Irish Museums Association. The First 25 Years

Aideen M. Ireland

The Irish Museums Association is now 25 years old and it is time to reflect on the establishment and development of the Association as we enter into a critical phase of its development. So it seems timely to ask – who are we, and where have we come from?

Establishment

The Irish Museums Association grew out of the International Council of Museums – (Ireland branch), which had been formally set up in Ireland in 1957. By the mid-seventies there was a growing feeling that membership of ICOM was only really of use to those who were able to travel abroad and that there was a need for a forum in Ireland for those generally interested in museums, and which would concern itself more with immediate local problems of museum practice in Ireland.

Thus it was proposed at a Committee meeting of ICOM-Ireland in February 1977 that a draft constitution of an Association of Irish Museums be drawn up. The draft constitution was considered and amended at the next meeting, held in June. Despite the assertion of Scannell and White that the Irish Museums Association was not formed until 1979, the Newsletter and other information sources do not bear this out. The Constitution of the Irish Museums Association was adopted at an ICOM-Ireland meeting held on 15 October, 1977 in Malahide Castle. Its main objects were:

• To define and support museums; to establish, support and reinforce the museum profession in Ireland, north and south,
• To organise co-operation and mutual assistance between museums and all those concerned with promotion of the museum service in Ireland,

1. Most of the information for this survey is drawn from the pages of the Newsletter or Museum Ireland. No attempt has been made to consult minutes or other files of the Association. This is not expected to be an exhaustive study of the history and development of the Association.
• To promote an awareness of the role which can be played by museums and the museum profession within the community,
• To maintain international contact through support of the International Council of Museums.³

The following were elected to the Executive of the new Association

Chairman                    James White
Vice Chairman                Edward Myers
Hon. Secretary               John O’Sullivan
Hon. Treasurer               William Dick
Committee                    Anthony Cains, Christopher Lynch
                               Muriel McCarthy, Diarmuid O’Donovan
                               Micheal Ó Morain, William O’Sullivan
                               Maura Scannell, Brian Turner
                               Aidan Walsh, Roger Weatherup

It was agreed that the Executive Committee for ICOM-Ireland would also be that for the Irish Museums Association. During the course of the AGM for 1979 it was agreed that the finances of the Association and of ICOM-Ireland be totally separate. This has remained the case until the present day.

During the Seminar held in Cork in 1985 Dr James White, the Association’s first Chairman, was elected the first ever Honorary Life Members of the Association. Dr White was awarded this distinction for his consistent and valuable support of the Association since its inception. His formative and prominent role as Chairman of the Association, while also Director of the National Gallery of Ireland, contributed significantly to the prestige and self-confidence of the newly established Association.

Core Values of the Association

Constitution
Clarification of a portion of the Constitution relating to supporting members was discussed at the first AGM of the Association in 1978. Ordinary membership was seen to embrace all people working in museums whether professional or amateur, part-time or full-time. The section read:

- Ordinary membership of the Association is dependent on observation of an agreed code of professional ethics. It is open to all personnel of museums and institutions as defined in Clause 8. The Executive Committee is also empowered to grant ordinary membership to any person whom they deem to be qualified by virtue of special training or experience. Each ordinary member shall be entitled to five votes at the Annual General Meeting.

- Supporting membership is open to any person who subscribes to the objectives of this Association. Each supporting member shall be entitled to one vote at the Annual General Meeting.  

A revised constitution for the Association was produced in 1981 arising from debate and recommendations at that year’s AGM. Clauses relating to Membership and to the Executive Committee were amended. The revised clauses dealt with the duties and responsibilities of both ordinary and institutional members, as well as voting rights. Election of the Executive Committee was dealt with, including the Committee’s relationship with ICOM. In 1982 the Association (along with ICOM-Ireland) resolved, in consultation with the Museums Association of Great Britain, that those involved in the arts and antiques trade should be excluded from membership. A further amendment to the Constitution was passed at the 1993 AGM. This ensured that the period of office for all officers (including the Chairman) was limited to three years. It was felt that this change would ‘provide younger members of the profession an opportunity to become active in the IMA’. Minor adjustments to the Constitution relating to professional ethics were made at the AGM in 1998.

Museum Ethics and Mission Statements
In 1983 the Association produced its own Museum Ethics drafted by Helen Hickey of the Fermanagh County Museum. The Ethics were printed in the Newsletter (No. 9) of March 1983 for membership comment and were subsequently adopted at the AGM on 15 October. The adopted Ethics were published in the Newsletter for October 1985 (No. 14).

The AGM of the Association, held in September 1995, adopted two draft Mission Statements – one for the Association itself and the other for a proposed Museum Service for Ireland. Both were printed in the Newsletter for January

5. AGM papers for 9 Oct. 1993

**Annual General Meetings and Spring Seminars**

**Annual General Meeting**
The first AGM of the Association was held in the National Gallery of Ireland on 18 November 1978 when a large amount of the business time was devoted to a discussion of the Constitution. At the AGM in Armagh in 1979 it was decided that the AGM provided an opportunity to visit museums and to hold a lecture of interest to those attending. Thereafter the format of the AGM generally consisted of a guest lecturer or a debate on a specific theme and visits to sites or museums of interest in the chosen locality, with the day culminating in the AGM. This policy was continued in subsequent years and has brought the Association around the country, with some local societies and venues varying with each other for a visit from the Association. Matters of policy – if not of politics – have been aired in convivial surroundings.

Though the one-day AGMs were originally peripatetic, in recent years they have tended to be held exclusively in Dublin, though the venue changes annually.

**Spring Seminar**
In 1979 it was decided to organise a weekend seminar in Killarney under the title 'Irish Museums. Past and Present'. This was the first Seminar organised by the Association and took place at the end of February 1980. The February – March date has been the tradition for the Seminars ever since. The strong lineup in 1980 included directors from the Armagh County Museum, National Gallery of Ireland, National Museum of Ireland, Monaghan County Museum, Muckross House, Ulster Folk and Transport Museum, as well as the Minister for Education, John Wilson, T.D.

For many years thereafter the proceedings of the Seminars formed an annual publication. Lately some papers from these Seminars have appeared in the Association's journal, thus obviating the need for an annual Seminar publication with a separate editor.

In 1986 the Seminar was held at the Irish Agricultural Museum in Johnstown Castle. The generosity of the Irish Museums Trust in providing six grants of £30
each was acknowledged. On the demise of these valuable grants the Association itself put up the money. Thus in 1995 scholarships were awarded for the first time to aid attendance at the Spring Seminar.

The Seminar held in Tralee in February 1993 was remarkable for many reasons. A record attendance of over 210 delegates listened to the Minister for Arts, Culture and the Gaeltacht, Michael D. Higgins, T.D. announce the establishment of more formal consultation links between his Department and the Association. The Association was delighted at this public and positive acknowledgement of its role. Matters which had concerned the Association, including the organisational needs of national institutions in the Republic and the capital funding requirements of heritage, were now expected to be lobbied for by Minister Higgins.

The following year the Minister for State at the Department of Arts, Culture and the Gaeltacht, Pat the Cope Gallagher, T.D. gave the After-Dinner Address. The last ministerial guest speaker was the Minister for Enterprise and Employment, Richard Bruton T.D., in 1995.

**Finances of the Association**

The initial annual subscription fee for membership was set at £2 at the first AGM in 1977. At the 1986 AGM discussion took place on the increase of the annual membership fee from £4 to £10 – an increase of 150% as was pointed out by Alfred Faullner. However, since the Association could not continue to be run on voluntary labour and needed more publications, the increase was felt to be justified. It was felt that publications would raise public awareness of the Association. Pat Murphy lamented the lack of a permanent executive secretary for the Association which would allow it to pursue its affairs in a more business like manner and provide the kind of service it felt to be essential. While the increase in the membership fee was passed (after a vote) it was felt that the Association should produce a document outlining its plans for the increased revenue. The revenue issue, along with the need to devise some kind of secretarial support for its activities, continues to be a core challenge for the long-term development of the Association.

Throughout these years, the financial life of the Association was precarious, and were it not for support rendered in kind or monetary support from the (National) Heritage Council the activities of the Association would have been severely curtailed.
Publications

Newsletter
Soon after the establishment of the Association the need for a regular newsletter was expressed. Its aims were:

- to provide a link between members of the Association,
- to be a platform for members' views,
- to be a means for exchanging information. 6

Views, comments, notices of events, developments, enquiries, news and any other relevant items were to be welcomed. Aidan Walsh became the first Newsletter Editor. 200 issues of the first Newsletter were produced for November 1978. It became bi-annual in 1980.

In 1983 the Newsletter (No. 9) received its modern printed format and the luxury of an ISSN number. Photographs also made their appearance. The new developments were made possible due to the increased membership fee. In October 1985 the Newsletter (No. 14) published its first advertisement – a trend which has continued to the present day.

By 1988 the high standard set by Pat Cooke since 1984 (including its glossy format) had to be scaled down due to the editorial time involved as well as the high production costs. A more modest Newsletter was suggested concentrating on news and appearing more frequently. More weighty matters, including papers from the Seminars, should be dealt with in a journal. However, it was hoped to produce up to four Newsletter per year.

The issues of the Newsletter for 1988 reverted to the stapled-sheets format though by February 1989 (No. 20) the new Editor, Robert Nicholson, moved the Newsletter back to A3 format with a break up of the text into interesting columns and boxes. Desktop publishing and the Association had met!

In 1995 (No. 31) the Newsletter, which was now under the editorship of Larry Walsh, rose from the four to six pages it had been under previous editors (Robert Nicholson, and later Pat Holland), to eight pages. A first was the colour photograph reproduced on page one of issue No. 29 in May 1994.

The new-look Newsletter was launched in 1997 (No.34) under the editorship of Colleen Dube and Karin Sterle and was continued by Derval O'Carroll. For No.37 the format became even larger and was printed on glossy paper. In 1999 the Newsletter moved over to the Association's colour, purple, under the editorship of Grace Mulqueen and the logo was displayed prominently on inside pages. Further initiatives are expected under the new editorship of Rosa Meehan.

*Museum Ireland*

1990 saw the Association undertake a new venture - the publication of an annual journal. The first volume of *Museum Ireland* appeared in February 1991 under the editorship of Aidan Walsh. The journal was intended to replace the publication of the proceedings of the annual Seminars. While papers from the Seminars were to be included in the new publication, it was hoped that the scope of the journal would be wider and articles could also be invited on specific topics. Copies were also to be available for purchase by non-members. A Subscriptions Officer and an Advertising Officer were appointed to the journal.

1994 saw a new editor and a new cover. Brian Lacey introduced a striking new image for the journal. Larger than previous journals, it carried two new features – reviews of museums and exhibitions, and articles on museums outside Ireland which dealt with Irish themes. The design and format established by Brian Lacey is still in use. Volume nine for 1999 saw the editorship pass to Jane Williams while this present number is edited by Brian Crowley.

The journal has become the main forum for the Association's viewpoint and for the opinions of members. Its continues to represent the Association nationally and internationally, and the launch of the annual journal has become a feature of each AGM.

*Directory of Local Museums*

In 1983 the Association took the decision to produce an up-to-date version of the *Directory of Local Museums* which had first been produced by John O’Sullivan for ICOM-Ireland in 1975. As the only comprehensive directory of museums in Ireland it was badly in need of revision and reprinting. The 1975 edition had 47 pages divided under headings such as ‘Local Museums’, ‘Local Societies’, ‘National and Provincial Institutions’.

The Association undertook, by means of a questionnaire, to produce a new edition in 1984. Again John O’Sullivan was the editor. This time the directory
dealt solely with museums. It was published by the IMA and ICOM-Ireland and consisted of 35 pages covering 126 entries. For a time thereafter the publication of a museum guide was taken up by the Irish Museums Trust.

Research

Support and Funding for Museums
In 1989 the Association undertook research into funding opportunities for museums in Ireland. Barbara Morrow, a professional researcher, saw the project through to completion. The result was the publication of a booklet on Support and Funding for Museums, an I.M.A. Directory which appeared in February 1990.

Survey of Museums in Ireland
During 1993 Karin Stierle of the Arts Administration Studies course at University College Dublin took up a placement with the IMA to produce a report on the state of museums in Ireland. A detailed questionnaire was sent to 289 museums during May 1993 and a 60% usable response was received. The survey was conducted over a twelve-week period and the work was overseen by a Sub-Committee of the Association. The final report was published as Survey of Museums in Ireland, edited by Helen Lannigan Wood.

The survey provided invaluable information on the number of museums in Ireland, details of new and defunct museums, numbers of visitors, visitor and educational facilities, staffing levels, management of collections, and funding. It was hoped that the information contained in the survey would form the basis of an illustrated guidebook to Irish museums to be produced by the Association in 1994.

Training

1989 saw the first questionnaire sent to members on the training needs of the sector. The Association's subsequent training programme began with a one-day meeting in Clonmel in February 1991 at the start of the Seminar. Topics included 'Preventative Conservation' and 'Museum Documentation'. It has become customary since to try and hold training events on the Friday afternoons of the annual seminar weekends.

In 1991 a Training sub-committee was established in response to an identified need for a training programme to service museums and societies around the
country. The setting up of an Outreach Programme reflected the strong demand from volunteer-based museums and local archaeology, history and heritage societies. As the Outreach Training Programme was a pilot scheme during 1992, only ten applications for training were accepted. The costs were borne between the Association and the local host group. A Training Programme brochure was produced.

For the session 1994-95 the Outreach Training and Development Programme of the Association was assisted by a grant of £1,000 from the National Heritage Council, enabling the Programme to hold nine sessions. In 1996 the Association decided to revise the Programme on a one-year trial basis and offered two new training opportunities. One was a Mentor programme, the other consisted of Training Workshops.

In 1997 a pilot training programme was undertaken once a week over eight weeks. The programme was funded by LEADER and there were eighteen participants. The theme was ‘A Hands On Approach to Running a Museum on a Shoestring Budget’. This pilot programme was so successful that it was later held in venues as far removed as Offaly, Mayo, Donegal and Sligo. It continues to attract support.

In November 2000, in a co-operative venture with Geoscapes, a training course aimed at non-specialist curators was held in TCD on ‘Geology and the Local Museums’.

Co-operation with other Bodies

At the 1979 AGM it was agreed that regular visits should be made to museums, initially in Ireland. The Association made its first visit to Limerick in November 1979 in conjunction with the Irish Association of Professional Archaeologists. Three museums were visited.

In 1982 the Association organised a joint study weekend with the Museums Professional Group from Britain. The theme of the weekend was ‘Museum standards’ and took place in St Patrick’s College, Drumcondra from 2-5 September. A members’ papers session was held on Sunday night – the afternoon had, apparently, been devoted to a hurling final! Alas, attendance from the Association was felt to be small.
In 1985 the Association held a joint conference in Belfast during September with the recently established Irish Professional Conservators and Restorers Association. Over 90 attended.

The Newsletter for November 1986 carried an advertisement for the Association's first ever trip abroad – a Springtime visit to Moscow, Yerevan and Leningrad to last for eleven days and ten nights. The trip was scheduled to take place during April. Though fifteen members declared interest in the trip, it failed to go ahead. The initiative was not repeated.

A joint seminar between the Association, the Irish Association of Professional Archaeologists, and the Irish Professional Conservators and Restorers Association was held in Dublin in March 1994. Entitled 'The Past in Pieces' it discussed the crises facing the curation, conservation, and storage of archaeological material in Ireland. In 1995 the Association and the Hunt Museum, Limerick held a conference entitled 'Museums – their Role in Modern Society'.

When the Network of European Museum Organisations (NEMO) was established in 1993, the Chairman of the Association acted as Irish representative. A meeting of the Network took place in Dublin on 25 November 1995 – the Irish representatives coming from the Association (Pat Holland) and Northern Ireland Museums Council (Aidan Walsh).

In 1996 Jim McGreevy requested positive interaction between the Irish Professional Conservators and Restorers Association and this Association with a view to working together on areas of mutual interest. Also in 1996, in a joint venture between the Association and the Heritage Council, Tony Canavan was appointed to carry out a pilot survey of national collections. The counties surveyed (over a six-month period) were Longford, Mayo and Tipperary South Riding. If the pilot phase of the project proved successful, it was planned to continue the project until each county in the country had an inventory of its institution-based collections. The pattern, thus established, continues.

Gulbenkian Irish Museums Awards

A feature appeared in the Newsletter for March 1992 (No.25) announcing the Gulbenkian Irish Museums Awards, in conjunction with the Association and the Northern Ireland Museums Advisory Committee. The prizes would be awarded in recognition of outstanding achievements and to encourage
improvement in Ireland's museums and galleries. The awards would be open to all museums irrespective of size. The major prize each year would be the Gulbenkian Irish Museum Award for outstanding achievement. Three further awards would be for the most improved museum or gallery with limited resources, the best visitor care, and the best collections care. The first major award went to Limerick Museum. In 1993 the Gulbenkian Foundation was joined by the Norwich Union Insurance Group as co-funder of the awards. In 1997 the Heritage Council joined the funding for the Gulbenkian Awards. The Heritage Council continues to co-fund the awards, and the administration continues to be undertaken by the Northern Ireland Museums Council.

In 1994 Number Twenty-Nine, the ESB’s Georgian house museum in Fitzwilliam Square, donated half its Gulbenkian/Norwich Union award to the Linen Hall Library, Belfast which had suffered considerable damage through fire bombs placed in the stacks. This award merited the only colour photograph ever printed in the Newsletter (Issue No.29, coincidentally)

**Lobbying**

Legislation and Relations with Central Government
On 2 November 1984 the Hon. Secretary, Martyn Anglesea, launched into print in the Irish Times supporting Homan Potterton, Director of the National Gallery of Ireland, on the lack of control in the Republic with regard to the export of works of art. He also drew attention to ICOM conventions and legislation in other countries, and went on to reiterate his concerns at the Cork Seminar in 1985. The establishment of an advisory committee by the Department of the Taoiseach in March 1985 to investigate these matters, under the chairmanship of Mr Justice Hamilton, attracted a submission from the Association, again written by Martyn Anglesea, and a review of existing legislation by Aideen Ireland in the Newsletter (No.14).

Discrete lobbying has continued. The passing of the National Cultural Institutions Act, 1997 merited a long article in the journal which noted that Minister Michael D. Higgins T.D. during the debate in November 1996 had referred to the contribution of the Association and its potential role as arbiter in contentious circumstances.

Following on from a statement (and invitation) issued by the Minister of State at the Department of Education, Michael J. Keating, T.D. on 15 September 1981 on the development of museums in the Republic of Ireland the Association submitted its views in writing and also met the Minister for State. The Minister for State promised that ‘a national policy on the development of museum services will be published next year.’ However, due to the fall of the government, this promise did not come to fruition.

A delegation from the Association met the Minister for Arts and Culture, Ted Nealon, T.D. in June 1984 and urged, amongst other things, the affiliation of the Republic to the International Centre for the Study of the Preservation and Restoration of Cultural Property. The Republic applied for membership and was admitted on 1 February 1985.

In June 1985 a delegation from the Association, led by the Chairman, Dr Patrick Doran, met a deputation from the Department of Labour, and Social Employment Scheme to discuss temporary employment schemes in museums. During 1985 the Association noted that while funding for museums was being cut by the Department of Education in Northern Ireland, other government departments appeared to receive substantial funding.

At the 1993 seminar in Tralee, the Association was addressed by the Minister for Arts, Culture and the Gaeltacht, Michael D. Higgins T.D. who stated a desire to see a more formal relationship between his Department and the Association. Dr Patricia Donlon and Aideen Ireland subsequently visited the Minister in the Department in September of the same year, and met him along with Colm Ó Briain and Brian Millane. Among the matters raised was the voluntary nature of the Association and (once again) the need for a paid secretariat. A subvention was also requested to assist the Association and to promote attendance at international meetings. The Minister replied that he was unable to assist the Association and recommended an approach to the National Heritage Council.

The raison d’être for a Survey of Museums in Ireland, compiled by Karin Stierle and edited by Helen Lamigan Wood in 1994, was to enable the Association to have firm figures when lobbying governments on behalf of museums. Funding, staffing and attendance levels were felt to be of critical importance, while information on the size and nature of collections was surveyed for the first time.

The Association and Local Government
During 1983, members of the Association met members of the County and City Managers Association. The County Managers came from Kerry, Leitrim, Louth and Sligo. The IMA delegation was led by the Chairman, Roger Weatherup. Discussions centred on the need for a co-ordinated network of county museums throughout Ireland. The Association felt that the county museum system was the best model to adopt, and expressed the view that each county should appoint a county or regional museum officer with direct access to the county manager, independent of the county library. A written submission was sent to the County and City Managers Association requesting the establishment of an ad-hoc advisory group. In 1985 the Association’s delegation offered to supply the County and City Managers Association with a document outlining the cost of setting up a county museum service, the calibre of person required to run it, and the objectives and time-span involved.

Matters which subsequently attracted the attention of the Executive Committee of the Association and to which written submissions were made included the appointment of curators for The Derek Hill Gallery (1982), and Letterkenny Museum (1983), the terms of the reference of the Tipperary South Riding Museum organiser (1983) and the Review of Museums in Northern Ireland (1983).

Further Developments
The Newsletter for October 1985 (No. 14) contained accounts of four substantial matters which had concerned the Association during the year. It was felt that the Association required a greater media presence, but should pick its issues carefully. It was therefore suggested that the Association should appoint a Publicity Officer from the Executive Committee. At the 1986 Seminar in Wexford Brian Lacey called for Association to encourage ‘healthy critical debate’. At the AGM in 1998 the Association appointed its first-ever Public Relations Officer, Labhras Joye.

The AGM for 1986 saw an extended Executive Committee established with the creation of the post of Membership Officer. Martyn Anglesea was elected as the first such officer. Discussion centred around the possibility of encouraging institutional membership of the Association, though some felt that more emphasis should be placed on the encouragement of individual membership.

In October 1986 the Association was shocked to learn of the sudden death of its
second Chairman, Edward Myers, at the age of 49. An appreciation which appeared in the subsequent Newsletter (No. 16).

A proposal, made in 1995, was for the establishment of Special Interest Groups for the membership. The first two suggestions were for a Museums Documentation Group, the other for an Irish Museums Social Historians Group. In 1997 the Education Group was established and comprised of a former member of the Irish Heritage Education Network (IHEN) and members of the Association. The Education Group held educational events each Friday afternoon before the start of the Seminar and throughout the rest of the year as required.

In 1996 the Association received a grant of £5,000 from the Heritage Council for the purchase of a computer and office equipment. A temporary home was found in Kilmainham Gaol Museum. Unfortunately, this was a temporary arrangement, and the Association is still in need of a permanent address.

Logo
The logo of the Association first appeared on the Newsletter for 1983 (No.9). It showed two confronting birds and was based on a design taken from the Shrine of St Patrick’s Bell.

In 1993 the new graphic style and image of the Association was launched. The new logo was based on a detail from the Early Christian high cross at Kilcullen, Co. Kildare and depicted four intertwined figures. The new logo arose from a competition undertaken by the Final Year class of the Visual Communications Department of the National College and Art and Design. 30 designs were submitted, and the award-winning project was submitted by Hilda Reid.

The recent consultation process undertaken by CHI Consultants has identified the need for a more modern logo and image for the Association.

Consultation, Discussion and the Future

In 2000, under the chairmanship of Robert Heslip, the Association undertook an internal review of its operations. The need for such a review had been raised by the Association’s Executive Committee, concerned by the Association’s limited resources and a need to become more responsive to its members and the museum sector. A facilitator was funded by the Heritage Council and the review began in November 2001.
A public Consultation Day was held in April 2001 to discuss how the Association might reposition itself to address the challenges that faced it. Arising from these discussions, the Association undertook a further review of its operations. The final outcome was the Strategic Review of the Irish Museums Association, delivered by CHL Consulting and published in April 2002. The Strategic Review was the subject of a further Consultation Day in May 2002. The Executive Committee has since devised an implementation plan based on the conclusions of the report and refined in the light of consultations. Among the goals the Association has now set itself are:

- a redesigned image for the Association
- new sub-committees
- launch of a membership drive along with an increase in membership fees
- appointment of a part-time administrator
- increasing the number of annual events
- improving international connections

Conclusion

The appeal of the Irish Museums Association lies in the breadth of its membership, which consists of full-time museum professionals, voluntary curators and assistants, as well as interested individuals. The Association continues to pursue policies relevant to museums at both departmental and governmental levels and offers a country-wide programme of museum training, publications, and seminars.¹⁰

This short review of the Association's history has pinpointed certain recurrent themes and concerns which have been highlighted in the recent Strategic Review. The challenge now is to ensure that a key number of these concerns — such as the need for secretarial support, a permanent address for its operations, and a more effective impact on the deliberations of government, north and south, on policies affecting the sector, will be seen as real achievements rather than distant hopes when the Association's 40 year review takes place 20 years on.

---