



The Aisling Society
of Sydney

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ANNUAL REPORT FOR 2024

THE COUNCIL OF THE AISLING SOCIETY 2024

PRESIDENT	MR TONY EARLS
VICE PRESIDENTS	DR PAMELA O'NEILL
	MR PETER GRAY SC
	DR MARIE LEECH
HONORARY SECRETARY	DR JEFF KILDEA
HONORARY TREASURER	MR PADRAIC HOBAN
ARCHIVIST/LIBRARIAN	MR PETER GRAY SC
PUBLICITY OFFICER	DR PAMELA O'NEILL
COUNCILLORS	MS MARY BARTHELEMY
	MS ANNE BRYCE
	DR EDDIE JACKSON
	PROF PETER KUCH
	DR PERRY MCINTYRE AM
	MR HUGH MYERS
	MR PATRICK TANSEY

THE YEAR IN REVIEW

In 2024 the Aisling Society held seven ordinary monthly meetings and our usual three social functions: St Patrick's Day Dinner, Mid-Year Lunch, and Christmas Party. Details of the meetings and social functions are provided in the body of the report.

The ordinary monthly meetings for 2024 were held using the hybrid in-person/Zoom format. Those meetings were conducted with the assistance of a technical consultant Ves Campion except for the October meeting when Natalie O'Neill provided IT support. The option of participating in our ordinary monthly meetings via Zoom continues to be popular, particularly for less mobile members and those living far from the city. However, the number of members attending in person declined to single figures during the year. At its meeting in December the council of the society resolved to continue the format at the start of 2025 but to seek the views of financial members in March/April as to whether we should revert to in-person meetings only or continue with the hybrid format.

MEMBERSHIP

At the end of 2024 the Society had two honorary life members, Bishop David Cremin and Anne Stevens, and 92 ordinary members. During the year we received the sad news of the deaths of six long-term Aisling members: Carmel O'Connor, Ailsa Hoban, Mary Lee, John O'Meally, Sr Moira O'Sullivan, and Michael Lyons. This year we welcomed Adel Firth-Mason, Glenn Gardner, Marie Matheson, Patrick Corr, and Jim Duffy as new members.

ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

The 2024 Annual General Meeting was held on Wednesday 28 February at the Consulate General of Ireland in Sydney and via Zoom video conference. The annual report for 2023, which had been prepared by the honorary secretary Dr Jeff Kildea and circulated to members beforehand, was presented, as was the financial report for 2023 which had been prepared by the honorary treasurer Padraic Hoban and likewise circulated. Both these reports were accepted by the meeting. Elections for office-bearers and Council members were held, resulting in the membership set out above.

ORDINARY MEETINGS

All our regular monthly meetings for 2024 were held on the fourth Wednesday of the month using the hybrid format. The in-person component of those meetings was also held at the Consulate General. The number of participants at the ordinary monthly meetings averaged 26.7, with 14.3 at the consulate and 12.4 online. Those who participated in this year's meetings were rewarded with a series of high-quality talks on a diverse range of topics.

FEBRUARY	Dr Peter Moore, historian and Aisling member gave a talk entitled: 'St Patrick's Day Buttons 1917 to 1941' in which he spoke about St Patrick's Day buttons that were sold in Adelaide from 1917 to 1941. Each of the twenty-five buttons in the his collection feature Irish Revival motifs joined by Australian symbols. Their artwork spoke to being Irish and about becoming Australian.
APRIL	Simon Smith, a documentary film maker, gave a talk on Henry James O'Farrell, the Irishman who attempted to assassinate Prince Alfred in Sydney in 1868 and who is the subject of Simon's book <i>A Man of Honour</i> .
MAY	Aisling council member Professor Peter Kuch continued his series of talks on Irish theatre in colonial Australia with a talk entitled 'Irish roles/Irish plays – performing "Irishness" at the Royal Victoria Theatre in the age of Wyatt and Knight, 1838 – 1844'
JUNE	Historian Dr Richard Reid gave a talk on Irish memorabilia in the collections of the National Library of Australia.
JULY	With the benefit of modern technology, members of the society heard a talk delivered by Irish novelist and short-story writer Evelyn Conlon from her home in Dublin. In the talk, Evelyn discussed stories from her collection of short stories <i>Moving About the Place</i> (which includes a novella set in 1970s Australia, called "How things are with Hannah these days") and her acclaimed novel <i>Not the Same Sky</i> , about Irish famine orphans coming to Australia

SEPTEMBER	The Executive Officer of the Irish Support Agency NSW, Dr Paula Cobain, gave a talk on the ISA, explaining to members what the agency is and what it does.
OCTOBER	Benedict Smith, Head of Mission, Identity and Civics at Catholic Schools NSW, gave a talk on the Young Ireland rebels who came to Australia in 1849.

SOCIAL FUNCTIONS

St Patrick's Day Dinner

On Friday 8 March, we gathered at the Sir Stamford Hotel, Circular Quay to celebrate the feast day of St Patrick. 66 members and guests attended. After dinner we were entertained by exhibition organiser Paddy MacDonald, who spoke in conversation with Aisling secretary Jeff Kildea about his collection of Charlie Chaplin memorabilia, reputed to be one of the largest private collections in the world.

Mid-Year Luncheon

The mid-year luncheon was held on Saturday 31 August at the Gaelic Club, Devonshire Street, Surry Hills. It was attended by 48 members and their guests. Our guest speaker was Geraldine Doogue AO, journalist and radio and television presenter, who gave the annual Joan Ward Memorial Address in which she spoke about her Irish grandparents, Tom Doogue and Delia Minogue, who emigrated to Australia from County Clare in the years immediately before the Easter Rising. Tom became a legendary policeman in Western Australia. During the event we were entertained by Irish singer/musician Doireann Nic Mhathúna.

Christmas Party

This year's Christmas party was a very enjoyable and convivial affair held on Wednesday 27 November at Sancta Sophia College, Sydney University, attended by 46 members and their guests. The weather was kind to us this year, though somewhat warm, and the attendees were able to gather in the quadrangle for a pre-dinner drink before moving into the dining hall. Instead of a guest speaker we were entertained by Doireann Nic Mhathúna with some of the attendees joining her in singing Irish ballads.

We are grateful to Dr Pamela O'Neill, for organising this year's social functions and for brightening up the dining halls with Irish decorations and in November with Christmas bunting, adding to the atmosphere of joy and gaiety provided by those attending.

AISLING SOCIETY MILESTONES IN 2024

- 24 August 2024 marked the 70th anniversary of the dinner at Pfahlert's Hotel in Margaret Street where several friends, including Mary Hegarty, Brian McGrath, and Fr Nicholas McNally, decided to form a society devoted to their shared love of Ireland, its literature and its history. On 16 March 1955 their dream was realised when the Aisling Society of Sydney held its inaugural meeting and adopted a constitution. This was followed in April by the first ordinary meeting at which James A. Meagher gave a talk on W.B. Yeats. Every year since then, the society has hosted monthly talks on the fourth Wednesday of each month, on a wide range of subjects.
- The society suffered a series of sad milestones this year with the deaths of several very longstanding members of the Aisling Society, including Mary Lee, who served as president during the years 1986-87 and 2001-03. As if to echo the title of the society's

50th anniversary publication, there has truly been a passing of the torch from one generation to the next.

- The Aisling Society was represented by the honorary secretary at the commemoration of the 120th anniversary of Sydney's 'Battle of Vinegar Hill' held on Sunday, 3 March at the Vinegar Hill Monument, Castlebrook Memorial Park, Rouse Hill.
- In November the society held a walking tour of Irish Sydney 'Walk an Irish Mile' led by Dr Peter Moore.

ACHIEVEMENTS AND ACTIVITIES OF AISLING MEMBERS IN 2024

- In March and June the talk that Hugh Myers gave to the Aisling Society on Doctor Richard Robert Madden in October 2023 was published in two parts in the *Journal of the Australian-Irish Heritage Association* (Perth).
- In May the Celtic Council of Australia awarded vice-president Dr Pamela O'Neill the honour of *Tus Enorys Ewn* ('Truly Honoured Person'). Pamela also received a grant from the Rosemary Samios Fund which she expended visiting Irish language centres in Belfast, Derry and Donegal, and historic sites in Northern Ireland and attending conferences and meetings with Celtic Studies colleagues.
- In July the secretary Dr Jeff Kildea published *Sister Liguori: The Nun who Divided a Nation* (Connor Court Publishing) and in September he presented the J.H. Plunkett Lecture for 2024, as well as having several articles published through the year.
- In October vice-president Dr Marie Leech was admitted as an Honorary Fellow of the University of Sydney in recognition of her significant contribution to the interests and welfare of the University over three decades and through her contributions to social policy in Australia.
- In October four members of the Aisling Society (Dr Pamela O'Neill, Prof. Peter Kuch, Dr Peter Moore, and Dr Jeff Kildea) gave papers at the International and Interdisciplinary Symposium "Pacific 'Celts'? Diasporas, Cross-Cultural Dialogue and Revitalized Identity" at the University of New Caledonia.
- Dr Perry McIntyre AM was appointed a Visiting Fellow of the State Library of NSW.
- Prof. Peter Kuch gave a number of conference presentations and contributed two book chapters that were published during the year.
- Vice-president Dr Pamela O'Neill continued to conduct classes at the Australian School of Celtic Learning and Pamela and Éilis Hurst continued assisting with Irish language classes at the Gaelic Club and online.

AISLING SOCIETY PRIZES

In May vice-president Dr Pamela O'Neill attended the awards ceremony at the University of Sydney to present an Aisling prize to joint winners Hannah Shaw and Thomas Cafe. Thomas is well known to the Aisling society as this is the third time he has been awarded the prize.

CONCLUSION

My thanks once again to the members of the Aisling Society for the honour they have given me by entrusting me with the role of honorary secretary. Thanks also to our president Tony Earls, our treasurer Padraic Hoban, our events organiser Pamela O'Neill, and to all the members of the Aisling Council for their help and support during the year. Mention should also be made of Aisling members Anne Bryce and Hugh Myers, who provided the suppers at

our ordinary monthly meetings, and Peter Gray SC, who makes the John Hubert Plunket Room in his chambers available for Aisling council meetings.

I record the society's sincere gratitude to the Consul General of Ireland Rosie Keane for her interest in and support of the society and its activities and for generously offering the consulate's conference room at Ireland House, 1 Market Street, Sydney for our meetings.

In 2025 the Aisling Society will celebrate the 70th anniversary of its founding. As we move through this anniversary year we look forward to consolidating and advancing the vision of the founders in promoting awareness amongst the Irish diaspora and the wider community of the role the Irish have played in the history, culture, and development of Australia.

Jeff Kildea
Honorary Secretary
January 2025