

## **MUSEUM AND OTHER CULTURAL BOARDS; SOME IRISH EXPERIENCE**

by Michael Ryan, Chester Beatty Library, Dublin

Paper presented at the INTERCOM Conference Leadership in Museums: Are our Core Values Shifting, Dublin, Ireland, October 16 - 19, 2002

The origins of most of the National Cultural Institutions of Ireland are complex. The National Museum owes its foundation to the activities of two private incorporated societies (The Royal Dublin Society and the Royal Irish Academy) which developed museum collections and over time persuaded Government to provide the necessary supports for proper museum activity. These somewhat haphazard, private initiatives led eventually to the establishment by Act of Parliament in 1877 of the National Institutions of Science and Art which included both the National Museum and the National Library of Ireland. The Royal Dublin Society had in the meantime been extremely instrumental in the establishment of the National Gallery and in that venture was partnered by some extent by the Royal Irish Academy. The National Gallery which will be 150 years old in 2004, like the National Museum traces its origin to these essentially private initiatives. Unlike the National Museum and National Library the National Gallery receives a separate parliamentary vote and has therefore considerable financial autonomy.

The National Library is technically in the ownership of its current Board of Trustees which, like that of the National Gallery, consists of representatives of a number of external organisations but the National Museum was established on the basis that it was essentially a Government agency directly within the Department of State (successively Agriculture and Technical Instruction, Education, Taoiseach (Prime Minister), Department of Arts, Culture and the Gaeltacht (later Arts, Heritage Gaeltacht & the Islands), and now Department of Arts, Sport & Tourism. Unlike the National Gallery which has Board of Governors, and the National Library which has a Board of Trustees, the National Museum shares with the National Botanic Gardens "a Board of Visitors" which, in addition to Government nominees, contains the ex officio representatives of the learned societies (Royal Dublin Society and Royal Irish Academy which were involved in its establishment). The "visitors" are not as the name implies a governing board. The powers of the Trustees of the National Library are largely notional and the Library staff are fully integrated in most respects into the Civil Service system. The Board of the National Gallery enjoys considerable independence and it is very much at arms length from the current Department dealing with cultural affairs. The Irish Museum of Modern Art is more autonomous in its structure being a not-for-profit company limited by guarantee in which the Minister for Arts, Sport & Tourism as the shareholder is the only agency for appointing the Board of Directors. The company model is followed by the Abbey Theatre and National Concert Hall.

The Heritage Council which has an almost bewildering variety of responsibilities for the natural, built, museum and archival heritage, is a Government appointed board. It acts in giving its advice as an agency dependent on now, the Department of the Environment. Unique amongst the National Institutions is the Chester Beatty Library which alone of the major Irish State funded organisations is a charitable foundation in the ownership of its Board of Trustees.

Museum and Library institutions are what concern us here and it is good to note that changes are contemplated in the governance of our National Museum and National Library. Under the Cultural Institutions Act, 1997 it is proposed that the boards of

the Library and Museum should be given greater autonomy and governing authority. Under this dispensation the Institutions would become in effect executive agencies answerable to their boards which will be appointed essentially by the Minister for Arts, Sport & Tourism with some restrictions. Under the new dispensation the National Museum will have a board consisting of 15 members appointed by the Minister. Two of these will be from a panel of four nominated by the Royal Irish Academy, one from a panel of two nominated by the Royal Dublin Society and one from a panel of four nominated by the staff. The other members will be appointed by the Minister who will also choose the Chair of the Board. The Board will have considerable governing authority and the executive under the Director will report to the Board in the normal way. An order bringing the Board into being has just been signed. A board will now be appointed. A similar arrangement is contemplated for the National Library.

The National Gallery Board consists of 17 members of whom ten are appointed by the Minister including one staff representative. There are six ex officio members, two from the Royal Hibernian Academy (the Irish academy for the visual arts), two from the Royal Dublin Society and one from the Royal Irish Academy. The Office of Public Works is normally represented also on the Board. The ex officio members' tenure of membership of the Board of the Gallery lasts only as long as they are in office in their parent bodies. The Ministerial appointees serve for five-year terms, which are renewable. The Board elects its own chair.

Alone among the National Institutions, the Chester Beatty Library follows a model much more familiar from the United States museum world. It is a registered charity established under the will of its founder, which was granted probate in 1969. As a charity it is answerable in many respects to the Charitable Commissioners for the conduct of its affairs and it comes under the general protection of the Attorney General who is in Irish law as in other parts of the common law area, the protector of charities. Amendments to the scheme of trust are possible only in accordance with charities' law. The only amendment to its constitution to date was a cy pres application which was granted by an Order of the High Court in December 1997. The Library was set up with a board of nine who were originally nominated by the founder in his will. These nine were at liberty to co-opt members to fill vacancies which arose from time to time and their terms of service were unlimited. The number of Board members is limited to twelve.

After the granting of probate, legislation was passed to implement the desire of the founder to have a trustee nominated by the Taoiseach (Prime Minister), another trustee named by the President and to enable also the Director of the National Library to serve ex officio on the board. The amendment of December 1997 limits the terms of service of trustees (with the exception of that of the Director of the National Library who serves as long as he/she holds office), to a five year term, renewable once. It also provides that three of the twelve trustees will be nominated by the Minister. All other appointments to the board are filled by co-option or by the President or the Taoiseach as described above. In the period of time since 1997 the Trustees have been enabled to sell their former property which housed the Library and enter into an arrangement with Government to fund the fitting-out of the Clock Tower Building at Dublin Castle for the purposes of the Library.

Regardless of the precise constitution of a board there seem to be worldwide common problems in relation to boards of cultural institutions. The principal difficulty seems to be a confusion of roles as between a board and the executive. In commercial companies this division of roles is usually very well understood but in the cultural sector it seems not to be as well defined. By confusion of roles I mean the

board taking direct executive action or in extreme cases individual members of the board assuming a day-to-day executive role in relation to some or all of the business of the institution. It is normally considered to be a recipe for disaster. Boards also sometimes have a tendency to micromanage particular aspects of the work of the institution.

Everybody will be familiar with the way that the choice of a new logo or the precise wording of a sensitive invitation card will divide a board while issues of great strategic importance may pass through a meeting with comparatively little stir made about them. A third problem which frequently arises with boards is what might be described as "constituency representation". By this I mean that individual members of boards have come to believe that they were appointed to represent a particular point of view, a geographical area or disciplinary sub set. In my experience of boards this arises constantly and is perhaps one of the commonest faults of governing boards. A final consideration is that of training. Most people are inducted on the boards with minimal briefing and no training in the management of meetings. This is often disastrous and board members should be disabused of the notion that personal agendas are inappropriate. Following the much publicised disputes at the Irish Museum of Modern Art which resulted in the loss of both Chair and Director, the guidelines which support the management and governance of state enterprises have been extended to cultural bodies. It is to be hoped that this is a stopgap measure because, while full of good advice about prudent behaviour, the guidelines leave no room for the trusteeship role which the governors of cultural institutions must exercise as a matter of duty.

They are designed for organisations which must function commercially and which are wholly owned by the State. They do not allow for organisations whose assets may be in a large measure, deposited on trust or loan, nor do they allow for the role of the ex officio or representative trustee or governor. The issue of effective trusteeship is, therefore, urgent.