The origins of the National Library of Ireland may be traced back to a private society. ‘The Dublin Society for improving husbandry, manufactures and other useful arts and sciences’ was founded in 1731. A royal charter was granted in 1749. The Royal Dublin Society, as it became, was concerned with improvement of the country in matters such as agriculture, manufactures and art.¹ The government acknowledged the Society’s usefulness by an annual grant. The use of public funds to help support a private institution was likely to lead to controversy. Membership applications were decided upon by ballot of the members, which included liberal and conservative elements. In 1835, Daniel Murray, Roman Catholic archbishop of Dublin, applied for membership; his application was contentiously rejected.² This incident presented an opportunity to William Smith O’Brien, Conservative MP for the County of Limerick, who, in 1836, proposed to the House of Commons that a Committee be appointed ‘to inquire into the administration of the Royal Dublin Society, with a view to the wider extension of the advantage of the annual parliamentary grant to that institution, without reference to the distinctions of party or religion’. The Select Committee, under the chairmanship of Smith O’Brien, prepared a Report on the Society, which recommended that:

the Library of the Dublin Society ought to be considered as intended, not solely for the advantage of a comparatively few individuals who belong to the Society, but as a National Library, accessible under proper regulations to respectable persons of all classes, who may be desirous to avail themselves of it for the purpose of literary research.³

² Regarding Dr Murray’s failed application, see W. Meagher, Notices of the life and character of His Grace Most Rev. Daniel Murray, late Archbishop of Dublin (Dublin, 1853), 69–70.
³ Report from the Select Committee on Royal Dublin Society (1836), xii (H.C. 1836 (445)). See also G. Long, ‘The foundation of the National Library of Ireland, 1836–1877’, Long Room 36
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The Society’s Library had previously been available to the public in a very limited manner, and from 1836 onwards it became more accessible, largely as a result of the efforts of the Society’s Library Committee to provide increased accommodation and longer opening hours. The Library stock in 1836 was largely scientific and technical, reflecting the Society’s aims, but over the following decades the acquisitions policy became more general, and an emphasis was placed on acquiring material of Irish interest. For example, an important collection of pamphlets dealing with seventeenth-century Ireland was purchased from the London bookseller Thomas Thorpe in 1840. Official publications were also acquired. In 1852, the Library was described as ‘containing about 22,000 volumes at present and receiving accessions at the rate of 500 volumes a year’. By 1862, the Library contained ‘about 30,000 volumes’. Thus when in 1863 the Library received a donation of approximately 23,000 volumes from Jaspar Robert Joly (1818–92), this gift not only added significantly to the Irish holdings of the Society, it virtually doubled the size of the collection. T. W. Lyster described the collection thus:

The Joly collection contains 23,000 printed volumes with a large mass of unbound papers and prints and a fine collection of Irish and Scottish song music. Its selection of Napoleonic literature is the most excellent in the three kingdoms, and that dealing with the French Revolution is not less extensive. But the chief interest lies in the quantity of books dealing with Irish history, topography and biography; the valuable collection of periodicals; and the portraits of the worthies of Ireland and views of Irish scenery classified and arranged in alphabetical order.

The collection was given to the Society on condition that ‘if at any time hereafter a public library should be established in the city of Dublin under the authority of Parliament . . . analogous to the library of the British Museum in London’ the Joly Library would be transferred to it. An increased emphasis on acquiring Irish material is evident. In 1863, Frederick J. Sidney told the

4 Royal Dublin Society, Library Committee Minutes, 30 March 1852.
5 Thom’s Almanac and Official Directory (1862), 794.
7 An Act to authorise the Commissioners of Public Works in Ireland to acquire from the Royal Dublin Society and others lands for the erection of a science and art museum in Dublin, and to establish a national library in Dublin; and for other purposes (1877). Short title: The Dublin Science and Art Museum Act.
Select Committee on Scientific Institutions (Dublin) that ‘One principle that guides us in the purchase of our books is, we consider that books written by Irishmen have a particular right to be placed in that library.’ The ‘Minute of 1865’ of the Lords of the Committee of Council of Education severed the private and public funds of the Society and the government undertook the complete support of several departments, including the Society’s Library. The Report from the Commission on the Science and Art Department in Ireland (1868–9) recommended the formation of a General Industrial Fine Arts Museum in Dublin, the central group of institutions to include ‘a Science and Art Museum, a Public Library, a Museum of Natural History, a Museum of Irish Antiquities, a National Gallery and a School of Art’.

Following protracted negotiations between the Royal Dublin Society, the Department of Science and Art (London) and the Commissioners of Public Works (Ireland), the Dublin Science and Art Museum Act of 1877 was passed, establishing a National Library and National Museum. This Act enabled the transfer of most of the Society’s Library, and the Joly Library, to the new National Library (the first explicitly ‘national’ library in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland, preceding the establishment of the Free State by over forty years, and arguably a sop to the Home Rulers). The Library was funded by, and reported to, the Department of Science and Art (London) until 1900, when it was transferred to the administration of the Department of Agriculture and Technical Instruction for Ireland. It formed part of the Dublin Institutions of Science and Art, which comprised the Library, the Museum, the Natural History Museum, the School of Art and the Royal Botanic Gardens, all of which originated in some degree in the Royal Dublin Society, and all of which, except the Gardens, were located around the Leinster House headquarters of the Society. The Director of the Science and Art Institutions (in practice, the Director of the Museum) was responsible for care of the Library building and certain administrative duties; this situation obtained until the retirement of G. T. Plunkett in 1907. (There are no longer any formal links between the two institutions.)

The Library was superintended by the Council of Trustees, eight of whom were appointed by the Society, and four by the Department. The Council of Trustees held its first meeting on 21 February 1878, and appointed as the

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8 Report from the Select Committee on scientific institutions (Dublin) (London, 1864), 117 (H.C. 1864 (495)).
9 Report from the Commission on the Science and Art Department in Ireland, 2 vols. (H.C. 1868–69 (4103, 4103–i)) (minute from vol. 1, vi–ix)
10 Report from the Commission on the Science and Art Department in Ireland, vol. 1, xxxvi.
11 Cf. footnote 7.
first librarian William Archer (1830–97), librarian of the Royal Dublin Society since only 18 January 1877. Until 1890, the collections of the National Library remained in Leinster House along with the Society’s own library. Under Archer, it was among the first libraries to implement the Dewey Decimal Classification system. In 1881, an architectural competition took place for the design of the Museum. A controversy ensued when the shortlist of five contestants was found to contain no Irish firm (all were English). A second competition, this time to include the Library, was won by the Dublin-based firm of Thomas N. Deane and Son, the winning entry strongly influenced by Archer’s pamphlet *Suggestions as to public library buildings*. The Library was built by the firm of P. and D. Beckett (P. Beckett was the grandfather of Samuel Beckett).

Archer, who retired in 1895, did much valuable work in the field of natural history, an interest he shared with Robert Lloyd Praeger (1865–1953), appointed Assistant Librarian in 1893 to replace Charles Theodore Hagberg Wright who had left to become Librarian to the London Library. Praeger’s contribution to Irish natural science is immense, including *Irish topographical botany* (1901) and *The way that I went* (1937), a classic work on the Irish landscape. He became Librarian of the NLI in 1920, and was elected as the first President of the Library Association of Ireland in 1928.

The new library proved very popular, as the figures for annual returns of readers indicate. However, the *Trustees’ Reports* continually refer to the space shortage, noting particularly that the East Wing as planned by the architect was unfinished. The annual purchase grant (1878–97/8: £1,000 per annum; 1898/9–1919/20: £1,300 per annum, reduced to £900 during the war years) gave cause for concern, as did the staffing levels.

In April 1900, responsibility for the Library was transferred to the Department of Agriculture and Technical Instruction, under which the Library remained until 1923/4. T. W. Lyster described the Library in 1902:

> The Library is open from 10 a.m. to 10 p.m. daily, except on Sundays and on three weekdays at Christmas, four weekdays at Easter, and twelve weekdays in August. The attendances of readers in 1878 numbered 27,452. In 1900, the

12 W. Archer, *Suggestions as to public library buildings: their internal plan and construction, best adapted to effect economy of space (and, hence, saving of cost), and at same time most conducive to public, as well as administrative, convenience, with more especial reference to the National Library of Ireland* (Dublin, 1881). Regarding the architectural competition, see R. Lohan, *Guide to the Archives of the Office of Public Works* (Dublin, 1994), 43–8. See also F. J. Burgoyne, *Library construction: architecture, fittings and furniture* (London, 1897), 153–8, and Frederick O’Dwyer, *The architecture of Deane and Woodward* (Cork, 1997), 393.

The staff in 1903/4 consisted of the Librarian, three assistant librarians, twenty attendants and two temporary cataloguers. The reports occasionally make comparisons, in areas such as funding and staffing, with their London counterparts. The Library served as ‘the only State-supported Public Library in Ireland’ and, to an extent, the reluctance of Dublin Municipal Council to establish a central reference library was due to the popularity of the national institution.

The Library transcended political and sectarian divides and was popular with both conservative and radical elements in Dublin. To some degree, this was due to T. W. Lyster, who succeeded Archer as Librarian in 1895. A founder member of Cumann na Leabharlann in 1904 and the Irish Rural Libraries Association in the same year, he was described as ‘the most zealous man I know’ by W. B. Yeats, who from his student days in the adjacent Metropolitan School of Art frequently read in the Library. Lyster also encouraged the students of the nearby University College Dublin to use the Library, though after his time, in 1923/4, their access was restricted because of pressure on space and ‘upwards of 700 standard text books used by students were . . . transferred to the Library of University College Dublin’. The Catholic Bulletin, frequently critical of the Royal Dublin Society and the Trustees, noted that the opening hours had been shortened, and that ‘it appears that their High Mightinesses have dumped four or five hundred text-books, more or less antiquated, into the College Library at Earlsfort Terrace, and told the Irish University students to go there after them.’ (The largely Protestant students at the even more...

15 Report of the Librarian of the National Library of Ireland, adopted by the Council of Trustees, and forwarded to the Department of Science and Art as their Report 1896, 469.
17 A. Mac Lochlainn, ‘“Those young men . . .”: the National Library of Ireland and the cultural revolution’, and A. Sheehy Skeffington, ‘A coterie of lively suffragists’, in Writers, raconteurs and notable feminists: two monographs (Dublin, 1993), 5–33 and 35–52. As well as James Joyce and George Moore, notable figures who read in and wrote about the Library include Oliver St John Gogarty, Arthur Griffith and Desmond Ryan.
adjacent Trinity College had use of a library which had, since 1801, benefited from British legal-deposit legislation.)

As well as serving as a reference library, the Library displayed a specific interest in Irish bibliography. Richard Irvine Best, the first Celtic scholar on the Library staff, was appointed Third Assistant Librarian on 25 March 1904; his *Bibliography of Irish philology and of printed Irish literature* (Dublin, 1913) and its companion volume covering 1913–41 (Dublin, 1942) are standard bibliographies of the subject.21 Best and his colleagues Lyster and William Kirkpatrick Magee appear in the ‘Scylla and Charybdis’ episode (set in the Library) of James Joyce’s *Ulysses*, set in Dublin on 16 June 1904. Magee, a schoolfriend of W. B. Yeats, was appointed Assistant Librarian in 1895; he is better known as the essayist ‘John Eglinton’, a perceptive and trenchant critic of the Literary Revival, and appears in George Moore’s trilogy *Hail and Farewell*.22

Lyster retired in 1920, and was succeeded as Librarian by Praeger. The Library was closed during the Civil War, from 28 June 1922 until 13 February 1924. Praeger retired in February 1924, under the provisions of the *Government of Ireland Act* of 1920, which offered certain Civil Service officers the possibility of early retirement on pension. Under the same Act, W. K. Magee retired in January 1923.23

In 1921, the new state had purchased Leinster House from the Royal Dublin Society. In 1924/5, after the foundation of the Irish Free State, the Library was transferred to the Department of Education, under which it remained until 1986. The annual purchase grant was doubled to £2,600 in 1922/3 (backdated to 1920/1). Staff levels improved, and women could now apply for posts as assistant librarians and library assistants.

Best became Librarian in 1924. His efforts ensured that the collection of Gaelic manuscript material grew significantly, many important items coming from the Sir Thomas Phillipps collection. Between 1898 and 1936, E. R. McClin- tock Dix presented the main part of his collection of early and provincial Irish imprints to the Library, amounting to some 8,000 volumes.24 The cultural introspection associated with the Free State was not particularly evident in the Library, though a gradual shift towards almost exclusive specialisation in

material of Irish interest took place over the following decades, to a significant degree driven by budgetary constraints.

The hitherto unfinished East Wing was completed in 1925/6. An exhibition room was opened in September 1927, and exhibitions of Irish material were regularly mounted. The separation of the printed-book collection into two distinct sequences, Irish and General, took place in 1928/9. This arrangement continued to 2001, when the Dewey sequences were closed, and a sequential numbering system was adopted.

The Industrial and Commercial Property (Protection) Act, 1927 gave the NLI legal deposit status for the first time, entitling the Library to material published in the Irish Free State. A growth in the newspaper and periodical collection is evident from this date. (The Copyright Act, 1963 and the Copyright and Related Rights Act, 2000 subsequently amended this.) The Trustees’ Report of 1933/4 carries an appeal from Best requesting material relating to ‘The bibliography of the struggle for national independence’. This led to James Carty’s Bibliography of Irish history, 1912–1921 (1936) and Bibliography of Irish history, 1870–1911 (1940), both based on the Library’s collections and reflecting its changing emphasis. A project to microfilm Irish manuscript material in private collections and foreign archives began in the 1940s. Richard J. Hayes became Director in 1940 (the title had been changed from Librarian to Director in 1934/5). His contribution to Irish bibliography is immense. The Trustees’ Report of 1953/4 refers to ‘a national bibliography on a scale unattempted in any other country’; the results of this ambitious project are the Sources for the history of Irish civilisation: Articles in Irish periodicals, 9 vols. (Boston, 1970); Manuscript sources for the history of Irish civilisation, 11 vols. (Boston, 1965) and Manuscript sources for the history of Irish civilisation: first supplement 1965–1975, 3 vols. (Boston, 1979). Hayes and his colleague Brighid Ní Dhonnchadha also compiled Clár Litridheachta na NuaGhaeilge 1850–1936, 3 vols. (Dublin, 1938–40), a comprehensive index to Irish-language periodicals and books.

In April 1943, the Office of Arms became part of the National Library, and was renamed the Genealogical Office, though it remained in Dublin Castle until 1981. The ancient title of Ulster King of Arms was changed to Chief Herald, a position held ex officio by the Director of the Library from September 1995 to August 2005.25 The first Chief Herald was Edward MacLysaght, author of Irish families (Dublin, 1957) and other standard works.

Hayes proposed (to Éamon de Valera, then Taoiseach)\textsuperscript{26} a sharing of resources with the nearby library of Trinity College Dublin, including the construction of a new block, in Trinity’s grounds, in which both libraries would have independent reading rooms, but access to each other’s collections. The proposal, supported by A. J. McConnell, Provost of Trinity, but not made public, was abandoned in 1960, after the Roman Catholic Archbishop of Dublin, John Charles McQuaid, expressed his disapproval to Seán Lemass, who had become Taoiseach. The idea of basing a national cultural institution in Trinity College, popularly perceived as a bastion of Protestant privilege in a predominantly Catholic state, was never likely to meet with widespread approval. However, the episode concentrated attention on the problems of the two libraries, perhaps the real intention of Hayes and McConnell.\textsuperscript{27} In 1960, TCD announced an international architectural competition for a new library, and a site was acquired at Morehampton Road in Dublin for a new National Library building in 1961/2. The \textit{Trustees’ Report} of 1964/5 notes a plan to build a new National Library at Northumberland Road. The Library, however, remained in Kildare Street, and the severe shortage of space was the main problem which faced Patrick Henchy, who succeeded Hayes as Director in 1967.

In 1968/9 Dr Kenneth Humphreys, Librarian of the University of Birmingham, was appointed by the Minister of Education, on Henchy’s recommendation, as consultant ‘to undertake a thorough survey on the functions and requirements of the National Library’.\textsuperscript{28} In April 1971, his report, which presented an alarming description of the Library’s premises, was submitted to the Minister for Education. Recommendations included considerable improvements in staffing and funding, the compilation of catalogues and the national bibliography (retrospective and current), and the provision of new premises:

> It is recommended that either (a) a new building for the Library should be erected as soon as possible on a site as near as possible to the centre of Dublin . . . or (b) the buildings in the vicinity of the present Library, i.e. the National College of Art and Design and the buildings in Kildare towards

\textsuperscript{26} The Taoiseach is the head of government in the Republic of Ireland, equivalent to the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom.


\textsuperscript{28} \textit{Trustees’ Report} 1968/9, 7. See also P. Henchy, \textit{The National Library of Ireland, 1941–1976: a look back} (Dublin, 1986), esp. 22–25. Dr Humphreys’s report was never formally published, but there is a copy in the National Library’s archives; the section quoted is on page 57.
Nassau Street should be evacuated and demolished. On the resultant area cleared the National Library should be expanded with full modern library facilities. This is the most urgent of all the Library’s problems.

It met with a sympathetic response, and further premises in the vicinity – nos. 2–5 Kildare Street – were acquired and a commitment was made to develop the Library at the Kildare Street site. (The Report also recommended that the contents of the State Paper Office and all public and private archives of historical interest in state custody be transferred to the Library, and that the title be changed to ‘National Library and Archives’. This did not happen. The State Paper Office and the Public Record Office amalgamated in 1988 to form the National Archives of Ireland.)

Patrick Henchy’s greatest achievement as Director was to ensure additional accommodation for the Library. This, however, did not happen immediately; the problem of insufficient accommodation and storage, and the inadequate purchase grant, were the constant concerns of Alf MacLochlainn, Director from 1976 to 1982, and his successor Michael Hewson, Director 1982–88.

In July 1986, the Library was transferred to the Department of An Taoiseach. The Department of Arts, Culture and the Gaeltacht (later Arts, Heritage, the Gaeltacht and the Islands) was established in 1992, and assumed responsibility for the Library until June 2002, when it was moved to the newly founded Department of Arts, Sport and Tourism. Dr Patricia Donlon became the first woman Director in 1989 – this was also the first time that the post was filled by open competition. In the same year, the Library took over responsibility for the compilation and publication of the *Irish Publishing Record*, the national bibliography. The last published issue is for the year 1994: since July 2004, the Library distributes monthly legal deposit accessions lists by electronic mail. The Manuscripts Reading Room at 2–3 Kildare Street (previously part of the premises of the Kildare Street Club) was formally opened in 1991.

In 1992, the Library published its *Strategic Plan 1992–1997*, indicating key objectives in the areas of access, acquisitions, services, implementation of a technology programme, and the building programme, and noting that ‘The strategy outlined in this plan leading from the mission statement centres on three pivotal points – collections, services and buildings.’ Dr Donlon retired in February 1997, having made a significant contribution to the development and modernisation of the Library. Subsequently, Seán Cromien, formerly Secretary of the Department of Finance, held the post of Director on a part-time acting capacity, and in September 1997 Brendan O Donoghue, formerly Secretary

of the Department of the Environment, was appointed Director. During his six years as Director, the Library underwent a transformation. Staff numbers and funding for acquisitions both increased significantly. The National Photographic Archive, housing the Library’s photographic collections, opened in Meeting House Square, Temple Bar, in October 1998. The main part of the Leinster Lane premises, formerly the National College of Art and Design, has been converted to provide additional reading rooms, an exhibition space and a lecture theatre. Future phases of the building programme will include refurbishment of the main library building and the construction of a large repository building. Since 1999, the Library has published a quarterly newsletter.

In 2002, the Library acquired the personal libraries of William Butler Yeats and Seán O’Casey. In the same year it was able to purchase previously unknown James Joyce manuscript material for £8 million; these manuscripts were the centrepiece of a major exhibition on Joyce’s novel *Ulysses*, marking the opening of the Library’s new exhibition space on 14 June 2004 (two days prior to the centenary of ‘Bloomsday’ in the novel). Other significant accessions include the papers of the playwright Brian Friel, and an extensive collection of material by and relating to Harry Clarke, the stained glass artist. Brendan O Donoghue retired as Director in September 2003. Aongus O hAonghusa was appointed Director in January 2005, having already held the position in an acting capacity.

*The National Cultural Institutions Act* dealing with the National Library and the National Museum (and to a lesser extent the National Gallery), originally passed in 1997, was finally implemented in May 2005. The Act alters the statutory and administrative framework of the Library, giving it more autonomy, and allowing for the broadening of its legal-deposit privileges. The Council of Trustees has been replaced by a Library Board, with expanded powers which will lead to new developments, while continuing the tradition of 128 years since the Library’s foundation. Through times of tribulation and vicissitude, and through times of progress and prosperity, it has done its utmost to sustain the vision of the National Library as the best manifestation of a country’s characteristics.

30 ‘O’Donoghue announces National Library is to be Independent Semi-State Body’ (press release from the Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism, Dublin, 22 April 2005).