

Ciara Stewart ICHS Blog – NLI Research Studentship 2019/2020

It has been an incredible joy and privilege to be awarded the National Library of Ireland Research Studentship for 2019/2020. As I was in the process of completing a PhD on nineteenth-century Irish women, and having worked with manuscript collections in the NLI before, I was eager to have the opportunity to work behind the scenes of special collections. I knew it would be an invaluable experience to learn, first-hand, how items are catalogued and how a collection comes together.

My main task was to arrange and catalogue the FitzMaurice Estate papers. This collection mainly includes the financial and legal estate papers of numerous members of the FitzMaurice family. The main contributor to the collection was William FitzMaurice, a land agent from Kelvin Grove in Carlow. As he was a land agent, the papers of numerous clients are included within the collection, which is comprised of manuscript items from the Burton, Baillie and Rochfort estates. There are 40 volumes in the collection, most of which are account books belonging to William.

One of the most fascinating items in the collection are the papers of William's son, Colonel Arthur Joseph William FitzMaurice, from Laurel Lodge in Carlow. He was Captain of the 5th Battalion of the Royal Irish Rifles during WW1 and his papers include letter books, war diaries, notes and instructions on the use of weapons and other war related items.

Overall, the items in this collection offer a great deal of information on landed estates in Ireland, particularly on the work of a land agent, like William FitzMaurice. It has a wide range of items such as deeds, leases, marriage settlements correspondence with solicitors, a stamp collection and some ephemera. This collection contains valuable material that depicts how estates in Carlow were managed in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. There are even deeds and other legal documents from as far back as the sixteenth century. Therefore, this collection is a vital contribution to the history of Carlow itself.

My other duties as research student included acting as Archivist on Duty for the manuscripts department. In this role I greatly improved my customer service skills as I had to answer reader's queries by phone and by email in a timely manner. I also expanded my knowledge of the library's holdings so that I could answer queries efficiently.

A part of my role as research student was also to organise tours of the reading rooms. For this I had to curate select manuscript items to put on display for the visiting groups of researchers and students based on their chosen periods of study and interest. My experience with providing tours further improved my confidence

and public speaking skills, as well as allowing me to learn more about the manuscripts department and the collections that are held there.

I was also granted the amazing opportunity to present a paper entitled 'Rebellious women in the National Library: Archival collections of women in Irish politics, ca 1870-1918' for International Women's Day and for Heritage week. To prepare for this, I wrote about NLI collections I have consulted for my own PhD research. However, I also wanted to learn more about the NLI's holdings on Irish women, so I examined other collections I had not used previously, such as the Rosamond Jacob papers. This was a very valuable opportunity to not only highlight some of the incredible manuscript materials held here on Irish women, but also to examine other collections I had not seen before. I wanted to present a paper that could help introduce these collections to students and researchers who had not yet considered consulting materials held in the NLI.

During lockdown, I had to work from home. This allowed me to work on making digitised materials more available from the Library's Decade of Commemorations digitisation projects. In addition to this, I have been enhancing the collection level descriptions and writing author biographies for the collections in our Towards a Republic digitisation project. To conduct this work, I utilised resources such as the Irish Census, various ancestry databases and the Dictionary of Irish Biography. Working on this helped further my knowledge of how collections are catalogued, which was very useful when I was preparing my own collection.

The year I spent in the NLI was an absolutely incredible learning experience. There were of course some challenges, as the FitzMaurice papers was quite a large and daunting collection. However, thanks to the help of the unbelievably kind NLI staff, I was able to arrange a manuscript collection as well as gain valuable experience in other areas of archival work. I cannot recommend this studentship enough, as it has greatly improved my skills as a researcher of Irish history.