

Chairman's Address

FLHS AGM 2012

Local history is the history not only of local people but also the history of local places. Even the academic historians, who are often critical of local historians, acknowledge that local studies makes a contribution to the way in which historians view the development of a country. The academic debate on the purpose of local history studies still seems to centre on the theme *should local studies be an end in themselves rather than an explanation of national themes at local level?* The English historian W. G. Hoskin who was the greatest populariser of local history expressed the view that local historians, while needed to be well grounded in their national history, must deal with the origin and growth of local communities. The study of local communities is now accepted as the concern of local historians and, as the co-ordinating body at national level, the Federation of Local History Societies sees as its primary task the enabling of local history societies to fulfil their roles of researching, analysing and publishing within their own communities.

There is a tremendous growth in local history in part due to the improved access to archives at county and national level. All counties have local study centres as part of their County Libraries, while at national level the digitisation of material has made primary source material available to a wider audience.

The variety of publications pouring off the presses each year is quite impressive — some publications more impressive than others, but each bearing the imprint of an amateur chronicler who may or may not aspire to be known as a historian. At no time in Irish history has the study of local history been so popular.

All the more reason therefore to understand why the role of the Federation of Local History Societies has taken on greater importance today than ever before.

The Federation founded 31 years ago has been involved in a number of interesting projects this past year. The National Library Digitisation Project which was managed by Pdraig Laffan on behalf of the Federation was a resounding success. It represented an important joint venture between the National Library and local history society members who were willing and able to devote some time working in the National Library.

The oral history seminar held in Drogheda in March was the first co-operative venture with the Oral History Network of Ireland and one which I hope will result in further joint ventures in the oral history field.

Oral history as a historical approach based on personal reminiscences was once described by George Ewart Evans, that splendid oral historian and writer, as *folk life studies*. Personal reminiscences give us details of folk life we might never otherwise capture in print and I would like local historians and local history societies to consider the benefit of oral history projects within local communities. The Federation can help by giving practical guidance and training on methodology to member societies in relation to oral history recording and I would hope that this is something we can address over the next year.

The Federation is gearing up to offer member societies a range of services and assistance which will help to improve the service local history societies offer their members. This will involve effective use of the Federation website which has come on line in the past month. It will also involve the

Federation in improving its communication links with member societies, whether through the website or through an electronic newsletter, as well as the annual review. To fulfil these plans I'm suggesting a change in the roles of some officer positions so as to combine the role of P.R.O. with that of webmaster and Member Secretary. The effect of the change will be to leave communication with member societies in the hands of one designated person. The existing position of Honorary Secretary to be that of Secretary to the Federation Committee.

The spring and autumn Seminars are a key part of the education and training facilities we as a Federation offer our member societies. We will try to ensure that these seminars are relevant to the needs of local history societies and their members. In that regard there is a need for societies to put forward suggestions to the Federation so that we can plan for and accommodate the needs of our members.

The social aspect of the Federation's work was well catered for since our last AGM, with trips to Banbridge and York and our thanks must go to Larry Breen for his excellent work in arranging both trips. Next month we have a trip to the Titanic Exhibition in Belfast, arrangements for which have been made by Doreen McBride of the Ulster Federation.

I would like to thank the officers and committee for their work during the year and look forward to continuing improvement in the contribution that the Federation makes to each and every local history society throughout the country.