

THE IRISH COLLEGES IN PARIS, 1578 - 2002: HISTORY

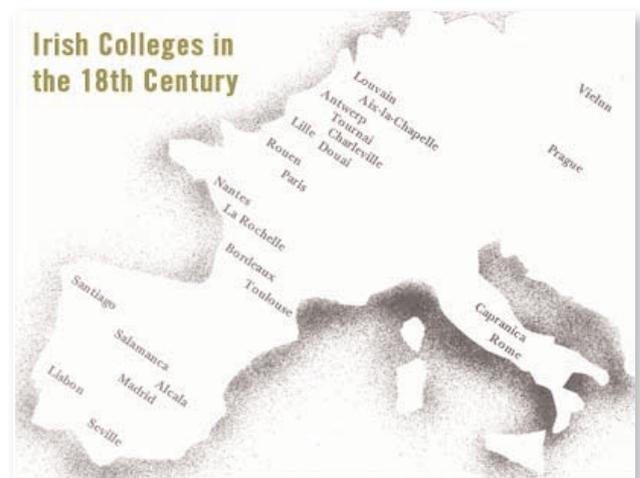
Dr Liam Chambers



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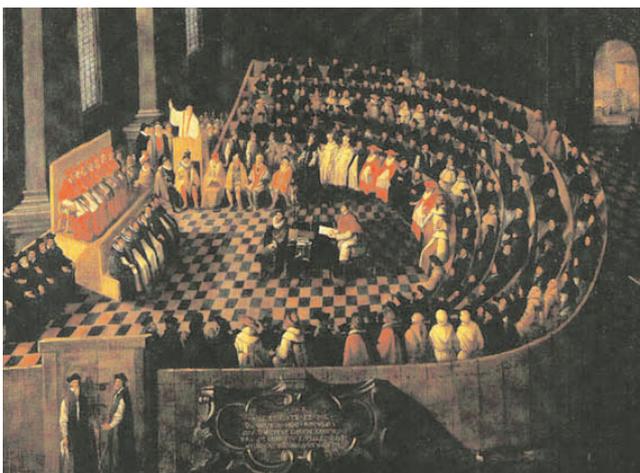
PARIS

Irish links with France have a long history, stretching back centuries. Throughout the medieval period important ecclesiastical, intellectual, trading and other connections were maintained and a small number of Irish students attended the University of Paris. The number of students leaving Ireland for Paris began to expand dramatically in the later sixteenth century for a number of reasons. The religious upheavals of the 1500s known as the Reformation gradually forced Europeans to affirm particular religious identities. Most of Ireland's Gaelic Irish and Old English population rejected the Reformation promoted by the state and, as a consequence, more and more young men sought out centres of Catholic education on the continent. Meanwhile, reform within the Catholic Church, developed most clearly at the Council of Trent (1545-63), placed a strong emphasis on a more educated clergy which provided another important stimulus for student migration to the continent. As a growing number of Irish students, priests and scholars arrived in university towns and cities like Salamanca, Douai, Paris, Leuven and Rome in the later sixteenth and early



BEGINNINGS, 1578-1660

Despite the long history of Irish links with the French capital, Paris was not an obvious destination for Catholic students from Ireland in the later sixteenth century. A series of bitter conflicts, the Wars of Religion, convulsed France in the later sixteenth century as Catholics and Protestants struggled to come to an agreed religious and political settlement. While Irish students may be found attending the University of Paris throughout the turmoil of the later sixteenth century, the emergence of a distinct Irish community was understandably tentative. Later commentators dated it to 1578, when a group of students led by a priest called John Lee entered the Collège de Montaigu, one of the city's main university colleges. Lee's community was probably one of a number of such groups, but it appears to have prospered, later moving to the more prestigious Collège de Navarre, before renting its own premises on the rue St Thomas.



Council of Trent

seventeenth centuries, Irish clergy with local connections and the students themselves began to develop structures – the Irish Colleges – to cater for this new development. Irish Colleges initially sprang up in Spain and Spanish Flanders, with later foundations in France, Rome and central Europe, so that by the middle of the seventeenth century a complex network of more than forty colleges existed stretching from Prague to Lisbon and Leuven to Rome. Over time, the Irish Colleges in Paris would become the most important.

In the early seventeenth century the community attracted an important patron, Jean de l'Escalopier, a leading political figure in Paris, whose support permitted the young community to move to accommodation in the rue de Sèvres. Lee was succeeded briefly by Thomas Dease whose departure for Ireland in 1621 resulted in the appointment of Thomas Messingham. Under Messingham's leadership, the Irish community developed significantly. As a college, it gained legal recognition and the right to collect money under Letters Patent granted in 1623. The following year the Irish 'seminary' was admitted to the University of Paris, while in 1626 the archbishop of Paris approved new rules.



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Messingham and a group of like-minded colleagues also improved the intellectual standing of the college. In 1624 he published his *Florilegium Insulae Sanctorum*, which re-told the stories of Ireland's leading saints, including Patrick, Brigid and Columba. The college's growing reputation should have encouraged further development, but financial pressures, political divisions and theological tensions resulted in a turbulent period during the 1640s and 1650s. Under the stewardship of Messingham's successor, Edward Tyrell, the college maintained a presence in Paris, but in much reduced circumstances.

COMPETING COLLEGES, 1660-1728

The tensions evident among the Irish clerical and student community in Paris in the mid-seventeenth century resulted in the emergence of a number of competing groups. The college headed by Edward Tyrell, who died in 1671, had traditionally been dominated by Leinster (and more particularly by Meath) priests. By the mid-1670s the community had split into two competing communities, one led by David Mulcahil, the other by Terence Fitzpatrick, both claiming to lead the Irish College which traced its origins back to the foundation made by John Lee in 1578.

Meanwhile a group of Munster and Ulster priests, led by Malachy Kelly and Patrick Maginn, established a third community when they negotiated the Irish take-over of a vacant Italian college, the Collège des Lombards on rue des Carmes, in 1676-77. Kelly and Maginn pumped money into rebuilding work, gained recognition for the college and had themselves appointed proviseurs for life. In the early 1680s they won state support for their claim to be the legitimate



John Lee of Waterford, with a small group of Irish clerical students, set up "the Community of Irish students in Paris" at the Collège de Montaigu in 1578.

Irish College in Paris and, by 1685, the competing communities of Mulcahil and Fitzpatrick were forcibly dissolved and Leinster (and later Connacht) students entered the new college. Indeed, unlike many of the Irish Colleges on the continent, which drew students from particular dioceses or provinces, from 1685 onwards the Irish College in Paris could reasonably claim to be a national institution with students from every corner of the island. If provincial diversity was reasonably well catered for by the mid-1680s, in another important respect student intake was rigidly uniform.

During the seventeenth century the relative poverty of Irish students travelling to the continent was a recurrent problem.



The chapel of the Collège des Lombards in the rue des Carmes is the only surviving part of the first Irish College. In its crypt are buried several illustrious Irishmen associated with the early days of the foundation.

students who had already been ordained were less amenable to a disciplined life in college.

The new Irish College founded by Maginn and Kelly was initially reserved for priests. However, the University of Paris also attracted much younger Irish students who could fund themselves, either through family largesse or by obtaining a bursary. Some were destined for ordination, while others studied law and medicine.

As the Irish Collège des Lombards chapel established itself, pressure was brought to bear on the proviseurs to admit the younger Irish scholars in the city and, after 1707, they were allowed to enter. The Irish had finally secured a permanent home for at least some of the priests and students studying in the university. The curriculum they followed varied. Many younger students would have begun by acquiring a solid foundation in the humanities, essentially Latin. A two year philosophy course leading to a Master of Arts usually followed, at which point a student had access to one of the three great faculties: theology, medicine and law. All of the classes took place outside the college, so that Irish students mixed with their French and international counterparts.

GOLDEN AGE, 1728-1789

Pressures of space and money at the Collège des Lombards meant that tensions were inevitable. In 1728 new regulations split the college into two entirely distinct communities: the 'Community of Priests', to be governed by four elected proviseurs, one from each province, and the 'Community of Clerics and Scholars', to be administered by a prefect. In the 1730s the College housed at least 100 students and rivalry between the two communities was accentuated by developments in Ireland.

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By the 1730s the severity of the penal legislation enacted against Catholics after 1691 was already waning. In fact, a debate was slowly emerging within the Irish Catholic church about how to respond to the fragile but real sense of their de facto toleration. Some leading figures in the church argued that the number of priests was too great and that the system of ordaining older students before sending them abroad was giving rise to abuses. They alleged that some priests refused to leave Ireland, while others were unruly influences in the colleges on the continent and in the streets of cities like Paris. Meanwhile in Paris a group of reformers, led by John Bourk from Cashel, were elected as proviseurs. Along with Andrew Donlevy, who was in charge of the younger students, they argued that the priests should be excluded from the college and instead it should be reserved for younger students, along the lines envisaged by the Council of Trent. Their case was taken very seriously because it had the backing of the college's new patron, a well-connected French ecclesiastic, Nicholas-Guillaume de Bautru known as the Abbé de Vaubrun, who financed major building work as the college expanded during the 1730s, as well as the construction of an impressive Italianate chapel designed by the architect Pierre Boscry. However, Bourk and the reformers faced the implacable opposition of their colleagues in the Community of Priests, as well as most of the Irish Bishops, who argued that a majority of the younger students remained in France on completion of their studies rather than returning to Ireland. In 1737 the Archbishop of Paris was forced to intervene and Bourk and some of his supporters were removed.

The disputes of the 1730s, which re-surfaced in the late 1740s, brought unwanted negative publicity to the Irish College. However, the number of students at the college was steadily increasing, the patronage of de Vaubrun alleviated some of the more pressing financial concerns and on a number of levels the college was entering something of a golden age.

By the middle of the eighteenth century Paris was home to a large Irish community, in whose life the college played a key role. Close family connections bound the Irish priests and students to other Irish migrants, such as the officers and soldiers of the Irish regiments in the French army. Priests resident at the college provided an array of services to their compatriots: they assisted destitute migrants, invested money for soldiers and others, provided legal advice and connections, translated documents and prepared the crucial attestations of identity which were so important in ancien régime France. Of course, the relationship was not all one way, Irish migrants made donations to the college and in the course of the eighteenth century dozens of foundations or trusts were established to provide bursaries to Irish students.

Since the late sixteenth century, Paris had been an important intellectual and cultural centre for Irish Catholic migrants.

This continued into the eighteenth century in the work of Cornelius Nary (religion, history, politics); Michael Moore (philosophy), James MacGeoghegan (history), Patrick D'Arcy (mathematics), Luke Joseph Hooke (theology), Andrew Dunleavy (catechetics) and others. By this stage the Irish were well integrated within the University of Paris and dozens of Irishmen occupied prominent positions in the Faculties of Arts and Theology. Meanwhile, the college became increasingly identified with the promotion of the Irish language which saw the publication of two important Irish-English dictionaries (in 1732 and 1768) and an Irish language catechism (in 1742). In the eighteenth century the *Leabhar Mór Leacain* (Book of Lecan) was held in the college library, before being transferred to the Royal Irish Academy in 1787.

By the 1760s, around 165 students were crammed into the Collège des Lombards. The living conditions of the 'Community of Clerics and Scholars' were particularly problematic, which prompted their prefect, Laurence Kelly, to move the community elsewhere. In 1769 he purchased a town house on an acre of land at rue du Cheval Vert (re-named rue des Irlandais in 1807) and a summer house in



Ivry-sur-Seine, which he transferred to the community three years later. The prominent architect François Joseph Bélanger oversaw the demolition of part of the existing town house to make way

for the imposing college building which opened to students in 1775 or 1776. This college still stands today as a remarkable indication of the significance of the Irish Catholic student community in Paris. It came, however, at a cost. In the 1780s, the debts run up during the construction of the new building and the growing financial crisis in the French state created recurring difficulties for the 180 students and staff at the two Irish Colleges. In 1787 the practice of appointing four proviseurs to oversee the 'Community of Priests', who were still resident at the insalubrious Collège des Lombards, ended with the appointment of a single administrator, John Baptist Walsh, who immediately set about ameliorating the financial position of the college. He had arrived in Paris just in time to deal with the greatest challenge yet faced by the Irish student community in the French capital.

REVOLUTION, 1789-1815

The French Revolution which broke out in 1789 fundamentally challenged the privileges of the monarchy, aristocracy and church, sending shock waves around Europe. The initial reaction of the Irish College superiors – John Baptist Walsh at the Collège des Lombards and Charles

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Kearney at the Collège des Irlandais – was to affirm their loyalty to the new dispensation. The colleges escaped the early nationalisation of ecclesiastical property by stressing their unique Irishness. Slowly, however, problems arose.

On 6 December 1790 a group of Irish students walked across Paris to the Champ de Mars (today the location of the Eiffel Tower), possibly to play football. The Champ had recently been the location of an enormous first anniversary ceremony to mark the fall of the hated Bastille Prison and a great 'Altar of the Fatherland' which had been constructed for the occasion was still on the site. Some of the Irish students climbed the altar to take a closer look and accidentally damaged the structure. Local workmen saw what was happening and the ensuing altercation turned into a full scale pursuit. Half a dozen Irish students were captured by the crowd and almost lynched on the spot before being rescued by the Revolutionary Guard. They were tried later for damaging the monument but their innocence was recognised and they were set free. The incident was worrying, for the students were loudly denounced in some quarters as counter-revolutionary foreigners.

By this stage ecclesiastical divisions in France were widening. In 1790 and 1791 the clergy were increasingly forced to support either the state-sponsored church established by the revolutionary Civil Constitution of the Clergy or take refuge in the increasingly underground 'refractory' church which refused to accept the revolutionary changes. In public, Walsh and Kearney continued to proclaim their revolutionary zeal. Privately, however, they opened their doors to refractory clergy and their supporters, providing secret retreats and ordinations, and an alternative venue of worship for the laity who wished to avoid the pro-

revolutionary churches in the local area. Before long public disturbances broke out as local revolutionaries attacked college visitors.



The creation of a republic in August 1792 left the Irish Colleges increasingly vulnerable and Charles Kearney, for one, began to wonder seriously about

their future. Two months later William Duckett and a group of radical students and former students briefly took over the Collège des Irlandais with the support of local revolutionaries, though Kearney managed to re-assert his authority. The colleges struggled on into 1793, but following the outbreak of war with Great Britain, all British (and Irish) subjects were arrested and their property seized. Walsh, Kearney and the remaining students were incarcerated, most of them in the Collège des Irlandais which was turned into a prison for this purpose.



Le Premier Consul, futur Empereur Napoléon 1er, s'intéressa à la Brigade Irlandaise et au Collège des Irlandais. Les régiments irlandais ayant été dispersés en 1791, Napoléon créa une Légion Irlandaise, à laquelle il offrit son propre drapeau.

In late 1794 the prisoners were released and over the next few years Walsh and Kearney succeeded in having the Irish properties and revenues returned to them. In the early nineteenth century the possibility of re-opening the colleges became a reality. Rather than opening all of the eighteenth century colleges, from 1801 the French state united the remaining Irish, Scots and English Colleges (and their revenues) into a single legal entity, the British

Establishments, which opened the Collège des Irlandais on rue du Cheval Vert to students in 1805. Meanwhile, the state also established a Bureau gratuit, which had responsibility for the temporal affairs of the college.

The Irish bishops were unwilling to send students to Napoleonic France and the establishment of the royal Catholic college at Maynooth had alleviated the immediate problems caused by the sudden closure of most of the Irish Colleges in the 1790s. Accordingly, the Collège des Irlandais opened its doors to the children of Irish, English and Scottish exiles in France, as well as to French boarders. Walsh gradually came under pressure from a number of sources, but particularly from a faction within the émigré Irish community which challenged his authority. In 1812 it succeeded in having him suspended and he was replaced by a former priest with strong connections to the Napoleonic regime, Richard Ferris.

RESTORATION, 1814-1858

The fall of Napoleon's Empire and the restoration of the Bourbon monarchy in the person of Louis XVIII revived the battle between Walsh and Ferris for control of the Irish College. The Irish bishops also realised that an opportunity to gain control of the college had arrived and they dispatched a Dublin priest, Paul Long, as their chosen superior. In 1816, Long finally gained French government recognition for his position. He also succeeded in having the management of the Irish Colleges detached from the English and Scots Colleges, and he persuaded the Irish bishops to begin sending students to Paris for the first time since the 1790s. Even allowing for the depletion of the revenues since before 1789, the finances were sufficiently healthy to ensure that the Collège des Irlandais would remain open. Also, there was the need to supply priests for the burgeoning population of

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pre-Famine Ireland. Despite his successes, Long's mission ended when Richard Ferris was once again named as superior in 1820. However, Ferris was in turn replaced by Charles Kearney, who had been in charge when the revolution broke out more than three decades earlier.

In the 1820s, the number of students at the college slowly increased, though poor management and continuing struggles for control meant that it was sometimes in a fractious condition. However, the increasingly conservative nature of the French state, especially after the accession of Charles X in 1824, meant that the claims of the Irish bishops over the college drew favourable consideration, notably in the abolition of the Bureau gratuit established during the Napoleonic era. In 1828, Patrick McSweeney, a priest from County Kerry, was placed in charge of the college. McSweeney, an authoritarian manager, effectively completed a process which had been underway since the early nineteenth century, the transformation of what had been an ancien régime college, over which the Irish bishops had little



The Library contains many rare and valuable items not merely of Irish interest but also deriving from the collections of the other Catholic colleges in Paris before the amalgamation.

formal control, into a nineteenth century seminary answerable to them.

By this stage, the college employed a group of professors who provided classes to students within the building, in stark contrast to the pre-revolutionary era when students had attended classes in the university. McSweeney also set about improving the upkeep of the

college and, in 1834, purchased a country house at Arcueil, about an hour's walk away. The college enjoyed a good working relationship with the regime of King Louis Philippe (1830-1848), but the 1848 revolution found an internal echo, as protests against McSweeney's management emerged from among the other staff. In consequence, a Commission was established to oversee major changes in the way the college was run and, in the early 1850s, he was replaced by a Dublin priest, John Miley.

The Irish bishops were unhappy with continuing state involvement in the affairs of the college, but they took advantage of the changeover to press their claims and in 1848 established a Board of Trustees, composed of a group of bishops. John Miley was a noted ecclesiastical historian who had strong political and clerical connections, especially to Archbishop Paul Cullen of Armagh and, later, Dublin. However, he was a very poor superior who quickly fell out with his staff and gradually lost the confidence of most of the bishops. Yet Cullen viewed Miley as an important ally and his uncompromising support for the increasingly beleaguered

superior led to an important turning point for the college. In 1858, following what he perceived to be a protracted campaign against him, Miley locked two members of staff, James Rice and Patrick Lavelle, out of the college. In response they successfully scaled the walls, whereupon they were forcibly ejected. The episode caused uproar internally and attracted the unwanted attention of the Archbishop of Paris, the Ministry of Public Instruction and the Paris Police. In the end the college closed for a period and Miley was forced to resign. In order to avoid the problems encountered by McSweeney's authoritarianism, Miley's ineffectiveness and staff insubordination, the Irish bishops turned to the Irish Vincentians to bring order to the situation.

VINCENTIAN COLLEGE, 1858-1939

The arrival of the Vincentians eased the tensions during the 1860s as student numbers rose again and in 1869 the college celebrated its centenary in the presence of Patrice de MacMahon, a future President of the French Republic. While the Vincentians had finally brought internal stability to the college, external problems multiplied: political changes, international war, financial instability and the abiding uneasiness of the Irish episcopacy about Paris as a destination for their seminarians.

The Franco-Prussian War of 1870-1 forced the closure of the college, which was transformed into a field hospital where more than 300 injured French soldiers were treated. In autumn 1871, it re-opened but the advent of the third French Republic brought new challenges. In 1873, a Bureau gratuit with responsibility for revenues and related matters was re-established. Paul Cullen and the other Irish bishops were outraged, but in the event the Bureau gratuit was sympathetic to the religious sensitivities of the college. Despite the establishment of a network of seminaries in Ireland, the Irish College in Paris retained a significant role. Between 1832 (the first year for which student registers survive) and 1939 more than 2 000 students passed through its walls, with roughly 1 500 proceeding to ordination. The college was especially important in the pre-Famine period, when there was a shortage of priests in Ireland. It was also very important for particular dioceses, like Cloyne and Kerry, which had strong links with the Irish College. By the mid-1880s it was bursting at the seams, with more than 100 students, but from this point onwards the number of students gradually decreased.

In 1888, the Bureau gratuit initiated a series of repairs which reduced the number of rooms to eighty eight and in 1892 the number of bursary places was temporarily reduced to fifty to save money. The arrival of an energetic new superior, Patrick Boyle, stabilised the situation, but two further crises quickly followed. In 1905, the law of the separation of the churches and the state raised questions about the very existence of the

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college. That it remained open was thanks largely to Boyle's perseverance and the British ambassador's support.

In 1914 the college was forced to close and remained so throughout the First World War. The displaced students were mainly accommodated in Maynooth, while a group of nuns and, in 1916, a cohort of refugees from Verdun occupied the building. By this stage Patrick Boyle had already become a champion of the college. In 1901 he had published the first full history: *The Irish College in Paris from 1578 to 1901*, and followed it up with dozens of articles, pamphlets and translations which established not just its history, but the story of the Irish in France. Boyle was also instrumental in having the college re-opened to students in 1919.

The reports of the Irish bishops who visited in the 1920s were generally positive, but the finances were precarious and the college was struggling by the time Boyle retired in 1926. In the same year the sale of the Collège des Lombards to the city of Paris, to facilitate on-going work to widen the rue des Carmes, was finalised. The older college had been rented to various groups since the 1790s and while most of the college was demolished, the chapel was preserved. The city made it available to the present occupants, the Syriac Catholic community, who re-named the chapel in honour of St Éphrem-le-Syriaque. Against the odds, the number of students at the Irish College gradually increased in the 1930s, but closure was once again inevitable due to war in 1939.

NEW ROLES

The superior, Patrick Travers, left the college as the German army advanced on Paris in 1940, but he got no further than Tours and eventually returned to the capital where he stayed for the rest of the war. His lonely occupation of the college ensured that it remained under Irish control. It was used to store food reserves during the German occupation



and, following the liberation of Paris, Travers permitted its use to facilitate the repatriation of prisoners of war and, later, as a centre for displaced persons run by the US army. Contrary to their attitude after 1918, following the end of the Second World War the Irish bishops showed no interest in re-opening the Irish College as a working seminary. The bishops were therefore favourably disposed to a request from a group of Polish clerics who wished to establish a Polish seminary in Paris. In December 1945, following the departure of the US army, Monsignor Antoni Banaszak and

a group of Polish clerics liberated from Dachau Concentration Camp took up residence.

During the Cold War, the Parisian seminary provided the Polish church with an important centre of activities in the west. One of those who visited on a number of occasions was Karol Wojtyła, the future Pope John Paul II. Meanwhile the war had thrown the finances and administration of the Bureau gratuit into confusion and it was not until 1949 that it began meeting again. Once the finances had been regularised and building work undertaken, the Bureau gratuit agreed to provide summer bursaries for clerical and lay Irish students from Maynooth, Holy Cross College and the National University of Ireland colleges. From 1956 the clerical students were accommodated in the Irish College while they studied at the Institut Catholique or the Sorbonne. The Bureau refused, however, to accommodate Irish students during the academic year and while a Vincentian superior was still in place, he did not reside in the college.

In the 1960s, Monsignor Brendan Devlin, Professor of French at St Patrick's College, Maynooth, began to take an interest in the college and to explore the possibility of re-opening it to Irish students. In the late 1970s he assisted Liam Swords, who was granted permission to live in the college and together they set about re-establishing an Irish presence. In 1984 the Vincentians relinquished the position of superior and Devlin was appointed by the Irish bishops. In his new position, Devlin spearheaded a diplomatic, political and academic campaign in Ireland and France to increase the Irish presence in the college and to establish it as an Irish academic, social and cultural space. The Amis du Collège des Irlandais, created in the mid-1980s, played an important role in the process. Devlin's campaign bore fruit in 1989 when an agreement was reached that Irish students would occupy one half of the college building, with the other half reserved for the Séminaire Polonais. Two years later, the Fondation Irlandaise, the legal trust in which the college was vested, and the Bureau gratuit, whose authority flowed from it, were re-cast to accommodate both Irish and French interests. In 1997, the Polish community moved to a new premises, leaving the Irish in full possession of the building. This paved the way for a complete restoration, funded by the Irish Government, between 2000 and 2002. Today the Collège des Irlandais operates as the Centre Culturel Irlandais, provides accommodation to students, scholars, writers and artists, houses a unique Old Library, a contemporary Médiathèque and a chaplaincy to the Irish Catholic community in Paris.

The Irish College in Paris has a history stretching back almost 450 years, longer than any existing Irish university or academic body. In that time thousands of students have passed through its doors and it continues to be a unique manifestation of the variety and depth of Franco-Irish relations.

Dr Liam Chamber



CENTRE CULTUREL
IRLANDAIS

PARIS

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