

# Cork: A Library Burned - A Library Reborn



*Carnegie Free Library, Cork.*

This exhibition tells the story of how, from humble beginnings, Cork's public library service was quickly built up around the dawn of the 20th century into a major success for its citizens.

But disaster struck Cork's popular Carnegie Library when its premises and most of its 15,000 books were destroyed by fire in December 1920. This event is often overlooked because of the enormity of what else happened that night 100 years ago in a city at the centre of a vicious War of Independence – the Burning of Cork.

Even more remarkable is what happened next, as thousands of books began arriving from around Ireland and around the world to help rebuild the collection of reading material for Cork's book lovers to enjoy.

What you see and read in this exhibition might seem at times like the stuff of fiction. But it is a real-life story of a city's love of reading, and of a librarian's dedication to meeting those readers' needs.



Cuimhneachán  
Commemoration  
1920-1923  
Corcaigh | Cork



LIBRARIES  
LEABHARLANNA

CORK CITY COUNCIL | COMHAIRLE CATHRACH CHORCAÍ



An Roinn Turasóireachta, Cultúir,  
Ealaíon, Gaeltachta, Spóirt agus Meán  
Department of Tourism, Culture,  
Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media



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Please follow the numbering system to  
work your way through the exhibition.

The Cork (Free) Public Library first opened at Nelson Place (later renamed Emmet Place) within the Crawford Municipal School of Science and Art, which now accommodates the Crawford Art Gallery.

The city had a long history of private libraries, but this was the first that was publicly funded. Its establishment and its future governance were entrusted by Cork Corporation to a committee of councillors and public dignitaries. On a salary of seven shillings a week, a library assistant was appointed in December 1892 to work with recently-appointed librarian James Wilkinson. The native of Co. Durham in England had just turned 23 when he arrived in Cork, but he would go on to manage city library services in Cork for just over 40 years.

The newsroom was the first element to be opened in the Cork (Free) Public Library. From December 1892, the ground-floor facility allowed visitors to read a variety of Irish and English newspapers and magazines. In July 1893, books became available for borrowing from the first-floor lending library. Borrowers who had paid a penny for a voucher could take home books from the library, which opened until 9pm daily.



School of Art and Opera House, Cork.

The Crawford Municipal School of Science and Art, home to Cork's first free public library, now home to the Crawford Art Gallery.

(Courtesy of Crawford Art Gallery)

## THE CORK EXAMINER.

**CORK (FREE) PUBLIC LIBRARY, NELSON PLACE,**

THE Public are informed that the Library will be opened on SATURDAY Next, the 1st July, at 5 p.m. The Issue of Books for Home Reading will commence on MONDAY, the 3rd of July. Intending Borrowers can obtain Vouchers (One Penny each) upon application at the Library any day from 10 a.m. to 9 p.m. Catalogues are now ready. Price 3d each; by Post, 4d.

By Order,  
**JAMES WILKINSON,**  
Public Librarian.

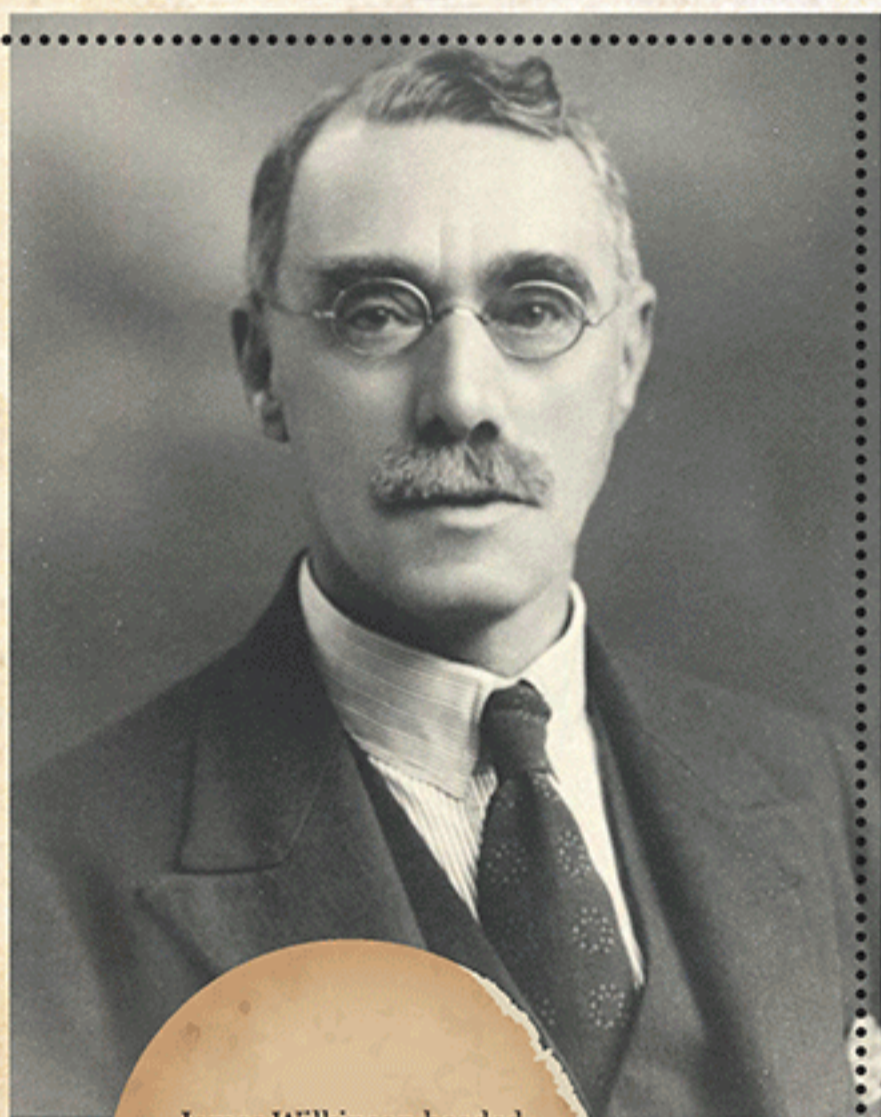
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The new lending service at Cork (Free) Public Library was the subject of advance advertising in the Cork Examiner.

Some of the stock was inherited from the Royal Cork Institution, previously located in the same building. The Cork (Free) Public Library also benefited from donations of books. But more than 3,700 volumes were purchased in the first year, accounting for most of the library committee's £700 budget.

Among those who donated books was nationalist MP William O'Brien, who presented two copies of his 1890 novel *When We Were Boys*. He also presented a copy of his 1892 lecture to the Cork National Society, *The Influence of the Irish Language on Irish National Literature and Character*. The topic reflected the growing theme of cultural nationalism running through public life and institutions at the end of the 19th century.

Also in 1893, the Cork Historical and Archaeological Society published its first journal, which continues to be produced annually.



James Wilkinson headed Cork public library services from October 1892 to December 1932.



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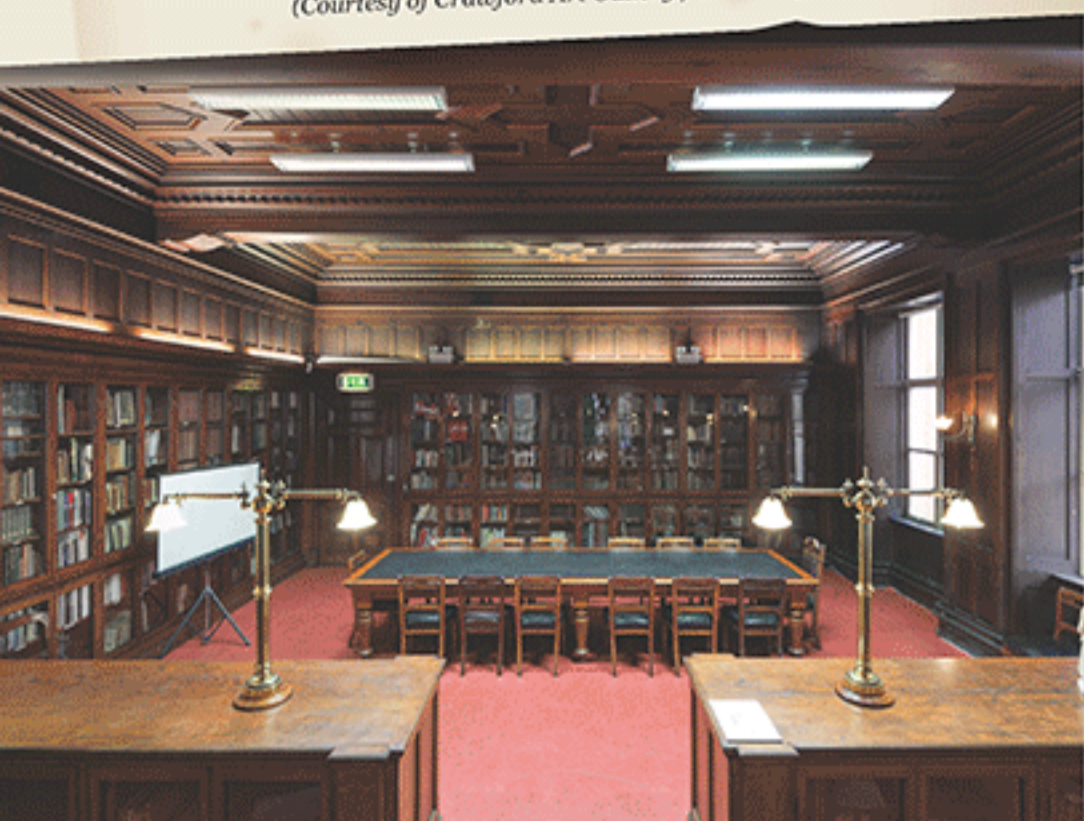


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The library in Crawford Art Gallery, which accommodated the Cork (Free) Public Library, 1892-1905.  
*(Courtesy of Crawford Art Gallery / Jed Niezgoda)*



The popularity of Cork's first public library was evident within months of opening. In September 1893 alone, almost 9,300 books were loaned from the Nelson Place reading room. Most readers were interested in fiction. Prose, drama and poetry accounted for more than two-thirds of lending in the library's first year.

But history and biography titles were also popular, and high numbers of science and commerce volumes were borrowed. Opportunities to broaden their horizons were clearly of interest to those patronising the library. A dozen books a day were being loaned out on topics about travel, voyages and broader geographical interest.

For those interested in doing more than reading about foreign travel, a branch of the Emigrants' Information Office was established at the library in 1895 to provide accurate information to those planning to emigrate, "whether to the British Colonies or to Foreign Countries."

Cork (Free) Public Library set a benchmark for future iterations of the service with its strong emphasis on young readers. During September 1893, 1,360 juvenile literature book loans were issued.

A year after the library opened its newsroom to readers, a defective flue caused a minor fire in December 1893. Luckily, it was under control in a short time by Cork City Fire Brigade.

Like the library, the fire service was under the management of a relatively new appointee. Captain Alfred J. Hutson had been appointed superintendent of the brigade in July 1891 and would serve in that role until 1928. But he and librarian James Wilkinson would cross paths again. The much larger fire at another library premises under Wilkinson's management would be at the city's first purpose-built library across the south channel of the River Lee 27 years later.



Captain Alfred J. Hutson, Superintendent, Cork Fire Brigade, at the time of his appointment in 1891.  
*(Courtesy of Pat Poland)*



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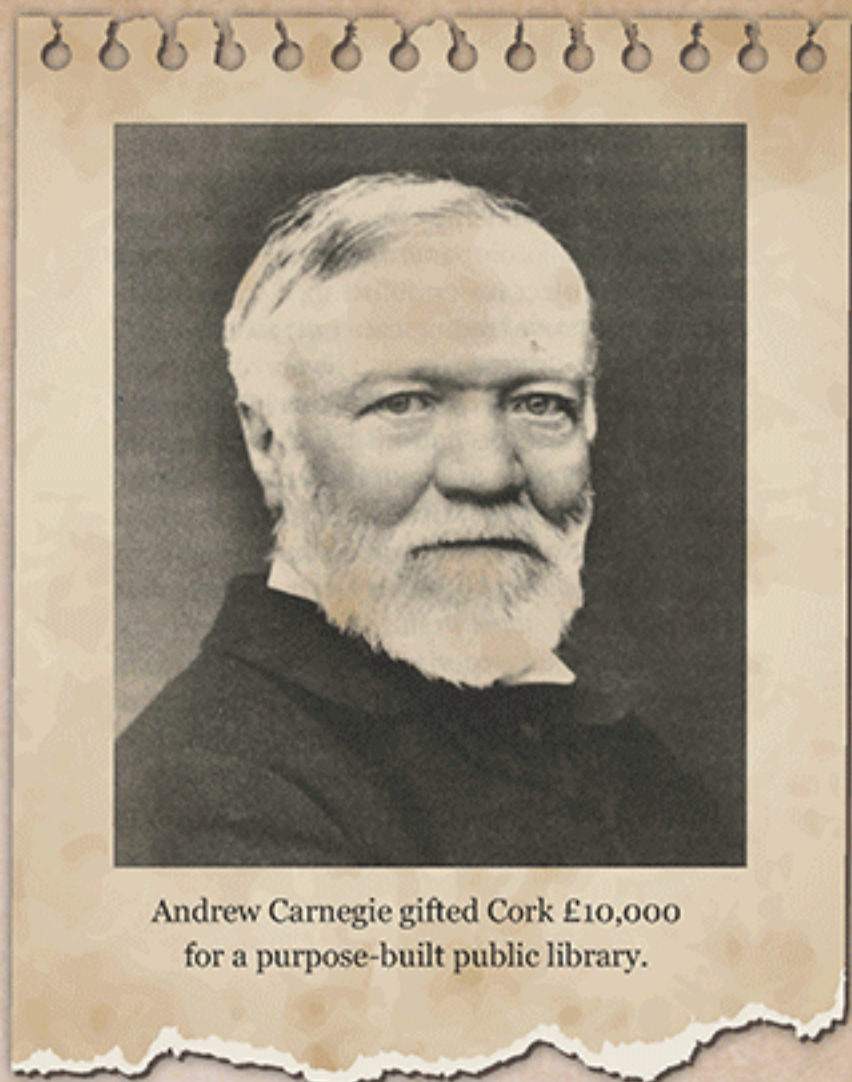


The library's enormous popularity led to regular overcrowding of both the newsroom and the reading room overhead. The latter space was being visited by close to 600 people on an average day in 1895, with inclement weather usually adding to its attraction but detracting from its amenity.

It was evident from an early stage of the Cork (Free) Public Library's operations that the city had an enormous appetite for books and learning among readers of all ages. But the parallel evidence of inadequate space, and limited room for on-site expansion, prompted efforts to provide a purpose-built library that could facilitate an expansion of books and more comfort for readers.

By 1902, the Scottish philanthropist Andrew Carnegie had become well-known worldwide for his generous donations toward the building of public libraries. He agreed to give £10,000 for such a project in Cork in response to a request from Lord Mayor of Cork, Edward Fitzgerald, the driving force behind Cork's hugely successful international exhibitions in 1902 and 1903. The first year of the exhibition was in full swing on the Mardyke (on land that would later become Fitzgerald's Park) in August 1902 when word of Mr Carnegie's gift reached Cork.

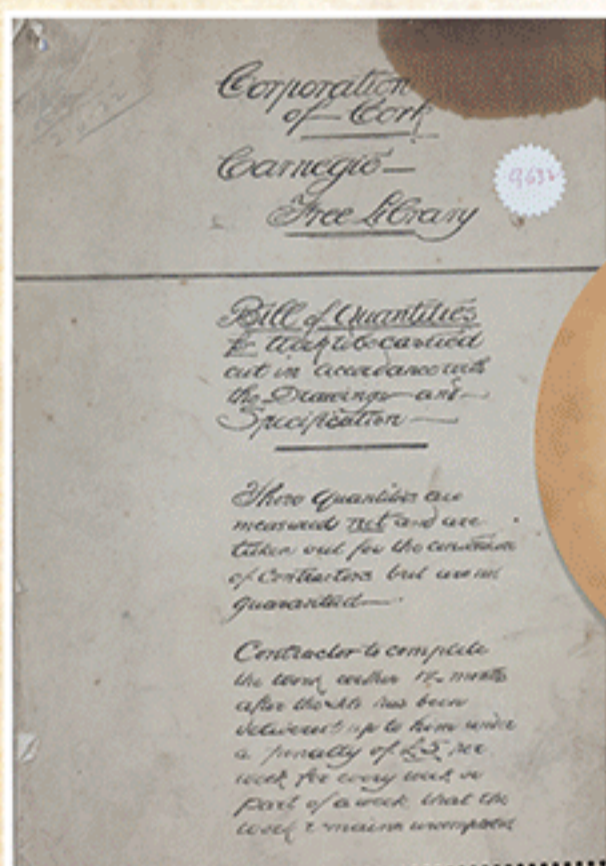
He came to Cork in October 1903 to lay the foundation stone and he was conferred with the Freedom of the City of Cork during his visit.



Andrew Carnegie gifted Cork £10,000 for a purpose-built public library.



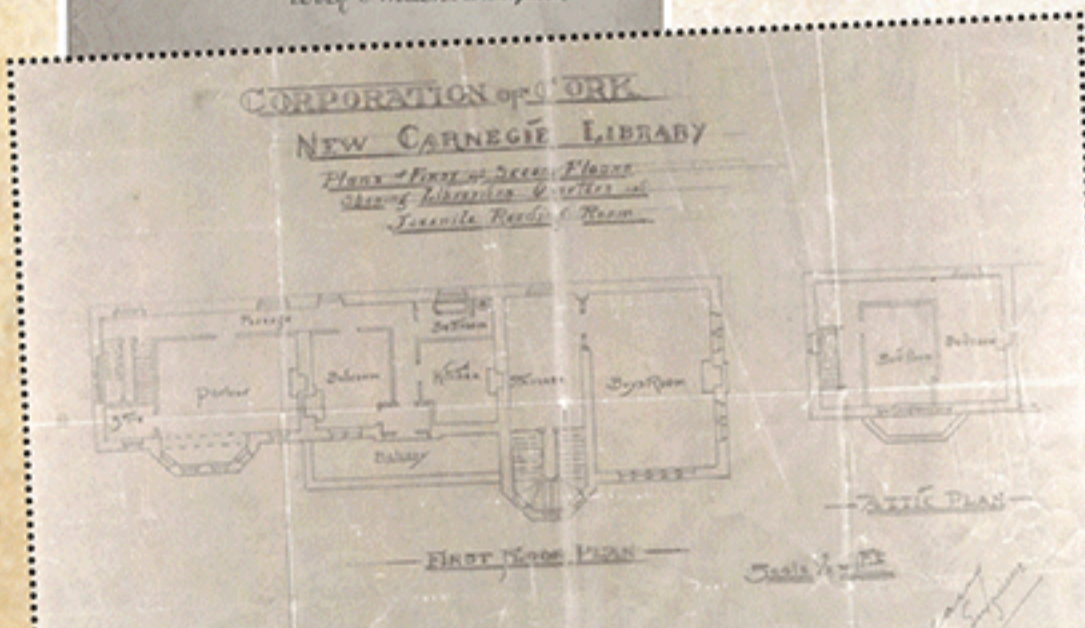
Cork's Carnegie Library was designed by Henry Albert Cutler, the main architect for the city's International Exhibition in 1902 and 1903.



Bill of quantities for construction of Cork's Carnegie Library, with a clause stipulating financial penalties if work went beyond the agreed completion date.  
(Courtesy of Cork Public Museum)

The design of the Carnegie Library was the job of Henry Albert Cutler, the city surveyor. The site was on Anglesea Street, at a right angle to the rear of the river-facing Municipal Buildings, which would formally become Cork City Hall in 1906. On the other side of the Corporation-owned library site was the city's Corn Exchange.

Local builder Patrick Murphy was awarded the contract for the construction of Cutler's design in the Elizabethan or Tudor style. An additional £1,000 - beyond the initial £10,000 grant - was provided by Mr. Carnegie late in 1904 to ensure heating and furniture could be installed in the new library. Cork Corporation officials took pride in the sourcing and crafting of materials locally. These included the red bricks and limestone used in the building, as well as gates and ornamental railings from the workshop of art metal worker Benjamin Watson. Even the ventilation and heating systems, in which a Belfast firm had a particular specialisation, were procured in Cork.



First-floor plan for the Carnegie Free Library, showing the accommodation for librarian James Wilkinson and family, with the Boys Room - later the Juvenile Library - on the same floor.  
(Courtesy of National Archives of Scotland)



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On September 12, 1905, Lord Mayor Joseph Barrett officially opened the Carnegie Free Library on Anglesea Street.

Turning the ceremonial key in the main entrance door, Cork's first citizen told those in attendance: "I now declare the Carnegie Free Library open for the use and benefit of the citizens of Cork for all time." Unfortunately, the benefits would only be enjoyed for a little over 15 years.

Along with his stock of books, James Wilkinson moved into the new standalone library, which had first-floor living quarters for himself and his family. It was not the only development for James and Marie Louise, who had married in Darlington, Co. Durham in August 1896. Their first child Audrey was born in the library residence on July 27, 1906.

Audrey Wilkinson was not the only child to frequent Cork's new library. With seating for 30 readers, and initially known as the Boys' Room, the Juvenile Library occupied a first-floor space in the south side of the building. Tales of war and adventure from authors of *The Last of the Mohicans* and *the Three Musketeers* were popular with the likes of policeman's son John Whelan, better-known later as the writer Seán Ó Faoláin. The Carnegie Free Library also subscribed for its younger readers to titles like *Boys' Own Paper*, *Girls' Realm*, *Little Folks*, and *Children's Friend*.

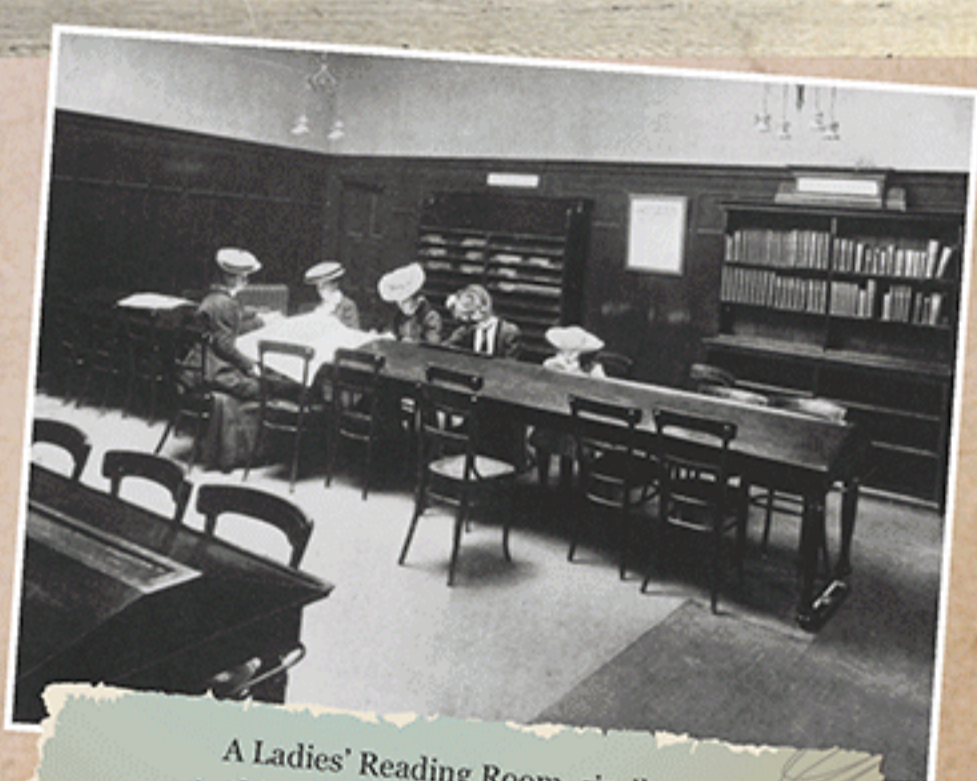
The classification of readers up to the age of 13 as juveniles may have reflected the social structures of the period, when most children joined the labour force after national school. Almost two-thirds of the 376 juvenile borrowers at the Carnegie Free Library in the year to the end of March 1914 were boys.

The two people standing on the balcony of the Carnegie Free Library are almost certainly librarian James Wilkinson and his wife Marie Louise.  
*(Courtesy of Cork Public Museum)*



Immediately below the Juvenile Library, to the right (or south) of the staircase tower, was the Ladies' Reading Room. Stocked mostly with newspapers and magazines from across the Irish Sea, it provided the first opportunity for Cork's women to spend time in what was previously a predominantly-masculine institution.

Of almost 2,100 people who borrowed from the library in the year up to March 31, 1914 (which does not include juveniles), 55% were females and at least one-third of those were married. The most prominent identifiable groupings among female readers were students, teachers, shopkeepers and vintners (or their female staff), artisans, clerical and book-keeping staff. Just nine classed themselves as domestic servants, but only 19 were classified in the library's annual report as 'professional'.



A Ladies' Reading Room, similar to this one in Glasgow, was provided in Cork's Carnegie Free Library.  
*(Courtesy of Gerald Blaikie)*



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Cork's library patrons and book stock grew in number – reaching more than 13,000 volumes in 1915. Although many militant nationalist journals of the early 20th century may not have been stocked, the city's politics was evolving in the immediate surroundings of the Carnegie Free Library.

At Cork Corporation's meeting in Cork City Hall next door, an increasingly-nationalist membership supported efforts to achieve Home Rule for Ireland in the Westminster Parliament.

The cultural nationalism of the period was evident before the public library had moved premises. Nelson Place was renamed Emmet Place just before the turn of the century in honour of the patriot Robert Emmet. While religious representation was retained on the committee responsible for library finances and governance, the membership of this body was expanded to include local officers of the Gaelic League in 1913-14.



Cork City Hall and the Carnegie Library were extremely close neighbours.  
(Courtesy of Cork Public Museum)

In December 1913, a rowdy meeting in Cork City Hall saw the formation of the Cork Corps of the Irish Volunteers, an organisation aimed at counteracting opposition to Home Rule being articulated by the armed Ulster Volunteer Force. As 1914 progressed, and Europe edged closer to a draining four years of war, Sunday patrons of the Carnegie Free Library may have struggled to concentrate as drill orders were called to the Irish Volunteers assembled at the Corn Exchange.

Many who wore the uniform of the Irish Volunteers, and of Cork's National Volunteers movement formed by an autumn 1914 split, may have held Carnegie Free Library tickets.

The pre-war male library patrons included high numbers from the lower middle-class occupations that typically populated both militia bodies. Clerks and book-keepers stood out as the dominant single group listed as borrowers in 1913-14. They accounted for nearly one-third of the 600 male borrowers whose occupation was known. But books were also issued for home reading by high numbers of teachers, shop assistants and men in various labouring trades.

**Carnegie Free Library, Cork.**  
**OFFICIAL BOOKMARK.**

*For Advertising Spaces on the next Book Mark (issued July, 1908), apply to Messrs. Stanley Russell & Co., Library Advertising Contractors, Colonial House, Tinsley St., London Bridge, S.E.*  
**Please leave this Mark in Book.**

Sole Agent for  
**Raleigh, Sunbeam, Sparkbrook, and Swift Cycles—from £5.**  
**R. B. BAKER,**  
44 King Street, CORK.

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AND HOUSE FURNISHERS,  
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**Power Bros.**  
High-Class Tailors, Hatters, Hosiers.  
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Pianoforte Manufacturers,  
9 MARLBORO' ST.,  
CORK.

**Munster Civil Service College**  
36 Grand Parade, Cork City.  
**B. MURPHY (Principal),**  
L.H.M.S. Certified Lecturer, Science and Art,  
South Kensington, London.  
This Institution is pre-eminently the most successful in Munster. The successes obtained by the students prepared exceed in many cases all other similar institutions in Cork. Fifty successes have been obtained for Cork G.P.O., exceeding all classes; equally successful at other centres.

FOR  
**SHOP FRONTS,  
SHOP FITTINGS,  
SHOW CASES,**  
**WM. O'CONNELL & CO., Ltd.,**  
Shopfitters, etc.,  
19 HANOVER STREET,  
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**DO YOU NEED SPECTACLES ?**  
If so, wear a pair of Sight Savers and retain a pair of healthy eyes through life.  
Eyeglass Tested Free by Competent Optician.  
**KILOH & CO. Ltd. 108 Patrick St. Cork,**  
Chemists and Opticians.

Local firms saw the Carnegie Free Library official bookmark as a way to reach potential customers. This 1908 example appealed to those in the market for blouses, ribbons and lace, but also to those more interested in shirts and ties. Shopkeepers and those with ambitions for civil service careers were also in the mind of advertisers.

(Courtesy of Michael Lenihan)



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This is the reader's ticket issued in the latter stages of the First World War to Daniel Holohan. He was living at Magnolia Terrace on Mahony's Avenue which leads from Luke's Cross on the city's northside to the Lower Glanmire Road.

Daniel had a short walk to work at the Great Southern and Western Railway, the city's biggest rail station. Born in Co Laois, he had followed in the footsteps of his father Lawrence as a railway employee. The ticket was due to expire on Daniel's 24th birthday - August 30, 1918.

NOT TRANSFERABLE.	<p>This Card must be renewed every twelve Months.          Books cannot be issued except on production of this Card.          Borrowers are cautioned against losing their Cards, as they will be answerable for all books issued upon them.          Change of Residence must at once be notified to the Librarian.</p>	Carnegie Free
	<p>Expires <u>30 August 1918</u>          Name <u>Daniel Holohan</u>          Address <u>6 Magnolia Terrace</u>          No. <u>602 St Lukes</u></p>	Library, Cork.

LEABHARLANN CARNEIGI, CORCAIGE.

IASAÉT.

Ar orcaite óna io fá d'á g.  
 Ar fánaó Dé Céadaoin óna I.

Books must be protected from soiling and from every other kind of injury. Should any damage be observed it should be at once pointed out to the Librarian.

Books should, if possible, be changed by borrowers personally. If a messenger be employed the borrower is responsible.

Immediate notice is to be given to the Librarian of loss of book or of ticket, and also of change of address.

*In the event of any infectious disease occurring in any house where there are Library Books, such books must not be returned to the Library, but handed over to an officer of the Sanitary Authority to be disinfected or destroyed. Until such house is declared free from infection by the Sanitary Officer no books will be issued to any persons residing therein. Any person neglecting to comply with this instruction shall be liable in respect of each offence to a penalty not exceeding Forty Shillings. ("The Public Health Acts Amendment Act, 1907.")*

CLASS..... Acc. No.....

Rules governing the borrowing of books from the Carnegie Library in Cork.

Earlier in 1918, a strong national campaign united many sectors of Irish society like never before, including the Catholic bishops, trade unions and the fast-growing republican movement. They forced the British government to back down on plans to begin conscripting Irish men into the British Army, which was facing seemingly-imminent defeat by German forces in the European war. The anti-conscription campaign was led by the Sinn Féin political party, backed by the Irish Volunteers who were behind the disastrous Easter Rising of 1916 in Dublin.

Although the Cork Brigade of Irish Volunteers had not participated in the Rising, strong local leadership saw the city and county subsequently become one of the military organisation's best organised. This was largely due to the work of men like Tomás MacCurtain and his friend Terence MacSwiney, who would become one of 73 Sinn Féin candidates to take seats in the December 1918 general election.

The republican public representatives met in Dublin for the first time in January 1919, naming their newly-formed Irish parliament as Dáil Éireann. One of its first acts was to declare Irish independence in front of the assembled world press. They hoped that peace talks in Paris following the recently-ended war would lead to international recognition of a sovereign Irish state, free from British political control.



The Revolt of Sinn Féiners in Ireland  
 Sinn Féiners Parading through the Streets before the Rebellion

Irish Volunteers marching in Cork's St Patrick's Day Parade, March 1916.  
 (Courtesy of Niall Murray)



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Nearing the end of 1920, Cork's Carnegie Library was enjoying visits from more than 4,000 readers each week. It continued to open seven days a week, despite daily violence and death on the city streets. The War of Independence was now reaching the end of its second year. It had resulted in the killing by disguised members of the Royal Irish Constabulary of the city's first republican Lord Mayor, Tomás MacCurtáin in March 1920.

MacCurtáin had secured unanimous support from newly-elected Cork Corporation members at City Hall in January 1920 for a motion recognising the Dáil Éireann executive as Ireland's true government. In a work yard at the rear of the City Hall - overlooked by the Carnegie Free Library - his successor as Lord Mayor and IRA commander, Terence MacSwiney TD was arrested by British soldiers on August 12, 1920. He immediately began a hunger strike in protest at his detention and two-year sentence by a military court. The story of his personal perseverance would be followed by millions of people worldwide in the pages of newspapers in several languages over the next 10 weeks.



A 1920 postcard issued before the death of Terence MacSwiney, published by The Irish Republican Association, Cape Town branch in South Africa.  
(Courtesy of Cork Public Museum)



On October 30, 1920, attendance at the Carnegie Free Library was less than a quarter of the normal 600-plus for a Saturday. The previous day, the library closed as a mark of respect as the remains of the city's Lord Mayor, Terence MacSwiney were brought home and taken from a vessel docked at the nearby Custom House. The 41-year-old Mid-Cork TD had died on October 25 at Brixton Prison in London after a hunger strike that lasted 74 days.

The library's low attendance that Saturday may have been due to the enormous crowds lined up along the railings outside. Thousands of citizens, members of Cork Corporation and the outlawed Dáil Éireann parliament, and other visiting dignitaries queued throughout the day to file past the open casket of Lord Mayor MacSwiney in the City Hall. Among them was 17-year-old library patron Michael O'Donovan – then a young IRA member and a future Cork County Librarian, who would go on to be better known as short-story writer Frank O'Connor.



Crowds queuing outside Cork's Carnegie Free Library to pay their respects in the City Hall to the dead Lord Mayor Terence MacSwiney.  
(Courtesy of Cork Public Museum)



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Terence MacSwiney's death and funeral led to rare closures of the Carnegie Library on a Friday and Sunday at the end of October 1920. Despite the disruption caused by large public funerals, the imposition of military curfews that saw streets cleared at night, and the tragic loss of civilian lives in the daily exchange of gunfire and grenades between the IRA and British Crown Forces, the Carnegie Free Library had remained one of the citizens' constant comforts. In the week before it would be gutted in flames, more than 4,100 people visited – including 649 on Friday, December 3 alone.

Visitors during October, November and early December 1920 could see alongside the building just how close the conflict had come to their beloved library. The Cork City Hall was one of several buildings associated with the republican movement to be subjected to arson attacks in the final months of that year by armed and masked men. They were almost certainly members of the Royal Irish Constabulary (RIC), or of its newest recruits the 'Black and Tans' and the Auxiliary Division.



VIEW OF MUNICIPAL BUILDINGS BEFORE THE FIRE.  
(AREA No. 7).

Fire damage to parts of Cork City Hall was visible in the weeks leading up to its destruction in the Burning of Cork.

(Courtesy of Cork Public Museum)



AUXILIARIES AND BLACK AND TANS  
OUTSIDE UNION QUAY BARRACKS CORK.

'Black and Tans' and RIC Auxiliaries outside  
Cork city's police headquarters on Union Quay.  
(Courtesy of Cork Public Museum)

As centres of Sinn Féin-controlled local government, town halls and offices of Irish public bodies were subjected to regular police and military raids. But things went further in Cork, beginning in early October when rifles were fired and bombs thrown through the west-facing windows of Cork City Hall – on the side running close to the gable of the Carnegie Free Library. This was followed in the early hours of Tuesday, November 30 by another attack. Even with Cork City Fire Brigade personnel posted on night duty at City Hall, a further attempt was made to set fire and armed men threatened the crew who eventually managed to hose down the flames.

If citizens or public officials believed their library would surely not be targeted, they might have been unwise. On November 7, 1920, an attempt was made to set alight the Carnegie Library and an adjoining technical school in Tralee, Co Kerry. It was a sad portent of the fate awaiting its sister facility in Cork city.



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On Wednesday night, December 8, one of the Carnegie Free Library's young readers lost his life in the street as he walked with members of Cork Young Men's Society from St Peter's & Paul's Church, just off St Patrick's Street.

RIC Auxiliaries had been stopping people in that part of St Patrick's Street around 9pm, when shots were fired. They were believed to have come from the police patrol, sending a panicked crowd rushing back into the church. Michael Murphy from Tower Street fell wounded outside and died from a gunshot wound on the church step. He was identified by a Carnegie Library ticket with his name on it that was found on his remains.

His stepfather said the telegraph department clerk at the General Post Office "had no connection with any political organisation and had no troubles of any sort." His death was barely investigated by a military court of inquiry, which reported there was "no evidence to show under what circumstances the shot was fired."

The 'military inquiry' was held at Victoria Barracks on Saturday, December 11, 1920. A few hours later, members of the RIC Auxiliary Division 'K' Company would leave there and come under IRA attack nearby. The consequences would be devastating for the city of Cork and for the library at which Michael Murphy had been a borrower.



Michael Murphy died on the step of Ss. Peter and Paul's Church, hit by gunshot from St Patrick's Street.

The IRA had agents inside the British Army headquarters at Victoria Barracks, but also had members in the community constantly sabotaging the Crown Forces. Among the many rail workers who searched military luggage at the Great Southern and Western Railway for intelligence material or ammunition was the now 26-year-old rail clerk - and Carnegie Free Library member - Daniel Holohan of Magnolia Terrace.

As a member of 'A' Company of the 1st Battalion of IRA Cork No. 1 Brigade, he laid in wait on several nights in early December 1920 to ambush a convoy of RIC Auxiliaries who were regularly transported along Old Youghal Road en route from Victoria Barracks to the city centre.

But a much smaller group of Daniel's IRA comrades assembled at short notice to attempt an ambush at the same location on Saturday night, December 11, 1920. At around 8pm, they attacked the two lorries carrying members of the Auxiliaries' 'K' Company, injuring a dozen and killing one. Not long after the ambushers ran off into the night, a combined force of Auxiliaries and British soldiers cleared local residents out of their homes and set several houses alight in reprisal for the attack.



The former home of Fenian Brian Dillon, one of the houses destroyed by Crown Forces in reprisal for the IRA ambush at Dillon's Cross.

(Courtesy of Cork Public Museum)



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By 9.30pm on Saturday, Auxiliaries whose colleague had been killed began shooting in the city centre and evacuating employees living above department stores on St Patrick's Street. With Grant's, the Munster Arcade and Cash's ablaze, the Cork City Fire Brigade was under enormous pressure to contain the fires already spreading to adjoining properties. Their work was constantly hindered by persistent threats and occasional gunfire from armed Auxiliaries, and by the cutting of their hoses. Although a small fire crew remained on watch duty at Cork City Hall, there was a realistic danger that any repeat of the previous arson attempts could put the building at high risk of complete destruction – and a similar fate might face its neighbour, the Carnegie Free Library.

As the night sky over the nearby city centre was lit up with flames, shooting on the quay outside City Hall was followed by loud banging on the front door approaching 2am on Sunday. The firemen inside were forced to evacuate through the rear of the building in fear. They soon saw men jump over the wall separating the City Hall from the Carnegie Library, then break down the back door of the Cork Corporation headquarters.

Less than an hour later, men were seen bringing jerry cans from Cork's nearby RIC headquarters at Union Quay and being admitted to the City Hall through the previously-bolted front doors. A number of explosions inside were soon heard and the heart of the republican control of Cork city was up in flames not long after.



The only known night-time image of the Burning of Cork.  
(Courtesy of Michael Lenihan)



The most common fire appliance at the disposal of the Cork City Fire Brigade in 1920 was one like this, photographed in 1906, with a hose reel underneath the carriage.  
(Courtesy of Pat Poland)



The Carnegie Library walls remained standing but the interior and its thousands of books and other holdings were destroyed in the fire.  
(Courtesy of Irish Examiner)

Whatever chance Cork City Fire Brigade might have had in normal circumstances to save the building, most personnel were still busy trying to gain control over multiple infernos on and around St Patrick's Street. The efforts of those few available to attempt putting out the City Hall fire were soon made redundant, as Crown Forces repeatedly turned off the water hydrants feeding their hoses.

The proximity of the two buildings made the spread of the fire from City Hall to the adjacent Carnegie Free Library inevitable. Cork City Fire Brigade superintendent Captain Alfred J Hutson would be unable to report the same success as that of December 1893, when men under his supervision had saved the library at Nelson Place from destruction.



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The rubble remains of Cork's Carnegie Free Library.  
 (Courtesy of Irish Examiner)

*"Next morning, when I wandered among the ruins, it was not the business district or the municipal buildings that I mourned for, but the handsome red-brick library that had been so much a part of my life from the time when, as a small boy, I brought back my first Western adventure story over the railway bridges."*

- Frank O'Connor, *An Only Child* (1961)

Cork Corporation and its staff had lost their place of work in the ruins of the City Hall. Next door, one of the city's finest institutions and most of its stock of 15,000 titles were still smouldering throughout Sunday after the blaze that began in the early hours. While the front and side walls remained intact, librarian James Wilkinson and his family were homeless like many other city workers.

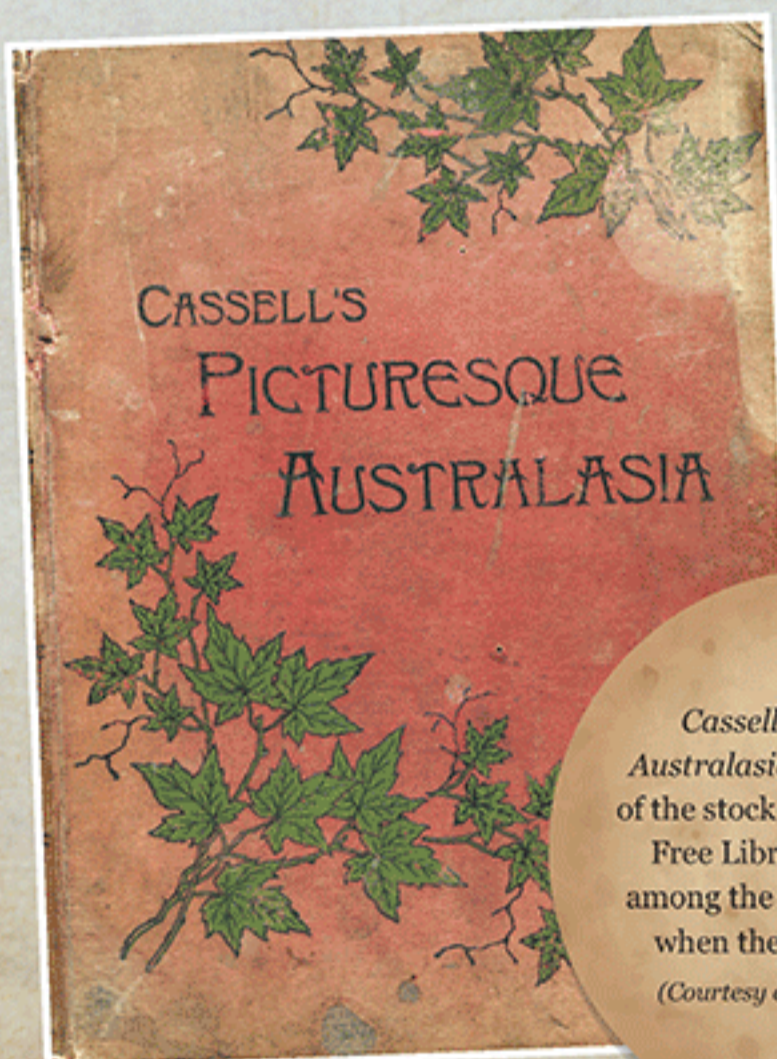
Recriminations and accusations over the cause of the overnight fires raged over the following weeks, as thousands were left jobless and total damage was estimated at up to £6 million. But the diligent librarian began his own personal crusade to restore service to the city's avid readers to whom he and staff had issued books no fewer than 100,000 times over the previous year.

The return of some of the 1,000 books out on loan on the night of December 11 might be of some assistance, and appeals were made for their prompt delivery to temporary storage secured at the Cork School of Art. But even full compliance would not provide enough stock to offer a full public library service.

Letters were issued in the local press but also to journals and newspapers around the world, making a strong appeal for book donations to help return Cork's public library service to its former glory. The response would be nothing short of astounding, with overseas donations coming predominantly from the United Kingdom, the US and Canada.



The facade of the old Cork City Hall was all that remained after the Burning of Cork.  
 (Courtesy of Cork Public Museum)



*Cassell's Picturesque Australasia* - a rare survivor of the stock of Cork's Carnegie Free Library stock. It was among the books out on loan when the library burned.  
 (Courtesy of Michael Lenihan)



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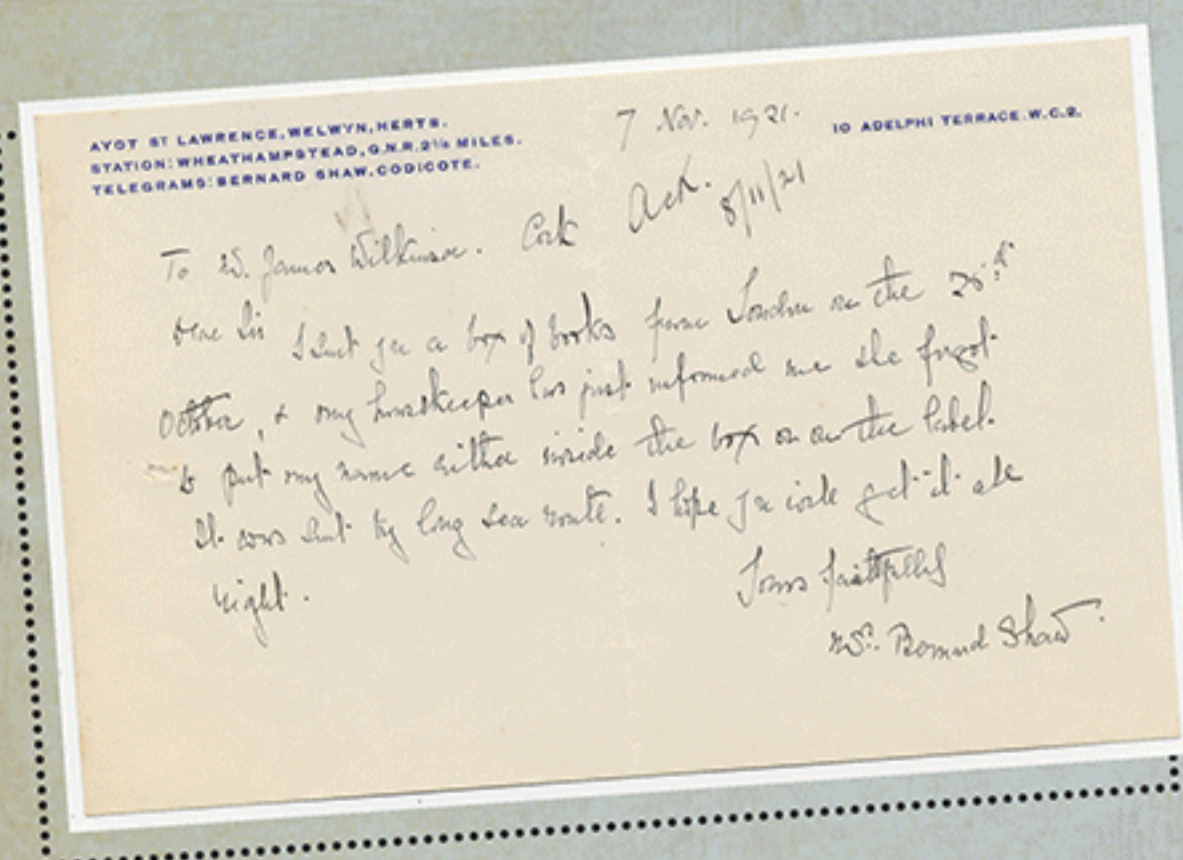
Most of the 5,400 books held in storage for the Cork Public Library committee by September 1922 had come from donations. The first title entered in an accession book begun in December 1921 was a returned book that was out on loan a year earlier - Wendel's *Weather Science*. It was soon joined by the first donated book to be listed, an 1892 geology book gifted by local donor Miss Cornwall. A 60-year-old book on the natural world was registered as being from local artist Hugh Charde. The first batch of more than 200 volumes to be received from the National Library of Ireland was also among the first registered donations.

Other institutions like Great Yarmouth Public Library also gave their assistance. The diaspora were a strong source of support. The Irish Women's Distress Committee had two bales of books shipped from London to Cork for the city's expanding library collection in May 1921.

Although no book was refused, many titles might not have been on the wishlist of Mr Wilkinson, even if he had an unlimited budget. But he also received some notable collections, including 62 Cork-printed books from the library of the late Rev R.S. Maffett of Dublin. They arrived in the year after a temporary library premises was finally occupied in 1924. Ironically, given the source of the blaze that forced the move in the first place, that short-term home was in the former RIC Barracks on Tuckey Street, between Grand Parade and South Main Street.



The Cork Public Library appeal for donations promised that every book received would have a special book-plate applied and the name of the donor would be inserted.



Formerly of Rosscarberry in West Cork, the author of this November 1921 note confirming despatch of her latest contribution was by far the single greatest donor. Charlotte Payne-Townshend was married to Irish author George Bernard Shaw. She sent almost 1,300 books across the Irish Sea from London for over a decade - even during the Civil War that lasted from summer 1922 to spring 1923 when transport and cargo to Cork city and county often faced disruption.

(Courtesy of Cork City Libraries)

Among many clerics to donate books from their personal libraries was Church of Ireland Rector of Ballineen near Dunmanway in West Cork, Rev A. G. Robinson. He and his wife added two natural science books to James Wilkinson's expanding stock - still awaiting a home - in the days before Christmas 1921.

The previous Christmas when the city was still reeling from the fires, their children - including rising nationalist-minded playwright Lennox Robinson - joined them on holiday in their Ballymoney rectory. Their daughter Nora, home from India with her own children, later described the prevailing atmosphere. "The police barrack in the village was destroyed one night by one side in the quarrel while half one side of the street was burnt down shortly after by the other. The burning of Cork thirty miles away hardly horrified us as much as this." (Lennox Robinson, Tom Robinson and Nora Dorman, *Three Homes*, 1938)



Lennox Robinson and his family were generous supporters of the Cork Public Library appeal for books.



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Just like the Nelson Place home of the city's first public library, the temporary Tuckey Street premises opened its newsroom before other facilities became available. That event in June 1924 was followed three months later by resumption of full borrowing services for the first time in almost four years since the Carnegie Library was burned.

With more than 10,500 books donated and more bought from cash donations and public funds, borrowers had a wide choice of reading material. But even with a large building and the £1,000 provided by the Carnegie United Kingdom Trust to help furnish and equip it, a three-storey property with small public rooms was inadequate for the kind of service James Wilkinson wished to offer citizens. The pressure was kept up to make effective and prompt use of the £30,000 available from British compensation, intended as it was for construction of Cork's second purpose-built public library in a little over two decades.



The new Cork Public Library on Grand Parade, as it looked in 1930.  
(Courtesy of Irish Examiner)



The Reference Room in Cork's newly-opened Cork Public Library in September 1930.  
(Courtesy of Irish Examiner)

A site in the immediate vicinity of the temporary library premises was eventually identified on Grand Parade and cost Cork Corporation £5,000. The construction work was undertaken by T. Kelleher and cost a further £19,000. The design featured inspiration from visits to English libraries by Dominic O'Connor of the O'Flynn & O'Connor architectural firm. Despite the reservations of other Cork Corporation officials, librarian James Wilkinson had significant input into what would be the fourth library premises under his management in Cork. Particular attention was paid to lighting, with overhead natural light illuminating the reading room, reference room, circulating library and juvenile room.

The new modern library was officially opened in September 1930, five months after its newsroom opened its doors. It was not alone a place to read and learn for younger citizens, said Cork Workers' Council president Jeremiah Hurley, but the new library would be a place of education to those of the working classes among its patrons. Reference was, naturally, made to the tragic events of a decade earlier that created the need for a new building. But Lord Mayor Frank Daly also highlighted the gains from the enforced move, referring to the more central location in the city and the improved facilities in the new Cork Public Library.

On the same day that Lord Mayor Frank Daly officially opened the new Grand Parade library in September 1930, the Cork Examiner back page featured advertisements for three St Patrick's Street department stores directly targeted in the December 11, 1920 arson attacks. After extensive rebuilding work, Cash's, Grant's and the Munster Arcade were also re-established and serving the citizens of Cork again.



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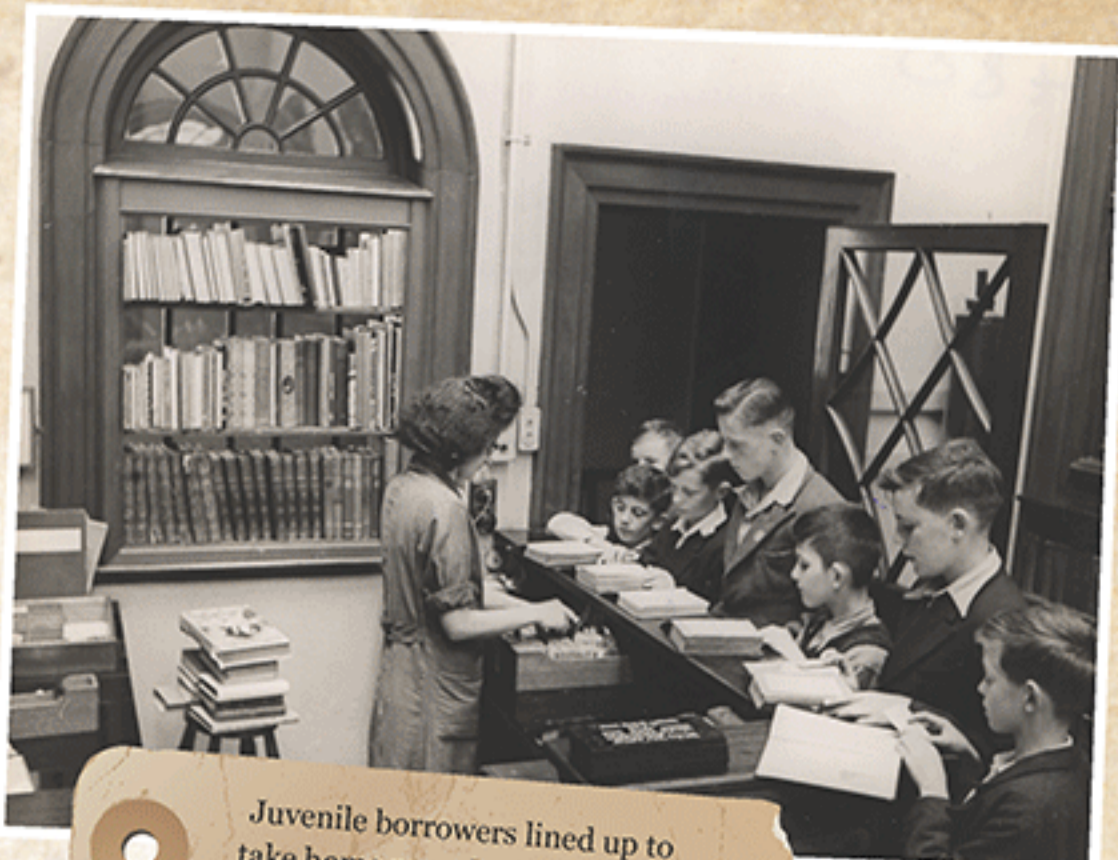
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As with its predecessors, the new library retained a special attraction for Cork's youngest book-lovers. Within days of the temporary premises at Tuckey Street opening in 1924, the shelves of the juvenile section had been "denuded of books." Almost 20,000 children's books were borrowed in the first six months of resumed library services in 1924, nearly 5,500 more than had ever issued in any full year before December 1920's devastating fire.

The extraordinary demand for children's literature continued in the following years, but it spiked again when the new Cork Public Library opened on Grand Parade. In its first full year of operation, up to the end of March 1932, it issued 32,992 loans to juveniles - over 10,000 more than the service issued two years before.

Adult lending surged to unprecedented levels in the 1931-1932 reporting year for Cork Public Library. Staff issued a staggering 121,244 loans in 12 months, which was 50,554 more than the previous year. The comfort of a new reference room contributed to growth in reference book issues by nearly 2,800 to just under 28,000 - a 52% rise in four years.



Juvenile borrowers lined up to take home more books from the Grand Parade library.

The quality of the new facilities undoubtedly contributed to the increased popularity of the library service. But it might be said that the rise in footfall did not disturb focused readers too much as the modern rubber flooring was said to render "traffic within the library noiseless". All rooms were said to be "free from external sound", further evidence of the thorough design and, perhaps, the input of librarian James Wilkinson.



The ever-present librarian James Wilkinson standing at the back left of the Cork Public Library newsroom in Grand Parade with a colleague. Daily newspapers are on stands along the left-hand wall, while journals as varied as Bookseller, Church of Ireland Gazette and Vegetarian Messenger are among those set out for interested patrons at the reading desks.

Although unhappy, as ever, with his book-buying budget, Mr Wilkinson's report to his Cork Corporation employers for the year 1931-1932 featured a tone of merited pride.

*"The progress attained during the first complete year the library has functioned in the new building has demonstrated that, given a central location and efficient housing, the citizens did not fail to appreciate the advantages that their library gave them; this is verified by the fact that the issues for the period of this report have exceeded the issues of the best previous year's record by the substantial margin of 60,903,"* he wrote.

James Wilkinson's mission to see the restoration of a library service in a purpose-built facility had been accomplished - thanks largely to the kind donations of hundreds of individuals and institutions around the world. Before he retired, aged 63, on the last day of 1932, the stock of Cork Public Library had passed the threshold of 15,000 books once held by the fondly-remembered Carnegie Library that went before it.



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“I retain the pleasantest recollections of your new building, which I think I can safely describe as the best-planned Borough Library in Ireland – unless there is some gem I have not come across.”

- Secretary, Carnegie United Kingdom Trust to James Wilkinson, Librarian, Cork Public Library, 1930

James Wilkinson's successors as head of the city's public library services inherited and passed along his legacy of passionate management and constant awareness of the needs of their modern readers.

Just as the facilities begun almost 130 years ago, young readers are a key to the mission of Cork City Libraries today. But it is also focused on readers and service users of all ages, with an emphasis on inclusion and lifelong learning that helped Cork earn the honour of being designated a UNESCO Learning City in 2015.

In 2019, more than 250,000 people passed through the doors of the City Library. More recently, interruptions to library services caused by extraordinary circumstances have brought to mind the unimaginable situation facing Cork's library staff a century ago after the Burning of Cork – and their magnificent response.

It gives confidence and inspiration as Cork's citizens and civic leaders ponder future developments of library services in the city for the 21st century and beyond.



Browsing the fiction shelves in 1965.

Cork City Libraries would like to acknowledge and thank the following institutions and individuals for their help with this Exhibition.

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