



Letitia Dunbar-Harrison

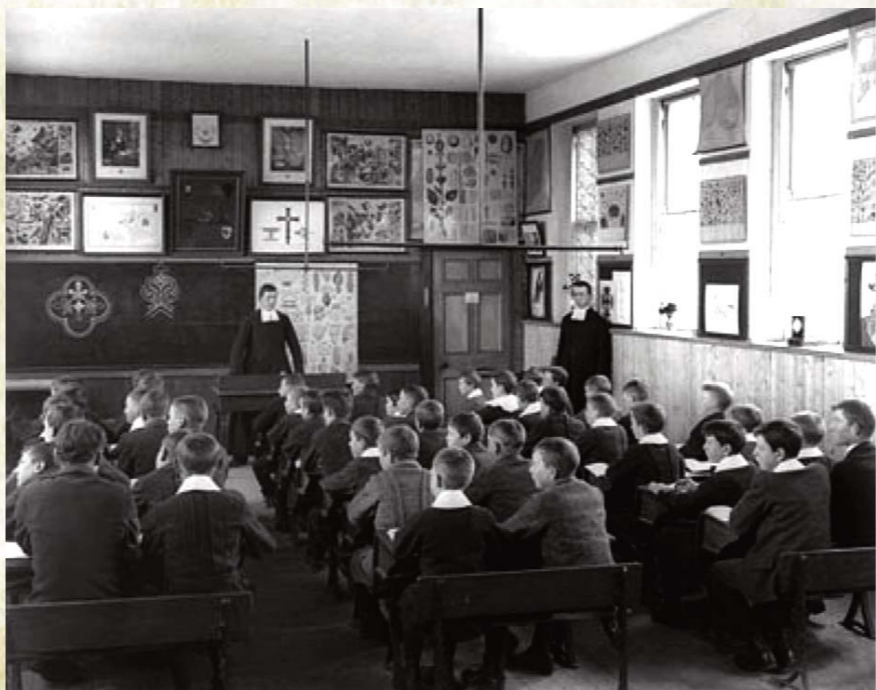
The people of Castlebar have shown no antagonism to Miss Dunbar personally: they have shown every mark of courtesy to her as a refined, cultured young lady, but if Dr. McBride means to imply that the people of Mayo are satisfied with her as their County Librarian he is quite incorrect.

Letter from Archdeacon Fallon, Ballina Herald, 30 May 1931.



Letitia Dunbar-Harrison on her graduation from Trinity College Dublin.

Letitia Dunbar-Harrison was born in Dublin in February 1906, into a middle-class protestant family. After earning a degree in Spanish and French in Trinity College Dublin, she completed a postgraduate course in librarianship in University College Dublin and secured employment at Rathmines library on the outskirts of Dublin City.



An Irish classroom c. 1920s.
Source: *The National Archives of Ireland.*



A Union Jack is flown from the roof of Trinity College during Dublin's Victory Day Parade 1919.

In 1930 the *County Librarianship* for Mayo fell vacant, and Letitia applied via the *Local Appointments Commission*. Beating over one hundred other candidates, she secured the appointment, moving to Castlebar to commence her duties. One of the requirements of the job was proficiency in Irish, and because few people spoke fluent Irish in the early years of the *Irish Free State*, successful applicants were given three years to fulfil this requirement. Although legally obliged to ratify appointments made by the *Local Appointments Commission*, Mayo County Council refused to ratify Letitia's appointment, resulting in a tense stand-off that lasted for almost a year.



Main Street, Castlebar 1930.
Source: *The National Library of Ireland.*

Despite the insistence of government officials in Dublin that Letitia remain in situ, the county library system was effectively boycotted. Supported by some, but not all local Catholic clergy, branch libraries refused to interact with Letitia and returned their stock of books to the County Library in Castlebar. Eventually, the minister for local government, Richard Mulcahy abolished Mayo County Council, replacing it with a commissioner, P.J. Bartley, charged with running local government.

Although Mayo County Council officially opposed Letitia's appointment on the grounds of her lack of Irish proficiency, records from the time confirm that her protestant background, Trinity College education and even her gender were primarily their reasons for its opposition. It is also likely that Mayo County Council resented what they interpreted as *Dublin meddling in local affairs* by the appointment of a County Librarian from outside the county.

These events began to attract interest from elsewhere in the country, especially in Dublin, where Eamon de Valera, at this time the leader of the opposition, and shortly due to fight a general election, used them to sharply criticise the government. After a year of deadlock Letitia was offered a transfer to the *Department of Defence* library in Dublin, at a higher salary. Letitia accepted this offer and moved back to Dublin. However, several months later, the marriage bar forced her to resign from this post, following her marriage to the Reverend Robert Crawford.

Letitia died in Ulster in 1994, after many years spent moving from parish to parish with her husband. It is perhaps significant that soon after her marriage she began to use the name Aileen Crawford, hoping to distance herself from what must have been a

traumatic experience in Mayo. Her short career reminds us of the continued difficulties faced by women as they attempted to establish careers in the *Irish Free State*. In Letitia's case, this difficulty was amplified by sectarian bias, political manoeuvring and, most importantly, the emerging gulf between County Council-run, rural Ireland and centralised, metropolitan government.



A Tir Agus Teanga or 'Land and Language' festival late 1920s.

Taoiseach W.T. Cosgrave 1932.

