

## **Dr Kate Brophy ICHS Blog – NLI Research Studentship 2020/2021**

Beginning my studentship in the midst of a lockdown, my first weeks with the NLI were spent working from home. Unable to physically access the archives, much of this time was spent learning the ropes of Virtua – the library’s cataloguing programme. To the uninitiated, the complexities of this system are somewhat daunting but with the patience and skilled guidance of my new colleagues I was soon proficient enough to embark on my own cataloguing project. This entailed researching the dates of death for thousands of individuals who had authored works held by the NLI and updating Virtua accordingly. A requirement of copyright law, this project meant that the NLI could then make digitised copies of many of these works freely available to the public via its website.

With the easing of restrictions, I was more than excited to begin working onsite. My first assignment was to list, arrange, rehouse and catalogue the Lally-Tolendal papers. Arriving on my desk in just two boxes, this collection is concerned with two Frenchmen of Irish descent – Thomas-Arthur Comte de Lally, Baron de Tolendal (1702-1766) and his son Trophime-Gérard, marquis de Lally-Tollendal (1751-1830). The majority of the collection concerns the confiscation of Thomas-Arthur's estate by the French authorities arising from his conviction of treason (and subsequent execution) for alleged military failings in Pondicherry, India and the protracted efforts of his son to have this sequestration lifted as part of a broader endeavour to clear his father's name. It also concerns the emigration of Trophime-Gérard from revolutionary France, his related quest for recognition as a subject of both Britain and France, and his claims and interests in Ireland and France. As a relatively small holding, working on the Lally-Tolendal papers afforded me the perfect opportunity to develop my archiving skills before undertaking my main project – the Coolattin papers.

A much larger endeavour, I set to work on the Coolattin Estate Administration papers. Arriving in ten large boxes, this portion of the collection is comprised of approximately 15,000 items. Spanning a period from the mid-1920s to the early 1960s, these records cover a diverse range of matters related to the management of the estate which once covered one-fifth of County Wicklow or 85,000 acres. Owned by the Fitzwilliam family who had their family seat at Wentworth Woodhouse in Yorkshire – the largest stately home in Britain – Coolattin served as a secondary residence. While the collection affords glimpses into the lives of Coolattin’s aristocratic owners, the lion’s share of the material focuses on the more prosaic realities of keeping such a vast estate afloat.

As is typical with large estates, the Land Agent was a pivotal to the entire enterprise and the centrality of this role is clearly reflected in this collection. Thousands of items in the collection concern decisions taken by the Agent in relation to employees, tenants, guests and neighbours of the estate. Insights into both social and economic history of the period may be gleaned from the voluminous records kept on the day-to-day running of the Coolattin sawmill, quarry, building yard, farm, house and gardens. Letters, notes, and lists documenting who was hired, fired, the level of wages and pension paid are interspersed throughout collection. The multitude of letters seeking direct financial assistance or employment on the

estate are similarly revealing. The fate of many who fell afoul of the Coolattin management be it as poachers, trespassers, or debtors can be traced in the abundance of correspondence sent between the estate authorities and various solicitor firms.

The period covered in these papers witnessed a steep decline in the fortunes of the 'Big Houses' dotted across Britain and Ireland, and Coolattin was no exception. This collection details the ongoing financial struggles faced by the estate and the various strategies developed to counter these difficulties. The impact of the Great Depression raised serious concerns as to the financial viability of the estate. A response to these growing anxieties, in the early 1930s a comprehensive valuation of the Coolattin Estate was commissioned. It calculated the value of the holding to be £95,530. It was, however, decided that owing to 'the abnormal conditions prevailing in Ireland' this figure should be reduced by almost £8000. The abnormality in question appears to be a reference to the contemporaneous growth in popularity of de Valera's Fianna Fáil party. With the subsequent onset of the Economic War, in October 1932 the Fitzwilliam family solicitor based in Yorkshire wrote to the Coolattin Land Agent expressing his anxieties as to what this deterioration in Anglo-Irish relations would mean for 'larger estates in Ireland belonging to Britishers'. Declaring such concerns to be a product of 'scaremongering' by the British press, the Agent replied that 'The one thing that is required in this country is people who can and will give employment'. This optimism proved to be largely justified. Fianna Fail made no direct attempts to dismantle such estates. The trade war did, however, create a range of logistical obstacles for the Fitzwilliam estate management with newly imposed import and export duties choking long-established supply lines between Coolattin and Wentworth. The paper trail left behind reads as something of a precursor to the present day realities of the Brexit fallout.

The outbreak of the Second World War further added to Coolattin's woes. Hundreds of the items in this collection relate directly to the 'Emergency' shortages. In addition to the difficulties in keeping the stores of Coolattin House stocked with food and alcohol, fuel shortages posed a major obstacle to keeping the estate's many enterprises running. The Land Agent was routinely in contact with the Department of Supplies with the aim of securing the permits necessary to purchase the fuel required to run all manner of equipment and vehicles.

Having completed my PhD on Irish Catholic missionaries in the twentieth century, the religious aspects of these papers were of particular interest to me. While the Fitzwilliam family are widely recognised as having been uncommonly liberal in their treatment of their Catholic tenants, sectarian divides are still very much evident in this collection. Although religion is rarely mentioned in relation to employees of the estate's many enterprises such as the sawmill or quarry, it was a different matter when it came to staffing Coolattin House itself. As documented in a number of these files, when employing domestic staff, a 'Protestant if possible' policy remained in place throughout the period covered in these papers.

This preference for Protestants is also documented in the files related to schools. With a long-established tradition of the Coolattin Land Agent acting as manager of a handful of Protestant estate primary schools, the estate provided top-ups to the salaries of their teachers as well as other benefits-in-kind such as such as fuel to heat school buildings. Reflecting the wider

decline of Coolattin, the records reveal that following the conclusion of the Second World War, the estate sought to divest itself of such obligations and transferred the management of schools to other parties.

While a narrative of decline is clearly evident in these papers, this collection is by no means a one dimensional tale of woe. It also provides a rich record of many cheerier occasions ranging from the day-to-day preparations for local fêtes, sporting competitions and shooting parties to the more extravagant affairs such as Fitzwilliam family weddings and birthday parties. These aspects of the collection add a richness to understandings of the period.

In addition to working on collections, I also worked as Archivist on Duty for the manuscripts department. This entailed replying to phone and email queries concerning a broad range of matters. This aspect of my work was especially helpful in expanding my knowledge of the NLI's diverse and vast range of collections.

I was also afforded the opportunity to present an online talk on my own area of expertise – Catholic missionary history – as part of the NLI's contribution to Heritage Week. Titled 'Irish Catholic Missionaries and the British Empire', it allowed me to showcase my research and highlight the importance of the NLI's extensive collection of missionary magazines to my doctoral research.

The studentship provides unique insights into the workings of libraries and archives, and first-hand experience of the archiving process. The skills and knowledge gained are invaluable to researchers, and I do not hesitate to recommend the position to other postgraduate and postdoctoral students.