

## **Nora Moroney ICHS Blog – NLI Research Studentship 2018/2019**

It has been a privilege to have been the ICHS Research Studentship holder at the National Library of Ireland for the past year. Having just finished a PhD on 19<sup>th</sup> century Irish writing, I was delighted to get the chance to further explore the vast range of manuscript holdings in Special Collections – and to switch sides of the desk from researcher to archivist. My main responsibility as a Research Student was to arrange and catalogue major nineteenth-century landed estates collections. These were a fascinating insight into the lived experience of major Irish families across the eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Two of the main collections I completed were the Greene Family papers and the Bagwell Estate papers. Focusing respectively on their holdings in Kildare and Tipperary, the collected papers of these families reflect the patterns of land ownership, tenancy and estate management that characterised much of Irish rural life during this period. Apart from revealing biographical details of the families in question, collections such as these also represent a major resource for researchers interested in the social and economic life of both landowners and tenants, as the rental papers, land deeds and tax records contain a wealth of material regarding local conditions and history.

Part of the attracting of working on a full collection such as the Greene Family papers was the potential to stumble across intriguing leads or characters that often remain occluded from major historical narratives. For example, Arthur Pageitt Greene trained as a doctor and worked for many years in Argentina during nineteenth century, while his second cousin Abigail Simpson spent most of her later life in psychiatric care in Dublin, branded ‘of unsound mind’. Arthur’s voice emerges strongly from this archive, through personal correspondence, medical records and a lengthy narrative he wrote about his time in Argentina. Abigail, on the other hand, is silent (and silenced), although her experience is recorded through a considerable mass of official documentation around her health and status. The intersections and divergences between their two narratives thus act a lens into the social practices and medical history of this period. These two lives were particularly compelling to me, and I presented a paper on them at the International Association for the Study of Irish Literatures (IASIL) annual conference in TCD in July 2019. The Bagwell Estate Papers similarly contained much of interest regarding the Landed Estates Commission, maps of landholdings in Tipperary, and personal correspondence (in doing so, giving a glimpse of what it was like living as landed gentry in Ireland at a time when their status and livelihood was becoming increasingly eroded and threatened).

During my final few months I also got the chance to work on literary papers, a particular passion of mine. I was responsible for running a mini-exhibition on the newly-catalogued Kate O’Brien papers, and undertook the arrangement and cataloguing of the Austin Clarke Additional papers and the rearrangement of part of the Eilís Dillon collection. Although the technical work of cataloguing can sometimes be challenging, the skills are vital to understanding the structure of library records, and

will be invaluable to me in future research on primary sources and archives. I also worked on a rotating basis as Archivist on Duty, the public facing role of Manuscripts department's reader services. This role involved managing orders, liaising with readers over phone and email, and working closely with the Library's retrieval and conservation teams. It was rewarding to be able to explore the extent of the Library's collections for readers, and allowed me to discover material I wouldn't have known about otherwise. In a similar vein, I was also responsible for giving tours of the manuscripts department for visiting groups of students and researchers. This was a particularly enjoyable aspect of the job, as it meant meeting a wide range of people with varying research interests and 'opening up' the archive for them. It also gave me a chance to research the background of the NLI and the history of its collections and acquisitions across the twentieth century.

Ultimately, a year spent as a Research Student at one of Ireland's most important cultural institutions was an unparalleled experience, giving me a taste of archival work as well as allowing me to delve into the history and culture of the island through its manuscript collections. From giving genealogical tours to grappling with the software MARC 21, it equipped me with a range of skills that will be essential to my future research career. For anyone looking to enhance their knowledge of manuscript research through archival-based work, this studentship offers the perfect opportunity and I would recommend anyone with an interest to consider applying.