

The Educational Company of Ireland and the Talbot Press, 1910-1990

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IN 1910, in a tall Georgian house in Dublin's Talbot Street, the Educational Company of Ireland opened its doors for the first time, ushering in a new and vibrant era in educational and secular publishing and in supplying the astonishing range of materials needed in the schools of Ireland.

It was a far-seeing venture that was to prove a major influence in the transition of education over a period that saw the nation gain autonomy, with its resultant reverberations in every classroom in the land. It was also the catalyst that, a few years later, precipitated the birth of a sister-firm, the Talbot Press, destined to be one of the most remarkable publishing enterprises in the history of the state.

The founding of the Educational Company, however, did not bring things of the classroom to Talbot Street for the first time. For forty years before that, the premises, no. 89 Talbot Street and some adjoining houses, in which the new firm was set up, had sheltered the Dublin branch of the prominent Scottish publishing house of Blackie and Son, of Glasgow, London, Toronto and Bombay, which, the *Manchester Courier* once claimed, 'had no superiors'. It had opened its Dublin branch in 1870, when the city's population was 246,000, close neighbour in Talbot Street of watchmakers, cork merchants, wine and spirit merchants and at least one purveyor of 'fancy goods'.

The two men behind the Educational Company were both prominent city businessmen, William Fitzsimmons and his lifelong friend and associate W. G. Lyon, who, in 1895, had succeeded Henry Baxter as Dublin manager of Blackies. When they started out on their own on that fateful day in 1910, they were in control of a business that now embraced what had been the two largest publishing and schools supply houses in Ireland, Blackie and Son, and Fallon and Company.

Fitzsimmons and Lyon were to place on record that they recognised the necessity to modernise the school-book trade in Ireland: 'The country needed books more modern in type, more attractive in appearance, better printed, better illustrated, better bound, and in every respect as good as the books used in Great Britain, yet issued at cheaper prices and manufactured wholly in Ireland, from Irish materials, by Irish people.'

Their business activities in the years that followed were staggering in their scope and achievement, even judged against present day yardsticks of more sophisticated machinery, incredibly improved communications and commercial transport that has accelerated out of all recognition. The business that was soon being conducted so successfully had feelers in every classroom in Ireland, and indeed, in schools overseas that were a world removed from Talbot Street.

The proud boast of the enterprise that was being moulded at the deft fingertips of Fitzsimmons and Lyon was that it was all-embracing in its feeding of the needs of the classroom. Its motto was 'Everything for Schools' and a brief glance at the prodigious versatility of the vast stocks carried on the groaning floorboards of the

Georgian houses in Talbot Street indicated how comprehensive was the range envisaged by the firm's two founders. As well as the obvious school textbooks, exercise books, headline copies, stationery of every description, there were more imaginative lines like raffia, wool, needles and modelling clay. There were also stocks of small assorted rocks for use in the study of geology. There was that unique Victorian nursery adjunct, the quaint sand-pencil, with which youngsters drew designs on a tray in sand that trickled from the specially designed pencil. In fact, the stock soon being carried by the firm could be said to range from cowrie shells to pianos.

In an adjacent premises in nearby Marlborough Place, later converted by the firm into a garage for the company vans and representatives' cars, the famous copybook lines, that had been initiated by Blackies, were at first manufactured, specially hand-stitched with thread to avoid the rusting that would be an inevitable aftermath of conventional wire clips. Here too were made the unique and superlative Vere Foster headline copies, those classic appendages of the classroom in the early decades of the twentieth century. There was a regular and extensive overseas trade in these to India and other countries in the then British Empire. The headline copies were shipped out in wooden crates that were specially manufactured for the purpose by Perrys of Camden Row at a cost of £1 per crate. A consignment of these crates, each containing a quarter of a ton of copybooks, was exported each week. Each crate was secured by tensioned rope, no nails being used. The crates were returned to Dublin after each trip.

The influence of the young firm on education in Ireland was phenomenal. A close contact was established and maintained with those who obviously held the tightest grasp on education and had the closest acquaintance with the policies that guided it, the teachers. With this alliance in view, and recognising the need to strengthen it, a magazine for teachers was launched, pledged to serve their best interests. Its editor was W. G. Lyon, who had also edited an earlier publication called the *Irish School Monthly*. The new journal was the *Irish School Weekly*, and in 1910 Lyon was to say that they had found that the educational weeklies in existence were, from one cause or another, in anything but a flourishing condition, and that teachers were without any real influential organ devoted entirely and solely to their interests.

The *Irish School Weekly* swiftly fulfilled the role seen for it by Lyon and Fitzsimmons in championing the cause of the teacher. In that year of 1910 there was a desperate need for security of tenure for teachers, as both principal and assistant teachers were liable to capricious dismissal. The Irish teacher was denied the elementary right enjoyed by all citizens to attend any public gathering called for any lawful purpose. Any teacher reported to the Commissioners as having been present at a political meeting, even if only as a spectator, was in danger of instant dismissal, while his counterpart in England was free to attend any public gathering. The Irish teacher had to wait three months for the payment of the small salary with which members of the profession were awarded, while he or she, incredibly, had to furnish superiors with a fresh certificate of character regularly every three months.

Within a short time of the founding of the Educational Company, the directors realised that a separate imprint, to cover non-educational publications, fiction as well as non-fiction, would be a decided asset. Thus in 1913 the Talbot Press was born. Its announced policy was that it would publish books about Ireland and books written by Irish authors, a blueprint that was to be strictly adhered to in the future. While

William Fitzsimmons looked after the production side of the Talbot Press, as he did with the Educational Company publications, W. G. Lyon attended to the literary side of the undertaking, his self-avowed aim being that no manuscript of permanent value should ever be rejected for commercial reasons. Indeed, Lyon's work in this literary sphere in the years ahead was to have him dubbed, by the well-known Jesuit writer and librarian, Stephen J. Brown, 'the Maecenas of Irish letters'. It was to gain for him, too, in the fateful year of 1916, personal mention in the last letter that patriot Thomas MacDonagh wrote to his wife from his prison cell shortly before his execution.

The Talbot Press list was to contain, over the years, the names of most Irish authors of note, and the prevalence in its earlier editions, spanning the traumatic years from the firm's foundation to 1922, of the names of so many Irish patriots and politicians who also happened to be writers, makes it a close-up mirror of Irish history at a period when momentous events were taking place almost by the hour.

The initial venture under the Talbot Press banner was the series of books issued under the general heading of *Every Irishman's Library*, similar in mandate to Dents' highly successful *Everyman's Library* in Britain. It was a wise headline. Dents had placed literally hundreds of authors, from Aristotle to Voltaire, from Chaucer to Cervantes, within easy financial reach of the man in the street. The Talbot Press series of volumes made their gradual appearances under the general supervision of some of the most distinguished Irishmen of letters of the day. They included Dr. Alfred Perceval Graves, Prof. William Magennis, Padraic Colum, George A. Birmingham, the Earl of Dunraven, Prof. Tom Kettle and Dr. Douglas Hyde. Graves's own collection of 'rallying songs for the six Celtic nations', called *The song of the heather*, would soon be added to the fast-growing Talbot Press catalogue. Douglas Hyde, a quarter of a century on, was to be elected first President of Ireland.

Every Irishman's Library claimed to present 'the master-works of Anglo-Irish literature' and, looking at the titles that were soon to appear under its banner, few would argue with the claim. It offered: *Maria Edgeworth: Selections from her works*, with an introduction by Sir Malcolm C. Seton; *The Collegians*, by Gerald Griffin, with an introduction by Padraic Colum; William Carleton's *Stories of Irish life*, with an introduction by Darrell Figgis; *Standish O'Grady: Selected essays and passages*, edited by Earnest A. Boyd; *Poems of Sir Samuel Ferguson*, edited by Alfred Perceval Graves; *Recollections of Jonah Barrington*, edited by George A. Birmingham; *The book of Irish poetry*, also edited by Graves; *Wild sports of the west*, by W. H. Maxwell, edited by the Earl of Dunraven; and *Irish orators and oratory*, edited by Prof. Tom Kettle. The volumes, attractively bound in stiff boards, with gilt tooling, were offered to the public at half-a-crown each.

It is part of the impressive history of the Talbot Press that by the late 1930s its list was to contain almost 500 titles. From this achievement it must emerge clearly as constituting the most significant force ever in Irish publishing, unprecedented and, to the present day [i.e. 1970], unequalled. The Talbot Press was eventually to publish about one thousand titles.

An enterprising step was taken by the young publishing house in 1921 when it inaugurated the first ever competition for an Irish novel. It offered a prize of one hundred guineas to the Irish writer who submitted the best novel set in Ireland. The prize was won by a young Sandymount-born nurse named Annie M. P. Smithson, with a novel entitled *The walk of a queen*. For three decades, until her death in 1948,

Annie Smithson was to be one of the most popular writers in Ireland, and more than twenty novels from her pen appeared under the Talbot Press imprint. She was, for a time, secretary of the Irish Nurses' Organisation.

Soon after its foundation the Talbot Press was to enter the world of church furnishings and special showrooms were opened in Talbot Street for this branch of the rapidly expanding business. Statues, crib figures, liturgical furnishings, missals, prayer-books, rosary beads, as well as secular pictures, were all among the comprehensive stocks carried. This section of the Talbot Press was discontinued in the late-1920s.

The Talbot Press, despite certain prophets of doom, continued to thrive, doubtless drawing its ever-increasing strength from the surge of nationalism that marked the early 1920s. In the November of 1923 it was stable enough to take over the long-established publishing firm of Martin Lester and, in the March of 1927, Maunsel and Roberts became part of the expanding Talbot Street empire. By both of these astute take-overs it added considerably to its impressively growing list and acquired some valuable copyrights. Notable among its acquisitions were the works of Padraic Pearse and Thomas MacDonagh and the famous historical romances of Mrs. M. T. Pender, *The spearman of the north*, *The bog of lilies*, *The green cockade*, and *Married in May*.

The Maunsel editions of Synge and Pearse were widely acknowledged as examples of the best standards of craftsmanship, as were its series of Abbey Theatre plays and its popular volumes of poems, and all these were now proudly marshalled together under the Talbot Press banner. Also among the more significant titles acquired from Maunsel were Austin Clarke's *The sword of the west*, Thomas J. Clarke's *Glimpses of an Irish felon's prison life*, Lynn Doyle's *An Ulster childhood* and *Ballygullion*, Sir Dunbar Plunket Barton's *Links between Ireland and Shakespeare*, and the valiant trade unionist Louis Bennett's *Ireland and a people's peace*. There were also Padraic Colum's *Broadsheet ballads*, James Connolly's *Labour in Ireland*, Aodh de Blacam's *Holy Romans*, and Eamon de Valera's *Ireland's case against conscription*. There, too, were Darrell Figgis's study of George Russell and several other titles of his, including *The case for Irish independence*, and Stephen Gwynn's *The famous cities of Ireland*, *The fair hills of Ireland*, and *Songs of the Irish Brigade*.

Other distinguished writers who found themselves swelling the Talbot Street shelves following the take-overs included Robert Lynd, Edward E. MacLysaght, William O'Brien, Thomas Kettle, James Fintan Lalor, Brinsley MacNamara, Shane Leslie, Susan Mitchell, whose study of George Moore had so displeased the master of Moore Hall, Rev. L. McKenna, Padraic O Conaire, P. S. O'Hegarty, Seumas O'Kelly, James Stephens, George Russell, John Synge, and in fact, it would seem, every contemporary Irish writer of note.

Of particular interest among the new Talbot Press acquisitions were Desmond Ryan's *The man called Pearse*, Brinsley MacNamara's *The valley of the squinting windows*, and George O'Brien's economic histories of Ireland in the 17th and 18th centuries. The Press also issued an Irish detective story, an unique achievement in fiction at the time, by Selskar Kearney entitled *The false finger tip*. Works in Gaelic included titles by *An Seabhac* [Pádraig Ó Siochfhradha], F. W. Canon O'Connell, Pearse, O Conaire, Aonghus O Dalaigh, Hubert Rooney. Another title, one of the most successful and enduring textbooks, that was to remain popular long afterwards, with the ever-increasing number of students of the Irish language at the time, on the swell of enthusiasm that marked the early 1920s, was Maire Ni Cheallachain's

classic *Irish at home*. This remarkable little volume, with forewords by Prof. Eoin MacNeill and Fr. Toal, was uniquely set out in three columns, giving popular everyday phrases in Gaelic, English, and then the pronunciation in simple phonetics. It was available, cloth-bound, at half-a-crown and, in paperback, at one shilling and sixpence. The Press had, since its inception, given stalwart and unstinting support to the Gaelic language, and two of its major contributions in this direction were O'Neill's *Larger English-Irish dictionary*, and Fr. Patrick Dinneen's *Irish-English dictionary*.

With its own constantly expanding litany of new titles, backed by those acquired from Martin Lester and Maunsel and Roberts, the Talbot Press entered the 1930s with supreme confidence. It could justifiably claim by then to be representative of all that was the best in Anglo-Irish literature. Its proud boast was that it kept one leg in the past by preserving the works of such worthwhile writers as Standish O'Grady and Dr. P. W. Joyce, while at the same time drawing public attention to its new discoveries, like Daniel Corkery, D. L. Kelleher, Francis MacManus, and Annie Smithson.

For the artistic work embodied in its well-turned out volumes it had commissioned designs, decorations and illustrations from most of the outstanding artists of the day. Those it employed from time to time included Victor Brown, A. Campbell, Maud Gonne, John Keating, Mildred H. Lamb, Michael MacLiammoir, Estella F. Solomons, John Power, Patrick Tuohy, Jack B. Yeats and others.

By the outbreak of the Second World War, the Talbot Press could claim to be known in countries as far apart as New Zealand and South Africa, Japan and Denmark, as a thriving overseas business expanded. Although the quality of the paper used in its books inevitably deteriorated during the war years, being on occasion of obvious 'Emergency' quality, the literary merits of its list never wavered. Topping its list of best-selling authors at this time was former schoolteacher John Desmond Sheridan, then editor of the *Irish School Weekly*. Sheridan, in the early 1950s, was to succeed Hugo L. Doak, poet and former High School teacher, as literary editor of the Talbot Press. Sheridan's book of humorous essays, his novels and his Saturday column in the *Irish Independent* had placed him just then on the crest of a wave of local and, indeed, international popularity, while the young nurse who had won the firm's literary prize in 1921, Annie Smithson, by now had more than twenty novels to her credit, all of which were in constant demand. Other distinguished novelists in the Talbot Press stable during the years of the war included Patrick Purcell, Philip Rooney, Francis MacManus, and Temple Lane.

There have been two outstanding bestsellers published by the Talbot Press. One of these was Dan Breen's *My fight for Irish freedom* [1924], perhaps an understandable bestseller in the fervid nationalism of the decades immediately following the 1916 Insurrection. The other was certainly less predictable. The book that the Talbot Press could not keep in print, so heavy was the constant demand for it, was J. G. Digges's *Practical bee guide*. By 1938 it had reached its 8th edition and it continued to sell for many years after that. Who would have thought there were so many beehives in Ireland? The manuscript was rejected by many other publishing houses before the Talbot Press, probably with fingers crossed, decided to take a chance on it. It proved a lucky chance that paid off abundantly and underscores the Russian roulette structures of publishing.

All publishing ventures undertaken in Talbot Street had not the same happy

results. It was a legend of the house that £100 - a sizeable amount of money at the time - was paid as an advance royalty to a well-known and distinguished poet for a new work. In the event, the poet - a household name - never got around to delivering the manuscript.

The banner of the Educational Company was also carried in Fountain Street in Belfast by a separately constituted company, also in former Blackie premises, and of which William Fitzsimmons and W. G. Lyon were also directors. An office was also opened in Cork, for many years located in Patrick Street and later moved to Cook Street.

Among the earliest acquisitions of the Educational Company directors were the goodwill and premises of the only large-scale manufacturers of envelopes in the country, the long-established firm of Edward Hely and Co., situated in Denmark Street. This firm was taken over in 1922 and for a decade and a half continued to operate from its original site, until the entire operation was moved in 1937 to newly constructed headquarters beside the Educational Company in Talbot Street.

Meanwhile, yet another business tangent was formed by the association of Fitzsimmons and Lyon with the Phoenix Publishing Company, a firm situated in modest offices above the Wells chemist shop at 61 Upper O'Connell Street, next door to the Pillar Picture House. It became the function of the Phoenix Publishing Company to issue library editions of selected Talbot Press titles, usually in uniform bindings. Among the most popular Phoenix titles, sometimes sold door-to-door salesmen on bicycles, were the sets of Smithson novels and Piaras Beaslai's *Michael Collins and the making of a new Ireland*, issued in two thick volumes in 1926. Much of the Phoenix stock was stored at the Edward Hely premises in Denmark Street, but the O'Connell Street firm worked independently of Talbot Street.

With the passage of two decades, the Educational Company was firmly established as the leading supplier of school textbooks and materials in the country and now, quaintly, Irish agent for the colourful schoolboy novels that issued regularly from Blackie in Glasgow. The black T-Model Ford cars of the company representatives were familiar sights parked outside schools and convents and colleges throughout the country, while the firm's directors and travellers were regularly seen in attendance at the annual Easter congress of the Irish National Teachers' Organisation.

Early in 1931, it was realised that the Educational Company and the Talbot Press had come of age (although the Talbot Press was not quite 21, it was felt that it was entitled to come in under the Educational Company umbrella!) and it was decided by the directors that the occasion would not go unmarked. On Friday, February 6, a social reunion was held in Clerys' ballroom, attended by the directors and staff, at which illuminated addresses were presented to Fitzsimmons and Lyon. The decade that lay ahead was to be a successful but traumatic period, the many and varied crises of which could hardly have been foreseen by the 300 guests who danced to the music of Billie Weiner's band that night.

On Tuesday, 4 January 1938, the death occurred of William Fitzsimmons. He had been the driving force behind so much of the firm's success, and whose expertise in the production end of the business had gained its products their great prestige. Fourteen months later, on Thursday, 9 March 1939, the death of his lifelong friend and partner, W. G. Lyon, robbed the firm of a kindly figurehead and, at the same time,

cheated the world of Irish letters of probably its most generous and influential benefactor.

The stage was now left empty for the second generation to fill. This consisted of William G. Fitzsimmons and Wilford J. Fitzsimmons, sons of William Fitzsimmons, and Ronald H. Lyon, only son of W. G. Lyon. As they took over the reins in Talbot Street, and barely six months after W. G. Lyon's death, the outbreak of the Second World War was to present them with new, complex and unprecedented problems. The difficulties of the war years, however, were tackled and overcome with spectacular success and when the improvisations of the 1940s gave way to the more generous potentialities of the two decades that immediately followed, the Educational Company had not only retained its position as the nation's leading supplier of 'everything for schools' but had considerably enhanced its reputation and spectacularly increased its profitability. Nor had the exigencies of war arrested the steady flow of books appearing under the Talbot Press imprint.

It was no surprise, then, in the early 1960s, in view of the prosperity and stability of the group of companies, that overtures were made to the directors by the expanding Hely Group that had mushroomed from the long-established Dame Street firm. Negotiations were entered into for a take-over by Helys, and gradually a blueprint of agreement was achieved. It was a prerequisite from the Educational Company directors that they should continue in office and that there would be no redundancy.

The death of W. G. Fitzsimmons left only his brother, Wilford J. Fitzsimmons, and Ronald H. Lyon as joint managing directors of a company that was now in a stronger position than ever. Additional directors were appointed, some from the Hely Group, others from the Educational Company/Talbot Press. By and large, business was carried on as before. Thus, through the greater part of the 1960s, the second generation conducted the ever-prospering business in Talbot Street much in the same way as their fathers had done, albeit under the Hely Group banner.

The close of the 1960s, however, was to bring another milestone, when the Hely Group itself was taken over by the Jefferson Smurfit Group. Some time earlier, this spectacularly expanding organization had taken over Longman Browne and Nolan. Thus, by an ironic twist of fate and the unpredictable roulette of the world of big business, the Talbot Street firms now belonged to the same family as their long-time rival. Browne and Nolan, from its offices in Nassau Street, had for long contested the dominance of the Talbot Street imprint. In 1971 the two traditionally rival firms were merged in a marriage that, adopting the best qualities of both companies, could only enhance their value to the teachers of Ireland. Longman Browne and Nolan, for some time operating out of offices in South Great Georges Street, was transferred to the Educational Company premises in Talbot Street. The Educational Company was now unchallenged as the largest school publishers in the country.

By that time the Educational Company could boast a list that carried over 500 titles, with an output of between 40 and 50 new school textbooks each year. The standard of schoolbook production had improved out of all recognition, with the chalk-dust drabness of the old classroom tradition giving way to the products of new technology and sophistication. The penny jotter days had long passed on. The schoolbooks used by youngsters were now colourful and inventive and embodied the highest standards in printing and binding. When the Department of Education syllabus was changed in the early 1970s, the Educational Company was quick to

reprogramme itself to new demands and new standards. With its high annual production, which had been maintained for so long, a certain saturation had been reached.

With the merger with Longman Browne and Nolan in 1971, the emphasis in the operation of the company changed to publishing, with cutbacks on other products and reduced output in unprofitable lines. The firm was now primarily a publishing house, exploring more favourable margins in publishing rather than in being distributor for other suppliers. Side by side with the Educational Company school texts, the Talbot Press device (a proudly strutting mastiff adopted in the 1940s) now embraced close on one thousand titles, truly a prodigious and unrivalled accomplishment in Irish publishing.

New liturgical developments in 1973 brought the Talbot Press back into a sphere where it had once enjoyed an unique dominance. Responding to the latest liturgical trends, it produced a new Breviary in English and an Altar Missal.

In May 1973, the Talbot Press and the Educational Company moved from the old premises at 85-89 Talbot Street to an extensive and modern complex on Ballymount Road in Walkinstown, a suburb of Dublin. This offered the advantages of greater space and potential for expansion, a ground floor operation as vital in the handling of heavy stock and, a most important facility for the steady flow of teachers who would want to call, an extensive and uncluttered car park. Six months before the move to Walkinstown, as it was considered desirable to retain the traditional presence in a street so long linked with the firms, a new retail outlet was opened at 20-21 Talbot Street. When this was closed in the late 1980s the firm's long link with the street was severed.

With the move to Walkinstown, the old houses in Talbot Street, where a Scotsman named Blackie had first hopefully opened his doors over a century before, were sold and later demolished. Perhaps significantly the last section of the houses to remain upright was the small return-room wing that had for so long housed the managing director's office that was the nerve-centre of everything the dream of Fitzsimmons and Lyon had stood for - a dream that had become a glowing reality in Irish publishing.

This is an edited version of 'Sixty golden years of Dublin publishing: a history of the Talbot Press', prepared by John J. Dunne in 1970 as a talk and never published. The typescript used as text had obviously been revised to bring the history beyond 1970. It has been reproduced with the permission of the author's executor, Joan Burgess.

