

Regular Feature - Librarians of Note from the Past

James Wilkinson and the Evolution of Public Librarianship in Turbulent Times

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BACKGROUND

Public libraries are often understood as steady presences—quiet places of learning, civic connection, cultural memory, and public service. Yet the professional lives of those who build and sustain these institutions frequently reveal stories of disruption, resilience, and negotiation with forces far larger than any library budget or committee meeting agenda. This is certainly the case in the career of James Wilkinson, Cork City Librarian from 1892 to 1932. His four decades of service illustrate not only the development of a modern municipal library service but also the complexities of practicing librarianship through colonial rule, war, political upheaval, censorship, and shifting national identity.

Wilkinson's professional life demonstrates how librarians work at the intersection of culture, education, politics, and community need, and how the profession has long required a blend of diplomacy, advocacy, and determination. His story, drawn from annual reports, newspaper archives, accession records, and correspondence, offers enduring lessons for library professionals today.

KEYWORDS

James Wilkinson, Public Libraries Ireland, children's literature, Irish Free State, moral panics, de-anglicisation

BEGINNINGS: BUILDING A LIBRARY SERVICE FROM SCRATCH

James Wilkinson arrived in Cork from County Durham in 1892 to take up the post of librarian in a newly created municipal service. The original plan to house the library on South Mall fell through when the landlord refused to reduce the rent, prompting the committee to settle instead in the building that is now the Crawford Art Gallery.

From the outset, Wilkinson demonstrated the energy and organisational acumen that would become hallmarks of his career. Within months he had catalogued the collection, opened reading rooms, and established practices that encouraged civic use of the space. The annual reports of these early years stress the tremendous public demand: by 1905, the library had recorded over 2.8 million visitors, a remarkable figure for a city of its size. His early challenges will resonate with many professionals today: inadequate stock, lack of space, concerns about ventilation, contentious opening hours, and the ongoing quest for more funding. He succeeded in addressing many of these by negotiating the establishment of a purpose-built Carnegie Library in 1905, but this, as we will see, was to be a short-lived boon.

INVENTING A CHILDREN'S LIBRARY SERVICE

One of James Wilkinson's most enduring professional contributions was the establishment of a pioneering children's library service, the first municipal system of its kind in Ireland. While many contemporaries resisted the idea of children as library users meriting specific space and services, Wilkinson recognised early

the desirability of dedicated space for child readers. The new Carnegie Free Library featured a juvenile reading room, an unusual innovation at the time.

His contemporaries were often sceptical. Influential librarian and library theorist L. Stanley Jast, for instance, initially dismissed children's services as a passing novelty. Yet Wilkinson persisted, building a substantial children's collection and recording astonishing usage statistics. Juvenile materials were among the most heavily borrowed items, even as library culture remained anxious about "mere storybooks" and the perceived dangers of fiction.

Professional correspondence and reports reveal Wilkinson's keen awareness that children's reading was never politically neutral. He operated within an Ireland under British rule, where juvenile collections were dominated by imperial adventure stories by the likes of G. A. Henty and R. M. Ballantyne. Later, during the early decades of the Irish Free State, the same collections were accused of undermining the emerging national identity. As debates intensified over the moral influence of printed matter, librarians found themselves at the centre of anxieties about citizenship, national culture, and young readers' alleged vulnerability to the politics of their reading matter.

Wilkinson faced these shifting expectations with characteristic pragmatism, balancing what the public requested, what donors supplied, what was available to purchase and what political discourse demanded. His careful stewardship of children's services demonstrates a fundamental truth of library work: our collections are always interpreted through the ideological currents of their time.

FIRE AND ASHES: THE BURNING OF CORK

Nothing tested Wilkinson's professional resilience more than the events of 11 December 1920. In reprisal for an ambush at Dillon's Cross, British Crown Forces set fire to numerous buildings across Cork city. City Hall was destroyed, and the flames spread to the adjacent Carnegie Library.

By dawn, the library was a shell. Over 14,000 volumes — the overwhelming majority of the collection — were reduced to ash. Only books out on loan survived.

Wilkinson also lost his home, which occupied the upper floors of the library. His wife and daughter moved to England for a time, hardly surprising as the city of Cork was manifestly unsafe. Yet in the face of such personal and professional upheaval, Wilkinson did not resign. Instead, he made Herculean efforts towards rebuilding the library service. Notices appeared in the press within weeks, requesting the return of borrowed books and appealing for donations to reconstitute the collection. The response, both domestic and international, was extraordinary: thousands of books were donated, authors from home and abroad contributed copies of their work, and parcels of books were sent from as far as America.

The library's accession ledgers from 1921–24 reveal not only the generosity of donors but also the sheer labour of processing, cataloguing, and absorbing an entirely new collection, while simultaneously lobbying for premises, staffing, and long-term funding. For library professionals, Wilkinson's response stands as a case study in crisis leadership.

WORKING IN A CLIMATE OF CULTURAL ANXIETY

The years following Irish independence were marked by intense debates about reading, morality, and national identity. The Committee on Evil Literature (1926), the Censorship of Publications Act (1929), and high-profile controversies such as the Mayo librarian dispute thrust librarians into the political spotlight.

James Wilkinson was an English Protestant heading up a major public library in a newly independent state

that was committed to establishing an Irish-Ireland identity, in opposition to much that could be regarded as English Protestant culture. In this milieu, Wilkinson might easily have become a target for suspicion. One periodical even attempted to cast doubt on the religious composition of the library's holdings as evidence of his unsuitability to lead a public library in a Catholic-majority city.

However, unlike the unfortunate Letitia Dunbar-Harrison of the Mayo librarian controversy, momentum did not gather around this implicit discrediting of James Wilkinson. It can be speculated that this was due to a number of factors, such as:

- Wilkinson had an established reputation for integrity and diligence after decades of service.
- He had successfully stewarded the library through the catastrophic fire, earning public goodwill.
- His service was deeply embedded in Cork civic life, crossing religious and political lines.

Nevertheless, the professional dilemmas he faced — balancing demand for British-published juvenile fiction against nationalist calls for de-anglicisation, complying with an expanding censorship regime, defending the library profession against accusations of moral laxity — illustrate the multifaceted pressures on librarianship during the early Free State period.

THE TEMPORARY LIBRARY: INNOVATION FROM CONSTRAINT

The establishment of a temporary library service in 1924 at No. 2 Tuckey Street, a former RIC barracks, required compromise. The building had been burned during the War of Independence and was only partially restored. Space was cramped, ventilation poor, and furnishings basic. The city's Carnegie Library had been purpose-built, whereas the Tuckey Street Library was a stop-gap.

Yet within three days of opening, the juvenile shelves were emptied: every one of the almost five hundred children's books had been borrowed. Wilkinson acknowledged this "unexpected extraordinary demand for children's literature." That it was not a fleeting spike in lending due to the novelty of a new library is witnessed to by the 1924-25 annual report, which records that issues from the children's collection totalled 19,832 within six months, in comparison to the previous highest record of issues 14,329 in a full year. Issues continued to grow and grow over subsequent years. The appetite for reading material after four years without a library was palpable.

The Tuckey Street years highlight the adaptive skills that remain essential to library work:

- maximising use of limited facilities
- working with inadequate stock
- dealing with record-high demand
- managing public expectations while advocating for replacement premises
- maintaining staff morale through precarious circumstances

In interviews and reports, Wilkinson stressed the need for a purpose-built library, and his persistent advocacy contributed significantly to the eventual construction of the new library building in Grand Parade, which is still in operation today.

OPENING A NEW LIBRARY IN A NEW STATE

The Grand Parade Library opened in 1930, a modern, spacious, and carefully-planned building with support from the municipal authority and the Carnegie UK Trust. Public reaction emphasised its light-filled reading rooms, dedicated children's library, and promise of renewed civic pride after years of destruction.

Yet its opening coincided with the height of the censorship era. Collections needed constant review as lists

of banned books grew. Professional anxieties were widespread: librarians were expected to act as moral guardians while also supporting learning, maintaining public trust, and implementing rapidly changing policy.

Having navigated the destruction of his library, the loss of his home, the rebuilding of collections, and decades of political turbulence, Wilkinson retired two years after opening the new library building. His forty-year tenure had been testing, coinciding as it did with three wars, the Spanish Flu pandemic, and moral panics about reading. His official retirement letter noted that “few...could realise the strenuous times” through which he had served.

LEGACY: BUILDING THE CONDITIONS FOR MODERN LIBRARY WORK

James Wilkinson retired at the end of 1932 and moved to Stetchford, Birmingham, where he lived until his death in 1943. Yet his professional influence remained deeply woven into Cork’s library culture.

Minutes from 1950 record the committee’s desire to expand children’s services further and even to open a library building exclusively for the use of child readers, an ambition directly traceable to Wilkinson’s early pioneering work.

His career offers enduring insights into the profession:

- **Librarianship is a public leadership role.** Librarians mediate between culture and community, operating at the intersection of policy, politics, and pedagogy.
- **Collections are always political, explicitly or implicitly.** Wilkinson’s careful negotiation of imperialist fiction, nationalist sentiment and censorship reminds us that librarians must frequently examine the values embedded in their collections.
- **Advocacy is central to the profession.** From leveraging the power of the press, lobbying potential funders, utilising professional networks and negotiating prevailing discourses, James Wilkinson demonstrated the importance of strategic communication.
- **Resilience and adaptability are professional necessities.** Whether navigating pandemics, war, funding crises, or shifting public expectations, librarians must innovate within constraint.
- **Children’s library services matter.** Wilkinson championed improved services to cater for child readers, recognising that they deserved their own library spaces and were not simply passive, uncritical incubators of sentiments espoused in their reading matter.

Figure 1.

James Wilkinson mural



CONCLUSION

James Wilkinson's career exemplifies a truth familiar to library staff: library work is never confined to books on shelves. It involves cultivating trust, navigating complexity, and building public value in ways often underappreciated but deeply consequential.

His professional life - spanning Victorian Britain, revolutionary Ireland and the early Free State — reminds us that the library is both a sanctuary and a battleground, a civic anchor and a cultural lightning rod. Today, as libraries again confront political polarisation, debates about reading material and questions about their societal role, Wilkinson's story resonates powerfully. A mural to honour his legacy is located at the junction of Anglesea Street and Old Station Road, Cork City, close to the site of the lost Carnegie Library.

The City Library is on the move again: it has recently been announced that the Counting House complex on South Main Street is to become the new home of the current Grand Parade Library. We may speculate with confidence that James Wilkinson would have been pleased to learn that the new space will offer expanded sections for children, teenagers and young adults.

