

General Information Series



Selecting Records for Preservation

The Public Record Office of Northern Ireland (PRONI) was established in 1923 as the archive for the province, and contains records of the Northern Ireland central and local government departments and the courts, as well as private and business records.

Public Records

The Public Records Act (NI) 1923 and the Disposal of Documents Order, No. 167, 1925, places responsibility for the management of public records on the appropriate government department or public body. Each department appoints a Departmental Record Officer to be responsible for the care of all its records (including electronic records). PRONI staff liaise with Departmental Record Officers and their staff on the selection of records for permanent preservation and on the transfer of records to PRONI. They also advise on good record keeping, and promote the effective and efficient management of records across departments.

Selection of public records for preservation takes place in two stages. The first, when the records have passed out of active use, usually takes place ten years after a record has been created. At this point, records that are obviously worthless are destroyed. Records that may still be needed for future administrative purposes, or future research, are kept for a further review at a later date. This process, known as 'second review', takes place when the record is twenty years old. With the perspective of time it is easier to judge which of the records are worth preserving permanently.

The 1925 Order also provides for the deposit of records in places other than the Public Record Office, at the discretion of the Keeper of the Records. An example of such practice is the records of local authority burial grounds. As family plots can be opened for fresh interments for decades after they were first used, the records are continually referred to.

Private and Business Records

PRONI staff are happy to advise prospective depositors on the historical, legal or political worth of their private papers. We are particularly interested in those papers that relate to Northern Ireland - its land, people, culture and history. Examples of the type of records we would be prepared to preserve permanently are:

- Pre-19th century title deeds and legal papers
- Emigrants correspondence
- Papers and correspondence of prominent people from Northern Ireland such as writers, historians, politicians and academics
- Business records from both current and defunct organisations
- Records from community groups such as charities, advice centres, self-help groups and cultural societies
- Church records (all denominations)
- Sports groups and special interest groups
- Political parties and pressure groups.

As can be seen from the above list, records need not necessarily be very old, nor do they need to belong to famous people. For example, our collections of emigrant letters are, in the main, written by ordinary people to their families back home. These letters are of enormous interest to those studying Irish, American, Canadian, Australian or British history, as emigrants usually made comparisons between Ireland and the country in which they settled. Emigrants often recorded such information as the availability of work, the average wage for an occupation and the general cost of living. Genealogists too, are interested in emigrant letters: they can be invaluable in helping put together a family tree.

On the other hand, there is a limit to the storage space available in PRONI. This means that we have to be very selective in the documents we acquire. We prefer, where possible, not to take duplicates of material already in our custody: newspapers, pamphlets and other printed material are not normally accepted and, unless yours is a very prominent family, the fruits of your genealogical research will not be gathered in.

If you are considering depositing your records in PRONI, then there are three ways in which this can be done: one, as an outright gift, when PRONI will accept all responsibility for the records, including sorting them into a logical sequence, making a coherent list (a copy of which will be given to you), and storing them in secure and environmentally controlled conditions. Your records will be carefully preserved for posterity. PRONI will also take over responsibility for the terms of access and copyright.

Should you wish to retain ownership of your documents, you should consider an indefinite loan. This means that you retain all rights to the documents but in all other respects your documents will be treated as above.

Alternatively, you may like to consider a short-term loan to PRONI for copying. We will, subject to your approval and our finances permitting, make copies (usually on microfilm) before returning the originals to you. The copies will be treated as a gift.

