



The Aisling Society
of Sydney

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ANNUAL REPORT FOR 2020

THE COUNCIL OF THE AISLING SOCIETY 2020

PRESIDENT	DR PAMELA O'NEILL
VICE PRESIDENTS	MR PETER GRAY SC
	DR MARIE LEECH
	MR PATRICK TANSEY
HON. SECRETARY	DR JEFF KILDEA
HON. TREASURER	MR PADRAIC HOBAN
ARCHIVIST/LIBRARIAN	MR PETER GRAY SC
PUBLICITY OFFICER	MS ANGELA MCLOUGHLIN
COUNCILLORS	DR EDDIE JACKSON
	PROF PETER KUCH
	MRS MARY LEE OAM
	MR TONY EARLS
	MRS TRUDI O'NEIL
	MS SUSAN RYAN AO (to 27 September 2020)

For the Aisling Council, as with the rest of humanity, the year was largely defined by the intrusion into our lives of the Covid-19 pandemic. Nevertheless, we managed to keep the Aisling spirit alive with the aid of modern technology using the videoconferencing software Zoom. Virtual meetings were well attended and our president, Dr Pamela O'Neill, showed great flair in maintaining order across multiple screens. Patrick Tansey continued as our events manager but this year most of his work involved cancelling functions he had previously booked rather than organising them. Archivist Peter Gray SC deposited with the State Library of NSW a bundle of Aisling records for the period 1995 to 2019 to add to the

existing collection dating back to the society’s foundation in 1955, which he had deposited in 1995. Sadly, we lost Council member Susan Ryan AO, who died suddenly in September. In addition, two long-standing Council members, Mary Lee OAM and Trudi O’Neil, have decided to retire from the Council. Mary, whose contribution to the Irish community in Australia was recognised in the 2019 Australia Day honours, served two terms as president of the Society (1986-87 and 2001-03) and many years on the council, while Trudi, for many years, acted as the minutes secretary and provided our post-meeting suppers.

MEMBERSHIP

At the end of 2020 the Society had 3 honorary life members and 105 ordinary members. This year we welcomed 10 new members: Anne Bryce, Michael Christie, John Coombs, Michael Flannery, Therese Hanrahan, John Kelly, Tom Kelly, Denis O’Connell, Ursula Stephens, and Anne Marie Whelan. During the year we received the sad news of the deaths of Carmel MacDonagh and Susan Ryan AO. Also, some members announced their retirement from the Society, including Sr Moira O’Sullivan and Professor Jonathan Wooding.

ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

The 2020 Annual General Meeting was held on Wednesday 26 February at the Consulate-General of Ireland, Level 26, 1 Market Street, Sydney. The Annual Report for 2019, which had been prepared by the Secretary Dr Jeff Kildea 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 and Council members was held, resulting in the membership as set out above.

ORDINARY MEETINGS

Apart from the first ordinary meeting in February, which was held in the conference room of the Consulate-General of Ireland, our ordinary monthly meetings on the fourth Wednesday of the month were this year held remotely using Zoom videoconferencing software. Not all members were able to avail themselves of the technology, but many did. It was especially pleasing to see so many members unfamiliar with the technology readily embrace it. As a result, the number of participants at Zoom meetings was about the same as we have been accustomed to see in previous years at in-person meetings. We ended up holding two more ordinary meetings than is normally the case. In addition, we were joined for the last three meetings by members of our kindred society in Canberra, Friends of Ireland, whose meetings had been curtailed by the pandemic. Those participating in this year’s meetings were rewarded with a variety of high-quality talks:

FEBRUARY	After the Annual General Meeting Dr Mary O’Connell spoke about her latest book <i>The Country of Our Dreams</i> , a novel set in 19th-century Ireland and 21st-century Australia, exploring the Irish Land War of 1879 -1882
APRIL	In the first of our Zoom meetings, members discussed a video talk entitled ‘Archbishop Kelly and the Quarantine Station incident of 1918’ relating to the Spanish flu pandemic that Dr Jeff Kildea had posted to YouTube.

MAY	Dr Pamela O'Neill spoke on 'Lost infants in the Irish psyche'. Her talk contextualised the infamous Kerry Babies case within Irish culture from the early medieval period to the present day, by looking at literature, archaeology, news reports and other sources.
JUNE	Caitlin Erbacher gave a talk entitled "'Guns and Chiffon": Negotiating Gender and Violence in the Easter Rising' on Irish republican women's participation in nationalist violence during the Easter Rising of 1916.
JULY	In a talk entitled 'The Great Irish Famine debate in America: Was the Famine genocide?', Aisling Prize winner Siobhán Ryan spoke about the debate in the United States on the use of the term 'genocide' in reference to the Great Irish Famine.
AUGUST	Irish-Australian actor and Aisling member Maelíosa Stafford gave a 'seriously humorous' talk entitled 'Minister O'Connor...What an Honour' based on his childhood memories of growing up in Ireland and hearing stories told to him by his grandfather about the early days of the Irish state.
SEPTEMBER	Erin Mollenhauer, Archivist and Special Collections Librarian at Moore College, gave a talk entitled 'The Loyal Orange Institution and the Anglican Church in Sydney' that looked at Irish Anglican clergy in mid-20 th -century Sydney with close connections to the LOI.
OCTOBER	Professor Emeritus Peter Kuch gave a talk entitled 'Hail and Farewell: Reminiscences about 13 years in New Zealand' in which he spoke about the challenges and delights of establishing a Centre for Irish Studies at the University of Otago: the students taught, the courses offered, the guests who were invited, the events held, and some of the conference presentations and publications that were produced.
NOVEMBER	Adjunct Professor Pam Sharpe gave a talk on her finding 'archive gold' in the form of an anonymous, damaged journal in the National Library of Ireland which provided a detailed account of the daily life in the British Army of Private Robert McNally in Ireland, England, New South Wales, Van Diemen's Land and India in the 1820s and 1830s.

SOCIAL FUNCTIONS AND SPECIAL EVENTS

Owing to public health restrictions we had to cancel this year's St Patrick's Day Dinner scheduled for 20 March 2020 and the Mid-Year Lunch scheduled for 8 August 2020, both of which were to be held at the Sir Stamford Hotel.

Aisling 20/20 Vision: Celebrating the contribution of Irish-Australian women

On 2 February the Aisling Society, in collaboration with the Consulate-General of Ireland marked St Brigid's Day with a special symposium at the State Library of NSW celebrating the historical and cultural contribution of Irish-Australian women. The symposium, which was open to the public and fully booked out, comprised a series of talks, many by Aisling members, on twenty Irish-Australian women who shaped Australia.

Christmas Party

The usual Aisling Christmas party, scheduled to be held on 27 November at Sancta Sophia College, University of Sydney, was cancelled owing to public health restrictions. However, in

its place the society celebrated the festive season on 16 December with a virtual Christmas party at which the Irish Consul-General Owen Feeney spoke and members entertained each other with music, stories, and talks on their research activities.

AISLING SOCIETY MILESTONES IN 2020

- A very big milestone was that the Aisling Society survived and thrived in 2020 despite the Covid-19 pandemic.
- The Aisling Society turned 65 years of age but, instead of retiring, it reinvented itself, adopting online meetings and holding its first virtual Christmas party.
- The Aisling Society, in collaboration with the Consulate-General of Ireland, hosted the *Aisling 20/20 Vision* symposium at the State Library of NSW celebrating the historical and cultural contribution of Irish-Australian women.
- Dr Pamela O'Neill represented the Aisling Society at Le Chéile workshops convened by the Irish Consul-General to coordinate the activities of the various Irish societies in Sydney.

EVENTS IN 2020 IN WHICH AISLING MEMBERS PARTICIPATED

- Dr Pamela O'Neill and Éilis Hurst continued assisting with the Irish language school at the Gaelic Club and then remotely.
- Dr Pamela O'Neill continued to conduct classes at the Australian School of Celtic Learning.
- Julian Neylan and Greg Stewart published for Bloomsday a podcast called *The Story of Ulysses*, enabling the day to be celebrated, even if only remotely.
- Trish Power, as the chair of the Great Irish Famine Commemoration Committee, hosted the 21st annual gathering at the Great Irish Famine memorial at Hyde Park in August. Owing to public health restrictions the number attending was limited to 20, but the event was livestreamed.
- A portrait of Claire Dunne OAM by Irish-born Sydney artist Sinead Davies was a finalist in the Archibald Prize
- Dr Jeanette Mollenhauer's book *Dancing at the Southern Crossroads: A History of Irish Dance in Australia 1880-1940* was published by Anchor Books Australia.
- Dr Jeff Kildea's book *Hugh Mahon: Patriot, Pressman, Politician Vol 2* was published by Anchor Books Australia.
- Dr Perry McIntyre and Dr Jeff Kildea co-authored with Dr Richard Reid a centenary history of the INA entitled *To Foster an Irish Spirit: The Irish National Association of Australasia 1915-2015* and published by Anchor Books Australia.
- Dr John McLaughlin AM was appointed a Knight Commander of the Order of St Gregory the Great.
- Professor Peter Kuch was appointed an Honorary Visiting Professor at the University of New South Wales.
- A volume of essays edited by Professor Peter Kuch entitled *New Zealand's Responses to the 1916 Rising* was published by Cork University Press. Dr Jeff Kildea contributed one of the essays.

- Professor Jonathan Wooding retired as Chair of Celtic Studies at the University of Sydney and has relocated to Wales.

AISLING SOCIETY PRIZES

Monetary prizes were again offered to students from the University of Sydney, Macquarie University, Western Sydney University, the University of Wollongong and the Australian Catholic University. Siobhán Ryan of the University of Sydney received an Aisling prize for her essay 'The 1990s debate surrounding changes to US school curricula classifying the Great Irish Famine as genocide'.

CONCLUSION

My thanks to the members of the Aisling Society for the honour they have given me by entrusting me with the Secretary's role. Thanks also to our President Dr Pamela O'Neill, our Treasurer Padraic Hoban, and our functions organiser Patrick Tansey and to all the Council members for their help and support during the year.

I again record the Society's sincere gratitude to the Consul-General of Ireland, Owen Feeney, for his interest in and support of our activities, for speaking at our functions and for generously offering the Consulate's conference room at Ireland House, 1 Market Street, Sydney for our meetings.

Through the difficult year of 2020 we have managed to keep the Aisling spirit alive through the enthusiasm of our members and their willingness to adapt to the changed circumstances forced upon us by the pandemic. I look forward with hope that whatever 2021 may bring we will continue to maintain that spirit whether it be online or in person.

Jeff Kildea

HONORARY SECRETARY

January 2021