

# An A-Z of the L&H

*For debate, the L&H was a starting point for many a budding politico. . .*

The L&H (Literary and Historical Society) at UCD has long provided many of the more rumbustious and combustible moments in UCD's history, a tradition that was marinated in Earlsfort Terrace and has been continued steadfastly at Belfield for the past 35 years.

The L&H was founded by John Henry Newman in 1855/56. Traditionally, it meets once a week to debate the topics of the day and by 2004, it had become the largest student society in Ireland. It's also one of the few survivors at UCD of the old Catholic University heritage.

Many of its sessions over the decades have been hot and heavy, a tradition maintained up to the present day, although if anything the L&H has become that little bit more respectable over the past few years.

But earlier in its existence, contentious debate was the order of the day and the L&H could claim speakers of great distinction. Two of the early founding figures of Irish independence, Patrick Pearse and Eamon de Valera, both addressed the society. Way back, in old God's time, in 1900, a young James Joyce tried and failed to become auditor of the L&H, which even in those ancient times, had immense credibility.

However, after the Treaty and the setting up of the Free State, the 26 counties settled back into being a cosy grocers' county council and much of the edge of earlier debates was lost.

But come the early 1930s, and one literary figure who added much spice to the proceedings

was Flann O'Brien (aka Myles na gCopaleen, real name Brian O'Nolan or Briain Ó Nualláin. He entered UCD in 1929 to study for a BA in English, German and Irish, at a time when the first generations of politicians and lawyers for the new Ireland were starting to be churned out in abundance at Earlsfort Terrace. However, O'Brien sided with the Mob, which gathered in the adjoining lobby to heckle the speakers in the actual L&H debates.

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RTÉ, the L&H was a real-life precursor. Indeed, as Maeve Binchy was to recall, the L&H was the "sex of the 1950s".

Her rendition of *The Purple People Eater* at the L&H is still fondly remembered in certain quarters. It was also said in the 1950s that the house at L&H debates was packed with gurrriers, although some wore evening clothes.

The late 1950s, ferment was starting to brew in Ireland and the L&H provided some of the yeast for the growing revolt

over social and intellectual conformity in Irish society. Desmond Green, who was auditor in 1960/61, recalls that in those days, education was repressive. According to Green, the L&H was where a few people let in the light and oxygen of freedom. At one stage, in 1961, the L&H was banned by the university and the agm had to be held in the Shelbourne Hotel. Desmond Green was elected auditor in an election that took place in a car outside Earlsfort Terrace.

"They were heady days indeed," he recalls. Then Fr Fergal O'Connor arrived to challenge the students at Earlsfort Terrace to think for themselves, to seek their own truth.

In the late 1960s, one of the best quips of all ever heard in the L&H, when the then US ambassador asked rhetorically how the US was going to release itself from the terrible imbroglio of Vietnam. An unknown heckler replied: "Send (President) Johnson to Dallas."

If the 1960s began with the L&H being banned by the outraged university authorities, it ended with out-and-out revolt. In 1969, occupation was the order of the day and such young radicals as Ruairi Quinn were to the forefront of protest.

But in 1972, the L&H cut loose from Earlsfort Terrace and shifted to Belfield. In the process, it swapped its debates from Saturday nights to Friday nights. After it moved place and time, the L&H just didn't dominate the university any more, even though to this day, it remains a multi-faceted leviant among student societies.

— Hugh Oram