Welcome to the Autumn Newsletter

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Heroes of Irish Archives III
William O’Sullivan, Keeper of Manuscripts at Trinity College Dublin (1921 - 2000)

William (Billy) O’Sullivan's devotion to Trinity’s manuscripts and archives was clear to those who visited the Library during his tenure as Keeper of Manuscripts (1953–1982), with scholars from many disciplines appreciative of his guidance. He explained to those attending the launch of a Festschrift published in his honour that he viewed himself as someone who helped scholars, though not one himself. That view met no agreement among the contributors to the Festschrift, which borrowed a phrase from the biographer of the seventeenth-century scholar James Ussher, Archbishop of Armagh, in describing him as ‘a miracle of learning’. (‘A Miracle of Learning’: Studies in manuscripts and Irish learning: Essays in honour of William O’Sullivan, ed. T. Barnard et al., 1998). In an appreciation of Billy for the Irish Times shortly after his death, I sketched out his interests and personality from my perspective as a member of his staff, as a friend for over twenty years and as his successor as Keeper of Manuscripts. Here, I focus on his work.

William O’Sullivan in the ‘Temple’, 1958 (courtesy of The Board of Trinity College, the University of Dublin)
Coming to Trinity College from west Cork, Billy O’Sullivan earned a First in 
history in 1942. He went on to the Irish Manuscripts Commission, learning, he 
said, to read the most difficult of 
seventeenth-century hands. In 1945, he 
joined the plaintiffs in the Foyle 
Fisheries case, led by Trinity’s Theo 
Moody, against the defence led by 
UCD’s Robin Dudley Edwards - see an 
account of this case in a 2009 History 
Ireland article. In 1949, he came to the 
Library of Trinity College as 
Superintendent of the Reading Room. The University had come to have, in his 
phrase, ‘a semi-twilight existence in the 
life of the country’, and the Library was 
in disorder. He never forgot those days 
of institutional penury. In the absence 
of inspiration from his colleagues, he 
turned to collaboration with Maurice 
Craig, who was engaged on research 
towards his Irish Bookbindings 
1600–1800 (London, 1954). They spent 
long summer evenings, when the 
building had closed to visitors, 
searching along the shelves of the Long 
Room for special bindings. In 1953, he 
was sent for nine months’ training to 
the British Museum’s Department of 
Manuscripts, where he made lasting 
friends, including the palaeographer 
Julian Brown, who was working on the 
manuscripts of Finnegan’s Wake. Upon 
his return, in 1954, Billy was appointed 
Assistant in Charge of Manuscripts, his 
designation being changed in 1961 to 
Keeper of Manuscripts.

His preoccupations came to be those of 
most archivists: collections, storage, 
and the needs of researchers. In his 
early years, readers of manuscripts 
were accommodated, sub-optimally, in 
the Long Room, while the manuscripts 
were held in a cramped room in the 
west pavilion of the Old Library. Here 
he ensured that sound curatorial 
principles were applied to the 
collections. Core to that task was the 
creation of a concordance matching the 
shelf marks of the medieval 
manuscripts across historic catalogues. 
It included identifications of those c.700 
items that had come with James 
Ussher’s library in 1661, forming the 
bulk of the medieval collection. 
Ussher’s manuscript catalogue had 
long been lost, but now it could be seen 
at a glance that, for example, an English
twelfth-century copy of the Book of Joshua, MS 47 in T.K. Abbott’s catalogue of 1900, bore the shelf marks BBB.54 in Ussher’s system; A.2.1 in a shelf list from c. 1670; B.51 in the first proper catalogue of the collection, produced by Samuel Foley later in the seventeenth century; 338 in Edward Bernard’s catalogue published at Oxford in 1697; and A.4.1 in John Lyons’ catalogue produced in the 1740s. Billy’s investigations were complicated by the fact that Foley and Lyons had both formed new arrangements of the manuscripts according to subject, even, as Billy put it, ‘carrying it to the unforgiveable extreme of breaking up volumes put together by Ussher … and forming new combinations from their contents’ (M.L. Colker’s 1991 Descriptive Catalogue of Mediaeval and Renaissance Latin manuscripts).

In 1957, an improved space for the storage and consultation of manuscripts was created in a former magnetic observatory built to the model of a Greek temple in 1837.

The new setting, in the Fellows’ Garden, appealed greatly to Billy’s hortulan enthusiasms. In reminiscing about ‘the Temple’, Billy would mention only one serious drawback: it was always cold. This he was determined to rectify when it came to planning the next move of the manuscripts.

In 1967 the Berkeley Library opened, allowing plans to be made for the manuscripts to move back to the Old Library in 1971. The redevelopment, which once he described to me as his ‘legacy’, comprises secure, air-conditioned storage and a spacious, airy reading room, with good natural light and, in a further improvement to the Temple, more radiators than are necessary. Plans are currently
underway for that development to be replaced with a reading room on the ground floor of the Old Library. Trinity has long held significant archives, not least its own muniments and such prime collections as the 1641 Depositions. But the acquisition of John Millington Synge’s papers and letters in 1968 marked a change of focus. Offered for the staggering sum of £50,000, their purchase was financed by the sale of a pair of eighteenth-century soup tureens and established the principle that modern papers form a research investment of strategic importance for the University. In the years that followed, Billy oversaw a rapid expansion in the collecting of major cultural and political material: notebooks from Samuel Beckett (1969); the archive of The Dublin Magazine (1969); the Clarke Stained Glass Studios archive (1973); papers of the art historian Thomas Bodkin (1974); and of Thomas MacGreevy (1976).

Bringing new complexities of scale and description, not to mention excitement, were the papers of John Dillon (1975) and Erskine Childers (1977). Extensive correspondence and diaries of Michael Davitt arrived in 1982. The absence however of a consistent source of income prompted Billy to make generous provision in his will for the establishment of a fund for the purchase of manuscripts and archives. His gesture has recently been marked by the addition of his name along the gallery of the Long Room, where it joins that of James Ussher and some benefactors. One wonders how Billy would have reacted to finding himself in such company.

Notes from the author: I am glad to acknowledge the help of Jane Maxwell, Ellen O’Flaherty and Greg Sheaf in the preparation of this article. Please also see my comments on Billy’s art collection in Adams cat. 74 (September 2001). See here for a select bibliography of his writings.

Bernard Meehan (Trinity Medieval History Research Centre; Head of Research Collections and Keeper of Manuscripts, Trinity College Dublin, 1983–2016)
Celebrating!
The bicentenary of the Mansion House Round Room, 'Royalty to Republic'

Dublin’s historic Round Room was built in 1821 for the visit to Dublin of King George IV.

Located beside the Mansion House, residence of the Lord Mayor of Dublin, over the past two hundred years the Round Room has welcomed royalty yet given birth to the Irish Republic, as the venue for the inaugural meeting of Dáil Eireann in 1919.

To mark the bicentenary, the Conference and Events Venue, which operates the Round Room and adjacent Supper Room as a restaurant and associated space, commissioned an exhibition with the title ‘From Royalty to Republic: a Dublin Story’ and this was sponsored by Dublin City Council as part of the Decade of Commemorations. Jan Leonard, Director of Business Development for the Round Room, was the co-ordinator, the firm ‘Nineyards’ was chosen for the design work and the retired Dublin City Archivist was asked to research the story and write the text.

Needless to say, the restrictions imposed by Covid-19 had to be considered and balanced against our intention to tell a story in a lively way. We agreed to work towards a real exhibition in the Round Room, which would take place during July and August, but if this could not happen we would be ready to publish the entire exhibition online. As it turned out, some government restrictions were lifted in June, which allowed the exhibition to go ahead in the Round Room, but under ongoing regulations, such as sanitising, masks and social distancing. The designers produced three pods to contain the displays in the overall shape of 200; no more than six people were allowed into a pod at any one time and this was monitored by the attendants on duty.
The materials used in the exhibition – including wood and curtains – were chosen to be easily recycled once the exhibition was over. The exhibition was opened on 19 July 2021 by the Lord Mayor of Dublin, Alison Gilliland, with few people present. To allow for a wide range of visitors, admission was free of charge, and the opening hours were from 11.00 a.m. to 8.00 p.m.

As Covid was slowing society down, we decided to have a long lead-in time to the exhibition. Work began in February 2021 and it was agreed that, while referencing the political history of the space, the main focus would be on the social history of the Round Room. This turned out to be very lively and at times surprising and even scandalous. The genesis of the Round Room included a volcano, a famine, an embezzlement, an unruly princess, a failed divorce, a suspected murder and ‘The First Gentleman of Europe.’

During the 1850s ‘Castle Catholics’ came to the fore and the Round Room became a venue for balls and banquets, sometimes with the Prince of Wales as the honoured guest.

These events were perfect for local luxury business with Mrs Sidford of 17 Nassau Street advertising ‘Ball-dresses in Fancy and Light-Coloured Silks.’ Jan was impressed by this and she discovered that there was a photograph of this shop in the UCD Virtual Library which provided a template for the designers to make a replica for the exhibition. This was furnished with two costumes kindly lent by the Abbey Theatre, a ball-gown in green satin and a gentleman’s evening dress from the period.

The Quadrille was a popular dance at that time and we discovered an app which would allow people to teach it to themselves. This became a feature of the exhibition, and a separate raised dance floor was provided with lights picking out the sequence of the steps – much enjoyed by children.

Young visitors were well catered for: they could stand in George IV’s footsteps and measure their feet against his, which were famously tiny; they could follow a quiz through the exhibition; and they each received a free booklet with simple texts and drawings for colouring in, commissioned from John D. Ruddy. A full-scale photograph of Constance Markievicz in evening dress suddenly came to life when she produced a revolver hidden in the folds of her skirts; while a whole-length...
reproduction of a portrait of George IV, sourced from Buckingham Palace, startled viewers when the king began to roll his eyes at the accusation that he had arranged for the murder of his wife, Caroline of Brunswick. The cultural attaché at the British Embassy was both enthusiastic and helpful, sourcing many unusual illustrations, as well as a recording of music which had been commissioned for the visit of George IV to Dublin in 1821.

The Round Room had been pivotal to the Irish Revolution. A photograph in the collections of Dublin City Library & Archive shows members of the Royal Dublin Fusiliers marching from the Round Room through the Mansion House grounds flanked by crowds waiting to enter for the first Dáil Eireann.

Lord Mayor Laurence O’Neill, an independent nationalist, was yet anxious that all Dubliners could use the Mansion House when they wanted, so when the RDF asked to host a lunch in the Round Room at 12.30 p.m. on 21 January 1919 for three hundred prisoners-of-war just returned from Germany, he agreed on condition that it was vacated before 3.30 p.m. for a Sinn Fein meeting. This was not a problem, as the RDF had booked a matinee for their troops at the Theatre Royal, starting at 2.00 p.m. This gave around an hour and a half to clear the remains of lunch away from the Round Room and to reconfigure it to welcome the inaugural meeting of Dáil Eireann, as the old Ireland gave way to the new. Photographs of the first and second Dáil, the latter colourized by Rob Cross, helped to bring the story to life.

An earlier meeting, which took place on 11 December 1917, was also commemorated in the exhibition. This took place in the ladies’ restroom beside the Round Room and was attended by women delegates to the All Ireland Sinn Féin Conference, held there on that day. Women present included Countess Markievicz, Dr Kathleen Lynn and Alice Ginnell among others, and they discussed and agreed on their agenda for the conference. An extract from Dr Sinéad McCoole’s play, Leaving the Ladies, which documents the meeting, was recorded and presented in a reconstructed restroom as a son-et-lumière production.

Archive film and photographs told the story of the Round Room during its second century, from 1921-2021. Highlights included a Native American priest at the Eucharistic Congress, 1932; Caitlín Bean Uí Chléirigh, first woman Lord Mayor of Dublin, who provided the Round Room as emergency shelter.
after the North Strand Bombing in 1941; Sales of Work, which helped to pay for parish churches erected in the 1950s; annual fairs, for books, crafts, antiques and family history; and of course the enormous céilidhs, held on St Patrick’s Day and St Stephen’s night and fondly recalled by Dubliners of a certain age!

Conferring of the Freedom of the City usually takes place in the Round Room, a recent example being the ceremony for Jim Gavin, manager of the Dublin senior Gaelic Football team, which won the Sam Maguire Cup five years in a row (and later for a sixth time).

On the whole, we found that we could work around Covid – with one exception. We would like to have arranged visits from local history groups, active retirement associations and Dublin City Council’s Culture Club, but with a cap of six people as an indoor unit, this just wasn’t feasible. However, Jan Leonard arranged for the exhibition to be filmed professionally by Lensmen Photography so that a record of it can be kept – for use in 2031 at the Round Room’s third centenary in 2121!

Mary Clark (retired City Archivist, Dublin City Library & Archive)

Heroes of Irish Archives IV
Brian Trainor, born Coleraine 28 May 1928, died Belfast 22 August 2018
Brian Trainor devoted much of his professional life and indeed his thirty-year retirement to making good the almost-irreparable damage done to Irish archives held by Public Record Office of Ireland in the attack on the Four Courts in June 1922.

Initially as archivist from the mid-1950s, then as Director of the Public Record Office of Northern Ireland 1970-1987, and as Chairman of the Irish Manuscripts Commission and of the National Archives Advisory Committee, he was at the forefront of the campaign to improve the quality of and access to historical sources whose availability and interpretation have played such a vital role in the ongoing
improved understanding of the island’s past.

Bernard Ignatius Trainor was born in 1928 in Coleraine, the son of a railway official and, although his father died when he aged three, it was that mixed railway community which imbued him with a lifelong sense of the importance of cross-community relations in Northern Ireland. In 1939 the local church funded scholarships to St Columb’s College in Derry for Brian and older brother Frank. He obtained First Class honours history degree at Queen’s University Belfast (to which he travelled daily by train) in 1949. After research in London at the Institute of Historical Research he was appointed assistant lecturer in history at Queen’s in 1951. In 1956 he was appointed assistant archivist in the Public Record Office of Northern Ireland and from then until the late 1970s embarked on an extensive and energetic campaign throughout Northern Ireland of identifying and accessioning historical records from solicitors’ office, businesses, linen firms threatened with extinction, together with thousands of individual family records.

Trainor succeeded Kenneth Darwin as Director of PRONI in 1970 and seized the opportunity to realise his vision as the office moved to purpose-built premises in Balmoral Avenue. Now the major holdings of documents could be stored under controlled conditions and accessed by students, academics, genealogists and casual researchers alike.

An accrual of additional staff to locate, acquire and process new documentary collections on an unprecedented scale facilitated the dawning of a golden age as he oversaw PRONI becoming an outstanding source of academic riches, producing pioneering studies in the field of social, economic and political history. A programme of publications was launched - *Aspects of Irish Social History*, which he edited with the late Bill Crawford, went into several reprints and remains a classic - resource packs for teachers produced, seminars and exhibitions hosted, programmes of local history lectures undertaken, teachers seconded (this in liaison with the History Inspectorate, Department of Education, Northern Ireland), links formed with universities and academic institutions throughout Ireland, and scholarship encouraged.

With extraordinary application, he created an outpost which embodied his ideal of an institution where archives and documentary collections were made freely available for purposes of furthering an objective and evidence-based understanding of our shared past. The vision succeeded because it so strongly reflected Trainor’s own work
As Chairman of the Irish Manuscripts Commission, Brian Trainor edited four issues of Analecta Hibernica and oversaw the publication of seventeen primary source materials (courtesy of the Irish Manuscripts Commission)

This mission was initially carried out with the minimum of intervention from officialdom in Stormont. That began to change however when collections of governmental records dating from the foundation of the Northern Ireland state began to be added to the PRONI holdings. The 30-year rule for access to these holdings, and the need to act in conformity with practice elsewhere in the UK, inevitably introduced constraints on the use to which some of these records could be put: controversy arose as academics were denied sight of what they suspected was information reflecting adversely on former Unionist administrations. Such constraints were contrary to Trainor’s instincts. It was a world that he found frustrating and increasingly uncongenial.

He took early retirement in 1987 to devote himself to the work of the Ulster Historical Foundation, an independent historical and genealogical research and publication agency, formerly part of PRONI. Among his contributions to the Foundation’s development were the annual lecture tours 1989-97 in the United States (44 of the 50 states visited) and Canada, involving herculean travel by Greyhound bus and hired car, delivering lectures to audiences with an increasing appetite for information on sources that would inform their interest in Irish heritage. He also championed the UHF's formative involvement in the landmark Irish Genealogical Project, an all-Ireland initiative compiling databases from church and civil birth, death and marriage records. He edited the sister publication of Familia. Ulster Genealogical Review, The Directory of Irish Family History Research, until his retirement as Research Director in 2006.
Following his retirement he continued with the famous lecture tours until the age of 85. He was closely involved in the 1980s in the campaigns to save the Linen Hall Library and Friar's Bush graveyard, both integral features of Belfast's heritage.

Most strikingly of all, perhaps, his archival vision incorporated a strong all-Ireland identity, something that was recognised by Dr Garret Fitzgerald in 1987 who appointed him chair of the Management Committee of the National Archives Advisory Committee. With L. M. Cullen he had undertaken a survey of business records in Drogheda in the late 1960s, an initiative that developed into the very successful Irish Manuscripts Commission business records surveyed, begun in 1970, based in the Public Record Office of Ireland. He also ensured that the records arising from the business records survey were entrusted to the National Archives of Ireland. Throughout the 1970s he served on the Irish Manuscripts Commission and served as Chairman 1976-77 and 1987-99.

Among his publication initiatives was the first output from the Women's History Project (*The Drennan McTier Letters, 1776-1819*). The nation-wide recognition of his achievements may be exemplified by the award of honorary doctorates by universities in both jurisdictions, in 1984 by the University of Ulster and in 1986 by the National University of Ireland.

Note from the author: versions of this article appeared before in newspaper obituaries e.g. the Irish News, the Coleraine Chronicle and the Irish Times. Note from the editor: two of the images were used previously in Raymond Refaussé’s tribute to Brian Trainor (ISA Newsletter, Autumn 2018)


Notice of Online Workshop
The Archivist and the Historian: Common Challenges, Common Opportunities
The Irish Association of Professional Historians (IAPH) is organising a reprise of their successful 2017 seminar which brought together members of the two professions by means of presentations and a chance to mingle and talk shop. This year it comes in the shape of an online workshop, to be held on Friday, 29 October 2021 (10am-4pm). IAPH is joining forces with UCD School of History, the ISA, the Archives and Records Association (Irish Region), and the Offaly Historical and Archaeological Society. It ‘will seek to examine the common challenges and
common opportunities facing historians and archivists'.

Speakers and participants include Virginia Teehan (CEO, the Heritage Council), Damien Burke (the Irish Jesuit Archives), Noelle Dowling (Dublin Diocesan Archives), Professors Catherine Cox and John McCafferty (UCD), Professor Lindsey Earner-Byrne (UCC), Dr Neil Johnston (UK National Archives), Cecile Gordon (Irish Military Archives), Dr Ciaraín Wallace (Beyond 2022 project, TCD), and Dr Sarah-Anne Buckley, Kieran Hoare, and Dr Barry Houlihan (NUI Galway). Registration went live on 20 September: please register here.

ISA News
- Irish Archives, the ISA’s annual journal, will be published in November and news of the launch will be publicised shortly.
- The ISA will host a lecture entitled 'The History of Irish Lights' by Niamh Collins, Archivist, Commissioners of Irish Lights, on Tuesday, 5 October, as part of the Dublin Festival of History: please register here.

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