



## BEYOND 2022 - IRELAND SETS OUT TO RECLAIM PART OF ITS HISTORY

***In the early days of the Irish Civil War (1922–1923), one of the biggest explosions to ever take place in Dublin razed the Public Record Office Ireland (PROI). To mark the centenary of this devastating event, an interdisciplinary team is virtually reconstructing the PROI and many of its records – some of which go back to the thirteenth century. SHELLY FARR BISWELL investigates this major cultural project.***

There is a universal shudder when a people's cultural heritage is lost. Consider the international response to the fire at Notre-Dame cathedral in April this year. As a *Guardian* opinion piece noted, "It feels as though the very heart of France and the soul of Europe have been suddenly and viciously ripped out."



Ireland's Virtual Record Treasury

While cultural heritage has often been lost through accidents (such as the Notre-Dame cathedral fire), natural disasters, environmental conditions, and neglect, much has also been lost through acts of terrorism and war. As former UNESCO Director-General Irina Bokova has stated, "The deliberate destruction of heritage is a war crime – it has become a tactic of war to tear societies over the long term, in a strategy of cultural cleansing."

In recognition of this, there have been attempts to stop the wilful destruction of cultural heritage during times of armed conflict. The first international treaty on this issue was the Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict, which was signed in 1954 in response to the cultural atrocities committed during the Second World War. More recently, in 2017, the UN Security Council unanimously adopted Resolution 2347, which formally recognises the intentional destruction of cultural heritage as being similar to other threats to international peace.

But in 1922, when the Irish Civil War began, Europe was still grappling with the fallout from the First World War. The destruction of the PROI was recognised as a tragedy at the time, but it was also seen as a single-line item in a very long list of cultural destruction.

### Ireland's lost cultural heritage

There's still a lot of contention about how the explosion in the PROI occurred and who was responsible. What isn't up for debate, however, is that millions of Irish records over a 700-year period were obliterated that day.



*The PROI (1914). NAI Mills Album. Courtesy of National Archives of Ireland*

Ironically, in the lead up to the civil war, the six-storey, stone building that housed the PROI, which was located in Dublin's Four Courts building complex, was considered one of the most secure places in Ireland to store records. For that reason, many churches and local authorities had moved their records there for safekeeping. Tragically, some records had arrived just days before the explosion.



*Interior of the PROI (1914). NAI Mills Album. Courtesy of National Archives of Ireland*

Dr Ciarán Wallace, a postdoctoral research fellow at Trinity College Dublin, says that the records that were blown up that day fell like rain across the city.

"We know the wind was coming from the south-west that day because fragments blew as far north as the coastal town of

Howth – about 18 kilometres away from where the Public Record Office had stood," he says.

In the aftermath of the explosion, PROI staff salvaged charred and damaged fragments from the rubble. In addition, the government asked the public to return anything they found, but over the days, months, and years that followed, very little was recovered.



*The scene after the explosion (1922). Courtesy of Irish Architectural Archive*

In the midst of the human loss and chaos of that period, the demise of public records was seen as the "birth pang of a new state", Wallace says. Some believed that the lost records were just "English" records. "That's quite reductive reasoning, though. They were records about our people, our society, our land."

### Reconstructing what was lost

How do you digitally reconstruct something that seems to have been irretrievably lost? Because only a relatively small collection of documents survived the explosion, the main task for the Beyond 2022 team is to hunt for copies, transcripts, and indexes of lost originals scattered in libraries and archives across the globe. To do this, Wallace says collaboration, funding, and an interdisciplinary approach are essential.

Beyond 2022 represents a collaboration between Trinity College Dublin and its archival partners: National Archives of Ireland, the National Archives (UK), the Public Record Office of Northern Ireland, and the Irish Manuscripts Commission. The project is funded by the Irish Research Council and is supported by Trinity's ADAPT Centre, the Trinity Association and Trust, and the Making Ireland Research Theme. The Beyond 2022 project team is in negotiations with the Irish government for the longer-term support of the project.



**Legal records from 1743 damaged in the fire of 1922. Courtesy of National Archives of Ireland**

Even with significant support, filling the virtual 9,300 square metres of shelving with the records that were lost or damaged has presented a formidable challenge. Fortunately, Herbert Wood, Ireland's chief archivist at the time of the 1922 explosion, had compiled and published a catalogue of Ireland's public records in 1919. Entitled *A Guide to the Records Deposited in the Public Record Office of Ireland*, Wood's work has meant that the project team can ascertain what was held within the PROI up to 1919. The *Guide* has served as a blueprint for the Beyond 2022 project team to create a searchable list of contents and to know where each set of documents was located before the explosion.

Using the *Guide* has also meant that the team can work with other national and international institutions – libraries, museums, churches, archives, private collections – to identify possible references or substitute sources to reconstruct some of the records.

"We've had good support from libraries and archives all around Ireland and the world in terms of locating substitute sources, and, in some cases, fragments of documents that were in the PROI at the time of the

explosion," Wallace says. "When we first started the project, we'd get disbelieving headshakes from people. But after we describe what we're doing, people get inspired by the possibilities."

### Creating a virtual archive

Wallace says the team has learned through earlier digital humanities projects that it's crucial to get computer scientists, designers, historians, librarians, and archivists around the table at the very beginning of a project.

"The digital technology experts are an integral part of the team. They often come at problem solving from a different angle, and that's been invaluable when considering everything from how people will search for records to what users will see when they come to the site."

For the building, for example, computer scientists are using virtual-reality technology and working with the architect's original plans, as well as rare photographs and drawings, to reconstruct the Victorian building.

When completed, a researcher will be able to "enter" the building, go up to the reference desk, and request a record. From there, the researcher will be taken to the floor, the bay, and sometimes even the shelf where the record was held and will be able to see any surviving parts of the record, as well as link to any substitute sources and references that are available in other libraries and archives. Researchers will be able to do complex searches too so they can see, for example, other records from the same year or on the same topic.

### Standing on shoulders

While these archives were generally overlooked in the decades following the Irish Civil War, through the years since, there have been organisations and individuals doing the painstaking work to recover some of the collections. Building on this work, several exciting projects were underway in Ireland by the 2000s.

In 2007, the National Archives of Ireland put both the 1901 and 1911 census records online (those census records had been held at the Registrar General's Office during the civil war and were not destroyed). The databases are searchable, free to use, and extremely popular, particularly in light of Ireland's significant diaspora.

During the same period, Trinity College Dublin initiated several interdisciplinary projects that brought digital

technologies and the humanities together in new ways. One project, CIRCLE: A Calendar of Irish Chancery Letters, c. 1244–1509, reconstructed the medieval Irish chancery records that had been destroyed in the 1922 explosion. The CIRCLE project showed what might be possible for Beyond 2022.

Then in 2017, the National Archives of Ireland, in partnership with the Irish Manuscripts Commission, began a survey of archival material that was salvaged following the 1922 explosion. The collection contains 378 brown-paper parcels that hadn't been opened since they were recovered by PROI staff in the days after the explosion.

Conservators opened each parcel to assess, document, and photograph the records inside. Currently, conservators are taking steps to repair and conserve the records. It's an intricate, time-consuming process, but already nearly 3,000 pages of paper and 1,000 sheets of parchment from the first 28 of the parcels have been treated and are ready to be listed by archivists and included in Beyond 2022.

### Reclaiming the past

Piece by piece, Beyond 2022 is reclaiming a part of Ireland's written history.

As Dr Peter Crooks, principal investigator for the project and an assistant professor of medieval history at Trinity College Dublin, has previously stated, "Cultural atrocity is a subject with a deep history and enormous contemporary resonance. Think of Sarajevo in 1992, Baghdad in 2003, Palmyra in 2015 ... But just as important is the story of recovery, of how societies deal with cultural trauma."

For Ireland, Beyond 2022 reflects an important part of that recovery. The virtual resource is expected to be unveiled in mid-2022. In the lead up to the unveiling, the Beyond 2022 project team is hosting a number of lectures and events to encourage a national conversation on the value of Ireland's cultural heritage.

To learn more, visit <https://beyond2022.ie/>



**Counting rolled leaves of parchment from the fire in 1922. Courtesy of National Archives of Ireland**