

## *Laidlaw Blog Post - My Summer Researching Scientific Authority in Colonised Ireland*

The overall goal of my research project was to explore the role of scientific authority in colonised Ireland and examine how knowledge was controlled and manipulated by colonial powers. This project aimed to uncover the ways in which scientific knowledge was not merely a pursuit of truth but also a tool of influence and control in a colonial context.

I began by conducting a literature review to establish a historical and theoretical framework for understanding scientific authority and the cultural context of my chosen timeframe. This involved studying historical documents and scientific papers. I then chose two case studies to focus on.

The RIA, the foremost scholarly institution in Ireland, was my first case study. The RIA's ideals of autonomy and objectivity were tainted from the start by the complex interplay of political and colonial influence. . The ultimate authority rested with King George III, declared as its "founder and patron" with perpetual succession. This structure laid the groundwork for a fatal flaw that would undermine the Academy's credibility. Despite its claims of independence, the RIA's dependence on British authority and its overt alignment with British interests soon became apparent.

By consulting the RIA's archives, I found that a subcommittee was created to expel unfit members, perhaps in response to mounting political tensions in Ireland. This led to the expulsion of William McNeven, William Lawless and Archibald Hamilton Rowan due to their political beliefs and national identity. These removals from the Academy, despite their significant contributions to science, underscored a disturbing trend of the RIA's commitment to maintaining favour with British authorities taking precedence over its scholarly mission. It is also interesting to note that they all received slightly different condemnations, with Archibald Hamilton Rowan being the only one who was not deemed a traitor. The only difference between the three is his heritage, it appears that his surname, wealth and Oxbridge education left him with an undeniable 'Britishness' that freed him of being deemed a traitor. . This selective treatment within the Academy reflects biases that favoured individuals perceived to align with British interests due to heritage and wealth, casting doubt on claims that scientific achievement was what mattered more to the Academy.

My second case study focused on educational institutions, particularly William McNeven, the first president of Queen's College Cork. This university was designed to be non-denominational, but McNeven's appointment as a 'token Catholic' highlighted the tight constraints imposed by both British authorities and the Catholic Church. His navigation of these structures reflected the broader struggle of Irish Catholics to assert their identity within a colonial framework.

I concluded my research by assessing the impact of compromised scientific authority on Ireland. It seems to me that the Royal Irish Academy's failure to be an autonomous body of scientific authority undermined its scientific credibility and stifled Irish scholarly progress. The expulsion of key figures like McNeven, who went on to open the first ever chemistry laboratory in America and developed maternity healthcare at a rate that far surpassed the rest of the world, shows how Ireland's scientific advancement was impeded by the loss of McNeven due to the Academy's compromised position. Similarly, Kane's experiences illustrate the personal and professional sacrifices involved in maintaining scientific authority within a colonial framework. Together, these examples highlight the broader challenges and limitations faced by scientific institutions under colonial rule.

On a more reflective note, this project has been an extremely beneficial experience. I feel that I have grown as a leader, researcher and person, aided no doubt by the leadership workshops we attended during the year. I also believe I have developed skills that will help me become a better leader, through organising research efforts and coordinating with archival institutions like the Royal Irish Academy. Accessing key documents, managing data and collaborating with my supervisor taught me the importance of clear communication and adaptability. I sometimes found the 9 to 5 research routine difficult, particularly working with historical archives, which was not my area of expertise. I learned to navigate complex and often near illegible sources of information and developed skills in critical analysis and historical interpretation. I am also a self proclaimed expert in deciphering tiny writing now!

Not everything went according to plan, and the scope of my research had to be adjusted due to difficulties in accessing some archival materials. Initially, I was overly ambitious in what I hoped to accomplish within six weeks. However, once I readjusted my goals to be more realistic, I felt more successful in my research.

I was extremely lucky to have a fantastic supervisor, Dr. Alison Fernandes, who provided invaluable guidance on analysing sources and academic writing. I also worked with a historian and librarian at the RIA who was incredibly helpful.

This project highlighted the importance of engaging with global perspectives, showing how colonial presences impact scientific practices. To me, it reinforced the idea that science and history are interconnected and that global awareness is crucial for addressing contemporary issues. In the future, I hope to continue examining scientific authority, especially where science has been used as a tool of power and control. I also aim to shift my completed research toward discussions on how historical insights can inform contemporary practices in science and policy.

Overall, this research project has been a profound learning experience, providing valuable insights into the intersections of science, history, and power. It has equipped me with skills and knowledge that I look forward to applying in future endeavours.