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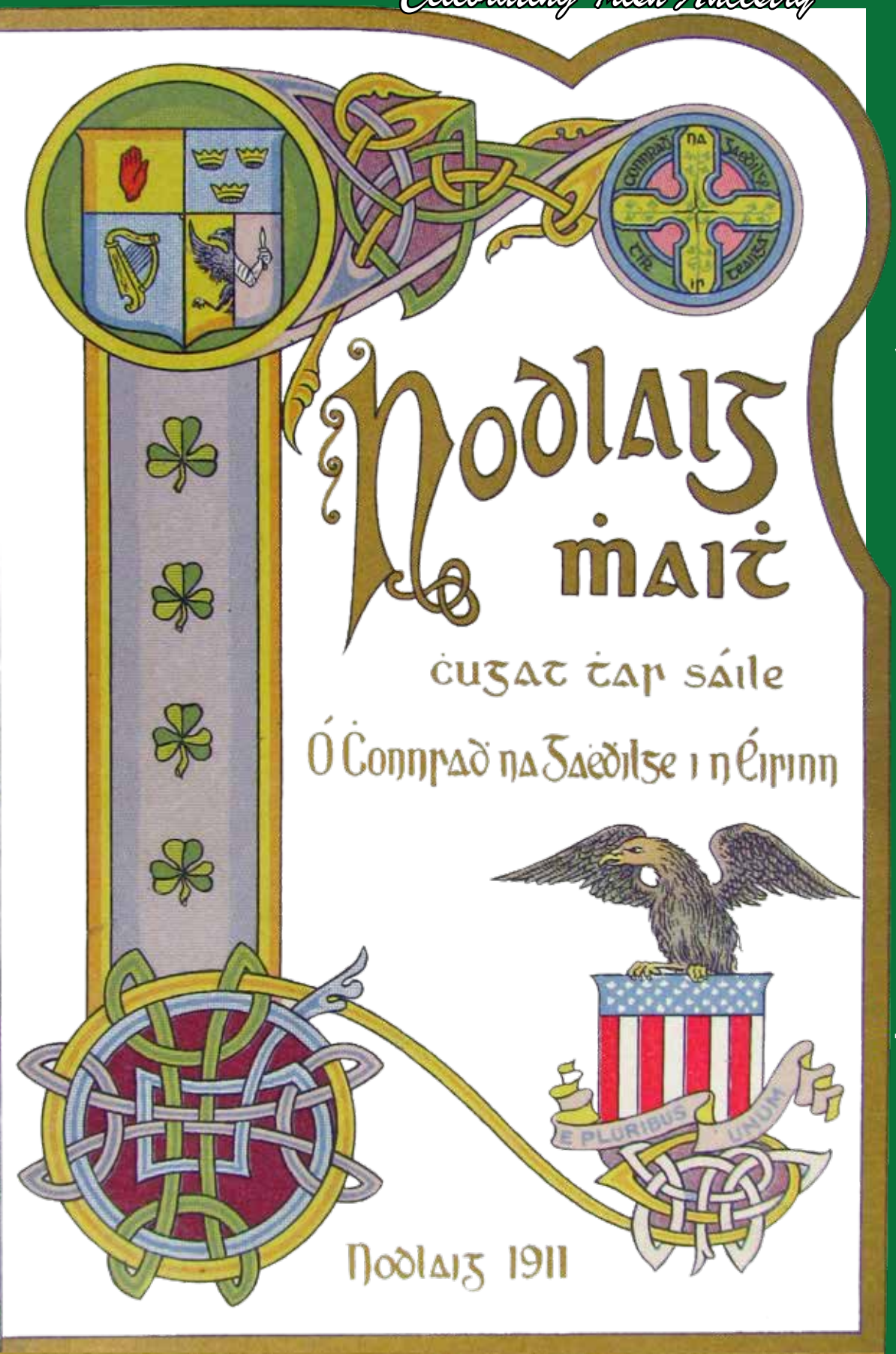
Irish Roots

Celebrating Irish Ancestry



In This Issue:

Discover The Many Resources For Tracing Your County DOWN Ancestors!

Unravelling Your DNA Clues: A Genetic Detective's Guide

A Genealogist's Challenge: Reconstructing A Life From Scattered Records

Using Estate Records As A Genealogical Source

Keeping You Up To Date With Irish Genealogical News!

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Local Resources For Family History Research



County Down

By James G. Ryan

This article deals with researching County Down ancestors, but with an emphasis on the resources specific to the county, or only available within the county. County Down was historically the territory of the McGuinness, O'Neill, McQuillan, McCartan, and McGilmore families. Following the Norman invasion the families of Savage, White, and Russell obtained land in the county. Following the defeat of Hugh O'Neill and his allies the lands of the Gaelic chiefs were confiscated and divided among English and Scottish 'adventurers' who brought in settlers from Scotland and England including the families of Boyd, Fraser, Johnson, Lindsay, Morrison, Patterson and Maxwell; Wilson, Young, Johnson, Taylor, Walker and Jackson. The county developed a prosperous linen industry in the 18th century and also benefitted from the industrial development of Belfast, which is on the borders of Down and Antrim.

Many of the Scottish settlers, who were very predominantly Presbyterian, left again in the 1700s to settle in America as the Scots-Irish. In 1922 the county was one of the 6 which remained as part of the United Kingdom when the Irish Free State (now the Republic) was formed.

Down has all of the major national records. Civil records of birth, death and marriage (from 1864) are available free at www.irishgenealogy.ie/. The General Register Office of Northern Ireland (GRONI) also offers access online for a fee. Griffith's Valuation (land occupiers in 1850s) is available free on https://www.askaboutireland.ie; and 1901 and 1911 census returns are free at https://nationalarchives.ie. Although part of the UK, many of the older records are more easily available on-line from archives in the Republic of Ireland.

Archives and Libraries

Down has several archives, libraries and on-line sources housing records of relevance to family history. They include:

- The **Public Record Office of Northern Ireland** (PRONI), based in Belfast, is the major archival resource for the county. The National Library of Ireland in Dublin also has records of value for family history, including estate records and pedigrees. www.proni.gov.uk
- **Ulster Historical Foundation** (founded in 1956) is a major resource for research in Northern counties. They run courses and conferences, and have indexed many local records (gravestones, church records etc) and made them available through publications and through databases on their website. They also provide the research services and records to the RootsIreland website https://ulsterhistoricalfoundation.com.
- Down Public libraries have 21 branches around the county. The branches with items of particular interest to local history are (a) Newry City Library, which holds books on Irish history, local studies; historical maps (1830s to 1950s) and local newspapers on microfilm. They also hold The Crossle Papers, an archive of notebooks and scrapbooks from the early 1900s. www.librariesni.org.uk/resources/cultural-heritage/cultural-heritage-collections/newry-city-library
- (b) Downpatrick Library, which holds the above forms of records and a "Register of inhabitants of Killyleagh 1891-1899" and the Grand

Estate Papers As A Genealogical Source



By Sean J Murphy

Surviving records of Irish estates such as rentals, leases, maps and wages books can provide much useful information to genealogical researchers. Collections of estate papers can be found in the National Library of Ireland, National Archives of Ireland, Public Record Office of Northern Ireland, while some are still in local custody. This article will advise how to establish if relevant estate papers survive and how to access them.

Until the Land Acts implemented by the British Government in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the great majority of Irish people did not own their land, but leased it from estate owners or landlords. The landlords were obliged to sell the bulk of their estates to the tenants under the Land Acts and the British Government loaned the purchase moneys to the tenants, which were paid back in subsequent years as 'annuities'.

Where they have survived and are of sufficient detail, records of landed estates are of great importance as genealogical sources, but must still be accessed in original form as digitisation has yet to get under way. It must be borne in mind also that most small tenants had no long term tenure rights, but had leases at pleasure or renewed from year to year, and so were not always recorded in detail. Additionally, not all estate owners kept detailed records of their tenants, especially if they had farmed out the collection of rents to 'middlemen'. Furthermore, like other classes of Irish documents, estate papers have been depleted due to destruction both in times of peace and war.

Rentals in particular are very valuable and the most commonly found type of record, in some cases providing information on a family over several generations. Leases tend to relate to larger tenants, while plotted maps are very useful and wages books contain information on estate employees who may not have been tenants.

Full listings of the tenantry on an estate in quasi-census form are rarely to be found, one example being among records of the Fitzwilliam/Coolattin Estate in Co Wicklow, now in the National Library. The first step in determining whether relevant estate papers are extant is to establish the name of the landlord, which is usually done by referring to the 'immediate lessor' column in Griffith's *Valuation*. Most of these entries in Griffith relate of course to middlemen and sublessors, as opposed to substantial landlords, and so estate papers may not always be found.

Substantial collections of estate papers are held in the National Library of Ireland, and are accessible through the Manuscripts Reading Room in Kildare Street, Dublin. Searches can be made in the National Library online catalogue using keywords such as 'estate papers', residence, surname and noble title where relevant, eg, Browne, Marquess of Sligo, Westport House. Particulars of manuscripts received by the Library before 1990, including estate papers, can be checked via the Library's *Sources* database. *Sources* also contains references to manuscript material in other repositories and to published articles as well.

A virtual directory of landowners in each county on the eve of the Land Acts is contained in an official list published in 1876, *Owners of Land of One Acre and Upwards in Ireland, now available online. See the illustrated entry for the Marquess of Sligo, Westport, who possessed nearly 115,000 acres of land and was Co Mayo's largest landlord. The Westport House Papers are now held by the National Library and a detailed archival list may be downloaded from the Library's website to assist research in the originals in the Manuscripts Reading Room. Particular manuscripts to be viewed should be ordered in advance via the order form on the Library's website.*

Detailed lists of a number of other more recently acquired estate collections can be searched via the National Library's website, while older typed lists are to be found in the Manuscripts Reading Room. The county sources section of Grenham's *Tracing Your Irish Ancestors*