

BRITISH ASSOCIATION FOR IRISH STUDIES

1. AIMS

1.1 The British Association for Irish Studies (BAIS), which came formally into existence on 5 July 1986, represents a major step forward towards promoting a better understanding of Ireland and the Irish. It is a cultural and educational body, dedicated to expanding Irish studies in Britain and Northern Ireland at all levels and raising their professional status.

1.2 The BAIS seeks membership from all those with a bona fide interest in Irish studies and will strive to encourage in Britain a better presentation of all cultural traditions on the island of Ireland. It is constitutionally and emphatically non-political and non-sectarian: indeed the constitution states that any member who uses the name of the BAIS in support of political or social action will have his or her membership invalidated.

2. ORIGINS

2.1 The demand for Irish studies is growing fast at all levels of education in Britain and in extra-mural cultural bodies and societies. Its growth is sustained by a number of factors: a continuing interest in their home culture on the part of the Irish communities in Britain; an increasing realisation in a number of academic disciplines of the importance of Irish

studies; the popularity of Irish music among the young; and, of course, the continuing conflict in Northern Ireland. But the growth is fragmentary and the quality uneven and as yet it is impossible to take a degree course in Irish Studies.

2.2 In 1984 a group of academics in the North Midlands of England began a campaign for the formation of a British Association for Irish Studies, to be set up broadly along the lines of those operating effectively in America, Australia and Canada. Its purpose would be to co-ordinate activities at all levels of education and across the disciplines which make up Irish studies. An informal meeting chaired by Dr. Anthony Kenny, Master of Balliol College, Oxford, was held in London. Those present agreed:

- (a) to hold a conference on Irish Studies;
- (b) to conduct a survey of Irish studies in Britain (restricted initially to higher education institutions).

2.3 The conference, the first of its kind in Britain, was held at St Peter's College Oxford in September 1985. It was arranged with the support of Anglo-Irish Encounter, an intergovernmental organisation dedicated to the improvement of relations between Ireland and Britain at all levels including the academic and cultural.

2.4 The Survey of Irish Studies in Britain, conducted by the Department of Humanities, North Staffordshire Polytechnic,

revealed that activity in Irish studies was considerably greater than had previously been suspected. A preliminary version of the survey produced for the St Peter's Conference contained almost 200 returns from both individuals and institutions. A second version of the Survey, now under way, looks set fair to contain twice that number of entries.

2.5 The conference agreed that the British Association for Irish Studies should be set up and authorised the interim committee make the arrangements. It was agreed also that it should encompass all relevant disciplines and all levels of education.

2.6 The association was formally launched at its first Annual General Meeting in London on July 5 1986, at which an executive committee was elected to serve for two years (see appendix A for the list of committee members). The occasion was well-attended and the audience enthusiastic.

3. ACHIEVEMENTS

3.1 The formation of the BAIS has been greeted with enthusiasm and good will by all interested parties, not least the governments of both Ireland and Britain. The association has already:

- (a) signed up 160 members;
- (b) launched a major membership drive in Britain and Ireland;
- (c) obtained IR£10,000 from the Irish government and \$2,000 from

The Ireland Fund;

- (d) set up three sub-committees dealing with compulsory, adult and further, and higher education, thereby encompassing all levels in Britain. All three sub-committees are preparing programmes of action. The higher education sub-committee has already carried out a survey of Irish studies provision in the universities and held a one-day seminar in December to discuss its findings: 25 universities were represented and a report was unanimously agreed, identifying eight institutions as key centres for the development of Irish studies. The report, calling for more funding from the DES for our area of study (and specifically for those eight institutions) went to the University Grants Committee in January;
- (e) is preparing the first issue of its newsletter;
- (f) is holding a conference at Oxford next April;
- (g) is providing lecturers for extra-mural groups;
- (h) has taken under its umbrella and partially subsidised the Soar Valley Workshop;
- (i) is devising London and regional lecture programmes; and
- (j) is making plans for a major fund-raising effort.

4. WHY IRISH STUDIES?

4.1 Some of the most important reasons why the demand for Irish studies is growing throughout Britain were outlined in paragraph 2.1. In London the pressure for expansion is even greater. Not only are the Irish the largest ethnic minority there, but their

culture (particularly in music and poetry), is one of the more accessible and hence attractive in a multicultural environment.

4.2. Yet Irish studies has been virtually ignored at most levels of education in London. Though the few courses provided have proved successful, Irish studies as a separate entity has rarely penetrated the rarified atmosphere of primary and secondary education. It is here that most development must occur. It is essential that at school level a positive, honest and realistic picture of Ireland should be painted.

5. ROLE OF THE BAIS

5.1 The BAIS is an organisation committed to the development of Irish studies at all levels and in a professional manner. Our membership has the expertise to help develop Irish studies and translate plans into action. Our own sub-committees are already doing a great deal of thinking and work on all this. We are available for consultation, for advice, and many of our members are prepared to give up their time to worthwhile projects.

6. PROPOSALS TO ILEA

6.1 Any proposals must necessarily at present be very general, but here are a few to be going on with:

(a) Irish studies should be given greater recognition at all educational levels for which ILEA is responsible;

(b) in order to achieve this, more is required from ILEA than vague expressions of good will;

(c) there must be a genuine move of resources into the field of Irish studies: in this context we welcome the production by ILEA of Irish studies material; however far more needs to be done, in particular an increase in in-service opportunities for classroom teachers, with cover provided;

(d) it is essential that ILEA press for the development of a discrete Irish studies component in GCSE courses, particularly in the areas of history and literature;

(e) the BAIS is proposing to run inexpensive day schools and conferences for schoolteachers and adult education tutors and we will expect ILEA to provide expenses and time off for their teachers;

(f) there is an urgent need within ILEA for an Irish studies degree scheme of the kind being developed within the North London Polytechnic: it is essential that any such scheme be given sufficient resources to operate at a level of excellence;

(g) as part of a drive to raise the status of Irish studies in adult education, there should be a development of access courses;

(h) in primary and secondary education there must be two developments - the inclusion of Ireland into the broad anti-racist framework and the retraining of teachers.

7. CONCLUSION

7.1 We know there is little money available but we believe

strongly that with imagination, intelligence and commitment a little can go a long way. This has already been proven, for example, by the highly successful Soar Valley Conference, which was subsidised to the tune of less than £10 per participant.