

Dr Bridget Harrison ICHS Blog – Research studentship 2021/2022

I was hugely excited to take up the 2021/2022 ICHS research studentship at the National Library of Ireland. As a historian of nineteenth-century Ireland, I was already familiar with the breadth and importance of the NLI's collections and was enthusiastic about the opportunity to contribute to such a valuable institution. The chance to carry out an in-depth piece of research into a collection that interested me and the opportunity to formulate a new research project this work afforded me was simply too good to turn down.

The research studentship provides a great deal of training to help you fulfil your duties. I was initially given an overview of how to employ General International Standard Archival Description (ISAD(G)), the standards used by archives internationally. I then received training in cataloguing using MARC21 and the Library of Congress subject headings on Virtua, the library catalogue used across the NLI. These skills are transferrable to work in other archives and libraries, so I was extremely glad of the opportunity to receive this training. Additionally, I was encouraged to take advantage of the Library's Continual Professional Development training catalogue, offering a wide range of courses from mindfulness to cybersecurity to unconscious bias.

My first collection was the T.M. Donovan papers. This was a two box collection of correspondence, draft memoranda and diaries from a little-known Kerry author. This small collection was intended to help me grow familiar with sorting and cataloguing. It consisted of letters the author sent to the National Library regularly throughout the latter part of his life (around 1932-1948), along with other correspondence, diaries and memoranda, sent in an ad hoc manner so that they would be preserved for posterity. The collection ultimately proved to be surprisingly engaging, illuminating contemporary political anxieties and rural culture, through the lens of one elderly man.

I then began work on my main project, which was to list, arrange, rehouse and catalogue the Daly of Dunsandle papers. This was the collection I based my application on, and consisted of estate papers from a land-owning family in Galway, spanning from 1667 to 1954, with most dating from 1880 to 1920. After rehousing, it spread to an expansive 83 boxes and 131 volumes. The bulk of the collection are accounts and other financial papers, tenancy records and papers related to estate management, including the management of bogs and timber cutting.

I had hoped to use the collection to examine how the landed gentry interacted with the Catholic Church, particularly with regards to charity and almsgiving. While I found useful records related to this, I found myself drawn into the relationships between landlord and tenant far more than I expected. As my PhD research was on Irish convents, for a nineteenth-century

historian I knew relatively little about the dynamics of land ownership and land agitation. A huge proportion of the collection addressed this in one form or another, be it through rent books recording biannual payments by townland, or correspondence from disgruntled tenants demanding repairs. One of the most fascinating aspects of the collection were the large number of court documents for offences such as trespass, poaching and the cutting of turf. In examining these, I was struck by how the court system helped to reinforce the Daly's ownership of the land, seemingly in contradiction to the way many locals interacted with it. Archiving this collection illuminated the dynamic and fraught relationship between landlords and tenants during the Land War in a way I had never before understood.

Upon completing the Daly of Dunsandle papers, I then moved on to assist with the cataloguing of the John Redmond papers, which are in the process of being digitised as part of the Towards a Republic digitisation and engagement project. John Redmond is one of several prominent nationalist leaders whose records were selected for cataloguing and digitisation as part of the Decade of Centenaries commemoration in the NLI. His correspondence is remarkably complete and provide an invaluable insight into the later years of constitutional nationalism. A small detail about the work that I really enjoyed is that I needed to number some of the items, which involved placing their call number on the back with pencil. It is an oddly exciting thing to literally leave my mark on such important historical documents.

Aside from archiving itself, I also had an opportunity to learn more about how the library operated. I was placed on the rota to serve as archivist on duty, the person responsible for answering public queries about manuscript collections and preparing orders for the manuscript reading room. While sometimes challenging, the role really helped me get to grips with the National Library collection and helped me to see how the different researchers benefited from it. I also provided tours of the library to visiting researchers, in order to help them get to grips with the collections and ordering procedures.

The studentship helped me to enhance my research skills and improve my own discipline with regards to meticulous and uniform note-keeping - something I woefully lacked and desperately needed during my PhD! The experience of working in an archive also helped to illuminate many of the procedures and systems that seemed unintuitive to me when I approached them as a researcher. However, for me personally the greatest benefit was exposure to a different career path than that of academia. Taking a year to work outside of a university environment helped me to examine what employment opportunities were open to me, what transferable skills I had and what I wanted out of my career. I would heartily recommend the studentship and I feel so fortunate that I had the opportunity to undertake it.