



WEST VIRGINIA LIBRARIES

Volume 9
Number 2

OFFICIAL PUBLICATION OF THE WEST VIRGINIA LIBRARY
ASSOCIATION

June
1956

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WEST VIRGINIA LIBRARIES is the official organ of the West Virginia Library Association. It is published quarterly. Contributions and other Communications should be addressed to the Editor or to the appropriate Editorial Assistant. Subscription is included with the membership dues. Annual subscription is one dollar to non-members.

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TWO PUBLIC LIBRARIES IN IRELAND

By

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The Marsh Library, Dublin, and the Public Library, Armagh, are public libraries, yet in a sense not understood in this country. Both are open to the public - and in that usage their title would be understood here - but they are public in the British sense in that they possess state charters and are incorporated. Marsh's Library was incorporated in 1707 and the Public Library, Armagh, in 1771.

I

Narcissus Marsh (1638-1713) founded his library when he was Archbishop of Dublin. Previously as Provost of Trinity College, Dublin, he had seen regulations in force in the library there that had made it useless to the public. Even in the case of students, rules were so extreme that they could not work without interruption. These experiences were not lost on Marsh and after he became archbishop he took as one of his good works the provision of a library for the public, including the students of TCD. The nucleus of this collection was the library of Stillingfleet, offered for sale after the Bishop had died in March of 1699. For these books, Marsh paid some 2500 pounds. To this fine library, Marsh added from his own books and later from the collection of the Huguenot Tannequy Le Fevre, Madame Dacier's father, who died in 1672. Also added were manuscripts from the library of Dudley Loftus (1619-95), the great jurist and orientalist. This provided about 25,000 volumes and 200 manuscripts. It is a miscellaneous collection, mainly of 16th and 17th century books including some interesting incunabula. In 1764, Harris, the editor of Ware, wrote that from his long experience the Marsh Library was the most useful in Ireland, "being open to all strangers and at all reasonable

time." However, in fairness, it must be recognized that the Library has ceased to keep pace with those enlightened and rational times. Its endowment, bountiful for those times, has suffered from inflation, and today the library is primarily of interest to the antiquarian, the historian, and the collector of literary miscellanea, though in its latitude it is still a superb library.

The Marsh Library is housed in a building by Sir William Robinson located to the southeast of the Cathedral of St. Patrick's on St. Patrick's Close in the grounds of the palace of the St. Sepulchre. The building, erected in 1707, today presents a picture of Georgian charm in the tree-shaded high-walled deanery. Marsh must have regarded it as a favorite place of his, for he was buried in a vault of St. Patrick's adjoining the Library.

It was to the deanery of Saint Patrick's, and the ex officio headship of the Library, that Marsh presented Jonathon Swift, who served from 1713 to 1745. The deanery was once attached to the Library and Dean Swift must many times have visited its rooms. As the present librarian has told me, the place is haunted and often he had imagined Dean Swift roaming through the Library. Truly Marsh has witnessed macabre scenes; one cannot forget that here occurred the midnight burial of Stella, that sight which Swift could not endure and from which he removed to another bedroom to avoid the light in the church.

I first visited the Marsh Library in the winter of 1952-3. I was eager to determine if one of its manuscripts, an archdeacon's formulary, was a duplicate of another at Armagh. Knowing the custom of European libraries, of

opening at limited hours, and wishing to avoid disappointment, I took out my copy of the Blue Guide to Ireland, a most useful vademecum and found that its open hours were Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, and Friday from 11 to 12 AM and from 3 to 4:30 PM and that on Saturdays it was open from 10:30 AM to 12:30 PM. From other library ancillae, I found that there was a written catalogue with author, title, and subject entries and that the staff was one male assistant. I also learned that Newport B. White, professor of ecclesiastical history at Trinity and authority on Irish monasticism, was present keeper of the Library. With this information, I applied to the Library at the appropriate time, but I confess that I was not prepared for what I encountered there.

The Library must be approached upstairs. Entry is through a small vestibule over which are inscribed the names of its various keepers. You then pass into what the Blue Guide calls a "charming suite of rooms practically untouched since the founder's day." The floor plan of the library is U-shaped. The base of the U and one of its sides contain stalls extending from the wall into the aisles and holding the books. The other side of the U is the entrance, containing the properties of the librarian, some tables, the catalogue. This is heated by a fireplace before which are some easy chairs. The general atmosphere is that of the apartments of an 18th century gentleman surrounded by what he regarded as best in life.

In this pleasant place I made my acquaintance with the librarian. It had been a cold and wet afternoon, and the librarian had warmed himself with port and the coals of his fire. The librarian, alone with his leisure, his thoughts, and his grand surroundings, perhaps resented my intrusion, but a perfect gentleman, such an attitude, if it existed, did not show. I asked him to show me around the library which he did, describing the rooms, stalls, and the books. It was at this

time that he told me the story of Dean Swift. When we had returned from our tour, we got down to my business, the investigation of the archdeacon's for-
mulary. This was brought from the shelves and placed on a table for me. As the handwriting was not always clear I called the librarian over for help. It was at that time that the librarian's unsteadiness proclaimed itself as his posture wavered over the page.

Another amazing thing was revealed in the care of the document. A table of contents on ordinary ruled theme paper was pasted to the front cover and throughout were penciled comments glossing the text. Obviously, the library, so unfrequented, had become in the mind of the keeper his own property, and to him, the public, so uncaring about its content, would likewise be uncaring about its condition. It is a great misfortune that some foundation does not provide funds for the preservation of a fine collection of books, and at the same time publicize for scholars outside its neighborhood its estimable value.

II

Richard Robinson (1709-94) founded his library when he was Archbishop of Armagh. Well endowed with funds and possessed of the ambition of a builder, Robinson, like Augustus who found Rome a city of brick and left it a city of marble, found Armagh a village of mud and left it a handsome town. In all, he spent some 35,000 pounds in public works, chapels of ease in the large parishes, a new classical school, the Armagh Observatory, a fine new marble archiepiscopal palace, the repair and beautification of the cathedral. Among these, the real ornament of his effort was the erection of the Public Library in 1771. It is on the hill which dominates the city, located amongst the cathedral, the deanery, the infirmary, and the residences of the vicars choral. The library, attached to the deanery, is in fact the dean's library. Built in the Georgian style, it is

part of the tone that Robinson gave the city and which exists to this day. Robinson was fond of books and chose the appropriate Greek inscription over the entrance, which translated reads "The healing of the mind." Robinson along with the building provided in 1781 a solid endowment for the Library, and while the funds for its maintenance have suffered from inflation like Marsh's, good management and administration with support from the Church of Ireland and the other archbishops has continued a well-run institution to the present. On this score, it is far superior to Marsh's. The collection numbers 20,000 volumes and is among the foremost in Ireland. Its manuscripts are particularly useful for genealogy, but the real treasures are the archiepiscopal registers of the See of Armagh. Indeed, it was just these registers that drew me to Ireland.

As I have said previously, the librarian is always the dean of Armagh, but the real administrator is the assistant librarian. The greatest of these was William Reeves, later Bishop of Down. Everywhere in the Library you see the imprint of his effort. It was Reeves who made the written catalogue in use today; it was he who transcribed the already mentioned registers; it was he who edited another treasure of the Library, the Visitation of Archbishop Colton. But it was also from the hands of Reeves that the collection suffered great damage. The Visitation was in his personal care when he died and was sold by his widow, making its way through the hands of various bibliophiles until it reached the British Museum where it may still be seen, stamped "The Property of the Armagh Public Library." It was Reeves, who following inexpert paleographical advice, used the juice of galls to bring up fading ink with the result that the juice oxidized and whole sections appeared blackened. It is as if it were painted in ink. But this is to leap ahead of the tale.

I had gone to Armagh on a research grant from the University of Wisconsin specifically to study the earliest of these archiepiscopal registers. I prepared myself from the Blue Guide; it was open Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday and Friday from 11 AM to 1 PM and from 2 to 4 PM; it was closed on Saturday afternoons and Sundays together with the greater religious holidays. The staff was one male assistant, whom I knew to be Mr. Hamilton.

One clear but cold day I made my first visit. I climbed the hill, found the finely styled Library and entered. The vestibule is terra cotta colored and is decorated with antiquities from the vicinity. You then climb stairs into the library proper and enter into a long room, its walls surrounded with shelves of books; above, a narrow balcony runs around the four sides catching the lower floor's overflow. It has an elegant 18th century atmosphere. I first made the acquaintance of the keeper, inquired of the registers, and was led to the muniment room off to one side. There I was seated at a table covered with green felt. A safe in one corner was opened, and the registers were revealed. I could have brought to me at any one time, one register and the accompanying volume of transcription. If I desired another, the first had to be returned and the second then brought forth. It was in this way that I began to examine the materials that were to occupy me continuously for the next two years.

The registers were bound in eight volumes and include documents as early as Magna Carta and as late as the reformation of Henry VIII. While some of the documents are on parchment, most are on paper, the earliest in Ireland. The documents are the oldest and most complete papers of the Irish Church. They contain autographs of the famous ecclesiastics of the primatial See of Armagh, beginning with Richard Fitzralph and ending with James Ussher. It was the last named prelate who gather-

