

## **30th June 1922: Did Everything Blow Up?**

Eileen M. Ó Dúill, CG

47 Delwood Road Castleknock, Dublin 15

E-mail: info@heirsireland.com

### **History of the Public Record Office in Ireland**

Established on 12 August 1867, the Public Record Office was responsible for the collection of records over 20 years of age (including wills), the Records of the State Papers Office over 50 years of age, court records, and records created by commissions and public bodies. On 11 August 1875, the Public Record Office also became responsible for the records of the Church of Ireland prior to 1870. This collection included documents and court records dating back to the 13<sup>th</sup> century. The following record groups placed in the custody of the Public Records Office from 1867 onward:

- Records of the Central court which were more than 20 years old
- original wills held in probate registries, 1858 to 1894
- records of the Landed Estates Records Office
- Bermingham Tower, Dublin Castle records including Chancery court records from the 13<sup>th</sup> century
- parliamentary records
- records from Dublin Castle - Privy council Office and Chief Secretary's Office over 50 years old
- records of extinct public bodies, courts and commissions

By 1922, the collection also included:

- Census of Ireland 1813, 1821, 1831, 1841, 1851
- 650 parish registers of the Church of Ireland after disestablishment in 1869
- prerogative and diocesan court records including testamentary records and marriage bonds
- Down survey maps

The Irish Independent newspaper account of Saturday 1 July noted that the loss included "priceless documents dating back to 1174... The burning of the records will leave many gaps in Irish history". At the time of the destruction of the Public Records Office in 1922, the office was administered by the Deputy Keeper, Mr. Herbert Woods. His pamphlet "Guide to the Records Deposited in the Public Records Office of Ireland" issued in 1919 provides a comprehensive list of the holdings of the office. Nine years later, the **55<sup>th</sup> Report of the Deputy Keeper of the Public Records** which reports records which were lost makes sad reading by comparison.

### **What Was Lost**

Herbert Woods, Deputy Keeper of the Public Record Office wrote ***A Guide to the Records Deposited in the Public Records Office of Ireland*** in 1919. It is a catalogue of the total collection and makes for very sad reading. Compare Herbert Wood's account with the **55<sup>th</sup> Report of the Deputy Keeper of the Public Record Office and Keeper of the State Papers in Ireland** to see the magnitude of the destruction.

### **Documents which survived the disaster included:**

- 35 rolls of chancery court proceeding dating back to the 14<sup>th</sup> century which were blown out of the building by the blast
- statute rolls of the Irish parliament 1536-37
- index volumes to court proceedings and parliamentary records
- John Lodge's 18<sup>th</sup> century extracts from chancery and other government records
- calendars and indexes of wills, grants of administration and marriage licence bonds
- some will books used to barricade the windows
- some 1851 Census returns for Co. Antrim which had been sent for binding

### **Salved documents and the Rebuilding of the Public Records Office**

Collecting substitute material, copies and transcripts of documents as well as purchasing private collections and accepting donations continues to the present day. These include:

- Contributions from the legal profession including old deeds, rentals, estate records and probate documents and testamentary material.
- Notes and copies made by researchers before 1922
- Church of Ireland clergy whose original registers were lost were asked to provide transcripts of any copies which had been retained in local custody
- Government departments, most notably the Registrar General (20<sup>th</sup> century Census), Valuation Office, Quit Rent Office, Office of Public Works, Irish Land Commission and Department of Education have provided considerable collections.
- Duplicates of some of the destroyed records such as the 17<sup>th</sup> century Book of Survey and Distribution were obtained from the Irish Manuscripts Commission and other sources.
- Co-operation between the governments of Ireland and Great Britain led to the return of Irish records held in England
- Purchase of private collections and donations from the general public. Appeals by the PROI to the general public to return any documents or fragments found after the explosion was disappointing. In recent years, private donations received by the National Archives have been significant.

In 1988 the State Papers Office and the Public Record Office were amalgamated to form the **National Archives of Ireland**. Now located in Bishop's Street providing more space for archives and research facilities. We are expecting a report, in the format of a Deputy Keepers Report shortly. It will detail the current situation and plans for expansion of the Archives for the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

I would like to close by giving the last word to **Herbert Woods**, Deputy Keeper, 1921-1923: "The Irish Records Office is starting again like a new country almost without a history...but the memory of the past will ever hang like a cloud over the building...no doubt much of the contents of the Public Records Office would be designated as rubbish by the man in the street, who is ignorant or careless about the annals of the past...the difficulties of genealogical study will be increased a hundredfold in the future... "The tragedy of 1922 lies in the fact that the method of assembling public records under one roof was the very means of making such a destruction possible."

### ***Bibliography:***

Philomena Connolly, "The Destruction of the Public Records of Ireland in 1922: Disaster and Recovery", ***Archivum*** (1996): 135-146.

Margaret Griffith, ***A Short Guide to the Public Record Office of Ireland*** (Dublin: The Stationery Office, 1964)

Aideen Ireland, "The Building of the Public Record Office of Ireland and Its Destruction in 1922", in ***Aspects of Irish Genealogy: Proceedings of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Irish Genealogical Congress***. Chris Ryan, editor. (Dublin, Ireland: Irish Genealogical Congress Committee, 1999)

James F. Morrissey, Deputy Keeper of the Records, ***The Fifth-Fifth Report of the Deputy Keeper of the Public Records and Keeper of the State Papers in Ireland***. (Dublin, Ireland: The Stationery Office, 1928)

Eileen O'Byrne, "Beetham and Lodge". In ***Aspects of Irish Genealogy: Proceedings of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Irish Genealogical Congress***. M.D. Evans, editor. (Dublin, Ireland: Irish Genealogical Congress Committee, 1996)

Ernie O'Malley, ***The Singing Flame***. (Dublin, Ireland: Anvil Books Ltd., 1978)

Mark Tierney, ***Ireland Since 1870*** (Palmerstown, Dublin, Ireland: C.J. Fallon, 1994)

Herbert Woods, ***A Guide to the Records Deposited in the Public Records Office of Ireland***, (Dublin, Ireland: His Majesty's Stationery Office, 1919)