

In Memoriam - Miriam Hederman O'Brien

Remarks on the Occasion of the Launch of the Online Archive of the *Journal of the Statistical and Social Inquiry Society of Ireland*

Miriam Hederman O'Brien

EDITOR'S NOTE: *The late Dr Miriam Hederman O'Brien (1932-2022) joined the Council of the Society in 1988 and became Vice President in 2005. In her honour we publish her speech made on 16th May 2007 in the Long Room of the Library of Trinity College Dublin on the occasion of the launch of the Journal of the Statistical and Social Inquiry Society of Ireland's online archive.*

The journals of the Statistical and Social Inquiry Society of Ireland provide a remarkable record of both the events and the ideas of the past 160 years. They relate mainly to Ireland but they reflect the views and enthusiasms that swept through Britain, Europe and the rest of the world. Founded in 1847 as the Dublin Statistical Society 'for the promotion of statistics and Political Economy' it was widened in 1862 to include jurisprudence. The address of the Archbishop of Dublin, then President of the Society, at the conclusion of the first session in 1848 emphasised that 'This was an institution for instructing not a few recluse students, but the people at large, in the knowledge of that science which all must practice, whether they practice it well or ill; and upon the good or bad practice of which the welfare of the nation, at all times, and at such times as these specially – nay, the very existence of the nation as a civilised community – must mainly depend'.

Lest this be considered hyperbole, you can read in the first volume that 'The people in Ireland died from want of money and not from want of food....' (p.29). An analysis of the disastrous impact of steps taken to intervene in the famine follows. 'But the interference with the trade in food undertaken by the commissariat arrangements, instead of benefiting... since the lowering of the price, ... is of no benefit to a man who has no money, increased their danger, by turning away the attention of the public from the only mode of saving their lives by supplying them with the means of buying food'. The challenges remain. The SSISI symposium in 2006 was devoted to Ireland's aid policy to developing countries.

Records of the Society show a fairly constant core membership, with swings in membership and attendances which seem to coincide with movements in the economy – increasing in economic downturns and declining somewhat when things improve. The years from 1860-1890 were marked by large attendances (a special train was commissioned for the Inaugural Meeting of 1864) and by reports of papers and addresses in the media of the day. The history of the Society reflects debates that preoccupied not only the professional 'enquirers' but those involved in the social and political development of society.

We are celebrating here the launch of most recent innovation in the Society's history in form of the archive online. This has become a reality as a result of the contribution of Trinity College and the outstanding work of Professor Paul Walsh, Honorary Secretary and editor of the Journal. The online archive makes available the riches of one hundred and sixty years of intellectual activity and the pursuit of answers to a wider public both in Ireland and throughout the world.

In some way my presence here is an illustration of the catholicity of the extraordinary body that is the SSISI. Dr. Garrett FitzGerald, who unfortunately is unable to be with us today, is a combined statistician, economist, policy-maker and statesman on the national and international stages. I am none of these but I have had to grapple with the vagaries of policies, some fashionable and inadequately tested, in many areas of economic and social life. As a humble, last-stage consumer I am therefore grateful for the new and accessible form of the archive and excited by its potential. Those who have brought this about deserve our enthusiastic congratulations.

My first contact with the Society was in the early eighties when I became involved with the Commission on Taxation. Faced with apparent discrepancies in the strength of different forms of economic activity in Ireland and unusual fluctuations in everything from livestock to retail sales in Northern Ireland and the jurisdiction with which the Commission was concerned it was difficult to assess the reality of the economy. SISSI was recommended to me as a source of reliable information. I was not disappointed. The vigour and rigour of the discussions after the main papers were particularly helpful for someone trying to make sense of the shifting sands of Irish tax policy in those years. The post-paper discussions provide some of the best insights into the subjects under review and are a valuable contribution to the art of 'Inquiry'.

May the Society flourish for another 160 years.