

# Space, Place and Memory

## National School Records and the Cognitive Landscape of Education

By Enda O'Flaherty

**A**n anyone who has undertaken genealogical research of their Irish ancestry has undoubtedly become aware that the vast majority of Ireland's 19th century census records were destroyed in a fire at the Public Records Office of Ireland in 1922. Census' data pre-dating 1901 survives only in fragments, and the genealogist must frequently use other resources such as Civil records of births, marriages and deaths. In order to piece together some level of detail about an ancestor's life, a trawl through proxy records is often required.

Passenger lists and emigration records often help to identify the individuals who emigrated, and the fortunes that befell them in far away shores. At home, records such as the Petty Sessions Court Registers can frequently tie an individual to a place and time in Ireland, and offer a glimpse into the day-to-day lives and predicaments of our 19th century ancestors. This is a precious level of detail not frequently encountered for many engaged in Irish genealogical research. However, there are further potential sources for fleshing-out the forgotten lives of the past. School records can offer an attractive insight into an individual's life, and occasionally serve to identify an

individual that cannot be found on any pre-1901 census record.

In 1831, Earl Stanley, Chief Secretary for Ireland, outlined a new State supported system of primary education (National Schools Act of 1831) that would lay the legal pillars of the National School system. Prior to the early 19th century, formal education in Ireland was primarily a privilege for the elite, non-Catholic classes, but as the 19th century progressed, the uptake of formal schooling grew exponentially. By 1900 there were 8,684 National Schools open and educating children on the Island of Ireland, with 745,861 pupils enrolled.

These numbers generated vast quantities of academic records which occasionally survive to the present day. The National Archives of Ireland currently holds a limited number of National School Roll Books/Registers accessible from the Self-Service Microfilm Room. Some county libraries such as those in Cork, Donegal and Louth, have made attempts to gather obsolete school registers and roll books, to varying degrees of success. However, undoubtedly a far greater number of these records are still held locally, and efforts are now being made to consolidate and catalogue the surviving school

records. The Anseo Project is a pilot project being undertaken in North Mayo and West Sligo which aims to create a virtual archive with surrogates of all extant statutory & ancillary records of Irish National Schools, through a crowd-sourced and centrally managed image-capture, digital storage and cataloguing programme. As of August 2018, Anseo community trainees & workers and local volunteers had together photographed over 280,000 images, from sixty-eight primary schools, to create the largest digital archive of school records in Ireland or the UK.

As the project moves forward, it is hoped that it will expand beyond its limited pilot area, and it will certainly provide the eager genealogist with a further invaluable proxy record. The project also introduces the genealogist to a significant space and place in the lives of our 19th century ancestors. Although the schoolhouse as a heritage object reflects different values for different people, it is still a common symbol of a shared past within both communities and wider population. It is a shared space that is recognised and remembered by all within a community through multiple generations.

# The Irish Mission At Watson House

By  
Maureen  
Murphy

The Mission of Our Lady of the Rosary for the Protection of Irish Immigrant Girls was the inspiration of Charlotte Grace O'Brien (1845-1909), the daughter of Young Irelander William Smith O'Brien who was transported to Van Diemen's land (Tasmania) for his part in the 1848 Rebellion. A nationalist herself who began to write about land reform and emigration in the 1880s, Charlotte Grace O'Brien's work on behalf of Irish immigrant women made a significant difference to more than 100,000 of some 310,000 Irish women immigrants who arrived in New York between 1882 and 1908.

Grace O'Brien started her campaign on behalf of immigrants with her concern about the way ships were configured for young women travelling in steerage. Visiting family in Queenstown (Cobh, Co. Cork), O'Brien took the opportunity to visit the White Star liner *Germanic*. While she wrote later that she thought that the *Germanic* was no worse than other ships, she was horrified at "...the way I saw all sexes and ages huddled together." She argued that young, single women should have their own accommodations.

Her second project was to improve conditions for emigrants as they waited in Queenstown to board their liners. Emigrants were often exploited by unscrupulous boarding house keepers. She opened her own O'Brien Emigrant Boarding House at West Beach in Queenstown on April 1, 1882. It was a daunting task for a middle-aged spinster who was almost profoundly deaf and who faced the hostility of other boarding

house keepers who urged local merchants to boycott her. She kept her Emigrant House open till 1884 when financial and health problems forced its closure.

Even if her boarding house was to have been successful, O'Brien knew that providing a safe and honest accommodation was only one step in guaranteeing safe passage for young Irish women emigrating to America. She decided to travel to the United States aboard an emigrant ship. The White Star Line's *Baltic* took her to New York in September 1882. She spent a short time in New York, part of it with a longshoreman's family, before she travelled to St. Paul, Minnesota where she was assured that Bishop John Ireland would be receptive to her idea of a home for immigrant girls arriving to the Port of New York.

When O'Brien returned to Ireland, Bishop Ireland raised O'Brien's proposal for an immigrant home with the Irish Catholic Colonization Society. Supported by his fellow Midwestern bishops, the Society

agreed to establish an information bureau at the immigrant depot at Castle Garden, the New York State Immigration Station till it was replaced by Ellis Island when the federal government became responsible for immigrant reception on April 19, 1890. Ellis Island itself opened on January 1, 1892.

The Mission of Our Lady of the Rosary offered assistance with making connections with family, friends or sponsors, with transportation if the immigrant were travelling beyond New York and employment counseling. After Father Riordan opened the Mission on January 1, 1884, immigrants could stay without charge until arrangements were made for them to move on. The Mission's permanent home at 7 State Street was purchased by Father Riordan in December 1885. Initially the funding for the Mission was provided by the Irish Catholic Colonization Society, but when it was clear that the Mission would require more substantial support, Cardinal McCloskey divided St. Peter's



County Meath is known as the Royal County because the county was set aside as the specific territory of the High King from the second century onwards. The seat of the High King during the following 800 years was at Tara. The abundance of historic monuments in the county, including some of the most important Irish historic sites, testifies to its ancient importance. One of these is the UNESCO World Heritage Site in the Boyne valley which contains the Newgrange (pictured above) and associated sites dating back to 2,000 BC. The county is a prosperous agricultural area, described as the great grazing-ground of the country, through which the River Boyne flows gently on its way to the Irish Sea. It has several significant towns including Drogheda, Navan, Kells, Ashbourne and Trim. All of these have been, and still are, also centres for industry.

The major Gaelic families include McLoughlin or O'Melaghlin, McGogarty O'Loughnane, Hayes, Kelly, Hennessy, and O'Reilly. In 1172 the county was invaded by the Normans and the land was granted to Hugh DeLacy who built an extensive castle on the site of what is now Trim. The main Norman families that settled in the county were Preston, Plunkett, Cusack, Darcy, Dillon, Nangle, Dowdall, Fleming and Barnewall. As elsewhere, these Norman families assimilated into the local population and British culture and administrative influence gradually waned over the following centuries. The area of Crown influence was gradually reduced to a territory around Dublin which was called The Pale. This included the Eastern part of county Meath. In 1641 the Irish and Norman chiefs of Meath, led by Thomas Preston, joined the rebellion of the Catholic Confederacy but were defeated by Oliver Cromwell in 1649. There followed a major confiscation of land and its redistribution to Cromwellian

soldiers and supporters. This was the foundation of some of the major estates on which the vast majority lived as tenants for the next few centuries.

The county has undergone major changes in population. In 1841 (according to the official census) it had 183,000 residents, but this dropped to 141,000 by 1857, as a result of the Great Famine (1845-47) and subsequent emigration. The 2016 census shows that the county has a population of 195,000 and it has been rising significantly in recent decades.

Meath has a relatively diverse set of records for family research. It has all of the major national records: Civil records of birth, death and marriage start in 1864 and most of these are available on-line from [www.irishgenealogy.ie](http://www.irishgenealogy.ie). Non-Catholic marriage records are available from 1845. It is planned that all of these records (up to at least 1918) will be available in due course.

Griffith's Valuation (a major listing of land occupiers) was conducted in 1854 and is available on many websites including

[www.askaboutireland.ie](http://www.askaboutireland.ie); and the 1901 and 1911 census returns are available on-line at [www.nationalarchives.ie](http://www.nationalarchives.ie). If you are beginning your search and do not know where your family was located within county Meath, these are useful starting points. A search in the Griffith Valuation, for instance, will show whether the name is associated with a particular local area (e.g. a civil parish). If it is, then you can search the church or other records (see below) from that area to find evidence of your ancestors. Equally, the 1901 census, although compiled long after the major period of emigration, may indicate the local prevalence of a surname. When you have identified a likely area, or a definite ancestor, one or more of the following types of records can extend your search.

### *Church Records*

There are 36 Roman Catholic parishes serving the county, of which 13 have registers for periods in the 18th century, the oldest being Kilmessan whose