



**Public Record Office  
of Northern Ireland**

# **THE MAJOR RESEARCH STRENGTHS OF PRONI**

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## Introduction

The Public Record Office of Northern Ireland (PRONI) was established in 1923 and opened in 1924 as the official repository for public records in Northern Ireland. It receives records from government departments, courts of law, local authorities and other public bodies, as one might expect of a Public Record Office; and, more unexpectedly, from 'big houses', private individuals, churches, businesses and all manner of private-sector institutions. PRONI currently has over 55 kilometres of records running – unevenly, for basically, it is a repository of modern records - from 1219 to the present day. A series of *County Guides* (of which Cos Armagh, Fermanagh and, imminently, Tyrone have so far been published), seek to rationalise these vast and diverse holdings on a geographico-thematic basis.

For most areas of research relevant to PRONI, the records held by it are important, well-catalogued, easily accessible and greatly under-utilised. In particular, PRONI offers the economic or business historian a wide variety of archive material relating to all sectors of the Northern Irish economy and documenting the economic development of Northern Ireland from the 18th through to the second half of the 20th century. Up to now, this rich vein has remained largely unworked: there is, for example, no specific study, based on archival material, on the Northern Ireland economy since the second World War. In many areas of social, religious, artistic, etc, history, PRONI's records are equally significant and untapped. There is (to quote one striking example) an annual John Hewitt summer school, but few people have yet consulted the John Hewitt archive, which he generously bequeathed to PRONI.



## Landed Estates Records

PRONI's landed estate archives (sometimes referred to as 'Big House' archives) include those of the great private owners (the Dukes of Abercorn in Co. Tyrone, the Marquesses of Downshire in Co. Down and the Earls of Antrim in Co. Antrim, for example), and those of many institutional owners like the London Companies (the Drapers and Salters Companies, for example) who were granted almost all of the re-named county of Londonderry at the Plantation. They are likely to include everything from estate papers to the personal and career papers of members of these great families at home and abroad. Many of PRONI's largest and most important archives fall into this category. A two-volume general *Guide to Landed Estate Records* and a specific *Guide to the Records of... the London Companies* have been published.



## **Business Records**

PRONI also holds what is probably the largest collection of business records in the British Isles. Among them can be found the names that have made Northern Ireland famous for linen, ships and engineering. The most extensive holdings of business records relate to the linen industry; more than 250 companies are represented, and full (though by now slightly out-of-date) details are provided in *The Ulster Textile Industry: a Catalogue of Business Records in PRONI relating principally to the Linen Industry in Ulster*. These business records can be studied alongside related classes of records deposited by employers' associations, trade unions, public utilities, solicitors, banks and government departments. Mention should also be made of one other, rather unusual source for the economic historian; this is the recently catalogued professional and personal papers, 1937-95, of R.D.C Black, Professor of Economics at Queen's University, Belfast, and author of *Economic Thought and the Irish Question*.



## Emigrant Letters

One of PRONI's outstanding resources in the sphere of economic and social history is its 'emigrant letters' – many of them components of archives, many of them the result of a deliberate collecting policy pursued by PRONI on both sides of the Atlantic. North American historians of emigration from Ireland who are familiar with this resource have described it as *the largest as well as the most professionally stored and catalogued collection of Irish emigrant letters in the world, possibly surpassing in size all other collections of trans-Atlantic emigrant correspondence, regardless of ethnicity*. The emigrant letters are as much about Northern Ireland as they are about North America (and Australia and New Zealand, etc). The emigrants remained, in many practical as well as psychological ways, deeply involved with their homelands and intimately involved with the history of those places. The remissions they sent home have an influence, not only on the standard-of-living of their families, but on Northern Ireland's general economy. ... Emigrants returning home to settle often brought with them capital for investment in new enterprises which also stimulated economic growth. Their visits home and their letters, especially when (as was often the case) read beyond the family circle, raised expectations for personal and social improvements even among those who never emigrated. ...' PRONI's emigrant letters, and other emigration-related documentation held by PRONI, constitute a high proportion of the Emigration Database held at the Ulster American Folk Park outside Omagh, Co. Tyrone; the original documents remain with PRONI.



## **Sport, the Arts and Entertainment**

In the recreational spheres of sport, the arts and entertainment, PRONI has in its custody a wide range of material. Sport in Northern Ireland, which generally speaking was organised on a Province of Ulster basis, took off in the late-19th century and much of the impetus was generated by the presence of the armed services. Cricket, football, hockey and rugby in particular benefited from this presence. Northern Ireland's sporting history is an important part of its cultural heritage and is well documented in PRONI. Minute books for a number of major sports clubs and organizations are available for research. These include the Ulster Branch of the Irish Rugby Football Union, 1886-1983, Linfield Football and Athletic Club, 1934-72, the Ulster Women's Hockey Union, 1905-93, and the Ulster Council of the Irish Lawn Tennis Association, 1927-70.

Literary and related records include those of local writers such as W.R. Rodgers (1909-69), poet, prose essayist, book reviewer, radio broadcaster, script writer, lecturer and, latterly, teacher – a career which spans an amazing series of professional and cultural transformations. The papers of John Hewitt, poet, writer, art critic, and journalist, have already been mentioned; they contain a large amount of correspondence with other writers and document his involvement in the Regionalist movement amongst Ulster writers in the post-war decades. Correspondence with many other local writers, such as St John Ervine, George Sheils, Forrest Reid, Seamus Heaney and Michael Longley, can also be found in a number of private archives. Also available are the papers of Belfast-born H. Montgomery Hyde, historian, biographer, politician, and secret agent; those of Miss Mary McNeill, also Belfast-born, and the biographer of Mary Anne McCracken and those of the late J.C. Beckett, Professor of Irish History at QUB, 1958-75, and of the late Professor E.R.R. Green, Director of the Institute of Irish Studies at QUB, 1970-81.

There is a wealth of material relating to the theatre in Ireland from the eighteenth century onwards, and records of several cinema houses in Belfast, eg the Midland Picture House, which was in operation, 1921-41. The records of the Royal Ulster Academy of Arts, incorporating the papers of its forerunners, the Belfast Sketching Club, the Belfast Art Society and the Ulster Academy of Arts, provide a

comprehensive history of exhibitions of Ulster painters during the last 100 years. The papers of Tyrone-born Sir Robert Ponsonby Staples (1853-1943), Protestant Home Ruler and painter of growing repute, are present in PRONI. Also of interest is the recently acquired archive of the Northern Ireland Arts Council and its predecessor, the Council for the Encouragement of Music and the Arts, 1947-80.



## **Architects and Architecture**

Another category of valuable research material held by PRONI is records relating to architects and architecture. The records of the firms of Young & McKenzie and Lanyon & Lynn are but two significant examples. The family and estate archive of the Earls of Gosford includes important and unused material documenting the English architect, Thomas Hopper's, most important Irish commission, Gosford Castle, Markethill, Co. Armagh, c.1820; and the estate archive of the Brownlow family, Lords Lurgan, includes some 400 drawings by the Scottish architect, William Playfair, for Brownlow House, Lurgan, in the same county, c.1840; and so on.



## Social History

In the realm of social history, PRONI holds a vast array of material relating to health, wealth, poverty, crime and punishment, education, religion, housing, gender, etc. Beginning from the early 18th century, the material increases markedly in range and quantity in the 19th century with greater government involvement in the economy and in society. The records of the Boards of Guardians from c. 1840 to c.1940 are one major example. However, records from the voluntary as well as public sector also feature prominently in PRONI's holdings, which include the archive of The Belfast Charitable Society, founded in 1752, and that of Bryson House, Belfast, whose predecessor body was founded in 1906. PRONI has always been eager to receive the records of such organisations, but a concerted drive to acquire them began in 1995 as an integral part of PRONI's policy of preserving material unique to Northern Ireland, with special reference to the last 30 years of 'Troubles'. This period has witnessed a dramatic increase in the number of community organisations operating in Northern Ireland - voluntary groups, charities and professional bodies involved in the arts, the media and in cross-community development. Those who have already deposited papers in response to this archives 'drive' include Dunlewey Substance Advice Centre, Belfast Law Centre, Belfast Masonic Charities, the West Belfast Festival, the community magazine *Rushlight*, the Church's Central Committee on Community Work, Protestant and Catholic Encounter and Brownlow Community Trust.



## Education

PRONI holds thousands of records of the national/public elementary schools from c.1830; indeed, more national school records survive for the Six Counties (and are in PRONI) than for the rest of Ireland. Despite the establishment of the national school system there remained much private education in the nineteenth century and some records for these schools have survived and are held by PRONI. One of the most important in Belfast, then and today, was The Royal Belfast Academical Institution (or 'Inst') with records dating from 1810. In addition PRONI holds the records relating to education administration in Northern Ireland by local authorities since 1898 and central government since 1921, together with the records of the Belfast Branch of the Irish National Teachers' Organisation and the papers of the first Northern Ireland Minister of Education, Lord Londonderry, author of the Education Act of 1923. All these sources are brought together in PRONI's *Guide to Educational Records*.



## **Women's History**

The influence of Northern Ireland women, both in the 'traditional' roles of wife, mother and mistress, and as spearheads of social reform and health care, as pioneers of scientific study, and as prominent figures in the Arts and politics, is reflected in the records deposited by government departments, local authorities, public bodies and private businesses and individuals. PRONI's *Guide to Sources for Women's History* describes these sources in great detail.



## **The Labour Movement and Trade Unions**

The history of the labour movement in Northern Ireland is well covered by PRONI's large collection of various trade union papers, as well as those of union activists. These include: the papers of the Journeyman Cabinet Makers of Belfast, 1788-1885, of the Belfast Operative Bakers' Society, etc; the papers of Patrick Agnew, trade unionist and Labour MP for South Armagh; papers relating to the General Strike, 1926; records of the Ulster Farmers Union; and a typescript of a BBC radio interview with contemporaries of James Larkin.



## Religion

Another rich source is archives relating to religion generally and denominational history in particular. PRONI holds individual church registers for all the main denominations in Northern Ireland since the nineteenth century. An early and striking example is the recently catalogued archive of Carnmoney Presbyterian Church, in south-east Antrim, 1686-1821, whose session books provide an insight into the social control exerted by the church session and into the social mores of the period in matters like illegitimacy, pre-marital sex, etc.

PRONI also holds a large amount of correspondence relating to the central and local organization of each of the Churches - their administration, congregations, ministers, priests, etc. One good example of an archive deriving from an individual ecclesiastic is that of Lord John George Beresford, Church of Ireland Archbishop of Armagh, 1822-62; PRONI's section of this much-dispersed archive comprises letters and papers relating to various issues including tithe composition and anti-tithe agitation; Irish Church reform, with particular reference to the Commission of Ecclesiastical Inquiry, the Irish Church Bill of 1833, the value of Church livings and of archbishoprics and bishoprics, etc. This archive should be studied in conjunction with the Armagh Diocesan Registry Archive, also present in PRONI. PRONI has published a *Guide to Tithe Records* to assist the ecclesiastical historian and, even more, the family historian and genealogist.



## **Political History**

Whether the subject be the evolution of local government structures or the workings of a modern day civil service, PRONI - with its mixture of private and official archives essential for such work – is uniquely placed to facilitate the researcher. Records relating to central government include the papers of the Cabinet Committees which document a vital part of the workings of the Northern Ireland government at Stormont. They provide a valuable insight into the decision-making process in key areas such as employment, transport, conscription and post-war reconstruction. They also illuminate the way in which government departments tackled various issues and in addition they put the spotlight on the role played by civil servants in the decision-making process. PRONI has published a *Guide to Cabinet Conclusions, 1921-43* and a *Guide to the Cabinet Committees, 1921-58*.

The Cabinet Conclusions and related memoranda in CAB/4 (a searchable digital copy is available in the search room) provide an insight into the very heart of government. However, it is impossible properly to comprehend the significance or origins of many matters without examining the appropriate papers in the relevant departmental archive. Indeed, the researcher should regard the Cabinet Conclusions as a point of entry or index to the work of the Northern Ireland administration as a whole. Vital as a adjunct to these official records are the papers of individual civil servants such as Sir Ernest Clark and Sir Wilfrid Spender, the first two Heads of the Northern Ireland Civil Service.

Records of local government running from the seventeenth century to the present day are available for consultation in PRONI. They include the records of Manor Courts, Parish Vestries, Grand Juries, Corporations, Town Commissioners, Boards of Guardians, County and District Councils, and in more recent times, the records of other public bodies such as the Northern Ireland Housing Executive, the Education and Library Boards, the Health Boards, the Hospitals, etc. For the seventeenth, eighteenth and much of the nineteenth century, such official records need to be supplemented by the privately deposited records of the great landed and mercantile families. Indeed, for as long as local government was a largely amateur affair, the records of the great landowners are the most important source for its study.

The records of these same families are also, for obvious reasons, the most important source for the study of local politics and elections, up to the early twentieth century. From the mid-nineteenth century, they are supplemented by the archives of the many firms of Northern Ireland solicitors who acted as registration or election agents and whose papers in those capacities are present in PRONI along with the rest of the archives of their firms; J. Whiteside Dane and Sir Charles Falls of the Enniskillen solicitors' practice which became known as Falls & Hanna are good examples for the period c.1880-c.1920.

In general, PRONI's sources for the political history of Northern Ireland, particularly from the nineteenth century onwards, have been more widely used than the sources described up to now. Yet, even in this sphere, there remains much to be done. PRONI holds a remarkable range of papers deriving from individual politicians and from political organizations, running from the eighteenth century to the present day. The individual politicians/political families include the Tennent family of Belfast, 1750-1845; all were involved in varying degrees in the major political movements of the era, in particular the United Irishmen, parliamentary reform and Catholic Emancipation. Also present are the papers, c.1780-c.1820, of Dr William Drennan (described by a recent descendant as a 'Gentle Jacobin'), founder of the Society of United Irishmen, which contain a wealth of information on late-18th century radical politics. The Cleland, McCance, McPeake and many other collections or archives document the 1798 Rebellion itself. For the 19th century there are the papers of William Sharman-Crawford, MP, Co. Down landlord and great champion of Tenant Right, and the Rev. J.B. Armour, Presbyterian Minister and Home Ruler. For researchers interested in the development of the Orange Order, PRONI holds the papers of William Johnston of Ballykilbeg including the diaries of this prominent Orangeman and MP, covering the period 1850 to 1884, and those of the late Aiken McClelland, historian of and honorary archivist to the Orange Order.

The birth and growth of Unionism is well documented in a mass of printed material, including press cuttings and items produced by Irish unionists for propaganda purposes (maps, posters, leaflets and pamphlets). There are also minute books relating to the various committees set up by such Irish unionist organizations as the

Irish Loyal and Patriotic Union, the Irish Unionist Alliance, the Unionist Anti-Partition League, the Ulster Unionist Council, the Ulster Unionist Clubs Council and the Unionist Party of Northern Ireland. In addition there are several collections of private correspondence and papers of individual unionists. Particularly useful are the papers of the Co. Tyrone Liberal-Unionist, H de F Montgomery, and the diaries of Lady Craigavon and Major 'Fred' Crawford. Most of these sources are exemplified in PRONI's still-available *Irish Unionism, 1885-1923: a Documentary History* by Patrick Buckland (Belfast, 1973).

On the non-Unionist side of the political spectrum, PRONI holds the records of a number of important politicians and organizations. The latter include the Irish Association for Cultural, Economic and Social Relations (whose archive runs from its foundation in 1939 to 1995), the Social Democratic and Labour Party, the Northern Ireland Labour Party, the Campaign for Social Justice and the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association. Nationalist politicians who feature among PRONI's holdings include Anthony J. Mulvey Westminster MP for Fermanagh-Tyrone, 1945-47, and, most important of all in terms of the size of his archive, Cahir Healy (1877-1970), pro-Treaty Sinn Féin, and (during most of the period 1922-65) Westminster MP for Fermanagh-Tyrone and Stormont MP for South Fermanagh.



## **Beyond the Six Counties of Northern Ireland**

Not surprisingly, PRONI holds material of all kinds which relates to parts of Ireland beyond the six counties of Northern Ireland. Anything recorded on a parochial or diocesan basis straddles the now Border, and PRONI's microfilming of church records has in many cases extended far or comprehensively into Cos Cavan, Monaghan and Donegal. Additionally, almost all the surviving landed estate records relating to Co. Monaghan have been deposited in PRONI. Many Northern Ireland landowners owned estates elsewhere in Ireland: the Dukes of Abercorn owned an estate in Donegal; the Marquesses of Anglesey in Louth; the Marquesses of Donegall in Donegal and Wexford; the Marquesses of Downshire in Offaly and Wicklow; the Marquesses of Ely in Wexford; the Earls Erne in Donegal and Mayo (where they employed Capt. Boycott); the Earls of Gosford in Cavan; the Nugents of Portaferry, Co. Down, in Westmeath; and so on. Exceptionally, PRONI holds the archives of the Earls of Dunraven of Adare, Co. Limerick, of the Gore-Booth family of Lissadell, Co. Sligo, of the Earls of Kenmare of Killarney, Co. Kerry, of the Knight of Kerry, and of the Earls of Shannon of Castlemartyr, Co. Cork.

In the spheres of literature and education, PRONI-held archives include some valuable non-Ulster material. The Lissadell archive includes the papers of the early 20th-century poetess, Eva Gore-Booth; the Dufferin archive contains papers relating to R B Sheridan (maternal ancestor of the 1st Marquess of Dufferin and Ava), Robert Browning and Rudyard Kipling while correspondence from W.B. Yeats, G.B. Shaw, A.E. (George) Russell, Thomas Hardy, Sean O'Casey and Oliver Gogarty, among others, can be found in the Londonderry papers. Prominent individuals whose papers are in PRONI and who took an active and often influential interest in the development of education in Ireland as a whole, include: Sir Alexander McDonnell,

Commissioner of Irish Education, 1839-71, Vere Henry Foster, who established the copy-book as essential to the teaching of writing everywhere English was spoken, and Newry-born Thomas O'Hagan, 1st Lord Hagan, who played a leading part in all levels of education during the 1860s-80s.

Furthermore, a number of individuals associated with Northern Ireland, and whose papers are in PRONI, have held high positions in the Irish (and British) government: John Foster was Speaker of the Irish House of Commons, 1785-1800, and twice Chancellor of the Irish Exchequer at Westminster after the Union; Robert Stewart, Viscount Castlereagh, was Chief Secretary for Ireland in the late 1790s and later Foreign Secretary, 1812-22; the 1st Marquess of Anglesey was Lord Lieutenant of Ireland twice during the era of Emancipation and Reform, 1828-34; the already-mentioned Lord O'Hagan was the first Roman Catholic Lord Chancellor of Ireland (under Gladstone), the Emancipation Act of 1829 being amended to make this possible; and Sir Edward Carson (best-known as an Ulster Unionist leader) was First Lord of the Admiralty during the First World War - a remit which his archive principally records. PRONI has also been active in photocopying the papers (mainly held by English county record offices) of Lords Lieutenants, Chief Secretaries, Under-Secretaries and other Englishmen (and Scots) who held office in Ireland during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries; the PRONI calendars of some of these archives have been published in the two volumes of PRONI's *Irish Official Papers in Great Britain* series so far to appear.

Nor have Northern Ireland-born individuals been stay-at-homes. Apart from those who emigrated, many Northern Ireland people have gone abroad to fulfil specific responsibilities on behalf of Britain: Sir Robert Cowan as merchant and Governor of Bombay in the 1720s and 1730s; Earl Macartney as ambassador to and governor of various places, 1764-1800; the 2nd Earl of Caledon as the first civilian Governor of The Cape (British South Africa), 1807-12; the 2nd Earl Belmore as Governor of Jamaica, 1828-32; the 2nd Earl of Gosford as Governor-in-Chief of Canada, 1835-38; the 1st Marquess of Dufferin and Ava as ambassador to almost everywhere, and Viceroy of India, 1884-89; and so on. The Ross-of-Bladensburg family have produced (and take their title from) a general who burnt Washington during the Anglo-American War of 1812, and a diplomat who carried on unofficial British negotiations with the Vatican in the mid-19th century. Sir James Emerson Tennent (1804-69) was Colonial Secretary in Ceylon and wrote an important book about the natural history of that country; he was also the originator of British copyright legislation and of competitive examination for the British Civil Service. PRONI holds the papers of many Northern

Ireland-born soldiers, for example General G.V. Hart (who served in the American Revolutionary War, at Seringapatem, and back home in Ireland), and General Sir Oliver Nugent, OC the 36th (Ulster) Division at the battle of the Somme. Family archives which document service in the Crimean, Boer and First and Second World War abound in PRONI.

In 1973 PRONI mounted an exhibition illustrative of its holdings relevant to 'The British Empire': the exhibition catalogue is still of value as an indicator of the importance of this material. An important part of the history of British India is to be found spread over numerous archives held by PRONI. Of these, perhaps the most important is the Graham Papers. PRONI's catalogue of this archive has been published under the title *The Graham Indian Mutiny Papers* (PRONI, 1980). PRONI has also published, in association with the Canadian Studies Committee at Queen's University, Belfast, a *Guide to the Northern Ireland Sources for the Study of Canadian History* (Belfast, 1994); and some similar information in respect of USA sources is likely to emerge from a forthcoming project, financed by the Northern Ireland office of the British Council, and marking the 200th anniversary of the setting up of an American consulate in Belfast.

All this material is held by PRONI. Almost all is un-researched or under-researched. PRONI eagerly welcomes scholars who want to do justice to that part of the Irish heritage which is in its keeping. For further information, you should consult PRONI's fast-developing web site <http://proni.nics.gov.uk/index.htm>.

