



The Aisling Society
of Sydney

aislingsociety.org.au

ANNUAL REPORT FOR 2015

THE COUNCIL OF THE AISLING SOCIETY 2015

PRESIDENT
VICE PRESIDENTS

HON. SECRETARY
HON. TREASURER
ARCHIVIST/LIBRARIAN
PUBLICITY OFFICER
COUNCILLORS

DR MARIE LEECH
MR PATRICK TANSEY
DR JEFF KILDEA
MRS MARY LEE
MR PETER GRAY
MR PADRAIC HOBAN
MR PETER GRAY
MS ÉILIS HURST
PROF RÓNÁN MCDONALD
MRS TRUDI O'NEIL
MR TONY EARLS
PROF ANDERS AHLQVIST
MR JOHN O'MEALLY AM

Trudi O'Neil also kindly continued her long-standing role as our Minutes Secretary, Jeff Kildea further improved our website and kept it updated, and Patrick Tansey generously continued to perform the lion's share of the work in organising our three main annual functions. These substantial additional contributions from Trudi, Jeff and Patrick are, as always, very much appreciated.

MEMBERSHIP

The Society has 75 financial members and 5 honorary life members. There is one current honorary member, namely our 2014 Western Sydney University prize-winner Lizzie Beard. This year we welcomed six new members, namely John McLaughlin AM, Dr Eddie and Mrs Shirley Jackson, Graeme Hoban, Gabriela Olivares and Fiona Lynch.

ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

The 2015 Annual General Meeting was held on Wednesday 25 February. The Annual Report for 2014, which had been prepared by Peter Gray and circulated to members beforehand, was presented, as was the Treasurer's report which had been prepared by Padraic Hoban and likewise circulated. Both these reports were accepted.

An election of office-bearers was held, resulting as set out above.

ORDINARY MEETINGS

Our ordinary monthly meetings were held again in the rooms of the Consulate-General of Ireland, for whose support and generosity we continue to be most grateful. As always we enjoyed the genuine interest of the Consul-General, in the person now of Jane Connolly, and of the Vice-Consul (first, George O'Keeffe until his departure in late 2015, and since then, Jonathan Patchell - to whom we extend a warm welcome), and of all the Consulate staff, to all of whom I express our sincere thanks.

- FEBRUARY** The February Ordinary Meeting followed the Annual General Meeting, and featured a Talk by our member and past President **Jeff Kildea**, about some of the many highlights of his very full year as holder of the Chair of Australian History at University College Dublin.
- APRIL** Professor **Peter Kuch**, also a past President, opened a fascinating window on the Irish Australia of the mid-1800s. *The Hibernian Father: A Tragedy in Five Acts* was the first play written by an Irish convict to be performed on the colonial Sydney stage, where it opened on 6 May 1844 at the Royal Victoria Theatre. Peter's elegant Talk was entitled "*Embodied Emotion and The Hibernian Father*".
- MAY** Young writer **John Connell's** acclaimed debut novel *The Ghost Estate* grapples with the impact of the post-GFC crash of the Irish property and financial markets, and with the relentlessly present ghosts of Ireland's past. John gave us a vivid and thoughtful picture of the scenes and the sadness that he found on his return to Longford a few years ago, and of the subsequent experience of writing his novel here in Australia.
- JUNE** We were delighted to welcome Dr **Matt McGuire**, Senior Lecturer and convener of English Literature at Western Sydney University, who spoke very movingly of "*Seamus Heaney, Literature and the Aftermath of the Troubles*".
- AUGUST** Dr **Eddie Jackson** was the CEO of the Belfast Local Strategy Partnership from 2003 to 2008, working closely with Belfast's politicians, business and community leaders, including paramilitary leaders, in trying to build peace and in formulating public policy to address the ongoing issue of sectarianism. His comprehensive and very sobering Talk was entitled "*Addressing Sectarian Divisions and Cultural Change in Northern Ireland*".
- SEPTEMBER** In the centenary year of the fateful Gallipoli campaign, we welcomed back the indefatigable Dr **Jeff Kildea**, who gave us a typically original and closely-researched account of "*The Irish at Gallipoli*".
- OCTOBER** Prolific author and speaker **Susannah Fullerton** presented a very lively illustrated Talk on the life and times of the brilliant and doomed Oscar Wilde, entitled "*The importance of being Oscar*".

SOCIAL FUNCTIONS

ST PATRICK'S DAY DINNER:

On Friday 20 March, we gathered once more in the splendid Strangers Dining Room in Parliament House in Macquarie Street, again as the guests of the Attorney-General of NSW, the Hon Greg Smith SC. 63 members and their guests attended.. The national anthems of Ireland and Australia were sung, to accompaniment by Arlene Tansey, and the message from the President of Ireland was read.

After dinner, our President, Dr Marie Leech, introduced our speaker **Billy Cantwell**, retiring publisher and founding editor of *The Irish Echo*, who reflected on his years on that pioneering and important journal of modern-day Irish Australia.

MID-YEAR LUNCHEON

53 members and their guests attended the luncheon, which was held on Sunday 26 July, this year for the first time at the Grand Dining Room of the former St Patrick's Seminary at Manly (now the International College of Management).

Most fittingly this year, the Society's 60th anniversary, the Joan Ward Memorial Address was delivered by **Anne Stevens**, long-time member and Councillor, a former Secretary, and twice our President. Anne gave us a wonderful suite of memories of the Aisling and its people over those sixty years, in her characteristically graceful style. In the course of his vote of thanks, Peter Gray presented Anne with Life Membership of the Society - a rare and richly deserved honour, which was greeted with acclamation.

CHRISTMAS PARTY

This was as usual a very enjoyable and convivial evening, held on Wednesday 2 December at Sancta Sophia College at Sydney University (of which our President Marie Leech is the Principal) and attended by 48 members and friends. A feature again this year was the now-traditional feast of music by **Kevin O'Connor** on the fiddle.

AISLING SOCIETY MILESTONES IN 2015

- In 2015 the Society celebrated its 60th anniversary. That significant achievement was the subject of a splendid full-page feature in the *Irish Echo* in July as well as a good deal of coverage on Irish radio, and was the centrepiece of our Mid-Year Luncheon at which Anne Stevens spoke so beautifully about some of the people and events that have shaped us so far.
- Clodagh Harrison returned to live in the northern hemisphere in mid-2015, after many years in Sydney in which she was a most valued member of the Society.
- Three other long-time members, Muriel Daly, Margot Keaney and Philomena Delahunty, also retired from the Society, and we send them our very best wishes.
- Our former members Fr Brendan Shiel, Carol McMahon and Rosemary Nugent died during the year, and Gerard Windsor's mother Mollie died in January 2016. May they rest in peace.
- We congratulate our esteemed Life Member and former President, Brendan O'Connell, who was awarded the Medal of the Order of Australia (OAM), for service to the community, in the 2016 Australia Day Honours.

EVENTS DURING THE YEAR IN WHICH MEMBERS OF THE SOCIETY PARTICIPATED

- Aisling members were among those who enjoyed the well-received inaugural Irish Film Festival in March.

- Padraic Hoban again co-ordinated the organisation of the traditional "Aisling car", and phalanx of supporting decorators and walkers, for our participation in the annual St Patrick's Day Parade in March.
- Marie Leech represented the Society at the Dean's Annual Reception for Alumni and Friends at Sydney University in April.
- In June, at UNSW, Professor Ronan McDonald chaired an evening of readings and reflections on "*Why Yeats Matters*", in honour of the 150th birthday of WB Yeats.
- Many Aisling members attended the 16th annual commemoration of the world-renowned Famine Memorial at Hyde Park Barracks in August.
- In December, a number of Aisling members were among those who attended the annual UNSW Patrick O'Farrell Memorial Lecture, named in honour of our distinguished former member, this year held at Government House.

AISLING SOCIETY PRIZES

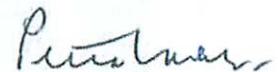
Prizes of \$150 were again offered to students from the University of Sydney, Macquarie University, Western Sydney University, the University of Wollongong and the Australian Catholic University. Happily, for the first time in many years we had a prizewinner from Western Sydney University, namely Lizzie Beard, to whom we offer our congratulations and best wishes. No prizewinners from the other universities were announced for 2014.

CONCLUSION

My thanks again to all the members of the Aisling Society for the honour they have given me for so long in entrusting me with the Secretary's role. Thanks also to Marie Leech as President, Padraic Hoban, Trudi O'Neil and Patrick Tansey in particular, and all the Council members generally, for the help and support which I have received during the year.

This year has been my final year as Secretary, after more than twenty consecutive years in the position. It has been my pleasure, and my privilege, to serve as Secretary over those years and to do my best for the Society. I have no doubt that my successor will find that an enjoyable and fulfilling time lies ahead.

I extend every good wish to the Society for 2016 and beyond.



Peter Gray
HON SECRETARY

January 2016