



HISTORY OF THE ULSTER TEACHERS' UNION

1919 - 2019

PREPARED BY: LEXIE SCOTT



THE BEGINNINGS...

2019 marked the centenary of the formation of the UTU. However, to understand the establishment of the Ulster Teachers' Union we need to look back almost 200 years. Schooling in Ireland in the period before 1830 was a luxury reserved for only those who could afford or for those who were fortunate enough to benefit from the provisions of the churches or other charitable organisations. This was about to change.

In 1831 the then Permanent Secretary of Ireland, Lord Stanley, brought forward proposals for the establishment of a national system of schools. These were to be funded by contributions from central government topped up by local donations. Stanley envisaged a system of non-denominational schools which would 'unite in one system children of different creeds.' The National School network was quick to establish but most of the schools were managed by local clergymen and few became truly non-denominational.

Records show that Ballyverdaugh National School, pictured, was the seventh such school to be built.

Ballyverdaugh opened in 1836 and originally housed separate boys and girls schools – the girls were located on the first floor. It was finally closed in 1935 and removed to Ulster Folk and Transport Museum in 1973.

While the idea of providing free education to everyone was extremely laudable the conditions for both the pupils and their teachers were often very poor. By the 1840s we begin to read of teachers grouping together to try to improve things. One of the earliest was the Ulster Teachers' Association held up as an example by Dr. James Bryce. Bryce, originally from Belfast, was the head master of the High School of Glasgow and one of the founding fathers of the Education Institute of Scotland. Bryce was to write to his colleagues in Scotland outlining what was happening in his native land saying, 'In Ulster some teachers of the humbler class began, sometime before 1840, to stir each other up to mutual improvement and to ameliorate their conditions.'



The move to form associations was widespread and by the 1860s moves were afoot to try to unite these geographically separated associations. In 1868 the first congress of what was to become the Irish National Teachers' Organisation was held in Dublin. Vere Foster, perhaps better known for his copy books, was asked to become the first President – a role he held for 5 years.

The first fifty years of the new organisation were to see remarkable growth in membership but were also to be marked by divisions between the teachers in Protestant controlled National Schools and their colleagues in Catholic Controlled National Schools. The influence of the increasingly fractious debate on Home Rule was highlighted at the 1883 Congress of the Organisation when two MPs representing the Irish Parliamentary Party agreed to attend provided the loyal toast to the Lord Lieutenant was omitted. This provoked an angry reaction mainly from the delegates from Ulster. Over the next three years several of the Associations from the north dropped away from the INTO and in 1886 the Northern Union of Irish National Teachers was founded at a special congress in Belfast. This new body, which re-joined the INTO in 1888, was to indicate the way things would develop in later years.



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To the left, Joseph Smyth was the Unions first General Secretary and Treasurer of the Ulster Teachers' Union.

The early years of the 20th century were, as we are all very aware, difficult years in Ireland, Europe and indeed across the whole world.

In 1914 war erupted across Europe.

This conflict' while fought predominately on the killing fields of France and Belgium, would cause the disagreements between the Northern Associations and the those in the south to escalate.

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Two years later its support for the policies of the ITUC, such as the withdrawal of Labour candidates in the General Election in favour of Sinn Fein candidates would prove to be the last straw for many in the North.

In 1919 delegates from four Northern Associations, Coleraine, Lisburn, Londonderry and Newtownards seceded from the INTO and at a meeting at the Belfast Museum on 19th July the Ulster National Teachers' Union was formed.

This meeting also elected Isaac McLoughlin as its first President and Joseph Smyth as Secretary Treasurer, position he was to hold for over 20 years.

The new union realised that it needed to promote itself in order to attract members and one of the first decisions taken was to order a print run of 2000 leaflets which were to be distributed to schools in the north. As well as setting out the aims of the new union it also explained, at some length the disagreement with the INTO. Membership subscription was set at 10 shillings (50p) but members were also expected to contribute to a welfare fund and an emergency fund.



In 1920 Alex McClarty was appointed as membership secretary for the Belfast area. He was paid a very basic retainer of £26 plus 10% of collected subscriptions and 20% of the first year's subscription. Interestingly a request to speak to students at Stranmillis in 1924 was refused and the Belfast Branch agreed to arrange a social afternoon to which students would be invited.

By 1920 and with a membership of over 500 it was decided to hold the first Annual Conference. This took place in what was then the Belfast Museum in College Square North and was attended by 60 members.

Membership continued to grow, no doubt aided by the establishment of Northern Ireland, and by 1922 there were over 2000 members. To accommodate the growing numbers the Annual Conference moved to the Assembly Buildings in Belfast.

The growing strength of the Union was clear the following year when offices were rented at 35 Royal Avenue.


Shortly after this the decision was taken to purchase a typewriter for official correspondence – minutes would continue to be handwritten.

In 1958 the Union moved to larger premises in High Street and also rented rooms in the Donegal Road. The latter being used to hold meetings of the Executive.

Then in 1973 the Union was able to purchase its own building at its current site on 94 Malone Road.

The Union has during the past 100 years been well served by both its volunteers and its staff. Those volunteers who have served on its Executive and other committees are too numerous to name so I have selected just three. The Union has also been well served by all its staff but again I will limit myself to the 6 General Secretaries.

As already mentioned the first President was Isaac McLoughlin. Isaac had been a prominent figure in the Irish Protestant National Teachers' Union and served as secretary of that body for almost 19 years, resigning only when it became clear that they were not prepared to move away from the INTO. He was principal of Workman Memorial National School in Belfast.



Miss Eva Kennedy was elected as President in 1923. A clear indication that the new Union saw the value of its female members. Miss Kennedy taught in the Model School Lurgan.

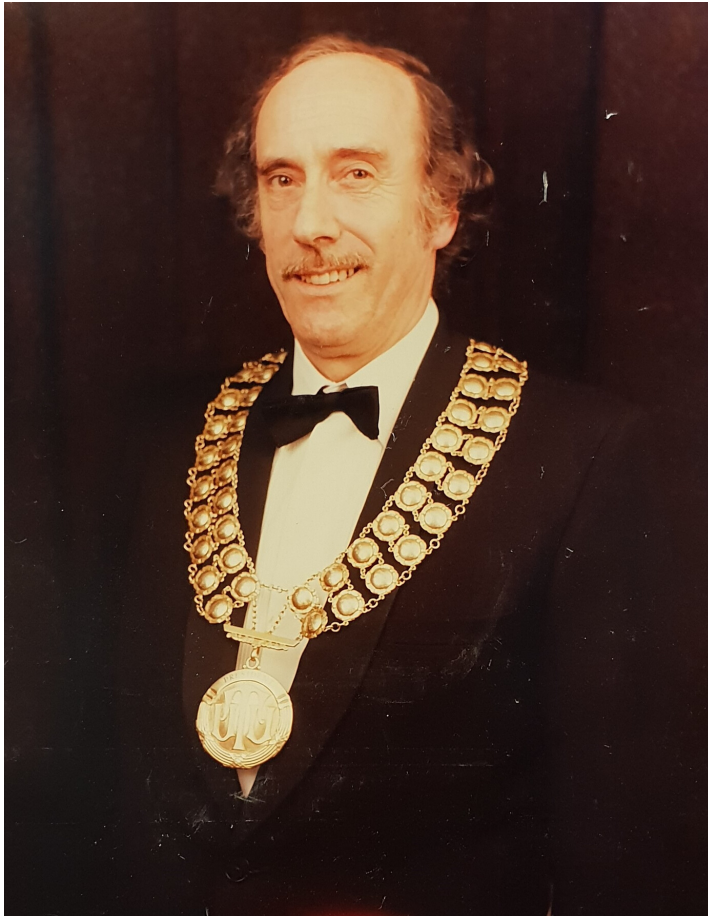
Three years later the Union would elect it's second female President, Sophia Allen in 1926.

In the first decade the Union made determined efforts to recognise and value its female membership. Declaring in 1925, for example, in response to proposals for a reduction, yes reduction, in teachers' salaries that, "It was also unanimously agreed that the Union would not agree to a greater reduction for women than for men."

Strong leadership has been an important feature in the Union's history and this has been reflected in the work of the General Secretaries who have served during this time. There have been 6 secretaries – Joseph Smyth, J King Carson, Brian Toms, David Allen, Ray Calvin and Avril Hall-Callaghan. Our new General Secretary Jacquie Reid will take up her post as we go to press and we wish her many happy years in the top role.

Joseph Smyth served as the Union's first General Secretary and Treasurer from 1919 until 1942. Joseph Smyth was headmaster of Nicholson Memorial National School in Lisburn. He had been very active in the Irish Protestant National Teachers' Union and was secretary of the Lisburn branch. During his tenure the role remained part-time.

J King Carson, held the position of principal first in Dundrod Primary School and then Woodburn Primary School, Carrickfergus and served as President in 1936-37. On the retirement of Joseph Smith, he became General Secretary of the UTU. Serving for some 28 years in this role it was he who encouraged the Union to play a bigger part on the world stage by encouraging membership of World Congress of the Teaching Professions and by ensuring that the union was represented at conferences and congresses across the world. It was during this period that the role of General Secretary became a full-time position.



BRIAN TOMS

Brian Toms was from Wales and while serving in the army during World War II he was posted to Northern Ireland where he met the lady who was to become his wife, Joan Swinarton from Magherafelt. After the war he returned to the Province and attended Larkfield training College as part of the post war teacher training scheme. He went on to serve as Principal of Cloncore Primary School Portadown. From here he went to Mullavilly Primary until his appointment to the post of Assistant General Secretary in 1969. As you can see he also served as Union President in 1967-68.



DAVID ALLEN

In 1978 following the retirement of Brian Toms, Ballymena man David Allen was appointed as General Secretary and was to establish a well-deserved reputation as a tough negotiator and a fierce defender of the rights of teachers. Piloting the Union through the difficult years of the Troubles, he had made a clear separation of his Trade Union work from his past involvement in local politics. David lived in what was then the new Union premises on the Malone Road and it was not unusual for members of the Executive and others to get a call late in the evening because David was still working..



RAY CALVIN

Ray Calvin was appointed to the UTU in 1971, coming straight from a sabbatical role at Stranmillis College. Ray served, initially as Membership Secretary and would later become Assistant General Secretary and then succeeded David in 1997. A very enthusiastic supporter of Special Schools, he was instrumental in having these schools moved from the Health Service into Education. Ray would also be at the helm, and as a keen sailor I am sure he would appreciate me using that analogy, when the Union decided in 1999 to join the Irish Congress of Trade Unions.



AVRIL HALL- CALLAGHAN

Avril, our recently retired General Secretary, was appointed to the Union in 1981. Her appointment made history as the first full time female official of any teacher union in Northern Ireland. Avril played a pivotal role in re-establishing the Young Teachers' Department and was a vocal supporter of its successor the Future in Teaching group. Avril succeeded Ray as Assistant General Secretary in 1997 when Ray became General Secretary and then took over the role in 2004 when Ray retired. This appointment again saw her making history as the first female general secretary of a mixed sex teachers' union in the UK.