library

Minutes of the 234th Annual General Meeting on Thursday 27th June 2024 at 1pm in the Linen Hall

Members in attendance: Mr Simon Bridge, Mr John Cross, Mrs Anne Davies, Professor Simon Davies, Mrs Mary Delargy, Mr Jim Fitzsimmons, Ms Lyn Hagan, Mr James Houston, Mr Eamonn Hughes, Ms Cathy Law, Ms Roisin McDonough, Mr Patrick McGarry, Dr Philip McGarry, Ms Maria McGilly, Mr Seamus McKee, Mr Joe McVey, Mr Anthony C.W. Merrick, P.R. Morrow, Ms Patricia McNeill (Ormeau Business Park), Mr John Sheldon

1. Apologies

Apologies were received from Judge Patrick Clyne, Dr Frank Ferguson, Mr Colin Gowdy, Sir Ian Huddleston, Professor Barry Kelly, Ms Irene Kingston, Mr Gordon Lucy, Professor Mícheál Ó Mainnín, Ms Brigid Napier, Ms Maggie Pernaut-Deschamps,

2. Minutes of the 233rd Annual General Meeting (AGM) held on 25 May 2023

The AGM minutes were proposed by Mr Eamonn Hughes and seconded by Mr Patrick McGarry.

2.1 Matters arising

There were no matters arising from the minutes.

3. Reports from the Library

3.1 President's Address

The President said that it was a great honour to be elected as President of The Linen Hall in its 235th year. He commended his predecessor Dr Eamonn Hughes, who steered the Library. He said the Board were deeply disappointed to be informed in May that our grant from the Department for Communities was being reduced with immediate effect by 33%. Since then, there was engagement with a large range of stakeholders and potential supporters, including senior figures in all five political parties. What was immediately clear at every meeting was the huge respect in which The Linen Hall is held right across the political spectrum.

While we remain in a precarious financial situation, the Management Team has worked hard to stabilise our position. A strategy group has been set up to help us plan for the medium

term, with regard both to setting our finances on a stronger footing and refreshing our vision of how we see the Library developing in the years ahead.

The 25th anniversary of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement was marked with a series of panels which involved all the main parties, as well as community activists. Later in the year we had a project 'Borders and Boundaries'

One particular highlight of the year was an event chaired by Paul Muldoon, with Louis MacNeice's daughter Corinna and Michael and Edna Longley. There were also two drama productions, book launches by Lady Mary Peters, Carl Frampton and Michael Magee, a number of discussions with local authors, and numerous other events. The Ulster Scots writing competition continues to grow every year, and we value the support we receive from the Ulster Scots Agency, and Foras na Gaeilge in the care and conservation of the Irish Language collection.

In April we ran a very successful charity fundraiser in Belfast City Hall featuring Adrian Dunbar. We were also very grateful to our stalwart supporter Dan Gordon, who curated an evening presenting readings from local playwrights, and then generously arranged a fundraising performance of The Boat Factory in the Grand Opera House. The Board are grateful to broadcasters Mark Simpson, Kathy Clugston and Tara Mills for their participation in our programme. The President thanked all of the staff throughout the Library who have worked tirelessly throughout the year, demonstrating creativity, and energy, and also to our volunteers who bring an extra dimension to what we offer the public. Finally, the President expressed his gratitude for members' support during our recent fundraising campaign. Thanks to the generosity of our members and friends, £14,550 was raised. The President did say that although there are challenges ahead, he was confident that with our history, our ever-expanding range of activities and our excellent staff team, we shall continue to be a beacon for promoting knowledge and enlightenment values.

3.2 Director's Report

During 2023 there was a 33% cut in core funding from the Department for Communities which meant our core funding was reduced from £246,000 in 2022/3 to £164,000 in 2023/4. The President, Philip and Director set out to lobby all of the political parties in Northern Ireland. Everyone expressed their admiration of the Library and were supportive of us. It was an opportunity to re-state the importance and relevance of the Linen Hall. An Equality Impact Assessment was launched by the Department. The Director was pleased to report that a large number of responses were received by the Department for Communities.

The Linen Hall was successful in receiving funding from National Lottery Heritage Fund to mark the 25th Anniversary of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement through an exhibition and series of events. This was a reflective project, and the objective was to consider multiple attitudes and experiences. The first event included a panel discussion by young MLAs – under 40 – none of them were old enough to vote in the 1998 referendum. Other panels included negotiators from 1998, and implementors of the Agreement. There was

widespread representation from politicians. Ian McElhinney and Dan Gordon brought together a curation of extracts from plays pre and post 1998 in the Studio at the Grand Opera House to show creative responses of the period. A video and exhibition catalogue were also produced.

Funded by the Department for Foreign Affairs Reconciliation fund, there was a project called 'Borders and Boundaries.' The exhibition explored the cultural, political, and economic meanings and realities of borders and boundaries in Northern Ireland throughout the past century, highlighting a diverse range of artefacts and archival material from our collections. A series of events explored the themes of blurring boundaries; cross border activism; displacement; border history; identity and literature.

Arts Council for Northern Ireland Lottery funding was received to support the arts and cultural programme. During the year we hosted almost 80 events and numerous exhibitions across a range of topics. We fostered new writers and explored our rich literary heritage. Many writers visited the Library to talk about and read from their work including Martin Doyle, Michelle Gallen, Wendy Erskine, Michael Magee, Dawn Watson, and Brian McGilloway, who has generously donated his archive to the Linen Hall. In commemoration of the tenth anniversary of the passing of Seamus Heaney, we organised a number of events in partnership with the Seamus Heaney Centre at Queen's University and BBC Northern Ireland. We were also privileged to host Corinna Mac Neice, daughter of the poet Louis Mac Neice, daughter of the poet Louis MacNeice for a panel discussion with Edna and Michael Longley, introduced by Paul Muldoon. We celebrated the 40th Anniversary of the play 'Lay Up Your Ends' by Martin Lynch and Charabanc Theatre Company by focussing on our theatre and performing arts archive to celebrate women in theatre in Northern Ireland. It was a particular honour to hold an event celebrating the work and life of the late Jo Egan, whose archive is also part of our Collections.

We continue to work with the Ulster Scots Agency and Foras na Gaeilge to ensure the conservation and development of our Language Collections. A third Ulster Scots writing competition was developed in 2023 which was highly successful, and conservation continued on the Gibson Collection. Foras na Gaeilge continued to fund conservation of Irish Language Collections. At the end of 2023 we were delighted to receive funding from the British Council for an Irish Language/Breton poetry jukebox. This is in partnership with the Centre Culturel Irlandais in Paris and culminated in events at the Etonnants Voyageurs Festival in St Malo in May 2024.

In 2023 an application was submitted to National Lottery Heritage Fund for a feasibility study for Linen Hall 2 – A Museum of Contemporary History in Northern Ireland. This was successful and an award was made of £248,000. This will consider whether a second building is feasible for the housing of the NI Political Collection, along with world class research facilities; interpretative and museum space and a repository for oral histories. This is important to shape strategy for the future.

.

The café continued to thrive and provide a welcome source of income in 2023.

During 2023 the charity bookshop had a difficult year as we had to vacate the Fountain Centre in the springtime and find new premises. We temporarily relocated to Linenhall Street, but this was not successful, so the decision was made to close this shop. However, towards the end of 2023 we were pleased to trade in St George's Market at weekends.

During 2023 there were two fundraising events. The Director thanked Adrian Dunbar for generously supporting the Linen Hall through an in-conversation event with Tara Mills in Belfast City Hall. This was kindly supported by the High Sheriff, Dr John Kyle as he made the Linen Hall one of his charities for his year in office. In October, Dan Gordon and Michael Condrón did a performance of 'The Boat Factory' in the Studio at the Grand Opera House.

The Director thanked the Board of Governors, staff and volunteers for their help and support throughout 2023.

3.3 Librarian's Report

Librarian noted 2023 was a busy and productive year in relation to the collections, and thanks to the industry of the team much was achieved. Highlights included:

With generous funding from the Department for Communities, we shone a light on the expansive and historically significant Gibson Collection of Robert Burns, and explored the wider influences of Robert Burns present in the poetry of our early Belfast and Provincial printed books, and Ulster-Scots collection, through the major 'Fragments of Scotch Poetry' digitisation and online exhibition project.

Generous funding from Foras na Gaeilge continued support for our Irish Language collection. In addition to continued conservational binding of over 100 newspapers, periodicals, and books, and a generous acquisitions budget, Foras funded the creation of digital surrogate copies of rare and unique treasures, including a James Blow printed church catechism in Irish; one of the earliest English Irish dictionary to appear in print; the first magazine published in the Irish Language; and issues of the Shan Van Vocht, edited by Alice Milligan and Anna MacManus.

Continued steadfast support from the Ulster-Scots Agency facilitated the ongoing comprehensive condition checking and conservation of the Gibson Collection of Robert Burns, and the restoration of a number of Burns-related artworks which vividly illustrate the impact of Burns.

And in relation to conservation in general, we refreshed our emergency procedures, disaster preparedness, and salvage training facilitated by Harwell; and a number of our funded projects allowed for great strides in preservation across our collections – including the scanning of unique literary letters, and specialist conservation of posters from our Northern Ireland Political Collection.

Building on the retention of our full museum accreditation status, under funding from Art Fund administered by Northern Ireland Museums Council, to mark Earth Day we took part in The Wild Escape programme. Drawing inspiration from the wildlife and biodiversity found in books held in The Linen Hall's children and young adult collection, the workshop at the Library with Forge Integrated Primary School aimed to increase knowledge and awareness of the natural world, local biodiversity, and climate change.

Use of the collections in terms of loans and collection queries was up on the previous year, and we continued to welcome users from next door to around the world. The Librarian noted we are always pleased to have the collections support partnerships which increase the reach of the collections, and in 2023 we worked in partnership with the University of Liverpool; the University of Oxford's; and Queen's University, Belfast, and NUI Maynooth. We also progressed collaborative doctoral awards around our collections with the University of Oxford and the Open University. And we were really grateful in 2023 to have welcomed a number of exceptional interns from Stranmillis University College; Cultural and Museum Studies at Ulster University; English at Ulster University; Public History at QUB; and Liberal Arts at QUB to grow their experience, knowledge, and skills by working with our collections.

Gratitude was extended to our members who support the collections through membership, and those who have contributed to the endowment fund which facilitates much-needed conservation – in 2023 this included funding the scanning of the Joy manuscripts – 13 volumes of manuscripts compiled by Henry Joy - and to the hundreds who support us through donations to the collections, a full list of whom was included in the annual report.

Librarian ended by illustrating the breadth of donations to the collections in 2023 using archives as an example: we received archives of Carol Moore; the late Dorothy Dunlop; the newspaper clippings archive of the Irish News; and Olympic material to our sport archive from Lady Mary Peters. The archive of Women Together was enhanced by the donation of the Chain of Office of Women Together by Maeve Mulholland; the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition archive was enhanced with the papers of Professor Monica McWilliams; and campaigner for women's rights Lynda Walker. Carol Moore also brought us an archive of the late Barri Adair; and we were privileged to be the chosen repository for the archive of community and trade union activist, politician, and campaigner for integrated education and equality, the late Baroness May Blood. In relation to our literary archives, we received the archive of Brian McGilloway; and additions to the Michael McLaverty archive from Dr Sophia Hillan.

The final donation mentioned was the National Collection of Northern Ireland Publications, known to many as NIPR. NIPR was launched in 2000, based on voluntary donations to a national collection. Recent years had been challenging for NIPR, and following the withdrawal of their funding in 2023, and consultation and discussions, the National Collection passed to the care of the Linen Hall when it was donated to the Library by the NIPR Board.

Librarian concluded by expressing gratitude to the President, Board of Governors, Director, Monica, Melissa and the Collections team, and Members for the support received during 2023.

4. Annual Report and Accounts for 2023

4.1 Finance Manager's Report

The Finance Manager provided a Financial Summary showing the main trends in the Linen Hall's financial performance over the last four years. The Linen Hall suffered a cut in 2023 of one third of its annual grant from the Department for Communities, losing £82,000 in core funding. At the same time, running costs continued to rise, with most inputs affected by the high rate of inflation, which had peaked at 9.6% in October 2022 and only fell back to 4.2% by December 2023. Other sources of core income were higher in 2023 (donations and legacies up by £40,000, rental income from the two shop units up by £19,000, membership subscriptions up by £10,000 and fundraising trading income up by £7,000), but these efforts were not enough to offset the £82,000 cut from the Department, in the face of increasing costs.

Despite these difficulties, work continued on several funded projects which had begun in 2022, alongside successful applications for further projects, some carrying on into 2024. Most notably, in December 2023, National Lottery Heritage Fund awarded a grant of up to £245k to fund a Scoping Study for the Linen Hall 2 Museum of Contemporary History in NI project.

The Linen Hall had built up a positive current account bank balance through the Covid years 2020 and 2021, with emergency core funding being applied for and costs being reduced through periods of closure, but the bank balance was substantially lower by December 2022 as core funding returned to previous levels and costs increased. The continuing core deficit in 2023 led to a bank overdraft balance of £236,000 by 31st December. To set this in context, the Linen Hall has normally operated within a bank overdraft facility of £150,000 to finance its day-to-day operations.

Looking at the income side in more detail, and comparing 2023 to 2022, total income fell from £1,028,000 to £943,000, excluding a NILGOSC pension scheme adjustment, the biggest differences arising from the timing and value of grant funding. Grant income received was £441,000 in 2023, compared to £602,000 in 2022, with funding for specific projects down by £73,000 and grants towards core operating costs down by £88,000. Project funding had been higher in 2022 as it included the closing stages of the extraORDINARYwomen project and the Enlightenment Festival, as well as £25,000 from the Department for Communities to replace the guttering on the Linen Hall's listed building.

Income from membership subscriptions, which go directly to help fund core running costs, showed an increase of £10,000 over the previous year at £141,000, and the Governors and staff are always grateful for the loyal support of the Linen Hall by its members.

Income from donations and legacies was £96,000 in 2023, compared to £56,000 in 2022, with members responding generously to an appeal for donations following the £82,000 funding cut

by the Department for Communities. All gifts and legacies are very gratefully received, whether to general funds or to the Endowment Fund.

Commercial rental income from the two shop units owned by the Linen Hall increased from £102,000 in 2022 to £121,000 in 2023 as there had been a period of vacancy in one of the units during 2022. The Linen Hall also boosts its core income through trading activities that tap into the earning potential of its unique assets. Box office sales, café income, gift shop sales, room hire, and tours all increased in 2023, and the two fundraising events, Adrian Dunbar in Conversation and The Boat Factory, raised £8,000 between them.

The Linen Hall Charity Bookshop lost its shop unit at the Fountain Centre in March 2023, and then the replacement premises in Linenhall Street failed to offer enough footfall, so sales moved to St George's Market and online from September 2023; the result was a reduction in annual sales of second-hand books from £48,000 to £26,000.

On the cost side, again comparing 2023 to 2022, total expenditure (other than those costs flowing from the pension scheme) increased by 6%, broadly in line with inflation, and the breakdown of costs followed a similar pattern across the two years. Some individual costs did show larger variances from 2022; energy costs increased from £35,000 to £54,000, and depreciation charges fell from £107,000 to £94,000 as many IT assets had become fully depreciated in 2022.

The Linen Hall operates a defined benefit pension scheme through NILGOSC, the local government scheme, and the Linen Hall's section of the NILGOSC scheme was in surplus by £1.6m at the end of 2023, which was a further improvement on the £1.3m surplus at the end of 2022, but this was due to actuarial measurements that are beyond the Linen Hall's control. It is reflected as an asset in the balance sheet, but it has no effect on cash flow. The charge included in operating expenditure for pension scheme net operating and related net finance costs in 2022 was £201,000, but this fell to £8,000 in 2023. There was also a net finance return of £64,000 in 2023, which has been included in overall investment income in the accounts.

The bank overdraft balance stood at £236,000 at the end of 2023, compared to a positive current account balance of £20,000 in the previous year, and although the bank balance can vary significantly over the course of a year, this high level of overdraft reflected a year of shrinking income and rising costs. We normally work within an overdraft limit of £150,000 and enjoy a good working relationship with Danske Bank, who have been supportive of the Linen Hall in a challenging year.

The Linen Hall also has investments and cash on deposit with the Northern Ireland Central Investment Fund for Charities, with Danske Bank and with Evelyn Partners stockbrokers, relating to the Catalyst, McLaverty and New Linen Hall Endowment Funds, none of which are available to spend, however the investment income from these endowments contributes to conservation of the collections, the biennial McLaverty Short Story Competition, and to some core running costs.

Considering reserves and longer-term financial sustainability, the Linen Hall has certain obligations as a registered charity, one of which is to have a suitable reserves policy. The Linen Hall's stated policy is to hold a level of unrestricted funds equivalent to three months' expenditure on core activities. At the end of 2023, this figure would have been £262,000. However, Note 25 to the full financial statements shows that the technical measure of the Linen Hall's free reserves was a negative £571,000, or £833,000 short of a healthy reserves position. In practical terms, this means that whilst the Linen Hall holds valuable assets in its collections and its building, cash flow needs careful management, and we are vulnerable to the effects of any one source of funding being unexpectedly reduced or withdrawn. It also underlines the need to keep all costs under strict control and to maximise income.

Note 27 to the full financial statements has been added this year to draw attention to the financial challenges that the Linen Hall is facing, and the resulting threat to its status as a going concern. Note 27 also sets out the steps being taken by a Strategy Committee of the Board to Governors to identify new means of income generation. The Governors have considered these plans and reviewed budget and cash flow forecasts to 31st December 2025 and have determined that it is appropriate to prepare the financial statements on a going concern basis. The independent auditor has also referred in his report to the uncertainty around going concern, but the audit report has not been qualified, based upon his consideration of the adequacy of the disclosures made in Note 27.

The Finance Manager concluded by noting that the full audited accounts for 2023 are available on the Linen Hall website and members are welcome to contact her with any questions.

4.2 Approval of Annual Report and Accounts

Mr Joe McVey proposed the acceptance of the Annual Report and Accounts; this was seconded by Dr Simon Bridge and was duly adopted.

5. Election of Governors

The following people were validly nominated for election to the Board of Governors – Ms Lynn Hagan, Mr Justice Ian Huddleston, Mrs Cathy Law, and Ms Brigid Napier.

6. Election of Auditors

It was proposed by Mrs Anne Davies and seconded by Mr Eamonn Hughes that Finnegan Gibson should remain as auditors.

7. Any Other Business

The President said that the Board had decided to make Mr Dan Gordon an Honorary Member of the Library as he had been very helpful in fundraising for the Library.

Mrs Mary Delargy said that she would like to congratulate staff on the work that had been conducted during the year. She was particularly pleased to learn about the project that was being carried out in relation to the McAdam Lexicon.

The 234th AGM closed.

Dr Simon Bridge
Honorary Secretary