

Notes and news

The Federation for Ulster Local Studies

A movement to promote better communication between local history societies in Ulster was started in May 1974 at a meeting convened by the County Donegal Historical Society at Ballybofey. A year later, on 10 May 1975, the Federation for Ulster Local Studies was formally inaugurated at a conference held at the New University of Ulster in Coleraine. It was attended by representatives of thirty-five societies and organisations whose concern was for the promotion of local studies in Ulster. Since then the federation has prospered and forty-seven member-groups were entitled to representation at its 1981 conference in Newtownards.

The members of the federation vary greatly in their size and function. They range from large, well-established bodies like the Clogher Historical Society with over 700 members to small, recently-formed societies like the East Belfast Historical Society (24 members) and the Old Newry Society (32). Most of them are concerned with the promotion of local history in their own area. A few have an archaeological bias, a few deal with the collection of folklore, and six are naturalist field clubs. The last decade or so has seen a real boom in local history studies in Northern Ireland, and since 1967 twenty-nine new societies have been formed.¹ This more than anything else has made the creation of a federation desirable.

The federation's aims are to 'promote the study and recording of the history, antiquities, and folklife of Ulster', and to develop communication and co-operation between its members and with other relevant bodies. It is hoped that this may be achieved along a number of lines. The annual conference elects a committee which meets seven or eight times a year. A

¹In 1967 — Ards Historical Society, Craigavon Historical Society; in 1968 — Lisburn Historical Society; in 1969 — Mullaghbawn Folklore and Historical Society; in 1970 — East Belfast Historical Society, Warrenpoint Historical Group, The Old Newry Society; in 1971 — Bangor Historical Society, Poyntzpass and District Local History Society; in 1972 — Mid-Antrim Field Club; in 1973 — Rathfriland Historical Society, Upper Ards Historical Society, West Belfast Historical Society; in 1974 — Newtownabbey Historical Society, Strabane Historical Society, The Lecale Society, and Saintfield Heritage Society; in 1975 — Ballynahinch Society, North West Archaeological and Historical Society, Carrickfergus and District Historical Society, Islandmagee and District Conservation Society; in 1976 — Banbridge and District Historical Society; in 1978 — Dromore Diocesan Historical Society; in 1979 — Ballinascreen Historical Society; in 1980 — North Belfast Historical Society; in 1981 — West Tyrone Historical Society, Killultagh Historical Society, South Derry Historical Society and Ballyclare Historical Society.

journal, *Ulster Local Studies*, is produced twice a year by the federation's editorial board. Each issue either carries or encloses a calendar of events for the ensuing six months. This is probably the federation's most useful service, as it informs members of lectures and outings planned by all the other societies. In May 1976 the calendar noted outings to places as far apart as Malin (by the Donegal Society), and Bangor Abbey (by the Ards Society). The Saintfield Society were to visit Downpatrick and the Route Field Club were bound for Whitepark Bay. Earlier that year there were January lectures organised by seventeen societies, ranging from a talk on folk music to a lecture by W. H. Crawford on eighteenth-century Ulster.

Each year the federation organises autumn seminars. The subjects covered so far have been on broadly based topics — placenames, architecture in the province, archaeology, the town in Ulster, oral history and the Ordnance Survey. These meetings have been well supported by the members and have been held in Antrim, Banbridge, Craigavon, Lifford, Dromore (County Tyrone), Newry, Magherafelt, Belfast and Rosstown. Sometimes societies join together to promote these events, and one of the most successful so far was the two-day Belleek seminar on the Erne river system in May 1979. These autumn seminars, generally held in November, and the annual conference held in May are the two main lines of communication within the federation.

After Coleraine the annual conference moved into all parts of the province — Armagh (1976), Monaghan (1977), Ballycastle (1978), Derry (1979), Belleek (1980), Newtownards (1981) and Downpatrick (1982). One of the most valuable sides to the annual meeting has been its bookstall. Here member societies can purchase the journals of the others as well as a good range of local history publications from other sources.

The federation's own journal, *Ulster Local Studies*, appears twice yearly. It carries news of the working of the federation, and of the activities of its member societies, as well as articles on source material and historical methods. The first issue (October 1975) has a useful article on 'recent local histories' by Réamonn Ó Muiri, who from the beginning has been the editor of the journal. Deirdre Flanagan contributed the first of a two-part article on 'Place names as historical source-material'. Mairéad Dunlevy-Reynolds gave a useful guide to research libraries in the second issue (May 1976), and Seán Ó Súilleabháin gave the first part of a contribution on folklore studies in the third number (November 1976). W. H. Crawford wrote of 'pioneers of local history in Ulster' in the same issue, and there were guides to studying a placename and a townland. The fourth publication has an assessment on the value of gravestone inscriptions by Richard S. J. Clarke, who himself is well on his way to recording the memorials of an entire county (Down). Issue no. 5 (or vol. iii, no. 1, to give the correct series) ventured into the field of Irish genealogies, while its successor (vol. iii, no. 2) contained a very detailed article on source material for a parish history. Since then *Ulster Local Studies* has carried a wide range of short articles which vary from 'photographic resources and the local historian' (vol. iv, no. 1) to 'stone and flint implements' (vol. v, no. 1). Each issue generally has background material on one or two of the member societies, reviews of local histories and notes on the meetings of the federation. The section on

reviews is particularly valuable as many of the items covered are so small or limited in printings that they are noticed nowhere else. Volume viii, no. 1, carried twenty-six such reviews including things as small as *Mass rocks of Inishowen* (17 pp) and *Ligoniel, the last of the mill villages* (36 pp).

Most of the federation's time at the early meetings was taken up with mounting a campaign to save the townland names of Northern Ireland, which were in danger of falling into disuse because of Post Office reorganisation. The Post Office asked the district councils to implement a scheme of naming rural roads instead, giving each house a number as well. At the start it seemed to be just an additional address, but as time passed the townland names were dropped altogether, and a new telephone directory was published under the new scheme. The Post Office pushed the scheme as far as it could, and there was an insinuation that there was something unreliable in continuing to use the townland address only. The great majority of the population did not realise that their local councils had the power to stop the Post Office. This is where the federation stepped in. They lobbied the twenty-six district councils, as all but Fermanagh had adopted the Post Office's scheme. Delegations from the federation were heard by a number of the councils, and at the time of writing eleven of them have rejected the alternative addresses. A townland sub-committee was set up to monitor the campaign,² and at the height of the dispute advice was taken from a senior counsel. The battle is not yet over, and the federation's work may well prove to have been of vital importance to future historians.

The federation's most recent work has been in launching its local history trust fund and setting up an education sub-committee. The trust fund was launched in Belfast on 28 April 1980, and in Dublin on 11 May 1981.³ The aim is to raise at least £50,000, which will be invested and the interest used to assist local history publishing — particularly the work of the smaller societies. The education group investigated the possibilities of setting up a certificated course in local history in Northern Ireland. It has made some progress with the New University of Ulster, whose Institute of Continuing Education began a two-year part-time course in the autumn of 1980. The committee of the federation also made an extended written response to the report, *Regional museums in Northern Ireland*. It would be invidious to single out individuals in the working of the federation but mention should be made of a few. Dr Brian S. Turner was its secretary for the first six years and was tireless in his efforts to safeguard townland names. The editor of *Ulster Local Studies*, the Reverend Reamonn Ó Muiri has now produced fifteen issues. W. H. Crawford was treasurer for the first four years. A. J. Malley, C. A. Dallat, A. W. K. Colmer, E. M. Griffith, J. B. Cunningham, Aidan Walsh and Mrs Mairéad Reynolds have all served the federation as

²Its members were Dr B. S. Turner (Glens of Antrim Historical Society), Annesley Malley (North-West Historical Society), Jack Johnston (Clogher Historical Society), Michael Anderson (Poyntzpass Historical Society), C. A. Dallat (Glens of Antrim Historical Society), and Frank Maxwell (The Lecale Historical Society).

³The following trustees were appointed: Sam Hanna Bell, Cahal Dallat, John Cunningham, Seamus Heaney, Professor D. W. Harkness, Lady Kinahan, Dr Liam McCormick, Aidan Walsh, Malachy B. McGrady, Lord O'Neill (of Shane's Castle) and Dr Brian Turner.

chairman for a year. Others who have played an important part are Fred Heatley, the Reverend P. Ó Gallachair, C. J. Lynn, Brian Lacy and the present secretary, Mrs Doreen Corcoran. The idea conceived at Ballybofey over eight years ago has now grown into a very permanent and worthwhile organisation.

Sept. 1982

JACK JOHNSTON