

The Irish state and the Big House in independent Ireland, 1922–73

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

List of figures	i
Acknowledgements	ii
Abbreviations	iv
Map: The locations of Big Houses featured in case studies	v
INTRODUCTION	1
CHAPTER ONE: THE BIG HOUSE AFTER INDEPENDENCE, 1922–32	18
CHAPTER TWO: THE BIG HOUSE ABANDONED: USE AND DISUSE, 1932–48	65
CHAPTER THREE: THE OFFICE OF PUBLIC WORKS AND THE BIG HOUSE, 1930–60	109
CHAPTER FOUR: POLITICAL CHANGE AND SILENT DECLINE, 1948–57	147
CHAPTER FIVE: THE IRISH LAND COMMISSION AND THE BIG HOUSE, 1940–65	173
CHAPTER SIX: A CLIMATE OF CHANGE, 1957–73	216
CONCLUSION	263

APPENDICES

Appendix One: Office of the Minister for Lands, memorandum for the
government, 'Preservation of mansions and large houses', 5 Aug. 1958 279

BIBLIOGRAPHY 288

Lists of figures and tables

Fig. 1.1 Russborough House, county Wicklow

Fig. 2.1 Hazelwood House, county Sligo

Fig. 3.1 Dunsandle House, county Galway

Fig. 4.1 Killarney House, county Kerry

Fig. 5.1 Shanbally Castle, county Tipperary

Fig. 6.1 Bishops court, county Kildare

Appendix One:

Table 1: Big Houses in the possession of the Land Commission, Aug. 1958.

Table 2: Results of auctions and sales by tender of Land Commission houses and accommodation plots, *c.* 1954–8.

Table 3: Big Houses demolished by the Land Commission from *c.* 1954–8.

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ABBREVIATIONS

C. P. W.	Commissioners of Public Works
E. E. C.	European Economic Community
E. U.	European Union
H. I. T. H. A.	Historic Irish Tourist Houses and Gardens Association
I. G. S.	Irish Georgian Society
<i>I. T.</i>	<i>Irish Times</i>
I. T. A.	Irish Tourist Association
I. R. A.	Irish Republican Army
L. C.	Land Commission
M. P.	Member of Parliament
N. A. I.	National Archives of Ireland
N. M. A. C.	National Monuments Advisory Council
O. P. W.	Office of Public Works
T. D.	Teachta Dála

Map: The locations of Big Houses featured in case studies



A — Russborough House, county Wicklow

D — Killarney House, county Kerry

B — Hazelwood House, county Sligo

E — Bishops court House, county Kildare

C — Dunsandle House, county Galway

Introduction

I. Aims and objectives

The principal aim of this thesis is to examine the attitudes of the Irish state to the Big House after independence in 1922 until accession to the European Economic Community (E.E.C.) in 1973. State is used in this thesis to include governments, ministers, civil servants, politicians and state bodies. The term Big House will denote the country homes of landlords in Ireland, predominantly dating from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. ‘Big House’ will be capitalised throughout the thesis because it was the label, rather than the description, popularly used to denote country houses in Ireland. The terms Big House and country house are interchangeable and will be used throughout this thesis. Terence Dooley described how these were often imposing mansions ‘built to inspire awe in social equals and, indeed, deference in the lower social classes’.¹ Furthermore, he pointed out that the term was also inflected with resentment as the houses were built on ‘what most tenant farmers would deem to have been confiscated land’,² a claim dating back to the time of the English plantations in Ireland. Therefore, Dooley asserted that ‘above all, and particularly from the 1880s, they inspired hostility’.³

This study will reveal and analyse the attitudes of Irish governments to the Big House from 1922 to 1973 through an examination of Oireachtas debates, private government files, policy and legislation in order to ascertain if governments in post-independence Ireland were hostile or amenable to the continuing presence of Big Houses in the Irish countryside. It will analyse the attitudes of various government departments towards them and their preservation

¹ Terence Dooley, *The decline of the big house in Ireland: a study of Irish landed families, 1860–1960* (Dublin, 2001), p. 9; The term was also used by Olwen Purdue in *The big house in the north of Ireland: land, power and social elites, 1878–1960* (Dublin, 2009).

² Dooley, *The decline of the big house*, p. 9.

³ *Ibid.*

or destruction and assess to what extent various departments were interested, concerned or even had a mandate to act in relation to these houses. The main protagonists – governments, ministers and civil servants – who attempted to address this issue, whether sympathetically or antagonistically, will also be identified and their role in the decline and/or survival of Big Houses in independent Ireland examined.

The central research questions of this thesis will include: What were the attitudes of governments in power to the country house in independent Ireland? Did different governments and ministers have different attitudes? Were politicians concerned about these houses and was this reflected in the rhetoric used during Oireachtas debates on these houses or realised through legislation? What were public perceptions? The fledgling state was trying to settle a civil war and establish secure economic footing on which to build the new state, so did the private home that was the Big House even feature among the issues they were trying to address?

Historiography on the subject has ascribed a shift in attitudes from the early 1970s with accession to the European Economic Community and increasing pressure on the Irish government to align their policies with European heritage protections.⁴ What happened in terms of the evolution of attitudes from 1922 to 1970? Did they remain static in some respects or was the shift in attitudes gradual or otherwise, and what caused this change? Was this evolution in attitudes reflected in the media, and in political and governments' attitudes? And if it was a comprehensive shift in attitudes, did this ever evolve into legislation or active moves toward the preservation of these houses? Or did attitudes, antagonistic or positive, ever translate into acts or policy which affected the survival or destruction of the house? Who had the most influential position in relation to the Big House: the Department of the

⁴ Most particularly Dooley's 'National patrimony and political perceptions of the Irish country house in post-independence Ireland', in idem (ed.) *Ireland's polemical past: views of Irish history in honour of R. V. Comerford* (Dublin, 2010), pp 192–212.

Taoiseach, the Department of Finance, or state bodies such as the Office of Public Works (O.P.W.), the Land Commission, or individual ministers or officials? Government files from the Departments of the Taoiseach, Finance, and the O.P.W. in particular have been examined in this thesis in detail and with systematic rigour in attempting to answer these research questions.

Prevailing historiography has argued that by the advent of the Irish Free State the Big House was viewed with hostility or apathy by the Irish public and governments alike. As noted above, in his 2001 work, *The decline of the big house in Ireland*, Dooley wrote that the Big House, above all, ‘inspired hostility’.⁵ Olwen Purdue has also written about the burning and destruction of the Big House in the revolutionary period and contended that ‘not only could the Big House be targeted for attack because it was seen to represent landlordism and imperialism but, following the formation and arming of the UVF in which a number of landlords took a leading role, Big Houses were seen as potential arsenals ripe for raiding’.⁶ R. V. Comerford has maintained that for the first governments of the Free State, ‘architecture from earlier times – particularly in the form of the stately home or Big House – was for long regarded as a relic of oppression and some kind of affront to the nation’.⁷ F. S. L. Lyons in his article ‘The twilight of the Big House’ also elucidated this view of the Big House in Ireland, stating:

not for nothing was the Big House set apart from the village, surrounded by its high stone walls, leading its own quite separate life. For the physical isolation in which most of the Anglo-Irish grew up was no more than the visible manifestation of the intellectual and spiritual isolation in which they were condemned – it is not too strong a word – to live.⁸

⁵ Dooley, *The decline of the big house in Ireland*, p. 9.

⁶ Purdue, *The big house in the north of Ireland*, p. 146.

⁷ R. V. Comerford, *Ireland: inventing the nation* (London, 2003), p. 46

⁸ F. S. L. Lyons, ‘The twilight of the big house’ in *Ariel*, i, no. 3 (1970), p. 122.

This thesis will examine how prevalent such hostility was among those in political power and whether or not such attitudes influenced policy or actions toward the Big House.

At the beginning of the period under examination, following the culmination of long-term political and social agitation that began in the late 1870s, the Big House was, in general, a private home owned by an ascendancy class which no longer played any political role in Ireland. The Big Houses were the centre-pieces of estates which, after land transfer, could no longer viably maintain them. Their primary *raison d'être* had been as private homes for the former landlord class and as a statement of wealth. However, when these reasons disappeared, what could the country house be used for? Should there be a use found for it, and who should do so when its owners could no longer afford it? Should such responsibility fall to the state? Could the Big Houses be put to private use as schools, hotels or country clubs? From the 1920s to the 1950s some were acquired for large institutions like convents and schools, but there was never enough demand to secure them all, and while an examination of the contribution of religious orders to save many Big Houses from destruction is needed, it falls outside the scope of this particular study which focuses on the attitude of Irish governments to Big Houses.⁹ What about the possible use of these houses as historical museums or attractions? They were not popular enough, particularly in the early decades of independence, to make this a viable option, as it had been in England where many owners opened their homes to day-trippers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Furthermore, there was no significant domestic or international tourism in Ireland in the 1920s and 1930s and Big Houses would have been too expensive to maintain without some such industry to make them financially viable for the state. In fact, it has been argued as late as 2011 that 'traditionally the audience for the historic house has been narrow, and recent

⁹ For an example of such a house being saved from destruction, see Garbally House, Ballinasloe. Brian Casey, 'The decline and fall of the Clancarty estate, east Galway, 1891–1923' in *Journal of the Galway Archaeological and Historical Society* (forthcoming, 2013).

research demonstrates that this is still the case'.¹⁰ So then, with huge social, political and economic issues to contend with, the suggestion by some members of the public and owners that governments should spend large portions of their budget preserving Big Houses was a difficult one to justify. In particular, smaller to middling country houses would never have sustained themselves as tourist attractions and, after the loss of lands from the grander houses, these could not do so through farming either. The number of Big Houses which the government could have acquired, retained and used in rational economic terms was very small. This they did in the case of Muckross Estate, county Kerry, and in the form of agricultural centres like Johnstown Castle, county Wexford, or prisons like Shelton Abbey, county Wicklow.

II. Parameters of study

The thesis will confine itself to the area covered by the Free State and, after 1949, the twenty-six counties of the Republic of Ireland. Terence Dooley and Olwen Purdue have both highlighted the fact that a discussion of the Big House in the six-county area would be an entirely different study given the different political, social and economic situation in the North of Ireland. There, the landed class survived as a powerful elite much longer than they did in the South. In the North sectarian divisions and religious lines were much more clearly drawn and considerably more inflammatory and this impacted the decline and importantly the survival of the house. The political establishment was also radically different, with their involvement in World War II and subsequently the control of the area by the British administration.¹¹ Olwen Purdue has written on the particular conditions that prevailed in the

¹⁰ Danielle O'Donovan and Jennifer McCrea, 'Education and the historic house: where the past has a value for the future' in Terence Dooley and Christopher Ridgway (eds) *The Irish country house: its past, present and future* (Dublin 2011), p. 185.

¹¹ Olwen Purdue, in her book *The Big House in the north of Ireland* (Dublin, 2009), has added to the historiography by producing a study of the Big House in this area. A reading of this study, the time-frame of which extends to the 1960s, illuminates the very different situation for the landed class and, by extension, Big Houses in the North of Ireland which will therefore not come under the scope of this study.

North which meant the decline of the Big House and landed class in Northern Ireland was very different to that described in Dooley's *Decline of the big house* in respect of the South. Purdue has shown how many landlords, owing particularly to their strong connections to the Unionist cause, as well as the Orange Order, retained their political importance and leadership role in communities much longer than in the South where they were effectively absent from the politics and leadership of the Free State. This in turn allowed for their perpetuation as a social group.

This thesis will adopt both a general and case study approach. The predominantly broad national approach will be helpful to gain an overall perspective on government's attitudes towards this issue, as well as allowing for the examination of their action in individual case studies. It will also permit the placing of perceptions of the country house in the wider context of the nation state, thereby allowing easier comparison and engagement with the historiography and histories surrounding attitudes to, and the fate of, the country house or the residences of the aristocracy in a wider European or global context. Furthermore, in an age of increasing micro-histories, it is still necessary to insert these specialised histories into wider national histories, within the boundaries of which each particular story was played out. The story of the Big House in Ireland must therefore be told with reference to the broader political, economic and social history of the period. R. F. Foster has pointed out the rarity of studies of such scope and stressed their importance when he stated: 'reading [Comerford's] *Ireland* (2003) also reminds us how rarely the country is dealt with in such a large conspectus, or as an episode in the broad historiography of nationalism; a subject which has come under sharp comparative focus from a wide variety of influential scholars over the past three decades'.¹²

¹² R. F. Foster, 'Forward to Methuselah; the progress of nationalism' in Dooley (ed.) *Ireland's polemical past*, p. 141.

An important theme which will run throughout this thesis is an analysis of the evolving acceptance of the Big House into the category of Irish national heritage. This evolution was only possible because the concept of national heritage and indeed the nation itself are fluid categories, the boundaries of which can be set by those in control of their definition to suit the needs of a particular time. Benedict Anderson in *Imagined Communities* argued that the nation was ‘an imagined political community – and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign. It is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion’.¹³ Therefore, if the construct of a nation is an imagined, created thing, not a given, already formed, then it is mutable and changeable in its boundaries, as well as in the moulding of its own self-image and the criteria believed essential to its ‘nationhood’. Comerford has similarly claimed:

to account for what defines the nation is not, then, a matter of reporting the realisation of some immanent ideal, but of attempting to describe an ongoing process of invention. Putting the case another way, Irishness is not an essence to be identified in various emanations, but a category whose ever-changing contents need to be accounted for.¹⁴

Similarly, the ‘canon’ of national heritage evolved over this period, so that by the 1960s the Big House was increasingly considered eligible for inclusion and this process will be examined in this thesis.

The concluding date of 1973 was chosen for a number of reasons. Firstly, the thesis will show that the tentative changes in the way the Big House was being viewed and marketed by the Irish government had begun to change by the late fifties and sixties in anticipation, among other factors, of accession to the E.E.C., which was granted in 1973. The main body of the work will thus chart the reasons behind the change in perceptions of the usefulness and value

¹³ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined communities: reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism* (Revised ed., London, 1991), p. 6.

¹⁴ Comerford, *Ireland*, p. 2.

of the Big House, its re-presentation, and equally the attitudes that remained constant which, post-1973, became clear in government legislation and policy. Due to the thirty-year closure period for state files in the National Archives, this project will also conclude at this time because the relevant files for later decades are not yet available. It is hoped that in years to come, this project can thus be extended by historians when further sources become available.

III. Historiography

Historiography on the Big House in Ireland has grown considerably in the last number of years. As Dooley has noted ‘...despite their centrality to Irish history (or possibly because of it!), it was not until the 1970s that Irish Big Houses and the family and servant communities who occupied them began to attract the level of attention from historians and specialists in art and architecture that they merit’.¹⁵ Since then a significant body of work on the history of the country house, its art collections, architecture, or disappearance from the Irish landscape has been published. In particular, academic histories focussing on aspects of the Big House have increased since the millennium.¹⁶ Then, as now, the historiography surrounding the Big House in Ireland has lagged behind its counterpart in England in terms of national studies. In Britain Peter Mandler’s *The fall and rise of the stately home* (London, 1997) has charted the story of decline and survival that marks out the study of these houses and the class that owned them. The owners are more the focus of David Cannadine’s *The decline and fall of the British aristocracy* (London, 1996). These remain the two seminal works on the subject in the English field, which has blossomed in recent years, and they remain important works in terms of subject and comparison for any Irish study.

¹⁵ Terence Dooley, *The big house and landed estates of Ireland: a research guide* (Dublin, 2007), p. 115.

¹⁶ Early works included Mark Bence-Jones, *Twilight of the ascendancy* (London, 1987); idem, *A guide to Irish county houses* (revised ed., London, 1988); idem, *Life in an Irish country house* (London, 1996); Desmond FitzGerald, David Griffin & Nicholas Robinson, *Vanishing country houses of Ireland* (Dublin, 1988); Desmond Guinness & William Ryan, *Irish houses and castles* (London, 1971); Randal MacDonnell, *The lost houses of Ireland* (London, 2002); Simon Marsden, *In ruins: the once great houses of Ireland* (Boston & London, 1997), among many others.

There is also a need for comparative histories of the Big House in Ireland with the fate of stately homes in England, the villas, châteaux and mansions of Europe, Russia and even the gilded age mansions of America, many of which faced the same issues of rising costs and questions of viability as the twentieth century progressed. Interestingly, in most survey histories of twentieth-century Ireland the Big House and the fate of landlords hardly feature. Furthermore, the land acts which reconstituted the geographical and social make-up of independent Ireland over the course of the twentieth century fail to feature significantly.¹⁷ This is telling in itself, indicating that, for the most part, there were much more pressing political and economic issues for post-independence governments to deal with than the decline of the Big House, such as mass emigration, unemployment and domestic and foreign policy.

Dooley's *The decline of the Big House in Ireland* (2001) was one of the first academic histories that concentrated specifically upon the Irish Big House. It was followed by new scholarship focussing on the history, art and architecture of the Irish country house.¹⁸ *The decline of the Big House* focussed academic research on the Big House and the story of its height of power and subsequent decline, particularly after the land acts, the War of Independence and the Civil War period. Dooley's study traced this decline through a study of the landed class until 1960, with a focus on the economic, social and political factors which led to their demise. In addition, this work itself proved a catalyst for changing attitudes by encouraging new historical interest in the study of the country house and its significance in Irish history. However, while this work examined the broad issues leading to the decline of the house, there is a gap in the historiography which allows for a more specific study,

¹⁷ These include works such as R. F. Foster, *Modern Ireland, 1600–1972* (2nd ed., London, 1989); Dermot Keogh, *Twentieth-century Ireland* (Dublin, 1994); F. S. L. Lyons, *Ireland since the famine* (4th ed., London, 1985) and John A. Murphy, *Ireland in the twentieth century* (2nd ed., Dublin, 1989); among others.

¹⁸ *Irish Times*, 16 July 2011. Such work includes, for example, Karol Mullaney-Dignam, *Music and dancing at Castletown, county Kildare, 1759–1851* (Dublin, 2011).

focussed on state attitudes to the Big House. More recently Olwen Purdue's *The Big House in the north of Ireland* sought to examine the decline of the Big House and landed class, and, significantly, their determined survival, in the region of the six counties of Northern Ireland.¹⁹ Purdue recognised the necessity for an examination of the Big House and landed class of Northern Ireland in a separate study. The work is important in this regard and also for a comparative analysis with the story of the Big House in the South. In addition, her study drew attention to the need for a historian to write about attitudes to the Big House in the South and to bring the history of the house in the South up to the 1960s and 1970s and thereby up-to-date with the historiography for the North.

Dooley stressed the need for such an examination of attitudes towards the Big House in independent Ireland in a piece entitled: 'National patrimony and political perceptions of the Irish country house in post-independence Ireland'.²⁰ This work highlighted some of the broader contextual changes nationally that contributed to a progressive change in attitudes from apathy or antagonism to appreciation. It drew attention to the need for a more detailed study of this area, emphasising how influential attitudes towards the Big House were for its survival. British historian Allen Warren has also argued for a timely reappraisal of the Big House in Ireland claiming that

despite a softening of the public attitude to the Irish country house during the years of the 'tiger economy' in the Republic,²¹ and the contemporaneous changes in militant nationalist and unionist ideologies in the north of Ireland, there is little to suggest any fundamental re-evaluation in the over-arching narrative of the decline and disappearance of the Irish landed class in terms of land, social relations and political or cultural power. There seems to be a number of reasons for this. First, the dominant Irish chronological narrative seems so robust and self-evident with its emphasis on the land question, the symbolic and physical decline and destruction of the 'Big House',

¹⁹ Purdue, *The big house in the north of Ireland*.

²⁰ Dooley, 'National patrimony and political perceptions of the Irish country house in post-independence Ireland', pp. 192–212.

²¹ For example, see Dooley, 'National patrimony and political perceptions of the Irish country house in post-independence Ireland', pp 192–212.

and the exclusion of the ‘alien’ families that had exploited their advantages over the previous three centuries.²²

Hence there is a need to analyse changes in attitudes in detail, from the early antagonistic attitudes or apathy of the state and public towards these properties to a situation toward the end of the century when they were beginning to be widely regarded as an important part of the national heritage.²³ This study intends to address this part of their history, which will not only fill a gap in the historiography of this field, but still has relevance for how the house is used, lived in, marketed and survives today.

IV. Sources

The most valuable repository for this research has been the National Archives of Ireland (N.A.I.), Dublin. The archive’s collections contain significant government papers that were used in this study, the most informative of which were the files of the Department of An Taoiseach and the Department of Finance. The former in particular contain a large volume of primary source material concerning Big Houses, most particularly the offers of such properties to the state as gifts, as well as documentation detailing wider public pressure in terms of preservation, government responses, and overall attitudes to the fate of Big Houses. It appears that the reason the Department of the Taoiseach papers are so comprehensive in relation to some of these cases, and in certain instances contain all the papers from the other relevant departments, was because, at least until the 1960s, the Taoiseach’s department took the principal role in these cases. This was especially true in cases of Big Houses offered as gifts since these offers were often addressed initially to the Taoiseach, and so responses were directed through this office. However, even apart from these cases, the department was

²² Allen Warren, ‘The twilight of the ascendancy and the Big House: a view from the twenty-first century’ in Terence Dooley and Christopher Ridgway (eds) *The Irish country house*, pp 244–5.

²³ The change in attitudes, widely accepted, is charted in Dooley, ‘National patrimony and political perceptions of the Irish country house in post-independence Ireland’, pp 192–212.

heavily involved in orchestrating government debates around these issues, corresponding and facilitating inter-departmental discussions, and arranging cabinet meetings.

The Department of Finance files are also revealing and, while the number of papers on some of these issues are smaller, the information which can be gleaned is important for this study. In most cases, apart from a few singular examples of the Taoiseach imposing his own opinion, decisions surrounding Big Houses, whether it be their preservation, use, or acceptance as gifts, rested primarily with the Department of Finance which controlled government purse strings. This thesis progresses the argument current in historiography that the decisive factor in governments' decisions and policies towards Big Houses was economics and, in this regard, the Department of Finance held much of the power to act.

Another very significant source in this repository is the Office of Public Works (O.P.W.) files. The Office of Public Works, or Board of Works, established by an act of parliament passed in 1831, continued to carry out its functions under the Free State and independent Irish governments. As the office was responsible for heritage preservation during this time, particularly under the 1930 National Monuments Act, an examination of the O.P.W. needs to be addressed on its own. The O.P.W. files are therefore extremely useful, particularly in relation to an examination of the powers which this body did or did not consider it had to preserve the Big House and whether they desired to, or did, use any such powers. However, access to these files can be problematic as the most relevant, particularly the F/94 files, were being indexed at the time research was in progress. Another difficulty encountered in the archives is that files from some of the archive's collections can be missing, withdrawn, or no longer available.

The continuity in arguments advanced by government departments in relation to Big Houses over lengthy periods is notable, with little difference wrought by changes of

government. This points to the fact that the most influential people were frequently not the ministers, who certainly fronted the department but changed periodically. Rather, civil servants were often a constant over long periods and remained in their positions despite changing governments and knew how various policies operated in practice and the constraints of departments in terms of legal powers, finances and so on. There are a number of recent works that highlight the significance of the civil service in terms of government policy and this thesis aims to progress this further.²⁴ These frequently unnamed or unacknowledged civil servants were deeply involved in the discussions that were taking place between departments on issues covered in this study, with government ministers often only entering the frame when approval was needed, if at all. Given the lack of names in certain files and the many illegibly signed handwritten notes, this interdepartmental correspondence will be referenced simply by department when it is not possible to accurately identify the writer of the document.

In addition, the most relevant files of the Irish Land Commission, a body often implicated in the history of the destruction of the Big House, are not yet fully available for examination. An enquiry was made to the Records Branch of the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, where the records are now held, but the Keeper of Records replied that the relevant files ‘are not available to the general public for research etc., unlike other state documents in the custody of the National Archives’.²⁵

Oireachtas debates from Dáil and Seanad chambers are also fruitful sources for an investigation of political attitudes towards the Big House. Unlike private government files, in these parliamentary debates deputies were conscious of being quoted in the media, and

²⁴ These include: Eda Sagarra, *Kevin O’Shiel: Tyrone nationalist and Irish state-builder* (Kildare, 2013); Martin Maguire, *The civil service and the revolution in Ireland, 1912–38: ‘shaking the blood-stained hand of Mr Collins’* (Manchester, 2008).

²⁵ Paul Nangle, Keeper of Records, Department of Agriculture, to the author, 8 Jan. 2013.

representing constituents on issues of local importance. Therefore the debates are not only revealing in terms of political attitudes, but also obliquely shed light on public attitudes. Rhetoric in these speeches was almost always delivered with constituents and their views in mind: appeasing the populace to win popularity was frequently as important as debating in a realistic and rational way on emotive issues, such as land. While the more robust and significant debates often took place in the Dáil chambers, it was important to examine the records from both chambers, as members of the Seanad were at times at greater liberty to discuss issues concerning these houses at longer length or in greater detail. Furthermore, they provide a different perspective to the view of Dáil deputies, with senators drawn from a wider variety of backgrounds and, particularly in the early period of the Free State, a number were chosen from the landed class, or members with an artistic or cultural background. This necessarily meant their view of the situation was different from the majority of deputies in Dáil Éireann who were drawn primarily from a farming or professional, middle class background which naturally moulded their attitudes.

Wider public and media reports of, and attitudes to, Big Houses and the perceived role of government in their preservation are also analysed through an examination of newspaper coverage, articles and ‘letters to the editor’ on the subject, illustrating the types of debate which were going on in public over these houses. The focus is mainly on the national newspapers, the *Irish Times*, the *Irish Independent* and the *Freeman’s Journal* and some local papers in the cases of particular houses. Sometimes in government files there are clippings on these issues from various papers, or discussions were brought up as the result of widespread or adverse media coverage, illustrating that the government were conscious of, and perhaps influenced by, wider debates that were taking place in the media and amongst the public. They were also attuned to the public justifiability and impact of their decision and policy making.

Debates over the destruction or imminent destruction of Big Houses often took place in the ‘letters to the editor’ section of the papers where the widely varying view points of the public are evident, illustrating that government action in relation to these properties was almost certainly not going to be pleasing to all. The most extensive coverage in relation to these properties was given in the *Irish Times*, possibly because of its history, when it was considered an upper class publication. However, it is also important to this study because it was the paper most widely featured among clippings in government files, reflecting again that it covered these issues in the most detail, or possibly that the government of the day were concerned with this particular paper’s coverage of this topic.

V. Structure

The thesis is divided into six chapters. Four of the chapters are chronological and will largely follow the same broad structure allowing for ease of comparison over different time frames and between different governments and also making it possible for broader conclusions to be revealed about how attitudes in various sectors changed over this period. These chapters will mostly begin with an introduction to the political, economic, social and cultural contexts of the time in order to situate the issues surrounding the house during each period within wider historical trends and movements. It will also allow for an appreciation of the other demands and priorities with which governments had to contend at that time. Political and public attitudes will then be examined through analysis of public appeals, media reports, local agitation and the political rhetoric of politicians in Oireachtas debates in order to assess the public and political feeling toward the Big House and to understand governments’ actions and reactions. The next section of each chapter will address government attitudes. This will examine, in particular, discussions in relation to policy, the motivations behind decisions taken on individual cases of Big Houses which came to government attention, and departments’ responses to enquiries and pressure. Based on a systematic examination of

departmental files the nature of their attitudes will be assessed, highlighting those whose views were the most influential. The role of civil servants in shaping attitudes and policy will be examined and the question of whether governments or individual ministers sought to advance their own agenda on this issue addressed. The final section will gauge the impact of governments' attitudes on the fate of the Big House through an illustrative case study. As the focus of the thesis is governments' attitudes to the Big House nationally, the case studies at the end of each chapter will allow for an examination of the state's interaction with one such house in detail. This allows for an in-depth analysis of the discussions carried on within government, popular opinion of the case, the views of various departments, the reasons behind decisions taken in such instances, and how significant a role the attitudes of various ministers or civil servants played in the decisions reached. Two chapters in the thesis will be predominately thematic. They focus on the Land Commission and the O.P.W.'s role in the story of the decline and/or survival of the Big House. It was necessary to deal with both these bodies separately as they were the two government departments inextricably linked to the history of the Irish government and the Big House and two of the most influential in this regard.

The first chapter of the thesis will focus on the beginning of the Free State and the first Cumann na nGaedheal government under W. T. Cosgrave from 1922 to 1932, in the decade immediately after independence. It will examine how the first Free State government had not the finances, nor the time to commit to the issue of the difficulties many Big Houses were facing, given the other major social, political and economic concerns they were seeking to address. Chapter two examines the period from 1932 to 1948 when Fianna Fáil came to power under Taoiseach Éamon De Valera. Their term in office coincided with a period of destruction and dereliction for the Big House. The chapter will investigate the government's response to the disappearance of Big Houses, assess whether the issue was a concern

politically, and illuminate the ways in which the government's action or inaction affected this decline. The third chapter on the O.P.W. will ask if it had a mandate to preserve country houses under the National Monuments Act and, if so, why did its officers do so or decline to do so? It will chart the O.P.W.'s attitudes towards the country house from 1930, when the first Free State act in relation to heritage preservation was passed, until 1960, when the O.P.W.'s files on country houses in the National Archives dry up. After this time this issue does not arise in departmental discussions until, perhaps, the 1970s or even the 1990s when the O.P.W. began to acquire Big Houses, although these dates are both outside the scope of this thesis and the thirty year closure period for government files. Chapter four will deal with a tumultuous period of change in Irish government from 1948 to 1957 when an inter-party government under John A. Costello and a Fianna Fáil administration wrestled each other in and out of office. It will examine whether the fate of Big Houses was an issue of importance to these governments who were anxious to please electorates in order to stay in power. The stripping of lands was a significant factor in the demise of the Big House and the fifth chapter on the Irish Land Commission will question what the commission's attitudes were to such houses when they were situated on lands acquired for division. The last chapter will examine how wider changes in economic policy and tourism development affected the concept of national heritage and fed into a beginning of a change in attitudes towards the Big House.

*Note on terminology: During the period covered, the portfolio for lands was included in various departments. For the purposes of this thesis where lands was included with any other portfolio, it is simply referred to as the Department of Lands and the Minister for Lands.

Chapter One

The Big House after Independence, 1922–32

In 1922 the Irish countryside was still dotted with Big Houses, although they now looked out on a countryside that had seen the ravages of the War of Independence and the Civil War. In some cases they were surrounded by small farmers and landholders becoming ever more hostile to their owners and increasingly jealous of their land. Terence Dooley has described how ‘during these years [1919–23], landlords, largely because of their socio-political, economic and religious backgrounds, were to suffer outrage and intimidation on a scale the like of which their class had not experienced in living memory, not even at the height of the land war in the 1880s’.¹ This chapter will firstly examine the national problems facing the Free State government at this time that are relevant for an analysis of attitudes towards the Big House in the period. This makes clear the level of priority that the Big House issue held for a government grappling with other more pressing concerns. It will reveal wider attitudes towards the Big House among politicians and the media and the way in which government ministers and departmental staff themselves acted toward the house, what influenced their actions and what this illuminates about their attitudes. Finally, the impact of the government’s attitudes and motivations will be assessed through an examination of a case study of a Big House gifted to the state during this period, Russborough House.

I

The year 1922 saw the establishment of the Irish Free State of twenty-six counties to be governed by its own parliament with dominion status under the King of England. This was

¹ Terence Dooley, *The decline of the big house in Ireland: a study of Irish landed families, 1860–1960* (Dublin, 2001), p. 171.

the result of a treaty signed in 1921, following the War of Independence.² The first government which came to power in this new state was a Cumann na nGaedheal government under the President of the Executive Council, W. T. Cosgrave, who was the head of government before the creation of the position of Taoiseach.³ This government had a monumental task ahead of it. The country was still a relatively poor, predominantly agricultural-based economy. In Dublin much had been destroyed in the war and social conditions were generally poor. Unsafe and unsanitary tenements were widespread and the mortality rate of citizens high.⁴ The economy also needed to be tackled, as ‘the resources of the Free State could come nowhere near funding social expenditure at the levels set by imperial governments’.⁵ To add to the difficulties faced by the first administration there was a split in politicians, revolutionaries and the general public, between those who were happy to accept the twenty-six county division and those who would settle for nothing less than full independence for the thirty-two counties and the severing of all links to Britain. The division led to the eruption of civil war in 1922 which plunged the country into chaos as the new state struggled to establish law and order, particularly in areas such as west Munster which were hot beds of Anti-Treatyite activities.⁶

These areas were also the principal locations where most of the Big Houses of the Anglo-Irish landed class were burned.⁷ While the burning of these mansions had begun during the War of Independence, the Civil War saw it become a much more prominent feature and weapon of retaliation. During the War of Independence from January 1920 to the calling of the Anglo-Irish truce in July 1921, an estimated seventy-six Big Houses were

² *Anglo-Irish Treaty* (6 Dec. 1921).

³ For a discussion of the Free State under Cosgrave see John A. Murphy, *Ireland in the twentieth-century* (2nd ed., Dublin, 1989), pp 61–75.

⁴ Frank Murphy, ‘Dublin slums in the 1930s’ in *Dublin Historical Record*, xxxvii, no. 3/4 (June–Sept. 1984), p. 111; *Irish Press*, 13 Oct. 1936.

⁵ R. F. Foster, *Modern Ireland, 1600–1972* (2nd ed., London, 1989), p. 519.

⁶ For a concise history of the Civil War period see: Dermot Keogh, *Twentieth-century Ireland: nation and state* (Dublin, 1994), pp 1–63.

⁷ Dooley, *The decline of the big house*, p. 185.

burned in the twenty-six county area of the present Irish Republic,⁸ predominantly in counties most affected by violence, especially Cork where twenty-six were burned.⁹ However, James S. Donnelly Jr. has since revised this figure considerably upwards for Cork where he argued that close to fifty Big Houses and suburban villas were burned prior to the 1921 Truce.¹⁰ This suggests that the overall national figure may also be considerably higher than originally supposed. In the Civil War which followed, an estimated 199 houses were burned between January 1922 and April 1923, nearly three times more than the figure for the War of Independence.¹¹ As Dooley has argued, the reasons for their destruction were numerous. Frequently during the War of Independence they were burned in retaliation for British attacks on citizens, particularly by the loathed Black and Tans. Agrarian issues, always of paramount importance in Ireland and one of the most significant driving forces behind the struggle for Independence, also led to the burning of houses by land hungry farmers anxious for the break-up of estates and the redistribution of land.¹² Furthermore, throughout the War of Independence some of these country houses were used as barracks or bases for training camps when commandeered by the Irish forces, so that when the Civil War broke out, both sides destroyed houses that were rumoured to be considered for such use. After the establishment of the Free State, houses were also burned because they were the homes of Free State senators. Dooley has described how: ‘following Liam Lynch’s order to burn the houses of senators, a total of thirty-seven were burned, sixteen of which could be described as big houses’.¹³ Many of the senators in the first Seanad were of the landed class, in an attempt by the new government at inclusion of the former political, and usually unionist, elite. In addition, houses were attacked and looted for arms, because of the reputation of landlords and

⁸ Ibid., p. 182.

⁹ Ibid., p. 185.

¹⁰ James S. Donnelly Jr., ‘Big house burnings in county Cork during the Irish revolution, 1920-21’ in *Éire-Ireland*, xlvii, no. 3&4 (Fall/Winter 2012), p. 142.

¹¹ Dooley, *The decline of the big house in Ireland*, p. 189.

¹² Ibid., p. 191.

¹³ Ibid., p. 190.

local or historical grievances against them and even, Dooley has pointed out, sometimes for no better reason than local hooliganism.¹⁴ This ‘bonfire’ highlighted that Big Houses were viewed as an alien presence in Ireland, symbols of British colonialism, imperialism and loyalty to the crown, centrepieces of estates established on confiscated land, occupied by exploiters, unionist strongholds, Protestant family homes, easy targets and not part of the Catholic, Gaelic Irish nation that was being envisaged as the new Irish state.¹⁵

II

After the end of this revolutionary period in 1923 the government legislated for the payments of compensation for property and damages inflicted during the Civil War. Those who had lost their houses could apply for compensation under the 1923 Damage to Property (Compensation) Act,¹⁶ enacted by the new state, although as Dooley has shown the conditions on which they could be eligible reduced their chances of being recompensed. For example, owners had to prove that they had attempted to defend and protect their property, something no non-resident owner could do. There was no compensation for the loss of contents and there was the question of market value for such a house now in a climate where these mansions had outlived their purpose and had little sale value at all. Dooley has illustrated how, for the majority of owners, compensation was inadequate and very slow to be paid, if awarded at all.¹⁷ Most owners were awarded only a portion of the costs they had applied for. Furthermore, owners struggled with the terms attached to such compensation, such as a reinstatement condition. This was problematic when many did not want to build a

¹⁴ Ibid., pp 171–207. In contrast, Olwen Purdue has written that ‘despite the violence raging in the southern provinces, particularly Munster, the early months of 1920 were relatively peaceful in the north-east. While newspapers reported almost daily on the burnings, raids and murder that was taking place in the south and west, reports of incidents in the six counties of the north-east were few and far between’. Olwen Purdue, *The big house in the north of Ireland: land, power and social elites, 1878–1960* (Dublin, 2009), p. 145.

¹⁵ See, for example, Keogh, *Twentieth-century Ireland*, pp 27–39.

¹⁶ *Damage to Property (Compensation) Act, 1923. An act to alter the law relating to compensation for criminal injuries* (12 May 1923).

¹⁷ Dooley, *The decline of the big house*, pp 202–204.

house again in such proportions, could not afford to or, given the violence and intimidation they had experienced – particularly from their own tenants or local area – did not want to remain resident in Ireland. They either left without compensation or attempted to rebuild, although this was difficult since payments were only made on completion of work and were very slow in coming.¹⁸ In fact, Dooley has concluded that ‘after independence, Free State government policy, official and otherwise, was unsympathetic in terms of compensating Big House owners for the losses suffered or in any way encouraging in terms of helping them to rebuild’.¹⁹ However, this was a government severely pressed financially and also aware, as will be seen in discussions below, that there was little use in rebuilding such houses when they were no longer economically viable.

This was not a cause for great sympathy among a populace who primarily viewed Big House owners as figures to be vilified, disloyal to the Saorstát and also as a very wealthy class given the size of their homes which were destroyed. Thus while many owners could not afford to rebuild, the general perception was that they were a moneyed class which did not induce many politicians to attempt to ease their financial burdens. In a debated motion by the Minister for Finance on compensation claims in 1922 Labour Teáichta Dála (T.D.) for Tipperary Daniel Morrissey made this clear when he stated that in the main ‘the destroyed property consists of mansions throughout the country, and really an extreme hardship has been imposed on the workers that have been thrown out of work as a direct result of this’.²⁰ It was the workers, rather than the owners, who were portrayed as the victims here. In fact, in the same debate fellow Labour T.D. William Davin, elected for Leix-Offaly, made clear that ‘the people who owned these mansions were, generally speaking, the remnants of England’s loyal garrison in this country, who have cleared out to a more congenial home, and as far as I

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid., pp 197–207.

²⁰ *Dáil Éireann deb.*, i, 2020 (1 Nov. 1922).

can gather, at least from newspaper comments, do not intend to return to this country’,²¹ putting forward the view that owners were not detrimentally affected by the destruction of these houses and had actually opportunistically chosen to move on to more hospitable locations. This view informed Davin’s argument that ‘they will take whatever will be given by the Irish people so far as money is concerned’,²² while his concern for the ‘unfortunate’ destruction of large mansions was mainly because they were ‘places where a good number of people have got employment’.²³

The benefit to the country of a re-instatement condition being attached to their compensation was also considered questionable. In the Dáil, Dublin county Independent T.D. Darrell Figgis argued:

Instead of making this full re-instatement condition mandatory, there ought to be some provision in the Bill ... by which this re-instatement condition may be put aside until it is actually discovered whether the amount of demesne land to be apportioned to such and such a landlord would really justify a house being built in the same large and magnificent proportions as the houses that, in some cases, were destroyed.²⁴

The President of the Executive Council, W. T. Cosgrave, described rebuilding as ‘an extravagance, an extravagance upon the person who would have to maintain such houses, and an extravagance upon the state in reconstructing houses of such dimensions’ and made a case for ‘substituted dwellings or for a more useful class of house’.²⁵ Here it is evident that he was thinking of both the state and owners, most of whom were finding the maintenance of such houses a serious financial burden at this time. In fact, Independent Senator Professor William Magennis maintained ‘that for certain white elephant houses – great mansions – there might in the new regime be no market value at all’.²⁶ Similarly they were depicted by Labour T.D.

²¹ *Dáil Éireann deb.*, i, 2028 (1 Nov. 1922).

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Dáil Éireann deb.*, ii, 1855–6 (1 Mar. 1923).

²⁵ *Dáil Éireann deb.*, ii, 1858 (1 Mar. 1923).

²⁶ *Ibid.*

for Dublin county, Thomas Johnson, as a ‘burden rather than a benefit’.²⁷ Senator Sir John Keane, himself an owner of such a property, argued that owners in most cases agreed and did not want compensation to buy a ‘white elephant’, but to acquire suitable accommodation.²⁸ Despite this, the *Irish Times* reported that in a Seanad debate on the Damage to Property Bill, the Minister for Finance, Ernest Blythe, insisted that ‘the government was very anxious that people should rebuild, and that people whose houses were burned should remain in the country and rebuild their own houses’.²⁹ However, the chairman of the Senate, Lord Glenavy, claimed in reply that ‘nobody was anxious to have a building reinstated in its old form. It had grown out of their needs and they wanted a different style of architecture. They found that some of those houses had not been occupied as residences for a considerable period, and they were generally troubled as to what a proper estimate would be’.³⁰

However, even the payment of low levels of compensation for the loss of Big Houses was somewhat controversial. Farmer’s Party T.D. for Tipperary, Michael Heffernan, who declared during a vote on property losses compensation in 1925:

a feeling exists that the owners of these mansions have got better terms in proportion to the losses suffered than people who had smaller houses and places which were very much less pretentious, destroyed. A mansion may have been built 70 or 80 years ago at a cost of £100,000, and I need not point out to the Minister that if placed on the open market now it might be a white elephant; it might not be worth anything.³¹

Against such sentiment the *Irish Times* strove to emphasise their local worth beyond the market value of the building and reported that ‘anxiety is being caused in many directions by the serious economic disturbance due to the destruction of the mansions and country houses of the old gentry’.³² The paper was presumably referring to demesne owners, as Dooley has

²⁷ *Dáil Éireann deb.*, ii, 1896 (1 Mar. 1923).

²⁸ *Irish Times*, 14 Apr. 1923

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ *Dáil Éireann deb.*, xiv, 11 (28 May 1925).

³² *I.T.*, 17 Aug. 1925.

illustrated how many of the staff employed by the Big House were Protestants from England, particularly those hired for the most important posts. The 1911 census returns showed that out of 767 servants returned, 470 were Irish and ‘only 14 per cent were locally born emphasising the fact that landlords preferred to “import” their servants. Because of this, big houses were not of great economic benefit to locals seeking employment on a permanent basis’.³³ This also served to foster resentment with the local population with its implication that they were not to be trusted or that only an English or Scottish Protestant was worthy of working in the most important jobs inside the house. Hence arguments like that advanced by the *Irish Times* above were in a minority with owners alienated as never before following the revolutionary period.³⁴

Furthermore, the Big Houses appeared now as buildings which had outlived their function, particularly with the land acts continuing to strip them of their estates. The land acts, principally the 1903 Wyndham Land Act and the 1909 Birrell Act, continued the process of the division of land among tenants in Ireland which was begun in the late nineteenth century.³⁵ However, these had not served to end landlordism in Ireland and, with agrarian and political grievance so inextricably linked to the Irish struggle for independence, land was one of the most important issues which the first Saorstát government was under pressure to address. As Olwen Purdue has argued: ‘the increasingly widespread and aggressive nature of land agitation, particularly in the south and west, gave the Free State

³³ Dooley, *The decline of the big house*, p. 160. For a discussion of servant life in the Big House, see this work pp 146–170.

³⁴ Eugenio F. Biagini has given a concise overview of the situation for Protestants generally in the South, that is of all social classes, in his review article ‘The Protestant minority in Southern Ireland’ in *The Historical Journal*, lv, no. 4 (Dec. 2012), pp 1161–1184. The alienation of the Anglo-Irish landed class even before partition is evident in works by authors from this background themselves such as the memoirs of Elizabeth Plunkett, Countess of Fingall, in *Seventy years young: memories of Elizabeth, Countess of Fingall* (London, 1937), or the works of Elizabeth Bowen, most famously capturing the decline of the Big House in *The last September* (London, 1998).

³⁵ For a study of the effects and results of the Wyndham Act see Patrick John Cosgrove, ‘The Wyndham Land Act 1903: the final solution to the Irish land question?’ (Ph.D. Thesis, National University of Ireland, Maynooth, 2008).

government little choice but to quickly legislate for further land reform'.³⁶ They did so with haste and in 1923 another land act was passed.³⁷ Its aim was the confiscation of large tracts of tenanted and untenanted land, although it did exclude home farms and demesnes unless expressly required for the relief of congestion by the Irish Land Commission which had been created in 1881.³⁸ A similar land act was passed in the North of Ireland,³⁹ so that there too, 'by the end of the 1920s nearly all tenanted land in Northern Ireland had passed out of the ownership of the landed class and any remaining tenanted land would soon follow'.⁴⁰ The legal complications of the Free State's 1923 act meant that redivision of land was slow and laborious and in 1931 another act was introduced to speed up the process.⁴¹ This act was also important for the government in terms of appeasing a voting populace who equated independence with the confiscation of land from the Anglo-Irish landlords and its division among 'Irish' farmers. As both of these acts served to re-divide the Irish landscape they proved to be the final nails in the coffin for the possibility of the survival of many Big Houses on income generated from lands. Dooley has elucidated on this, stating:

Much more than 150 acres was required to maintain a great mansion. Unfortunately for those landowners who wanted to remain in Ireland, and who were not driven out by events of the revolutionary period from 1919 to 1923, the Free State government had little sympathy for anyone holding on to thousands of acres when there were so many smallholders and landless men clamouring for land.⁴²

Nonetheless, Alvin Jackson pointed out that even before the 1870s landlordism was on the wane throughout Ireland, England and continental Europe due to a myriad of factors: falling

³⁶ Purdue, *The big house in the north of Ireland*, pp 94–5.

³⁷ *Land Act, 1923. An act to amend the law relating to the occupation and ownership of land and for other purposes relating thereto* (9 Aug. 1923).

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ *Northern Ireland Land Act, 1925. An act to amend the law relating to the occupation and ownership of land in Northern Ireland; and for other purposes relating thereto* (28 May 1925).

⁴⁰ Purdue, *The big house in the North of Ireland*, p. 100.

⁴¹ *Land Act, 1931. An act to make provision for the early vesting of holdings in the purchasers thereof under the land purchase acts and for that and other purposes to amend those acts and the local Registration of Title (Ireland) Act, 1891, and also to make provision in respect of the variation of certain tithe rentcharges and variable rents* (30 Apr. 1931).

⁴² Dooley, *The decline of the big house*, p. 134.

property values, heightened competition from North American and antipodean agriculture, and political democratisation.⁴³ There were other influential factors in the Irish context too: the rise of the farming interest lobby group in the years after the Famine, and its political mobilisation after the agricultural crises of the later 1870s, disengaged managerial policies, as well as an inefficient rent structure. However, he has argued that

the most comprehensive blows to the landed position came – ironically – from the very policy which was designed as a rescue mechanism and which was embodied in a succession of acts from 1885 through to 1909: land purchase ... Irish landlords were therefore the victims of a modest democratisation of capital: they were in addition the victims of the land agitation, the First World War, the Anglo-Irish and the civil wars, and of the mildly unfriendly policies of the new Free State.⁴⁴

Combined with the agricultural depression in the 1920s the viability of the Big House had by then all but vanished. In spite of this, the Protestant landed class had not and Dooley has shown how the 1926 census, the first taken by the Free State, showed that ‘Protestants who made up only 8.4 per cent of the population of the Free State, owned 28 per cent of the farms over 200 acres in size’.⁴⁵

Nevertheless, when Big Houses were divorced from their original purposes and ‘gradually stripped of their great demesnes through compulsory state acquisition, they became anachronisms in the Irish countryside’.⁴⁶ Furthermore, they were the private homes of a class which were seen to belong to an administration which had left Ireland and the general feeling was that they should follow. The houses and landlords had also become symbols of every nationalist and agrarian grievance fostered since the nineteenth century during the Land War and the struggle for Independence. R. V. Comerford has similarly argued that the Big House:

⁴³ Alvin Jackson, *Ireland 1798–1998* (Oxford, 1999), p. 226.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ Dooley, ‘*The land for the people*’: *the land question in independent Ireland* (Dublin, 2004), p. 45.

⁴⁶ *Idem*, *The big house and landed estates of Ireland: a research guide* (Dublin, 2007), p. 62.

had been made into a symbol of oppression and decadence in order to justify the long Land War, and the dominant party politics of the occupants was sufficient pretext to perpetuate the antipathy into the revolutionary years and beyond. Landlord and big house would do as synecdoche for all the historical grievances of the nationalist narrative.⁴⁷

Since that period the demesne walls had become increasingly symbolic of a divide between the inhabitants of the house and the local populace. This was also a consequence of owners' desire to remain separate from local communities with whom they had rarely deigned to associate. In fact, antagonistic attitudes and the distancing of this class from the majority of the population were not caused by a one-sided bitterness. Dooley has described how:

After the so-called Troubles of the early 1920s, the old landed class became psychologically more insular than ever before. Their political connections to Britain were severed and the British army officer class had departed Ireland by 1922. Most found it difficult to sever their old emotional ties and they therefore found themselves in a state of limbo, floating between Britain and Ireland but belonging to neither.⁴⁸

The lines of division between the landed class and the population that surrounded them had been drawn before this period, particularly during the Land War and even further back in Irish history, but it continually remained an issue in Irish social, political and economic life throughout the twentieth century. As early as 1848 John Mitchel wrote in the *United Irishman* that 'the time for conciliation of the landlord class is past ... I believe rights of property as they are termed must be invaded'.⁴⁹ Comerford has also elucidated how their status as a landlord class wrote them out of the new definition of Irish nationality that was being created. He argued: 'much of the rhetoric of nationality is concerned with justifying possession of the land ... in modern Ireland, the lords of the soil were supposed to be of

⁴⁷ R. V. Comerford, 'Foreword' in Terence Dooley and Christopher Ridgway (eds), *The Irish country house; its past, present and future* (Dublin, 2011), p. 11.

⁴⁸ Dooley, *The big house and landed estates of Ireland*, p. 136.

⁴⁹ *United Irishman*, 6 May 1848.

different stock from the rest of the population. In the 1880s, the Irish nation was re-imagined so as to exclude them'.⁵⁰

Any arguments that emphasised the positive effects of having such a class remain in the country came from their own ranks and were primarily articulated in the Seanad, where some of the Anglo-Irish class were still able to expound their views on the issues of the day, without any real input to the running of the state.⁵¹ Free State Senator, poet, author, medical practitioner and also Big House owner – who had been a supporter of Sinn Féin – Dr Oliver St John Gogarty, was one such figure who maintained, despite historical associations, that the houses and establishments rented for the hunting season, primarily by the gentry, were financially important to the country.⁵² His own residence in Connemara, Renvyle House, was burned in 1923 owing to his position as a Free State senator. In a 1929 Seanad debate on game preservation, he encouraged a realisation that ‘even the Gaeltacht to some extent depends on the circulation of money’.⁵³ He highlighted the economic dangers when vacant houses were being left instead to decay, but was aware that it was not a popular concern, commenting ironically that ‘as long as we are going to consider that the salt of the earth lives in the Gaeltacht it may be possible to allow a number of gentlemen’s houses in the country to fall into ruins to further our patriotism’.⁵⁴ Similarly in a 1923 debate Independent Senator Colonel Maurice Moore stated that he would like to see the derelict mansions and demesnes built up again, despite the fact that ‘the society and people of those times have passed

⁵⁰ R. V. Comerford, *Ireland: inventing the nation* (London, 2003), p. 9.

⁵¹ ‘As a temporary placatory measure 30 out of a total of 60 senators were to be appointed by the President of the Executive Council “with special regard to the providing of representation for groups or parties not then adequately represented in Dáil Éireann”, and William Cosgrave proceeded to appoint 16 former Unionists of different descriptions. ... But for those who emerged, dazed, into the more settled conditions of the mid-1920s, the Irish Free State offered a home: a home where there was some restrictions and some threats, where some territory was out of bounds, but a home nonetheless’. Jackson, *Ireland*, p. 277.

⁵² For further discussion of landowners and the changes in hunting and shooting see: Dooley, *The decline of the big house*, pp 258–264.

⁵³ *Seanad Éireann deb.*, xiii, 337 (12 Dec. 1929).

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

away'.⁵⁵ He went on to emphasise his belief in the necessity of having this class in society. However, he was careful to base this necessity on their role and value to the country and not as a preservation of privilege, emphasising: 'I think it is necessary to have a leisured class in this country, able by their money and the extent of their land to do a good deal in the way of setting an example, trying experiments in agriculture, and affording an object-lesson to the people of the district around them'.⁵⁶ In the final analysis these opinions were being voiced in a chamber whose deliberations did not reach far beyond its own benches and to an audience of which many had a vested interest in the preservation of this way of life.

Therefore the Big Houses were in a precarious position in the early decades of post-independence Ireland, with no lands to farm, no rents from tenants, and their age making them ever more expensive to maintain. In addition, the worldwide economic depression, the 1929 Wall Street crash, the decline of stocks and shares, in which many owners had invested money, all contributed to owners' inability to maintain their houses.⁵⁷ The fallout was manifold, with many forced to sell if possible, move out, abandon the property or possibly continue to live in the house, although in much reduced circumstances and with little money to invest in the house's upkeep. When the income-generating lands were confiscated, contents were often sold to pay the bills and the Big House itself usually followed.⁵⁸ Many houses which were sold were turned to new uses. Religious orders bought and saved a number by converting them into convents, religious institutions or schools, an example of which is Emo Court, county Laois, which was bought by the Jesuits from the Land Commission in 1930 as a novitiate. In fact, before 1935, 'Battersby and Sons alone had sold at least sixty big houses in Ireland including Bishopscourt; Kilashee; Kylemore Abbey and

⁵⁵ *Seanad Éireann deb.*, i, 718 (28 Mar. 1923).

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ See Dooley, *The decline of the big house*, pp 118–122.

⁵⁸ See *Ibid.*, pp 242–260.

Ravensdale'.⁵⁹ Nevertheless, there was little sustained market for these houses which were predominantly difficult to sell and this proved to be the case for many mansions acquired by the Land Commission during the course of their division work so that demolition or ruin were often the only options left for these once grand houses.⁶⁰ Burton Hall, county Carlow, was one such house which was sold to the Land Commission in 1927 and subsequently demolished in 1930. Dooley has argued that 'the coincidence of the break-up of estates, increased taxation and the economic depression in the 1920s and 1930s, sounded the death knell for so many Irish big houses'.⁶¹

However, this decline of the Big House was lived out by quite a minority of citizens who resided in private mansion houses. Hence owners' claims that they were now far from wealthy were not taken too seriously in popular perception, given that an impoverished gentry may have lost some of the fortune they once had but were still in an often wealthy, or at least perceived wealthy position, compared to an average Irish farmer or city dweller. In the first decades of independence then, the perception that these ostentatious properties were now burdens rather than luxuries was not one which had widespread currency or appeal and popular opinion was that life within the demesne walls was continuing in all its extravagance. In a 1931 Dáil Debate on the Intoxicating Liquor Bill, Fianna Fáil T.D. for Cork-East, William Kent, embodied such sentiment by arguing that the government should be targeting 'the people in stately mansions and banqueting halls who spend thousands of pounds in costly liqueurs, champagnes and crushed port'.⁶² Others attempted to counter this with the newly cultivated idea, close to reality for some, of the impoverished owner and in a Dáil debate in July 1924 on the Finance Bill, Major Bryan Cooper contended: 'persons who own such

⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 141.

⁶⁰ For more information on this see Chapter five: The Irish Land Commission and the Big House, 1940–65.

⁶¹ Dooley, *The decline of the big house*, p. 16.

⁶² *Dáil Éireann deb.*, xxxvii, 1736 (18 Mar. 1931).

houses need every concession and would be glad to get it even if it were only a five pound note'.⁶³

The heavy burdens of taxes and death duties were not the only expenses involved in ownership of a Big House in this period and the increasing costs of maintenance and preservation, combined with decreasing income from the land, contributed to the sale, abandonment or destruction of many properties that were no longer economically viable. Dooley has shown how the Free State inherited its rates of death duty from Britain which had, particularly since Lloyd George's 'People's budget' of 1909, rose significantly and hit landowners hard (previously the low rates and exemptions for landowners in proportion to that of the rest of the population amounted to what Dooley terms 'impressive privileges').⁶⁴ Under Free State governments they also rose and by 1950 the rates had increased dramatically, rising progressively from 6 per cent to 41.6 per cent in the intervening period. Simultaneously, from 1925 to 1930, a total of £5 million was paid in death duties in Ireland and this amount rose to a total of £13.4 million for the period 1945 to 1950.⁶⁵ The same 1909 budget had introduced a super tax on gross incomes over £5,000, a tax the Free State also inherited although 'in 1923, the rate of super tax in Ireland rose progressively from 1s 6d in the pound for incomes over £2,000 to 6s in the pound over £30,000'.⁶⁶ Likewise, the Free State government inherited ordinary income tax rates from Britain although these rates also fluctuated in the following years. Furthermore, high rates payable on houses lead to their decline as a dismantled house was rates free, thus leading many owners to remove the roofs from houses leaving them to ruin.⁶⁷

⁶³ *Dáil Éireann deb.*, viii, 1583 (17 July 1924).

⁶⁴ Dooley, *The decline of the big house*, p. 136.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 137.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

This policy was not one specifically introduced by the Free State government to sabotage the chances of the survival for Irish Big Houses. It was a form of taxation inherited from the British administration, particularly the Liberal governments' attempts to redistribute wealth by taxing the wealthy, and was not sympathetic to any aristocratic landowning class. Purdue has described the situation in Northern Ireland where by 1939 the upper level of taxation had risen to 60 per cent for properties valued at over £1m. This meant that 'for someone inheriting a big house, taxation at these levels were, at best, a problem – at worst, ruinous. There was hardly an estate in Northern Ireland that was not seriously affected by the payment of taxation and, in particular, death duties at some stage. On those estates where the actual margin of income was small, such payments simply could not be met'.⁶⁸ Purdue elaborated on how taxation, and particularly death duties:

had a potentially devastating impact on an estate's chances of survival. There were estates in Northern Ireland, the Free State and throughout the British Isles where the payment of death duties brought a family to such a state of financial ruin that they had no alternative but to sell or simply abandon their property.⁶⁹

Nonetheless, she emphasised that most remaining Northern Irish families were able, through careful planning, to avoid such significant duties or were able to manage their payment successfully while keeping their property going as a viable concern.⁷⁰ This is notable as it was not the case for many Big House families in the South. If rates, taxes and duties were similar in the North of Ireland, but through careful management and prudence they were able to survive as a powerful elite up to the 1960s and beyond, then in the South perhaps some of the blame for destruction, sale or abandonment of Big Houses, which has often been laid at the governments' feet by owners citing taxation, should also be placed at the feet of those of the Anglo-Irish class who were perhaps not prudent or frugal enough or

⁶⁸ Purdue, *The big house in the north of Ireland*, p. 111.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 115.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 115.

did not have the motivation to keep the house going through such difficulties. Even so, in 1931 these Big Houses were described as ‘white elephants’ in the *Weekly Irish Times*, which went on to report: ‘to be burdened with a house with rooms that are never occupied is like holding a private museum, in which no one is interested. So that there is nothing to envy in the individual who has a big house and nothing else to live on!’⁷¹

III

The decreasing wealth of Big House owners could hardly be accurately termed poverty in a country where genuine poverty and destitution was rife. Dublin had its own slum tenements at this point and the country continually lost a proportion of its population as *émigrés* were anxious to leave an Ireland where opportunities for employment or raising one’s economic position were scant. Dermot Keogh has shown that ‘rank poverty in the countryside in the 1930s continued to force young men and women to suffer the indignities of the “hiring fair” ... Others sought seasonal work abroad. About 9,500 went to Britain in 1937’.⁷² Similarly, in Enda Delaney’s opinion, for the first independent governments, emigration was the issue of high priority, although little practical action was taken. He has argued that

from the end of the Second World War until the early 1970s nearly 700,000 people left independent Ireland ... mass migration had underlined the obvious shortcomings of the level of economic development since the foundation of the independent Irish state in 1921–2. Economic success or failure was measured more often than not by the number of people departing for other countries annually ... For politicians in independent Ireland emigration was the source of much embarrassment, especially given that Britain, the old enemy, was the destination for the majority of people who left after 1921.⁷³

⁷¹ *Weekly Irish Times*, 25 Apr. 1931.

⁷² Keogh, *Twentieth-century Ireland*, p. 91.

⁷³ Enda Delaney, ‘Emigration, political cultures and the evolution of post-war society’ in Brian Girvin and Gary Murphy (eds), *The Lemass era: politics and society in the Ireland of Seán Lemass* (Dublin, 2005), p. 49.

Hence the Big House, however uneconomic, as private home and as symbolic of the British administration in Ireland, was not a prime concern for this Irish government in economic or indeed heritage terms.

Up until 1930 the state was tackling more pressing social issues than heritage preservation and so the legislation which controlled this area remained the legislation enacted by the British administration. National monuments could be vested in the Commissioners of Public Works or given to their guardianship by the Commissioners of Church Temporalities, the Ancient Monuments Protection Acts, 1882 and 1892, section 14 of the Irish Land Act, 1903 and section 47 of the Land Act, 1923.⁷⁴ As such, prior to the 1930 act the commissioners were charged with the duty of maintaining ancient monuments under five different statutes.⁷⁵ Aware of the absence of any specific legislation for the national heritage, in 1924 the Royal Irish Academy and the Society of Antiquaries of Ireland sent a memorandum to the Department of the Taoiseach on proposals for a suggested National Monuments Act. The memorandum stated that if such an act was passed, the Irish Free State would take its place among the other nations of Europe in terms of such legislation. They emphasised:

In Ireland, such preservation is doubly necessary: first because education in the past has not been such as to develop in the people at large an understanding of the value of ancient monuments; and secondly because of the great importance of Irish antiquities for an understanding of the early civilisation not merely of Ireland, but also of Europe.⁷⁶

Their draft act thus specifically focused on the preservation of ‘ancient monuments’ which were defined as: ‘all remains bearing upon the racial characteristics, or the social, political,

⁷⁴ File on ancient and national monuments acts addressed to Commissioner Kent, 16 Apr. 1928 (National Archives of Ireland, O.P.W. files, F94/289/1/1).

⁷⁵ ‘Powers of Commissioners of Public Works’, undated (N.A.I., O.P.W. files, F94/289/1/1).

⁷⁶ Memorandum, undated (N.A.I., Dept. of An Taoiseach files, S5004A).

artistic, or religious history of the Irish people'.⁷⁷ To make this clear it outlined: 'the year 1800 A.D. shall be fixed as the limit of date before which all such be deemed "ancient", except in the case of manuscripts in the Irish language, when its limit shall be 1850 A.D'.⁷⁸

While the government may have been inspired by these proposals they did not act on them, but five years later proposed their own legislation. In a 1929 debate on this National Monuments Bill, Hugh Law, Cumann na nGaedheal T.D. for Donegal, argued for the protection of 'the historical mansions' and highlighted 'the destruction that is going on, every day that passes without adequate protection being afforded brings about the ruin and, it may be, the disappearance of monuments which are of the deepest interest to all Irishmen'.⁷⁹ This claim, however, was not backed up by many other politicians' concerns, nor was it specifically legislated for in this act. It was 1930 when this act, the most significant legislated for by an Irish government in terms of heritage protection until the 1995 Heritage Act, came into force. The 1930 National Monuments Act made provision 'for the protection and preservation of national monuments and for the preservation of archaeological objects in Saorstát Eireann'.⁸⁰ For the purposes of this act, 'national monument' was defined as a monument or its remains 'the preservation of which is a matter of national importance by reason of the historical, architectural, traditional, artistic, or archaeological interest attaching thereto'.⁸¹ The 1930 act also established the National Monuments Advisory Council (hereafter the N.M.A.C.) for giving advice and assistance to the Commissioners of Public Works in relation to the enactment of this legislation, and was to include among its members

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ *Dáil Éireann deb.*, xxxii, 267 (24 Oct. 1929).

⁸⁰ *National Monuments Act, 1930. An act to make provision for the protection and preservation of national monuments and for the preservation of archaeological objects in Saorstát Eireann and to make provision for other matters connected with the matters aforesaid* (26 Feb. 1930).

⁸¹ Ibid.

the Keeper of Irish Antiquities at the National Museum and an officer of the Commissioners of Public Works, as well as other nominated members.

Mairéad Carew has argued that this act only legislated for the preservation of a ‘native’ past. She maintained:

The National Monuments Act 1930 was a very important piece of legislation in terms of consolidating national identity in Ireland through the protection of its material culture. Those archaeological monuments deemed to be ‘national’ could be used in the service of the new state and in the enunciation of its official history. Those deemed ‘anti-national’ could be allowed to decay or a blind eye could be turned to their destruction, as they served no purpose other than as a reminder of a past which was perhaps, from a particular political perspective, best erased.⁸²

However, the National Monuments Act did not specify any particular date for the limits of its powers and was, in this sense, much broader in its wording than the proposals which the Royal Society of Antiquaries in Ireland with the Royal Irish Academy had submitted to government in their draft ‘Ancient Monuments Protection Act’ of 1924. This draft act had defined qualifying ancient monuments as only those dated before 1800. Their proposed act would have therefore restricted absolutely, by legislation, any monument built after this time. Unlike this, the government’s 1930 National Monuments Act changed the focus of preservation from being solely on ancient monuments to being on all monuments that could be considered of national importance. By not defining any date for qualification as a national monument, the act left it open to the commissioners’ discretion to decide whether or not any buildings, such as Big Houses for example, built after 1800 could be preserved under this act by virtue of their architectural interest or other merits rather than immediately disqualifying them based on the date they were built. Hence, technically the Big Houses of Ireland could have been preserved under this act, although chapter three will show that predominantly they were not, which raises the question of if not, why not? This discretion was important and was

⁸² Mairéad Carew, ‘Politics and the definition of national monuments: the “big house problem”’ in *The Journal of Irish Archaeology*, xviii (2009), p. 132.

to be that of the Office of Public Works, as it was the body charged with its implementation and therefore their commissioners' and inspectors' attitudes and opinions on what should be covered under the protections of this act was of crucial importance, as was the question of whether their budget allowed it.

The 1930 Act was not without its limitations, however. Within a few years of the enacting of the legislation these had already become so apparent that the N.M.A.C. recommended amendments. Suggestions included giving local authorities the ability to transfer the ownership of a national monument from their care to the ownership of the commissioners or appoint the commissioners as guardians and the issuing of temporary preservation orders where a national monument was in immediate danger of destruction. Furthermore, it was recommended that powers be given to inspect monuments still in private ownership or on private lands and to excavate at reported archaeological sites without waiting for a license and there was a proposed increase of the period of the council's membership from three to five years.⁸³ In spite of this, the O.P.W. concluded that most of the suggested amendments were scarcely necessary and that the present act was adequate, suggesting that its staff did not consider most of the 'limitations' which the N.M.A.C. had pointed out to be overly important.⁸⁴ The first proposed amendment was the only one considered of sufficient importance to warrant the introduction of an amending bill, but they thought that the absence of this amendment was not so destructive as to merit the early introduction of legislation 'particularly at a time when the government's legislative programme is so large and includes matters of so much greater importance',⁸⁵ an unusual admission from a department

⁸³ 'National Monuments Act, 1930: amendments recommended by N.M.A.C. (N.A.I., O.P.W. files, F94/289/1/1).

⁸⁴ O.P.W. Internal minute 'Notes on amendments proposed by national monuments advisory council', 14 June 1938 (N.A.I., O.P.W. files, F94/289/1/1).

⁸⁵ Ibid.

specifically concerned with the importance of preserving heritage. The act was not amended until 1954.⁸⁶

The implementation of the 1930 act by the Commissioners of Public Works reflected the new state's desire to preserve and promote its own native traditions and heritage. Hence, while no date limits were specified in this act, most monuments preserved under this legislation dated prior to the seventeenth century; ancient monuments which could be more readily considered native.⁸⁷ Preserved under this legislation were ancient monuments, such as round towers and the monastic settlement of Glendalough, a site which embodied a native Gaelic, Catholic tradition which the state was seeking to embody.⁸⁸ Preserving and promoting this heritage also created a lineage from which the state was seen to have been born and one which was untainted by centuries of British control.

On the other hand the Big House was symbolic precisely of a colonial history and in many cases the private home of a perceived wealthy foreign elite. It was also, comparatively speaking, a more modern building and, as such, was not considered eligible for preservation under this act as it was enforced by the O.P.W.⁸⁹ Furthermore, while this was the first attempt by the new state at creating some policy and control over national monuments, their budget, particularly for heritage, was not a large one. Ruins of monasteries and round towers, or ogham stones were also therefore easier and more realistic propositions for maintenance.

⁸⁶ *National Monuments (Amendment) Act, 1954. An act to amend the National Monuments Act, 1930* (22 Dec. 1954).

⁸⁷ In relation to a letter from the Tourist Board enquiring about the possibility of preserving Big Houses under the National Monuments Act, a civil servant in the O.P.W. argued that the buildings referred to were 'of modern date and construction and would not, save in very exceptional circumstances, be suitable for preservation under the National Monuments Act'. (Signed internal note in reply to division C of the O.P.W.'s handwritten note, 18 Jan. 1944 (N.A.I., O.P.W. files, F94/574/1). Again in response to a similar query from Tipperary District Council in 1944, the O.P.W. proposed replying that 'the wording of the resolution however suggested to them that the "old places" referred to were mansions or houses of comparatively modern date and construction, and these would not, save in very exceptional circumstances, be suitable for preservation under the Act'. Draft letter from O.P.W. to Tipperary district council, Apr. 1944 (N.A.I., O.P.W. files, F94/574/1).

⁸⁸ Department of Finance to the secretary to the President of the Executive Council, 2 Nov. 1930 (N.A.I., Dept. of An Taoiseach files, S5935).

⁸⁹ See Chapter three: The Office of Public Works and the Big House, 1930–1960.

They required only a low budget to preserve, often only needing the erection of a fence and a sign to secure such a site as a national monument in the commissioners' eyes – very manageable with a small field staff. A Big House on the other hand was something which was meaningless as a ruin. Its historical importance and integrity lay precisely in its maintenance and grandeur as a home, the decoration of its rooms, its art and architecture, the preservation of all of which would have proved a colossal expense for the commissioners. The houses were often also over two centuries old and so had many problems with rotting, leaking, heating and plumbing, which would have made them hugely expensive to maintain in good condition without bearing the adverse criticism of letting them go to ruin in state care. Furthermore, there was no popular interest in preserving Big Houses and so the government would not have been providing a popular visitor or amenity site for locals, nor would the houses have proved economically viable to the government in terms of tourism revenue. These considerations were to the forefront of the government's mind when they were offered as a gift to the nation Russborough House, county Wicklow, in 1929, just before the passing of this act, which will be detailed later in this chapter.

The English National Trust was enabled by the government to accept gifts of country houses, not least to avoid such embarrassing situations of offers to government, which they did not want to accept. Nevertheless, during the 1920s: 'the Trust was finding it difficult to scrape together even the £2,000 needed to pay death duties on its gifts from Lord Curzon, Bodiam and Tattershall Castles'.⁹⁰ In fact, the economic position of the government in England, without the country house bearing any of the weight of colonial associations placed on its Irish counterpart, had been just as antagonistic to the survival of the private country house in the first decades of the century, if not more so, motivated there instead by ideals such as economic and class equality. Peter Mandler revealed that 'when Labour's fiscal

⁹⁰ Peter Mandler, *The fall and rise of the stately home* (New Haven & London, 1997), p. 256.

policy of taxing the land materialized in 1930 – the top rate of death duties went back up to fifty per cent and a Land Valuation Bill was announced – a few landowners also came out in favour of the State taking over their agricultural and amenity functions’.⁹¹ He continued:

If landowners were hoping that the National Government might look more favourably on these arguments than had Labour, they were fooling themselves ... The Treasury was implacably opposed to tax reliefs for private citizens and predicted a public outcry if private houses were subsidised in this way just because they were ‘historic’. Nor was the Treasury interested in taking over ownership of houses and estates ... it was grappling unhappily with an offer from Sir Charles Trevelyan of the house and estate at Wallington in Northumberland, which Trevelyan was offering as a gift to the nation if some public use could be found for it. No government department showed any interest in this gift ... At most, the Treasury was willing to consider legal changes that might make it easier for the Trust to accept gifts such as Wallington, free of estate duty, to spare the state embarrassment.⁹²

This illustrates that concessions to the trust in England at this time were influenced by the fact that the country house problem was one the state did not want to take on and therefore enabling the National Trust to do so freed them from any obligation they had to accept houses for which they had no use and little appreciation at this time. When Neville Chamberlain became Chancellor of the Exchequer he was, however, willing to look at the question in a different way long before such suggestions were heard in Ireland. Mandler has illustrated that

He agreed with the Treasury’s objection to private benefits, but was willing to consider concessions to the Trust if private owners submitted themselves to closer public control. Both he and Sir William Ormsby-Gore, the head of the Office of Public Works, took *Country Life*’s brief for the country house seriously. But if the country house really was a national heritage, they felt, it required national planning, not some hole-and-corner, case-by-case negotiation with the National Trust.⁹³

The question of a National Trust was not, however, on the Free State’s agenda at this time and therefore any such gifts of houses were the responsibility of the government itself.

⁹¹ Mandler, *The fall and rise of the stately home*, p. 272.

⁹² *Ibid.*, p. 298.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, p. 298.

IV

In 1929 Russborough, county Wicklow, described by Mark Bence-Jones as ‘arguably the most beautiful house in Ireland’,⁹⁴ became one of the first Big Houses offered as a gift to the state. Such houses were often offered for what were claimed by their owners to be patriotic and philanthropic reasons, but it could also be an option for owners anxious to rid themselves of a property which was expensive to maintain, but which they could not sell. For whatever reason, the offering of Big Houses to the Irish state continued up until the 1970s and these cases can be particularly revealing of owners’ positions and governments’ attitudes when the motivations behind accepting or refusing these offers and the discussions which took place behind governments’ closed doors are examined. The case study of Russborough House will be examined here because it was a case which in many ways was typical of the discussions surrounding the offers of Big Houses to the state throughout the period of examination in this thesis. This is notable given that Russborough was one of the earliest instances of such offers. Russborough also offers a glimpse into the differing attitudes that surrounded the value of such properties in government at this time, from the interest it created and the visits which cabinet members took to view the place, to the more nativist bias displayed by the secretary of the Department of Finance.

⁹⁴ Mark Bence-Jones, *A guide to Irish country houses* (Revised ed., London, 1988), p. 250.



Fig. 1.1, Russborough House, county Wicklow.

Source: Archiseek, <http://archiseek.com/2010/russborough-house-damaged-in-fire/#.UXlbsLhOOM8> [date accessed: 25 Apr. 2013]

Russborough house, county Wicklow, is a large Palladian mansion, built in the 1740s for Joseph Leeson, afterwards the first earl of Milltown. It was designed by Richard Castle. In 1929 it belonged to Lady Turton, having passed to her on the death of her husband, Sir Edmund Turton. At this time the Hon. Sir Edward Eliot, Lady Turton's nephew, began investigating the possibility of her gifting the property to the nation, confiding to Sir Walter Nugent, an acquaintance and Free State Senator, that 'Lady Turton cannot afford to keep up the house as it ought to be kept up and it appears that it would be very difficult at the present time to find a purchaser'.⁹⁵ Therefore it had occurred to Lady Turton that 'it might be possible for the house to be made use of in some worthy way for the good of the Irish nation',

⁹⁵ Sir Edward Eliot to Sir Walter Nugent, 12 Oct. 1929 (N.A.I., Dept. of An Taoiseach files, S5935).

and while Eliot wrote that ‘its distance from Dublin would be against any such scheme’, he maintained that the house itself would make ‘an admirable museum or art gallery’.⁹⁶

Two months later, on 10 December 1929, Eliot wrote to Nugent officially declaring: ‘on behalf of Lady Turton, I am now authorised to make a definite offer of Russborough to the Irish nation’.⁹⁷ He outlined that the gift would include ‘the whole of Russborough demesne within the demesne wall, with the exception of a piece of land known as Ballydallagh’, and the contents of the house.⁹⁸ The demesne consisted of approximately 432 acres of land let for grazing. It was understood that these rents would, if the gift were accepted, be received by the state, although he did not suppose these very material.⁹⁹ He wrote:

Lady Turton’s motive in making this offer of a gift is from her love of Russborough and her love of Ireland. The only conditions which Lady Turton would wish to attach to the gift are that some undertaking should be given that the house and estate should be maintained and that the house should be used for some worthy national purpose.¹⁰⁰

He also thought Lady Turton would be ‘very much gratified if the nation, in the event of it deciding to accept the gift, would make some provision under which the house should be open at reasonable and convenient times to the inspection of visitors’.¹⁰¹

Sir Walter Nugent became the middleman between Eliot and the government who he subsequently informed of this offer. The government acted quickly and by 27 January 1930 President Cosgrave wrote to Nugent informing him that he and two of his colleagues had been to Russborough, and ‘were very much impressed by its beauty of architecture and

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Sir Edward Eliot to Sir Walter Nugent, 10 Dec. 1929 (N.A.I., Dept. of An Taoiseach files, S5935).

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

situation and are very grateful indeed to Lady Turton for her generous and patriotic offer'.¹⁰² He explained that the difficulty in reaching a decision was largely financial, writing: 'as I think I already mentioned to you, we have been compelled, very reluctantly indeed, to refuse generous offers of similar mansions on at least two previous occasions', although he noted that 'their distance from Dublin was considerably greater and a big additional disadvantage was a complete absence of furniture and pictures'.¹⁰³

One of these mansions offered to government just a few years previously, in 1925, was Glenstal Abbey, county Limerick, which had been built in the 1830s by the Barrington family. Home in 1925 to Sir Charles Barrington and his wife, the castle had been left with less than 1,000 acres after the land acts and was becoming increasingly difficult to maintain. However, the event which hastened their desire to leave Glenstal was the shooting dead of their only daughter Winnie in 1921 as she was travelling in a car with a Black and Tan officer which was ambushed by the I.R.A. Nonetheless, when they decided to leave in 1925 Sir Charles eschewed bitterness by writing to the Free State government offering Glenstal as a gift to the Irish nation, suggesting its suitability as a residence for the governor-general, who remained as a figurehead of the British administration in Ireland. Cosgrave, then President of the Executive Council of the Free State, and Tim Healy, the governor-general, visited Glenstal in July 1925, and 'were astonished at its magnificence, which far exceeded our expectations'.¹⁰⁴ However, restricted by the tight finances of the new state, Cosgrave had to inform Sir Charles that 'our present economic position would not warrant the ministry in

¹⁰² Department of the President to Senator Sir Walter Nugent, 27 Jan. 1930 (N.A.I., Dept. of An Taoiseach files, S5935).

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ W. T. Cosgrave to Sir Charles Barrington, 29 July 1925. *Glenstal Abbey archives*. Boxfile no 1: 'Origins of Glenstal Abbey' cit. in Mark Tierney OSB, 'The origins and early days of Glenstal Abbey' in Martin Browne OSB and Colmán O Clabaigh (eds), *The Irish Benedictines: a history* (Dublin, 2005), available at Catholic Ireland.net, <http://www.catholicireland.net/pages/index.php?art=1026> [date accessed: 24 Oct. 2012].

applying to the Dáil to vote the necessary funds for the upkeep of Glenstal' and it subsequently became a Benedictine monastery.¹⁰⁵

Cosgrave re-emphasised to Eliot in 1929 how disappointed they had been to have to refuse such a gift. In the same letter on the subject of the offer of Russborough, Cosgrave wrote that he knew a certain portion of the contents of Russborough were included in late Lady Milltown's gift to the National Gallery and were on loan only for the duration of Lady Turton's lifetime and he assumed that she did not wish to have them removed from Russborough. While he did not know what proportion these articles were in relation to the total contents, Cosgrave wrote that if it were considerable and should Lady Turton want them removed:

the cost of re-furnishing on a scale suitable to the house would be large and would be a very important factor in our minds at the present time when we are endeavouring to economise all round. This consideration would be of almost equal importance whether it was decided to retain the house as a museum and art gallery – a doubtful proposal in view of the distance from Dublin – or whether it was found possible to utilise it as a national guest house for which it should be very suitable.¹⁰⁶

He asked if Sir Walter could ascertain Lady Turton's intentions in this regard and added that it would be helpful to know the present letting value of the grazing on the demesne as this would also be needed. He concluded that once they had this information he would like to have the O.P.W. inspect the property 'with a view to suggesting the best method of utilising the gift should it materialise' and preparing an estimate of preliminary expenditure required and the net annual maintenance charges for the finance minister.¹⁰⁷

Cosgrave, accompanied by Lady Turton, Eliot, two members of the Board of Works and Minister for Finance, Ernest Blythe, again visited Russborough on 11 February 1930 and

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Department of the President to Senator Sir Walter Nugent, 27 Jan. 1930 (N.A.I., Dept. of An Taoiseach files, S5935).

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

made notes of the visit.¹⁰⁸ Eliot had shown them an estate plan, the letting value of the land and a copy of the probate paid on the estate. The total, including furniture, which amounted to about £2,000, was £6,400 or £6,500. Exempt from the gift were certain articles of furniture. He concluded: ‘Lady Turton is anxious that we should accept. She is of Irish extraction and mentioned that she did not like ... the idea of selling the property and taking the proceeds out of Ireland’.¹⁰⁹ However, Eliot had earlier confided to Nugent that she was making the offer precisely because she could not find a buyer.

In February 1930 Sir Edward Eliot compiled a memorandum on Russborough, including a detailed schedule of the contents of Russborough, which would give the particulars of the gift.¹¹⁰ The Department of the President detailed the case for government. They summarised that on his death in 1929, Sir Edmund Turton, Bart., was the absolute owner of Russborough estate, although the contents of the house were divided; one part was his and the other part he had only life interest in. These contents had been bequeathed by Lady Milltown, a previous owner, to the National Gallery. However, as all of these could not be exhibited at the gallery, some of the articles were returned to Russborough to remain there during Sir Edmund’s life. On his death, Lady Turton became entitled to Russborough and its contents and for the duration of her life to the bequeathed articles which were property of the nation.¹¹¹ As part of the gift she would surrender this life interest.¹¹² The only conditions Lady Turton wished to attach to the gift were ‘that some undertaking should be given that the house and estate should be maintained and that the house should be used for some worthy national purpose’.¹¹³ It was assumed that if the state accepted the gift they would not wish to

¹⁰⁸ Copy of President’s note on visit to ‘Russboro’, 11 Feb. 1930 (N.A.I., Dept. of An Taoiseach files, S5935).

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ This was attached to a letter from Edward Eliot to President Cosgrave, 1 Mar. 1930 (N.A.I., Dept. of An Taoiseach files, S5935).

¹¹¹ Sir Edward Eliot’s memorandum on the gift of Russborough, February 1930 (N.A.I., Dept. of An Taoiseach files, S5935).

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ Ibid.

dispose of it in future, but the department thought it right to insert a clause in any conveyance of the estate to the nation, that if they did, then the nation should offer to restore it in the first instance without payment to Lady Turton or her successors.¹¹⁴

With further inspection deemed necessary the O.P.W. informed the Department of the President on 2 April that they were sending a member of their architectural staff to make a survey of the building with a view to preparing an estimate. The value of the gift and these properties in general at the time is revealed in this letter as the O.P.W. sought clarification on the matter, writing:

With regard to the exact value of the house, we should be glad to be informed in what sense the word 'value' is to be understood. The house is, we understand, a very fine and beautiful eighteenth century mansion; it has probably no sale value because no one would be likely to buy it except perhaps for demolition. The land can be valued on its profits if let for grazing, and the furniture on its sale value.¹¹⁵

What is clear here is that in 1930 no matter how beautiful the architecture of a Big House, it had no market value except in terms of salvage value from its demolition.

On 30 July 1930 the O.P.W. had completed their examination and the reports on Russborough were forwarded to the secretary of the Department of the President. These included a report by the O.P.W.'s principal architect, Mr Byrne, on the extent and cost of necessary works of repair and improvement and estimates for annual charges for maintenance of the mansion, reports by the assistant superintendent of the Phoenix Park, Mr Pearson, on the cost of restoring and maintaining the grounds of the house, a report by the O.P.W.'s chief valuer, Mr Robinson, on the valuation of Russborough house and demesne, and a report by the furniture clerk of the O.P.W., Mr Curnow, on the value of the furniture and pictures in the house. All reports considered the possibility of using the house either as a residence or as a

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ Raftery for the secretary of the O.P.W. to the secretary of the Department of the President, 2 Apr. 1930 (N.A.I., Dept. of An Taoiseach files, S5935).

museum as requested. T. Cassedy, the secretary of the O.P.W., noted that they had not been asked to advise on the fitness of the place as a residence and, if not considered for that purpose, those in the O.P.W. thought its preservation ‘as a museum specimen of the class of eighteenth-century Irish mansions, to which it belongs, would be extremely desirable if the government is prepared to meet the cost’.¹¹⁶ He suggested consulting the National Monuments Advisory Council which had been established under the 1930 National Monuments Act by the Minister for Finance. It is interesting to note here that as early as 1930 the O.P.W. thought it would be ‘extremely desirable’ to use the mansion as a museum piece as an example of Irish mansions – the emphasis being that it was an example of an ‘Irish’ mansion – and showed an appreciation for the specificity of this mansion, its value in itself and its importance to Irish history. Importantly, this was if the government was prepared to finance it, not the O.P.W. on their current budget.

Attached to this letter was the report of the O.P.W.’s principal architect, Mr Byrne on Russborough House which began: ‘the mansion, which – a rather rare event – was completed as a single project to definite architectural design, had been well-maintained and is an interesting example of an [eighteenth] century nobleman’s seat’, adding ‘the house and its demesne seem worthy of preservation as an example of by-gone time and fashions’.¹¹⁷ He wrote:

if the mansion is not to be regularly occupied (say in some such manner as is Chequers by the British Prime Minister) but the principal part is retained as a specimen of all 18th century nobleman’s seat, and, with suitable contents, exhibited as one of the national museums, the costs of structural repair and of annual maintenance would be reduced.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁶ T. Cassedy, secretary of the O.P.W., to the secretary to the Department of the President, 30 July 1930 (N.A.I., Dept. of An Taoiseach files, S5935).

¹¹⁷ O.P.W.’s principal architect Mr Byrne’s report on Russborough House, county Wicklow, 25 July 1930 (N.A.I., Dept. of An Taoiseach files, S5935).

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

This is interesting as chapter three will show that in almost all cases of Big Houses brought to their attention over this period, the O.P.W. recommended against their preservation. What possibly accounts for the difference here is that in cases of refusal the houses were put forward for preservation as national monuments for which the O.P.W. would have been responsible. Here the suggestion was different; that of the state accepting the gift of Russborough and then possibly opening it as a museum. The department who would have been responsible for the house is not mentioned and therefore the O.P.W. may have thought it could, and even should, be maintained by the state as long as it did not have to shoulder the economic burden and responsibility. Furthermore, the mention by Byrne of Chequers in England is notable and points to the dynamics at play among some politicians and those in state bodies who, on the one hand, rejected the Big House because of its associations with British rule and, on the other, continued to be influenced by Britain in terms of the state's use of important country mansions. Returning to their estimates, the O.P.W.'s principal architect reported that if works were confined to the centre piece and curved arcades of the house, leaving the wings and flanking buildings without repair, they estimated incurring a cost of £6,500, excluding lighting and drainage.¹¹⁹

On 3 September 1930 the secretary of the Executive Council requested that the Minister for Finance, Ernest Blythe, have his department examine the matter and return a recommendation.¹²⁰ The President wanted the issue dealt with urgently as he had received 'enquiries on behalf of Lady Turton as to the government's attitude in the matter'.¹²¹ In spite of this, there does not appear to have been any urgent decision taken as over a month later, on 15 October, the private secretary to the president wrote to Eliot asking that he convey to Lady

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

¹²⁰ A. S. secretary to the private secretary to the Minister for Finance, 3 Sept. 1930 (N.A.I., Dept. of An Taoiseach files, S5935).

¹²¹ Ibid.

Turton his regret that there had been ‘so much delay in dealing with her generous offer’.¹²² He informed Eliot that the Minister for Finance had almost completed his examination and would ‘shortly be in a position to make a recommendation’.¹²³ This statement illustrates the importance of the recommendation of the Department of Finance, which was required in order for the government to decide on the gift, presumably on the basis of what it was prepared to allow. The letter concluded: ‘the President would like to assure Lady Turton that he himself is keenly interested in the project and will endeavour to secure as early a decision as possible’.¹²⁴

On 24 October J. J. McElligott, the secretary of the Department of Finance, informed the secretary to the President that the Minister for Finance recommended declining the gift.¹²⁵ He considered it probable that all the figures quoted by the Commissioners of Public Works for state expenditure would be found in practice to be too low. In his experience:

notably in connection with the acquisition of Leinster House for purposes of the Oireachtas, and in connection with the acquisition for purposes of preparatory colleges of old mansions in the country ... adaptation and renovation of old buildings are extremely costly, that preliminary estimates are almost invariably largely exceeded, and that when renovation commences the opening up of work, or, failing that, the experience of actual use, reveals defects previously unsuspected which can only be set right at heavy expense.¹²⁶

Therefore the minister anticipated that in the old building at Russborough there would be considerable outlay both on external and internal reconstruction and improvements to make the place ‘serve adequately as a modern residence’.¹²⁷ Comparison was made with the former under-secretary’s lodge [now Áras an Uachtaráin] in the Phoenix Park which, although much

¹²² Signed for the private secretary to the President of the Executive Council to Hon. Edward G. Eliot 15 Oct. 1930 (N.A.I., Dept. of An Taoiseach files, S5935).

¹²³ Ibid.

¹²⁴ Ibid.

¹²⁵ J. J. McElligott, secretary of the Department of Finance, to the secretary to the President of the Executive Council, 24 Oct. 1930 (N.A.I., Dept. of An Taoiseach files, S5935).

¹²⁶ Ibid.

¹²⁷ Ibid.

smaller and already in good repair, had cost £3,500 in renovations and structural improvements to make it suitable for the Papal Nuncio. The minister was convinced that the figure of £450, which had been quoted as the figure for the ordinary maintenance of the Russborough buildings, would be exceeded when compared with the government's 1930/1 estimates for buildings in their charge. He contrasted the proposed annual cost of £830 for the upkeep of the grounds and gardens with the Phoenix Park which, 'while not quite seven times the size of Russborough demesne costs about £18,000 per annum in maintenance'.¹²⁸ However, a Department of the Taoiseach official did not consider this 'a just comparison'.¹²⁹ McElligott noted that the figures quoted by the Commissioners of Public Works took 'no account of establishment charges', such as staff wages, maintenance, renewal of furniture, supply of coal, gas and electricity, provision of police and military protection, or cost of entertainment.¹³⁰ Again comparison was made with the total annual cost of the governor-general's establishment, the vice-regal lodge, which required only yearly maintenance and no structural improvement and was still given £16,000 per annum by government, which the governor-general was believed to supplement with substantial sums from his £10,000 salary. These examples were included as an indication 'of the scale of outlay which would be involved in the maintenance of a residential establishment in a style in keeping with the dignity of the state in a large old mansion such as Russborough'.¹³¹

As to the alternative proposal, the Minister for Finance did 'not gather that anyone seriously suggests that Russborough house would be suitable as a museum', that is, a suitable place to keep and display for public view objects of interest.¹³² The department emphasised that its distance from Dublin – twenty miles – and from any other large population centre

¹²⁸ Ibid.

¹²⁹ Handwritten note on letter from J. J. McElligott, secretary of the Department of Finance, to the secretary to the President of the Executive Council, 24 Oct. 1930 (N.A.I., Dept. of An Taoiseach files, S5935).

¹³⁰ J. J. McElligott, secretary of the Department of Finance, to the secretary to the President of the Executive Council, 24 Oct. 1930 (N.A.I., Dept. of An Taoiseach files, S5935).

¹³¹ Ibid.

¹³² Ibid.

made it inaccessible to the general public and so ruled out the idea and they noted that this consideration had been acknowledged by Sir Eliot.¹³³ Moreover, they believed that the Commissioners of Public Works' report made clear 'that the present contents of the mansion are of no special interest as museum specimens'.¹³⁴ Therefore, the minister did not consider it necessary to make a serious examination of the costs involved in using the place as such and was satisfied anyway that, if it was examined, it would be found unfavourable.

The department went on to address the idea of treating the mansion itself as a museum specimen, a proposal which the Commissioners of Public Works supported. However, in the Department of Finance's opinion this amounted 'simply to treating Russborough House with its contents and demesne as a national monument, to be preserved and maintained at state expense, and the gift as simply a request from the owner of a national monument that the state should take it over and preserve and maintain it'.¹³⁵ They noted that the costs incurred through such a use would be much less than those of an official residence, since if the rooms were used as display rooms for museum objects it would only be necessary to preserve the building, contents and grounds from actual decay. Caretakers could also be employed to 'show round any persons sufficiently interested to visit the place'.¹³⁶ Large outlay on sanitary works, heating or lighting installations would also be avoided if the premises were on display in daylight only. Even still, the Department of Finance again found the Commissioners of Public Works' estimates for this proposal quite inadequate as the figures postulated that only the central block and arcades of the building would be preserved, with the wings being allowed to decay and the gardens and ornamental grounds dropped and used for grazing.

¹³³ Sir Edward Eliot to Sir Walter Nugent, 12 Oct. 1929 (N.A.I., Dept. of An Taoiseach files, S5935).

¹³⁴ J. J. McElligott, secretary of the Department of Finance, to the secretary to the President of the Executive Council, 24 Oct. 1930 (N.A.I., Dept. of An Taoiseach files, S5935).

¹³⁵ Ibid.

¹³⁶ Ibid.

They also included no provision for caretakers' wages, cleaning, maintenance and rates on lands and buildings, which it appears even they would not be relieved of paying.

In addition, the Minister for Finance did not consider it practicable for the state to allow the wings go to ruin and 'the dropping of the gardens and ornamental grounds would, in his view, defeat the whole idea of preserving the mansion as a specimen of a country house of its period'.¹³⁷ Demonstrably, it was the finance minister here who was more concerned for the integrity of the historic property as a whole if it was to be preserved, rather than the Commissioners of Public Works. The fact that this was proposed by the commissioners would suggest that the cost of maintaining the whole building and gardens was prohibitively expensive and therefore, to preserve any of the house, priorities would have to be made on what could realistically be maintained. The Department of Finance estimates were £5,000 initial capital outlay on restoration of buildings, grounds and gardens, plus approximately £1,500 a year net, after deductions of grazing receipts, on current establishment expenses for the 'lowest standard of upkeep tolerable under state control'.¹³⁸

However, McElligott again emphasised:

The minister remains of opinion that the gift should be declined on the ground that its value to the nation when so used would not be worth its cost. So far as the minister has been able to gather neither Russborough House nor the family connected with it has ever been associated with any outstanding events or personalities in Irish history. Accordingly, the interest which the place possesses is only its interest to connoisseurs of architecture, plus whatever interest it has as illustrating a certain phase of social life in Ireland. Opinions differ as to the aesthetic merits of the Georgian as a style of architecture, but, the period being relatively modern, good specimens of it are sufficiently numerous both in this country and in England to render state action to preserve this one superfluous.

This illustrates that it was thought, at least by the Minister for Finance, that preservation of Georgian architecture could be achieved by preserving a number of examples, rather than

¹³⁷ Ibid.

¹³⁸ Ibid.

individual cases. While this was certainly not a decision that was appreciative of the architectural merits of each individual house, it was one which was based on a limited budget in relation to preservation, and was made in 1929 when there was not a keenly developed sense of the importance of preservation of such houses, an awareness of their individual merits or a tourism industry which could support them. Furthermore, McElligott stressed that as Russborough house had no 'national' historical associations, it would only appeal to a minority of people with an interest in architecture or the broader social history it represented.

Aside from the economic reasons behind the recommendation to decline, McElligott also gave the minister's opinion on the value of the gift, particularly to the Irish nation, and his attitude towards whether the government had a responsibility to preserve these Big Houses. He wrote:

The minister is informed that Georgian architecture is better represented in the city of Dublin than in any country house in Ireland, and several of the best Georgian buildings in Dublin are already in government hands and used as public buildings. He is informed, moreover, that Russborough is not the best specimen in the Saorstát of Georgian country house architecture, that it is only the central block which has real architectural distinction, and that even there the distinction belongs to the interior rather than to the exterior. Even if this house were the best specimen of Georgian country house architecture in the Saorstát, which, as stated, it is not, the minister considers that its taking over for preservation by the Saorstát government would not be justified unless it stood very high amongst houses of the kind all over the British Isles, because Georgian is not an Irish style of architecture, and there seems no point in an Irish government preserving, as a national monument, a building not distinctively Irish, which will present itself to overseas visitors as only second rate of its kind.¹³⁹

Evident here is a definite bias in favour of 'native' monuments rather than those which could be considered foreign, implying, therefore, that the government of Ireland had no duty to care for these monuments and that they would be of no importance to Irish people as they were not thought to be an intrinsic part of Irish history. However, the minister was also thinking of

¹³⁹ Ibid.

overseas visitors who could see outstanding examples of such architecture in Britain and may have come to Ireland to see more traditional or ‘native’ Irish monuments.

The letter continued:

Turning to the interest which Russborough possesses as illustrating a certain phase of social life in Ireland, apart from the fact that that phase is sufficiently illustrated by numbers of other mansions in the country in private hands, there is again the point that that phase of social life had nothing distinctively Irish about it, the social life of country magnates in the 18th century within a wider radius of Dublin being patterned upon the life of the corresponding class in England of the same period. The National Monuments Act, 1930, defines a national monument as one the preservation of which is a matter of national importance by reason of the historical, architectural, traditional, artistic, or archaeological interest attaching thereto. It would require much special pleading to bring Russborough in any reasonable way within that definition.¹⁴⁰

The fact that McElligott, on behalf of the minister and department, considered Russborough more ‘British’ architecture and could not see that it was of sufficient historical, architectural, traditional, artistic or archaeological interest to be considered a national monument, were two important reasons which influenced the decision to refuse the gift.

The letter stated that the total outlay by the Commissioners of Public Works on the preservation of national monuments for several years had averaged, including outlays from endowment funds, some £2,800 a year. Acquiring Russborough, therefore, would, apart from the initial £5,000, raise annual state outlay on national monuments by over 50 per cent for one property. McElligott added:

When one considers the number, the nature, and the enormous national and indeed world interest of the monuments covered by the £2,800 – the structures of pre-Christian antiquity at New Grange, the round towers, the churches at Glendalough, the Rock of Cashel ... – the project of spending over one half that total upon this one place, which, by comparison has neither any national nor world interest worth speaking about, seems quite out of proportion. So far state intervention to preserve old monuments has not gone beyond those belonging at latest to the Middle Ages, and to initiate now a programme of preserving eighteenth century buildings would be quite a new departure which could not fail, by making a heavy inroad on the scanty funds

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

which can be made available for such purposes, to prejudice the preservation of real national monuments, of these remain a large number belonging to the Middle Ages or to antiquity which the state may feel called upon to take over and preserve.¹⁴¹

This makes clear that despite no date being specified in the National Monuments Act, it had been the practice of the O.P.W. to only preserve those ancient monuments dating prior to the Middle Ages and not beyond the seventeenth century. The Department of Finance officials were afraid of the number and burden of Big Houses which could be placed on them to preserve if they made a precedent with Russborough, which in any case, in their opinion, had no substantial national or world interest and would take funds from 'real' national monuments, belying their attitude toward this architecture. However, economically speaking, their attitude to the gift was rational when over 50 per cent of their annual budget, a considerable proportion, would have been swallowed up by the maintenance of one property.

McElligott supplemented the department's argument by noting that the letter from the donor's solicitors stating that 'Lady Turton cannot afford to keep up the house as it ought to be kept up, and that it would be very difficult at the present time to find a purchaser' had made clear that she would not be able to offer any endowment for the upkeep of the place.

For him this indicated:

a recognition by the donor of what the minister conceives to be true in fact, that a gift of this nature, to be advantageous should be accompanied by an endowment for maintenance, i.e. that the value of the gift, per se, is a minus quality. The minister is less disposed to recommend state intervention to relieve private owners of the expense of maintenance of 'white elephants' since the state itself is already in the position of having more old buildings on its hands than it knows what to do with.¹⁴²

This report by the Department of Finance is revealing for a number of reasons. Firstly, financial consideration was the main concern and their estimates were based on previous experience. Nevertheless, even taking this into account, the minister and his departmental

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

¹⁴² Ibid.

staff, most particularly McElligott, were less than appreciative of the property's aesthetic or architectural value with no mention that it or its contents were worthy of any particular merit. Furthermore, they discounted its value as a museum specimen and as an example of a certain type of life-style, a specimen which would be of no public interest, not only because there were other examples of this, but also because it was not sufficiently Irish.

The report was influential as cabinet minutes of 2 December 1930 record that 'having regard to the initial expenditure and cost of maintenance which acquisition of the house and grounds would involve it was agreed that the offer could not be accepted at the moment'.¹⁴³ As such on 5 December President Cosgrave wrote to Eliot apologising for the delay and stating that while the majority of the Executive Council:

had the opportunity of visiting the house and were very much impressed by its architecture and the beauty of its situation ... It is with sincere regret that we have been forced to the conclusion that financial considerations render it impossible to accept the gift at the present moment. The cost of the initial works which would be required and of the subsequent maintenance could not, if the house and demesne were to be kept in a suitable manner, be brought down to a figure which in the present condition of our finances we could justify including in our expenditure, the more so as the state has already on its hands a number of residential buildings which it maintains at a loss.¹⁴⁴

He asked that Eliot convey to Lady Turton the government's gratitude for her very generous offer and wrote:

We appreciate highly the interest which she has always taken in this country and the love of Ireland which has motivated her offer. She may rest assured that our decision has been dictated by necessity and has been arrived at after anxious consideration and with much reluctance and regret.¹⁴⁵

On 9 December Eliot replied to Cosgrave that Lady Turton was disappointed about their decision and added that, if possible, she would like a copy of the Commissioners of Public

¹⁴³ Extract from cabinet minutes, 2 Dec. 1930 (N.A.I., Dept. of An Taoiseach files, S5935).

¹⁴⁴ President Cosgrave to Sir Edward Eliot, 5 Dec. 1930 (N.A.I., Dept. of An Taoiseach files, S5935).

¹⁴⁵ Ibid.

Works' report on the condition of Russborough as it would be useful for her work on the house.¹⁴⁶ It was ten days later when the Commissioners of Public Works were informed of the government's decision in a letter which stated: 'you are doubtless aware that ... the government decided that they could not accept the offer'.¹⁴⁷ The letter requested a copy of their report for Lady Turton, suitably revised.¹⁴⁸

On 15 January 1931 Cosgrave forwarded the report to Eliot. He also wrote that he should have explained clearly what was meant by the phrase 'at the present moment' in his original letter declining the gift. He clarified:

The position is that we have a number of residential and other buildings left over to us from the British government times which are expensive to maintain and rather too large for our requirements. None of these, of course, would fulfil the purposes for which Russborough would be ideal, and it may be that if the economic situation generally became brighter, it would be possible for a future government to accept Lady Turton's offer. At the moment, however the prospects of this seems remote and it would be unfair to suggest to Lady Turton that she should refrain from making other arrangements regarding Russborough because of the likelihood of any early variation in the decision to which we were reluctantly forced to come.¹⁴⁹

The next day Eliot replied: 'I do not know at all how she proposes now to deal with the house, but should she decide to keep it and an opportunity should occur at any future date, we might perhaps renew the negotiations'.¹⁵⁰

However, in June 1931 the *Irish Times* reported that Russborough house, 'one of the first early Georgian mansions in Ireland', had been purchased by Captain Daly, a British army officer.¹⁵¹ This was a Col. Denis Daly, a relative of the Dalys who owned Dunsande House, county Galway, which will be discussed later. The *Irish Times* also made clear its

¹⁴⁶ Sir Edward Eliot to President Cosgrave, 9 Dec. 1930 (N.A.I., Dept. of An Taoiseach files, S5935).

¹⁴⁷ A. S. of the Department of the President to the secretary of the O.P.W., 15 Dec. 1930 (N.A.I., Dept. of An Taoiseach files, S5935).

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁹ President William Cosgrave to Sir Edward Eliot, 15 Jan. 1931 (N.A.I., Dept. of An Taoiseach files, S5935).

¹⁵⁰ Sir Edward Eliot to President Cosgrave, 16 Jan. 1931 (N.A.I., Dept. of An Taoiseach files, S5935).

¹⁵¹ *I.T.*, 3 June 1931.

admiration for the property stating: ‘Russborough House, situate in the midst of some of the most beautiful scenery in Wicklow, was formerly one of the show places in the county’.¹⁵² After Daly’s ownership Russborough passed to Alfred and Lady Beit in 1953 and is currently in the possession of the Alfred Beit Foundation.

In the end, government officials expressed their regret that they had to refuse this offer for economic reasons. While the Department of Finance did discuss Russborough’s minimal interest due to its lack of nationalistic associations – and this belies a lack of appreciation for the importance of this architecture in its own right and its integral place in Irish history, even if in a negative role – what the Department of Finance appear to have been most concerned about was the expense involved in accepting and preserving Russborough house. The minister and secretary of the Department of Finance immediately recommended against acquisition, noting the vast sum of the budget for national monuments which this single building would take and their concerns that any estimates for costs involved provided by the Commissioners of Public Works would, in reality, be too low. It was only later in their letter that they discussed its merits for consideration under the National Monuments Act or its possible use to the public or the state, outlining that it was not in itself an exceptional example of Georgian architecture and that its use to the state would be minimal and would not justify the costs involved. While it is true that they did not view it as a particularly ‘Irish’ form of architecture, this discussion only took place after the Department of Finance had already stated that they could not recommend acceptance as the costs involved were prohibitive and that it would take such a substantial sum from the budget for national monuments so as to leave many others without any government funding for protection or preservation. The Department of Finance had to decide between preserving this one Big House – which they had no use for and were not aware of any public interest in preserving –

¹⁵² Ibid.

as a museum piece in itself, or spending the same budget or less on protecting all the ancient monuments they listed which came under the scope of the National Monuments Act, including round towers, ogham stones, and even Newgrange. It is also worth remembering that the Department of Finance were not aware of any plans to demolish the house; in fact it was sold afterwards by the owner, suggesting that they may have seen it as being a case of either they spend large portions of their budget taking it on and preserving it with little use to the public or state, or it could be sold on anyway or kept by the owner – the house being preserved either way. The ultimate decision, it seems, was whether the government needed to, could be justified in, and, most significantly, could afford to accept and preserve these Big Houses. In the case of Russborough, the Department of Finance, led by its minister, stated definitively that the answer was no.

Conclusion

In the period 1922 to 1932 the first Cumann na nGaedheal Free State government was confronted with establishing law and order, overcoming the Anti-Treatyites in the Civil War and laying the foundations of a newly independent state. As such, heritage preservation was not their main concern. In relation to houses damaged or destroyed during the Civil War, compensation under the 1923 act was difficult to obtain and slow in coming; both factors combined to dissuade owners, who originally wanted to stay in Ireland, from doing so. However, the Department of Finance was also necessarily running a very tight budget at this time, even attempting to establish the state on a secure financial footing was a considerable task. As such the payment of large sums to owners to rebuild ostentatious mansions which no longer had any market value did not make sense to the economically bound administration. Thus to tax the wealthy, or perceived wealthy, classes with high levels of death duties on large incomes, inherited from the British administration, and to charge rates on large houses made sense to a government and a populace who had no desire to perpetuate an elite wealthy

class, not least of all because they were perceived as ‘outsiders’ to most of the public, more part of the British administration than the Irish Free State. Furthermore, many of the politicians at the time had come from a militant Republican background. Rates were also set by local councils who were now dominated by local middle class and farming interests who had no desire to allow any privileges to the Big House. Arguments for an easing of the financial burdens towards this class were therefore rare and usually voiced by owners themselves, who were attempting to cultivate a new idea that they were now a sort of impoverished ascendancy. While this may have been true in some cases, it was also a useful image that made them more acceptable in a state grappling with poverty and poor housing and sanitary conditions for the majority of its populace. This necessitated that the government naturally focused on issues which affected the very mortality of the majority of its citizens, or attempted to tackle emigration, rather than the narrower concern that many of these private homes, the Big Houses, were being sold on or destroyed.

Even still the 1930 National Monuments Act did legislate for the preservation of national heritage. However, one can see from departmental correspondence that while no limiting date was specified in the act, it was usually only implemented for monuments which were dated pre-eighteenth century and not of more ‘modern’ construction. This may have been for a number of reasons and once again budget was paramount. The Department of Finance revealed in the discussion over Russborough that the O.P.W.’s annual budget for 1929 was £2,800, a small budget for the preservation and maintenance of all national monuments. As such their focus was on older sites and ruins which required no heavy maintenance expenditure, while the enormous maintenance costs involved in preserving a Big House would take a huge portion of this budget. Furthermore, given the amount of owners anxious to leave Ireland at this time, the government did not wish to make a precedent of taking on such properties. This consideration of expense was also the primary reason the

Department of Finance recommended declining the offer of Russborough. In their estimate it would have cost £5,000 in initial acquisition costs and over half the annual budget of the O.P.W. to maintain, making it almost impossible for them to acquire and certainly disproportionately expensive in relation to other monuments perceived worthy of state care. Whether in the case of Russborough the government also exhibited some nativist bias is not in question. The Department of Finance spoke about the fact that Russborough was not particularly Irish and so there was no point in an Irish government preserving it, nor did it then seem possible to preserve as a national monument.

One of the most influential civil servants in the Department of Finance was J. J. McElligott, who was assistant secretary from 1923 until 1927. He was then promoted to secretary, the most powerful position within the department, where he remained until 1953, thereby influencing government policy in relation to finance for a very considerable period of time. His belief throughout the period was that ‘government should spend as little as possible, keep taxation low, and rely on the unhampered flow of the market to ensure maximum profits for farmers and businessmen’.¹⁵³ This was important because:

one of Michael Collins’ last acts as chairman of the provisional government was to issue an important memo to all departments concerning the position of the Department of Finance. As was the case in the British state, the permission of the Department of Finance was required before the cabinet could approve any proposal which required spending. The Taoiseach could override this rule when he thought it proper. For the most part this practice was followed by all governments up until the 1960s. This naturally gave the Department of Finance great power over the total business of government, a power which its long serving secretary McElligott was keen to use.¹⁵⁴

¹⁵³ John Paul McCarthy and Tomás O’Riordan, ‘James J. MacElligott’ in *The Pursuit of Sovereignty & the Impact of Partition, 1912–1949* available at: University College Cork Multitext Project in Irish History, http://multitext.ucc.ie/d/James_J_MacElligott [date accessed: 1 Dec. 2012].

¹⁵⁴ Ibid.

Therefore, McElligott and the civil servants of the Department of Finance were hugely influential for forming government policy throughout this period in which expenditure was kept to a minimum.

The department's views should not be viewed too hastily as prejudicial in hindsight. The Department of Finance was administering the finances of the country on behalf of a populace who appeared at this time to have no interest in preserving the Big Houses and were primarily concerned that the land of such estates be divided. Therefore they had no public mandate to expend so much public money on a property like Russborough. This was particularly important when its value to the public would at this time have been negligible. Furthermore, the Department of Finance argued that international tourists would go to Britain to see such architecture, expecting to visit more native examples of the built heritage in Ireland. In addition, the fact that Russborough was deemed 'too modern' to be preserved was also a condition attached, it would appear, to what could be considered vernacular architecture, such as thatched cottages, none of which were preserved under the 1930 act either, with its focus on more ancient monuments.

Land division in this period under the 1923 and 1931 acts cut off one of the final air supplies to the Big House and signalled the end for many. However, an even more destructive period for the Big House was on the horizon and, as the Cumann na nGaedheal party was ousted from power in the 1932 election, the Big House problem would fall to a new government in a period when its disappearance from the Irish landscape seemed inevitable. This will be examined in the next chapter.

Chapter Two

The Big House abandoned: use and disuse, 1932–48

In March 1932 Cumann na nGaedheal were defeated in the general election and Fianna Fáil assumed power under President of the Executive Council, Éamon de Valera.¹ This government remained in office until 1948, a period which saw an economic war with Britain, the enacting of the Irish constitution and Irish neutrality during the Second World War. It was also an era during which the destruction of Big Houses and their abandonment became both common place throughout the country and a catalyst for stirring public concern and government action into investigating if or how these Big Houses could survive in the new state by adapting to new uses when they were no longer being maintained by their owners as residences. This chapter will examine why this concern developed, who articulated it, how government responded and what impact this had for the fate of the Big House. An illustrative case study of Hazelwood House, county Sligo, will also be examined to assess how all these factors played out in an individual case.

I

In October 1936 the *Irish Press* recounted the story of a mother living in a tenement in George's Place, Dublin, who had seen five of her children die there.² This was one of a series of articles published that year in the paper which highlighted the deplorable conditions in the city's many slums. According to the census of 1926, 22,649 Dublin families were living in overcrowded tenements and that was only the number counted as overcrowded by definition of the census of more than two people per room.³ Sickness and death rates in slum areas were

¹ The title was changed to Taoiseach in 1937.

² *Irish Press*, 13 Oct. 1936.

³ *Ibid.*

almost twice what they were in the city's suburbs.⁴ Furthermore, as late as 1938 the Citizen's Housing Council, a private body set up in response to the conditions in Dublin slums, published a report stating that there were, at the time, 9,440 families living in unfit houses, in comparison with the 7,967 families listed in this position in the 1913 Housing Inquiry,⁵ illustrating that nearing 1940, conditions for the lower classes in Dublin city and throughout the country were very bad and deteriorating. It also puts the issue of the 'impoverished gentry' and their decaying Big Houses into a broader sociological context. This was the context in which the government had to consider the question of the survival of the Big House.

Also deteriorating were relations between Britain and Ireland. The destruction of a statue of King George II in Stephen's Green Dublin in 1937 in response to the coronation of King George VI in England was illustrative of continuing antagonism from some sections of the public.⁶ In addition, the Fianna Fáil government, elected in March 1932 under Éamon de Valera, reinforced a sense of separation and antagonism.⁷ One of their first acts was to suspend payments of land annuities due to the British government owing from the various land acts passed under the British administration for the sale of land to Irish tenants.⁸ This refusal breached the terms of previous agreements between the governments. In response the British administration imposed emergency taxes on Irish agricultural exports. With Britain being Ireland's largest export market this response from the British government was swift and harsh possibly, as Kevin O'Rourke has argued, because de Valera's refusal was seen as a

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Frank Murphy, 'Dublin slums in the 1930s' in *Dublin Historical Record*, xxxvii, no. 3/4 (June–Sept. 1984), p. 111.

⁶ *Irish Independent*, 14 May 1937.

⁷ The Labour Party gave Fianna Fáil the five extra votes it needed to have an overall majority in the Dáil. For more on the election campaign, see Dermot Keogh, *Twentieth-century Ireland: nation and state* (Dublin, 1994), pp 59–63.

⁸ Keogh has argued that the hard-line Anglo-Irish policy which de Valera 'drifted into within weeks of coming to power ... was against the best advice of the most senior member of the Department of External Affairs'. Keogh, *Twentieth-century Ireland*, p. 67.

political move to try to distance Ireland from Britain. The British response was also politically motivated, their aim being to so adversely affect Irish farmers that the Fianna Fáil government would be ousted and a more conciliatory Cumann na nGaedheal one would return to power. However, in reality: ‘the British miscalculated seriously: the Economic War actually helped rather than hurt de Valera’.⁹ R. F. Foster has also argued that ‘de Valera used the ‘economic war’ to brilliant political effect in domestic Irish terms. Traditional Anglophobia responded to the Fianna Fáil rhetoric of sacrifice in the face of foreign oppression; the snap election that returned Fianna Fáil in 1933 was largely fought on this basis’.¹⁰ The Irish government reacted equally harshly and increased Irish protectionism by imposing restrictions on British imports to Ireland. In addition, the end of the ‘war’ was seen as a victory for Ireland, since in 1938 when restrictions were eased by both sides, the land annuities which the Irish government owed were exchanged for a £10 million pound once off lump sum, far less than the estimated £100 million due for land annuities. In addition, naval ports on the Irish coast which the British had retained control of after 1922 were returned to the Irish state, thus enabling de Valera to declare neutrality during the Second World War which began in 1939.¹¹

The government’s nationalist agenda also saw them enact the constitution of Ireland, *Bunreacht na hÉireann*, in 1937.¹² This document set out to legislate for the Ireland they were seeking to form. Dermot Keogh has maintained that the constitution was ‘the embodiment of the Catholic nationalist tradition’ which de Valera ‘personified in his public life’.¹³ It also stated explicitly that no titles of nobility would be conferred or recognised,

⁹ Kevin O’Rourke, ‘Burn everything British but their coal: the Anglo-Irish Economic War of the 1930s’ in *The Journal of Economic History*, li, no. 2 (June 1991), p. 358.

¹⁰ R. F. Foster, *Modern Ireland, 1600–1972* (2nd ed., London, 1989), p. 552.

¹¹ The agreements were enshrined in a new Anglo-Irish agreement which was signed on 25 Apr. 1958. Keogh, *Twentieth-century Ireland*, p. 104; O’Rourke, ‘Burn everything British but their coal: the Anglo-Irish Economic War of the 1930s’, p. 358.

¹² For a discussion of *Bunreacht na hÉireann*, see Keogh, *Twentieth-century Ireland*, pp 96–104.

¹³ Keogh, *Twentieth-century Ireland*, p. 96.

without government permission, by the Free State, a move that directly targeted some Big House owners' claim to status through their titles.¹⁴ Most importantly for de Valera, the monarch and the governor-general were now written out of the constitution. In addition, the government enacted a budget which made it harder for Big Houses to survive, with increases in taxation rates and death duties on substantial houses, estates and wealth. This budget had such an effect on Lord Powerscourt that in 1932 the *Irish Times* reported that he had decided with 'regret' to part with his ancestral home, Powerscourt in Wicklow, owing to the burden of increased taxation. The paper feared he was only one of the first owners to realise what their position in the Free State would mean 'under the recent budget, to landowners and others living on invested capital'.¹⁵ They added that the 'most unfortunate feature about the matter is that many people who in the past have earned livings on big estates will find themselves deprived of living and friends as well'.¹⁶ It was Lloyd George's 'People's budget' of 1909 which actually introduced a 'super tax', calculated on gross incomes over a certain figure which, along with interest rates, fluctuated over this period.¹⁷ The Irish Free State inherited this tax and its rates of death duty from Britain, 'but by 1950 the rates had increased dramatically rising progressively from 6 per cent to 41.6 per cent in the intervening years. While from 1925 to 1930, a total of £5 million was paid in death duties in Ireland, this amount rose to a total of £13.4 million for the period from 1945 to 1950'.¹⁸ Furthermore, a high ordinary income tax rate of 6s. in the pound was inherited by the Saostát government, who in fact lowered it to 3s. in the pound in 1928.¹⁹ However, Terence Dooley has shown that 'in the face of economic depression and the Economic War with Britain, it rose from 3s. 6d. in the pound in 1932 to a high of 7s. 6d. in the pound in 1942' so that 'over half of earned

¹⁴ *Bunreacht na hÉireann* (1937), article 400.

¹⁵ *Irish Times*, 17 May 1932.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Terence Dooley, *The decline of the big house in Ireland: a study of Irish landed families, 1860–1960* (Dublin, 2001), p. 137.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 136.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 137.

or invested incomes of over £10,000 per annum was lost to taxes by 1950'.²⁰ This was particularly detrimental to former landlords' income since most had invested income or bonds received in return for the acquisition of land under the land acts in stocks and shares hoping they would be a similarly sustaining source of income.²¹ This was also the case in Northern Ireland by the early twentieth century when, after the sale of estates, for many families the predominant source of income changed from rental to investments.²² Furthermore, invested incomes had already proved disastrous in some cases for families who lost large portfolios resulting from the 1929 Wall Street Crash and the subsequent depression.²³

However, in 1932 the *Irish Times* was keen to place the entire blame for the demise of the house on the state's taxation policy. Its report declared:

the dead hand of the state lies heavily on the great houses. Depleted incomes make their maintenance difficult enough, but high taxation and death duties render the passage of a great house from father to son almost impossible. Ireland has seen the decay of several fine houses which the fires of insurrection had spared. More and more of them are going under the hammer in England, and many historic houses in Scotland are falling into disrepair, or are being transformed to uses which, however laudable, must cause a pang to their former owners ... A great house, whether its history has been good or bad, possesses a soul that vanishes with its owners ... Sentiment, however, cannot stand against the pressure of hard facts ... The money which would have kept the soul in a great house must pass to-day into the coffers of governments and it is better that the estates should pass into other hands than that they should be compelled to go to ruin in the hands of their impoverished owners.²⁴

The reality was that all the factors mentioned above meant that the passing of the Big House to future generations from families already living in much reduced circumstances was very difficult, causing the destruction or abandonment of many country houses in this period.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ This did not always work out due to economic factors such as the worldwide economic depression of the 1920s, but also some landowners' inexperience and naivety in the business of investments. See Dooley, *The decline of the big house*, pp 118–22.

²² See Olwen Purdue, *The big house in the north of Ireland: land, power and social elites, 1878–1960* (Dublin, 2009), pp 103–9.

²³ See Dooley, *The decline of the big house*, pp 121–2.

²⁴ *I.T.*, 7 Nov. 1932.

The abandonment of houses was often accompanied by the removal of their roofs so as to avoid rates, leaving the house to become absorbed back into the landscape as ruins. The demolition of at least fifteen houses took place between 1930 and 1950, predominantly the period when this Fianna Fáil administration was in government, not inclusive of those houses which were abandoned to dereliction and ruin.²⁵ This figure was estimated from the 1988 revised edition of Mark Bence-Jones's *A guide to Irish country houses* which listed some 2,000 country houses. The criterion for inclusion in this volume was that the house was a country house, not a town property, 'which, at some stage in its history, was the country seat of a landed family or at any rate of a family of some standing in the locality'.²⁶ An analysis of the houses mentioned in this book and their fate at the time of its publication is necessary and useful when figures for numbers of houses demolished, ruined, abandoned or otherwise in this period are scant or non-existent, even despite the difficulties with providing accurate estimates from this work.²⁷ Firstly, in terms of houses which were cited as having been demolished, during the years from 1920 to 1930 only one house approximately is listed as having met this fate; five were demolished between 1930 and 1940; ten between 1940 and 1950; twenty-three between 1950 and 1960; and eight fell to the wrecking ball between 1960 and 1970. A further seventy-two approximately were listed as having been demolished but no year was given for their demise, while seventy-four were described as falling into ruin and eleven as derelict.²⁸ Approximately 254 of the 4,500 Big Houses compiled on the National

²⁵ Figures compiled by author from houses listed as having been demolished specifically in these two decades by Mark Bence-Jones in his *A guide to Irish country houses* (Revised ed., London, 1988).

²⁶ Bence-Jones, *A guide to Irish country houses*, p. vii.

²⁷ This would be a very useful study that would be hugely beneficial for the historiography surrounding the Big House in Ireland.

²⁸ These are estimates subject to human error. They were compiled by the author working through each entry and what was listed as the fate of each house. Not included in these figures were houses which were damaged or destroyed by fire, accidental or deliberate, houses which fell into ruin or dereliction and were demolished afterwards, and houses located in the six counties of Northern Ireland. Furthermore, many entries did not say what fate befell the house so these were excluded. In addition, in relation to the boundaries of study here the details given in this book from 1988 are interesting. The fate of any houses listed may have changed since, although the numbers for those ruined, derelict or demolished after 1970, as listed in this work, are extremely rare.

University of Ireland, Galway's landed estates database which covers the provinces of Connacht and Munster are listed as demolished, only about five per cent of the total.

One can see from the above figures that the decade from 1950 to 1960 was the most destructive period for the Big House in Ireland. By estimation, at least 204 houses were demolished, ruined or abandoned between 1920 and 1970, as listed by Bence-Jones. Furthermore, at least fifty-three houses were taken over by religious orders as convents, novitiates, schools and so on.²⁹ By this estimate, out of the 2,000 houses listed in this work, only approximately 10 per cent were definitely destroyed, ruined or abandoned. Even allowing for the fact that no fate was recorded for many houses, this is still quite a small proportion. Furthermore, Bence-Jones has since argued that only 10 per cent of those 2,000 properties are still in the hands of original owners. Therefore, if only 10 per cent of country houses are still owned as homes by their original owners and over 10 per cent were destroyed, it seems probable that the majority of Big Houses were sold to new owners or put to other use by the state, private businesses or religious orders. While there may be debates about the damage such transformations do to the historical integrity of such a property, one can see from the evidence above that perhaps as many as 80 per cent of the 2,000 country houses documented by Bence-Jones survived through such transformation, in contrast to the 10 per cent still owned by original owners. Hence such adaptations appear to account for the survival of most Big Houses in Ireland.

²⁹ The number taken over by religious orders necessitates a study on this aspect of the survival of the Big House which once again will add tremendous value to the historiography of this field. Houses taken on by religious orders include: Mount Anville, county Dublin, which became a girls convent school; Moore Abbey, county Kildare, which became a hospital run by the Sisters of Jesus and Mary; Gallen Priory, Offaly, which became a convent; Loftus Hall, county Wexford, which became a convent; Kylemore Abbey, county Galway, which became a convent and school; Glenstal Castle, county Limerick, which became a Benedictine Abbey and a boys public school; Blayney Castle, Monaghan, which became a convent; Faithlegg House, county Waterford, which became a school run by the De la Salle brothers; Gormanstown Castle, county Meath, which became a Franciscan school; Cloonamahon, county Sligo, which was bought by the Passionist fathers; Dromcar, county Louth, taken over by the Society of St John of God's; Myross Wood, county Cork, which became property of the Sacred Heart Fathers; Donamon Castle, county Roscommon, which was bought by the Divine Word missionaries, among many others.

The difficulties for the survival of the Big House in the twenty-six counties in this period were similar to those faced by the country house in Northern Ireland and Britain. This challenges the idea of exceptionalism with regard to the destruction of Irish Big Houses. Nevertheless, Olwen Purdue has maintained that, while similar, the position of the Big House in the twenty-six counties in the first decades of the twentieth century was worse. She wrote:

One estimate suggests that in Britain a total of 282 country houses were demolished in the decade following the end of the Second World War. The picture in the counties that became the Republic of Ireland was worse. Many Irish big houses disappeared either through the inability of the owner to maintain them, through violent destruction, or because, no longer having any role in the new Ireland that had been created to exclude them, their owners simply closed the door behind them and left. Bence-Jones has estimated that out of the 2,000 big houses catalogued in his *Guide to Irish Country Houses*, only ten per cent remain in the hands of the original owners.³⁰

II

By 1943 Anglo-Irish Free State senator Sir John Keane was drawing attention to the position of the owner who was ‘struggling to live on his demesne’, being ‘overhoused’, with ‘no surplus cash income’.³¹ Nonetheless, Keane was also quick to point out that the loss of a Big House would result in unemployment in rural localities, demonstrating his awareness of the necessity to appeal to the value of maintaining these properties by highlighting their economic importance.³² Furthermore, he emphasised that he was not talking about wealthy demesne owners, as they ‘do not deserve very exceptional treatment’.³³ Rather he was speaking of owners who were now struggling financially and called them ‘a very deserving class in the community ... They are very poor, a new genteel poor’.³⁴ In relation to a reduction of rates on Big Houses, he asked the Minister for Finance ‘not to cling too rigidly to the

³⁰ Purdue, *The big house in the North of Ireland*, p. 119.

³¹ *Seanad Éireann deb.*, xxvii, 2133 (19 May 1943).

³² In fact, as noted in the previous chapter, many of the staff working in the Big House, and particularly in the most important posts were English or Scottish Protestants and therefore Dooley has illustrated that ‘big houses were not of great economic benefit to locals seeking employment on a permanent basis’. Dooley, *The decline of the big house*, p. 160. However locals were employed on demesnes and farms. *Ibid.*, p. 272.

³³ *Seanad Éireann deb.*, xxvii, 2134 (19 May 1943).

³⁴ *Ibid.*

official point of view of his advisors, but really to consider the human aspect of these cases which, I think, has never appealed so far to his Departmental advisers'.³⁵ Although in reply the Fianna Fáil finance minister, Seán T. Ó Ceallaigh, maintained that if an individual made a case he may have the value reduced,³⁶ it belied an unwillingness to change the general official line towards these houses and owners, rather stating that exception may be made in particular circumstances to a rule which made it increasingly difficult for owners to survive. However, rates were a burden on every member of the community and the government therefore would have been making a very unpopular move if they reduced rates only for people living in the historic mansions of Ireland.³⁷

Such was the demise in these houses owned by original owners that in 1946 the *Irish Independent* argued: 'in Great Britain, as in Ireland, the Big House is passing. Perhaps it would be more accurate to say it is changing character ... the crushing death duties which have been, in effect, a series of capital levies on successive owners, have made the rich poorer without making the poor richer'.³⁸ However, the duties were obviously not so exorbitant that residence in a Big House was impossible and in fact the position was seen to be much better than England, where the house bore none of the historical baggage that its Irish counterpart did, since in the same year the *Nenagh Guardian* reported on an influx of a wealthy elite to Ireland, stating:

³⁵ *Ibid.*, xxvii, 2134–5 (19 May 1943).

³⁶ *Ibid.*, xxvii, 2135 (19 May 1943).

³⁷ The Commissioner of Valuation made this point to the Land Commission in 1958 when the L.C. suggested a reduction of rates on historic mansions. The letter read: 'the commissioner does not think the suggestion is practicable. There are more occupied than unoccupied mansions and large houses. An increase in rate poundages would inevitably follow the legislator's unwillingness to offer to future occupiers of currently unoccupied mansions a relief which was to be withheld from, say, religious communities caring for mental defectives or epileptics in similar mansions. How could the legislator defend derating of the native, not to mention the foreign, occupier of a mansion to the cottier, the widow or the father who gets no relief from a burden which normally represents a higher proportion of net income the lower the income group to which the ratepayer belongs?' Observations of the Commissioner of Valuation on the memorandum for the government from Oifig an Aire Tailte regarding the preservation of mansions and large houses, 21 Oct. 1958 (National Archives of Ireland, Dept. of Finance files, FIN/F63/8/58).

³⁸ *Irish Independent*, 8 July 1946.

The flight of the monied classes from Britain still continues. Fear of the new Labour government started a trek which has been ending in the big houses of remote rural Ireland ... The big houses, many of which have been vacant since the exodus at the Treaty time, are now being snapped up at fabulous prices ... the latest of these houses to change hands is Harristown House, county Kildare, formerly the property of Percy La Touche ... bought by a British army general for £44,000.³⁹

The new owner was Michael Beaumont. In July 1938 the *Irish Times* described the reaction to such a situation in England where, at a conference there, one of the speakers suggested it was 'a national duty to retain these [landed] families in their surroundings, "and safeguard the pride of Britain"', by considering such suggestions as freedom from taxation; rates and death duties'.⁴⁰ The paper reported that in Ireland:

the problem is aggravated by the tendency of the larger farmers not only to leave the land, but to leave the country also. The 'big house' is left untenanted for a prolonged period, during which time its landed estate is sub-divided by the Land Commission ... This is a form of emigration that is overlooked because, in numbers, it may be low; but in potential economic value those who belong to the 'country family' class are worth infinitely more than has yet been accepted by reformist demagogues. In Ireland, and to a lesser extent also in England, the local 'big house' falls to the occupation of a religious community, or some institution controlled either by the state or a local authority ... Yet, while in England the destruction of the landed families is probably unintentional, in this country it is part of a deliberate policy.⁴¹

However, the fact that taxation policies in both countries were very similar and that there are no Irish government files suggesting this aim, questions this assertion by the *Irish Times*.

In fact, one of the first acts of this government was to accept the offer of Muckcross House and estate as a gift to the nation by Senator Arthur Vincent in 1932. There appears to have been little or no discussion of the merits of the gift in government and, without hesitation, on 5 September 1932 Conor Maguire, the attorney general, wrote to the owner, Senator Vincent:

³⁹ *Nenagh Guardian*, 6 July 1946.

⁴⁰ *I.T.*, 24 July 1937.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

I am now in a position to inform you that the Executive Council is in favour of accepting on behalf of the state the offer of the Muckcross estate. It is hardly necessary to say that the President and council appreciate the spirit in which this splendid gift is being offered to the nation ... Irishmen everywhere will rejoice that a demesne famous for its beauty and so rich in historical associations is about to become national property.⁴²

One can see that the government's attraction to the gift was primarily in the demesne, which would provide in many ways greater amenity value and wider appeal than the house. The gift was subject to the conditions that the estate would be known as the Bourn Vincent Memorial Park and that Mr Bourn would have the right to erect a monument to his daughter in the park.⁴³ It was also suggested that the transfer be exempt from stamp duty and that if the death of Mr Bourn occurred within three years of the deed of the gift, the property would not be included in his estate for the purposes of duty. The attorney general stated that the minister had the power to accept the gift in the form in which it was being made, but needed legislative powers to maintain the estate as a public park. He maintained that a bill would have to be introduced dealing with the matter and proposed that such a bill should also include provision for the making of a contribution towards the costs of transfer and the exemption from stamp duty.⁴⁴

On 16 November 1932 the solicitors for Vincent wrote to the attorney general enclosing an announcement they had formulated for the press, which he forwarded to the Minister for Finance.⁴⁵ The announcement was entitled: 'great new national park; the Muckcross Estate, Killarney, to be given to the nation' and stated that the gift had been assured to the government through the generosity of Mr William Bowers Bourn of California who had originally bought the property from the late Lord Ardilaun and settled it on his son-

⁴² Conor A. Maguire, attorney general, to Senator Arthur Vincent, 5 Sept. 1932 (N.A.I., Attorney general files, AGO/2005/77/34).

⁴³ Conor A. Maguire, attorney general, to the President of the Executive Council, 19 Oct. 1932 (N.A.I., Attorney general files, AGO/2005/77/34).

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Messrs Whitney, Moore & Keller solicitors to Conor A. Maguire, attorney general, 16 Nov. 1932 (N.A.I., Attorney general files, AGO/2005/77/34).

in-law, Senator Arthur Vincent.⁴⁶ It reported that the government would take over the property as a going concern, acquiring all effects necessary for the occupation of the house, the retaining of the famous herd of Kerry cattle, the boats and the farming implements and machinery from the estate.⁴⁷ Arthur Codling, assistant secretary to the Minister for Finance, added a paragraph to the announcement which read: ‘we feel sure that Irishmen, not only in this country, but throughout the world, will learn with great pleasure of the generous gift of the donors. The beauties of Killarney are world-famed. Henceforth they can by no mischance become the monopoly of a privileged few; they are part of the heritage of the nation’.⁴⁸ Here it is clear that the land of this estate, particularly in the famed scenery of Killarney, was the primary reason the state took over this property, for its amenity value to the public, rather than for the Big House, and so the acceptance of this gift did not mean the government viewed these houses as worthy of preservation in their own right, particularly when owned by the ‘privileged few’.

This is illustrated further in the fact that after the passing of the 1932 Bourn Vincent Memorial Park Act the government took possession of the estate and opened it to the public, although Muckross House itself lay idle until 1962 when eventually it was opened as a museum in a joint venture between the trustees of Muckross House and the state, as will be documented in chapter six. The government’s original focus on the demesne is important as later statistics illustrate that many more people benefited from that amenity than from the house. The national park and wildlife service noted that the number of paying visitors to Muckross House in 2003, at its peak, was 200,632, while the total number of users for the

⁴⁶ Draft press release forwarded to the attorney general by Messrs. Whitney, Moore and Keller solicitors for Senator Vincent, 16 Nov. 1932 (N.A.I., Attorney general files, AGO/2005/77/34).

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Handwritten note on draft government announcement on the Bourn Vincent Memorial Park (N.A.I., Attorney general files, AGO/2005/77/34).

demesne and national park (the land total was added to since the gift of Muckcross) was over one million.⁴⁹

This land attached to a Big House was also behind most negative perceptions of Anglo-Irish Big House owners, considered by many as the descendants of usurping landlords who had unjustly acquired land which belonged to the ‘native’ Gaelic Irish. In a Dáil debate on the 1933 Land Bill, which became the 1933 Land Act, Fianna Fáil’s Minister for Defence, Frank Aiken, speaking on behalf of the Minister for Lands and Fisheries, stated: ‘derelict residences shall no longer protect lands required for division’,⁵⁰ while Mícheál Cleary argued that it was ‘the duty of the state to step in and say that the men whose forefathers were evicted from these lands should be restored to them’.⁵¹ The 1933 Land Act introduced by Fianna Fáil gave the Land Commission more far reaching powers to compulsorily acquire land than they previously had, when residential land was excluded.⁵² This was a loophole in previous land acts which was exploited by many landowners to include outlying lands or farms, even if it only contained a residence unoccupied, derelict or ruined. The 1933 act was specifically designed to undermine this exploitation. Furthermore, the Land Commission could now acquire land when the owners did not live in the area or use the land as ordinary farmers. Dooley has shown how effective this 1933 act was, writing: ‘by the late 1930s, the old landed estates had eventually been broken up in Ireland. The Free State Land Acts had vested 113,800 holdings on just over 3 million acres in the Land Commission for £20.8

⁴⁹ Department of Environment, Heritage and Local Government: National Parks and Wildlife Service, ‘Management plan for Killarney National Park, 2005–2009’, p. 38, available at: National Parks and Wildlife Service, <http://www.npws.ie/publications/archive/KNPMP.pdf> [date accessed: 27 Mar. 2013]

⁵⁰ *Dáil Éireann deb.*, xlviii, 2391 (13 July 1933).

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² *Land Act, 1933. An act to amend generally the law, finance, and practice relating to land purchase, and in particular to make further and better provision for the execution of the functions of the judicial and lay commissioners of the Land Commission and to provide for the revision of purchase annuities and certain other annual payments and for the funding of arrears thereof, and to provide for other matters connected with the matters aforesaid* (13 Oct. 1933).

million'.⁵³ He has argued that 'the reduction of retained land below a viable level began a downward economic spiral that was impossible for big house owners to reverse. It was tantamount to ruin especially with the rise in taxation'.⁵⁴

The division of land and the subsequent break-up of the demesnes upon which the house was centred were seen as the natural culmination of an agrarian and national struggle which had been fought since the Land War of the late nineteenth century. The demise of the landed class was thus also sought and presumed as part of this land division process. In a 1939 Land Bill debate the Minister for Lands, Gerald Boland, elucidated that 'it is a great pity that the landlords did not take the advice given to them by Thomas Davis a century ago; that they could have been a force in this country for good'.⁵⁵ He did allow that there may have been exceptions, astutely tipping his hat to a number of senators who had been members of the landed class, including Sir John Keane. Nonetheless, he maintained his unabashed antagonism towards them because generally 'they were a poor lot and they let their opportunities go, and the less we say about them now the better'.⁵⁶ In the same debate Senator Christopher Byrne embodied similar attitudes towards this class as unjustifiably owning land and wealth when he argued: 'we are not going to stand by and allow one-fourth of the people to own three-fourths of the land, while the three-fourths have to live on the one-fourth', thus expressing the view that the landed class unjustifiably held Irish land and wealth.⁵⁷ In fact, this no longer applied to the former ascendancy after the land acts of the early twentieth-century and shows how out of touch he was with the reality of the situation.

The Irish landscape was changing, and its new image, as it was being constructed by this government and its ministers, was no longer centred on the Big House, their vast estates

⁵³ Dooley, *The decline of the big house*, p. 134.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ *Seanad Éireann deb.*, xxiii, 955 (26 July 1939).

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

or the elite class who owned them. However, as they disappeared, the number and the dramatic sight of derelict and demolished Big Houses throughout the Irish countryside began to garner attention for the first time.⁵⁸ Hence arguments, such as those below, began to be voiced calling for these houses to be put to use rather than demolished. This concern was first expressed by the public, the media and other politicians, not the sitting government.

Illustrative of this growing interest in the Big House, and fuelling it further, was the *Irish Times*, always considered the publication of choice of the upper classes. In May 1936 the *Weekly Irish Times* began a weekly series entitled ‘Historic Irish Mansions’ by James Fleming on the subject of Big Houses with original families still in possession.⁵⁹ This series continued for five years until 29 November 1941 when it had covered 291 houses. The amount of houses featured reveals the number of mansions that were still owned by original families. In addition, this was quite a high profile feature on many houses and families that may have been previously unknown, coming as it did little more than ten years after the burnings and targeting of Big Houses which took place during the Civil War. Perhaps it was considered that such a danger had passed or owners realised that the readership of the *Irish Times* were interested in their houses solely for their historic merit. Either way this was a long running series which illustrates that, at least for the readership of the *Irish Times*, such houses were creating interest in their history as early as the 1930s.

Why, though, did interest and concern arise out of their destruction, as will be shown below? Was it because they were now becoming a novelty as something that was being ‘lost’,

⁵⁸ The visual poignancy of the destruction of Big Houses and its sudden nature garnered more attention than abandonment or gradual ruin could evoke. This was again the case when in 1974 ‘The Destruction of the Country House’ exhibition opened at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London. It charted the disappearance of the country house in Britain to great and stark effect and inspired groups like SAVE Britain’s heritage, founded the following year, to focus on the country house and the preservation of the built heritage and stirred public consciousness. In 1989 a similarly and deliberately stark and emotive exhibition, ‘Vanishing Country Houses of Ireland’ sponsored by Christies, ironically a company responsible for the sale of much house contents from Ireland, began running at Powerscourt House, county Wicklow.

⁵⁹ See, for example, *Weekly Irish Times*, 9 Nov. 1940.

a much more sentiment-inducing motif than the maintenance of a private home of which there were many? Calls for a halt to the demolition of such houses were also predominately because it was considered that these buildings could be put to alternative use within the community, rather than motivated by concern that the house as private home should be preserved. In fact, it is worth noting that any concern voiced during this period, when it really tentatively began to be voiced, was for the houses themselves, not their owners. Therefore as the original owners either sold, left or abandoned their houses, the minority who remained became more isolated than ever, considered the remains of a departed ascendancy on the shadowy margins of Irish life. Dooley has described how:

it was difficult for those who remained in Ireland to integrate into the political, social or cultural mainstream of Irish life. Most families attempted to keep a foot in both Ireland and Britain. They continued to look to British public schools, Oxbridge and military colleges for their education, They continued to serve Britain as soldiers and in Britain as politicians ... However, attempting to keep a foot in both countries did not help these families to become fully integrated in either Ireland or Britain. In Ireland, they were generally perceived as being British; in Britain they were generally perceived as being Irish.⁶⁰

In independent Ireland their drift into oblivion went either unnoticed, was considered indifferently or presumed to have already taken place. Elizabeth Bowen, who lived in Bowen's Court in Cork, recognised this divide and stated in 1941 that if Big Houses were to survive, barriers on both sides of the demesne walls would have to be broken down.⁶¹ While this period did see the literal knocking of the estate walls by land division, the psychological, cultural and social barriers which separated Anglo-Irish owners from the rest of the population actually appeared to grow. As their houses were being dismantled, the landed class were portrayed as disintegrating. In fact, by 1942 Independent Wicklow T.D. Patrick Cogan referred to them as already extinct. For the remaining members this rhetoric served to

⁶⁰ Dooley, *The decline of the big house*, p. 258

⁶¹ Elizabeth Bowen, 'The Big House' in Hermione Lee (ed.), *The mulberry tree: writings on Elizabeth Bowen* (London, 1986), p. 30.

utterly negate their identity and presence in the country. Cogan stated that previously ‘we were inclined to denounce and freely denounce, the old landlord class who ruled our rural areas. We got rid of them’.⁶² This was presumed as a given, even as he actually highlighted the positive contribution this class made to society and regretted their loss. He gave lip service to the popular critique of landlords, but also asserted that ‘some of them were not so bad and, in clearing out that class, we destroyed a section of it who contributed far more to the development of the land than we have been able to contribute under our own democratic administration’.⁶³ Meanwhile, the changing lifestyle of this class was caricatured aptly by the *Irish Times* in 1934 when it reported: ‘the duke, pursued by the income-tax collectors, has gone to live in a London mews. His daughter is a waitress in a tea-shop, and his son sells motor cars to the wealthy descendants of men who held horses in the yard fifty years ago’.⁶⁴

Many of the Big Houses were thus now empty and therefore also ‘emptied’ of symbolic association with the Anglo-Irish landed class, so they could be put to use in the new state. Such was the feeling of those who protested against their demolition arguing that these houses could now be put to a national use. Public committees and politicians wrote to government suggesting these houses be put to use as schools, hostels, hotels or TB sanatoria, as will be shown below. In the absence of information on their suitability for such adaptations, the houses were thought of as large, well-made buildings which would be expensive to erect again and so should be put to some public use. Hence, and really for the first time in such numbers, concerned parties wrote to government suggesting that the responsibility and the decision to preserve and use these houses was theirs now, not the choice of private owners. Emptied, these houses could be made to play a new role in the state, but only if the government was motivated to mould them to do so.

⁶² *Dáil Éireann deb.*, lxxxvii, 851 (2 June 1942).

⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴ *I.T.*, 21 July 1934.

Public opinion differed widely on their possible new adaptations. In a 1939 Dáil debate on the Tourist Traffic Bill, Fianna Fáil T.D. for Leitrim, Bernard Maguire, argued that

many of these mansions could be utilised at very little cost and turned into very useful hostels or hotels ... I believe these old mansions which, in most cases, are white elephants on the hands of the Land Commission, and in many cases are being pulled down at public expense, could be utilised and thus continue to pay rates to the local authorities.⁶⁵

In 1943 Fine Gael T.D. for Leix-Offaly, Dr Thomas O'Higgins, suggested using some of them as TB sanatoria. He emphasised that every county had 'splendid mansions' that are 'in the custody of either the Department of Defence or the Minister for the Co-ordination of Defensive Measures' and asked for discussion with 'whatever department controls those beautiful empty mansions' as they would be ideal centres for evacuees.⁶⁶ Alternatively, in 1938 Fine Gael T.D. for Donegal East, Daniel McMenamin, stated that 'a number of very fine mansions are now semi-derelict' and suggested that perhaps they could be taken over as domestic training schools.⁶⁷

Peter Mandler has shown that the situation in England was similar and that the thinking of the time was 'short of demolition, white elephants might be converted to some remunerative use. When this occurred, sentimentality was rarely an issue, more a grim determination to exploit all available assets to their fullest'.⁶⁸ In 1933 the *Irish Times* also reported that the fate of the house in Ireland was being replicated in Britain, where:

the 'Big House' is being turned from its old functions to services for which it was never intended, but for which it seems to be completely suited ... Lord Northbourne has let his Kentish seat to be a preparatory school and the famous Maidwell Hall ...

⁶⁵ *Dáil Éireann deb.*, lxxv, 1239 (27 Apr. 1939).

⁶⁶ *Dáil Éireann deb.*, xci, 1410 (28 Oct. 1943).

⁶⁷ *Dáil Éireann deb.*, lxx, 1020 (24 Mar. 1938).

⁶⁸ Peter Mandler, *The fall and rise of the stately home* (New Haven & London, 1997), p. 246.

has just been sold for another school. Among famous English houses which have been converted into schools in recent years are Stowe, Canford Manor, Maiden Erleagh.⁶⁹

A similar pattern was being woven in Ireland where the 1939 acquisition of Donamon Castle, county Roscommon, by the Divine Word Missionaries continued a trend of religious orders acquiring Big Houses.

There was also concern in 1941 about these buildings; however, the argument was not for their preservation, but rather that they should be used by the government for their materials. Lead, for example, had become a very valuable commodity during the Emergency, from 1939 to 1945, when the Irish government decided Ireland would remain neutral during World War II and people were buying up these houses for their scrap value. A significant factor behind this stirring of public awareness was the fact that the disappearance of the Big House had become even more dramatic because of the many houses that were now being bought for demolition having suddenly become valuable, not as residences, but as commodities. Houses were bought up for demolition by speculators interested in selling off valuable slates or lead from their roofs, while the Land Commission also demolished some houses on acquired lands, from which they could use the materials to build factories, roads and so on. Big Houses had become far more valuable and useful for their parts than when they were standing. In April 1941, in the Dáil, Deputy Seán Broderick, Fine Gael T.D. for Galway East, urged the Minister of Local Government and Public Health, Mayo North T.D.

Patrick J. Ruttledge:

to co-operate in those cases in which the Land Commission are selling mansions to people who want to make money. These mansions have good roofing, the finest of slates, which could be used on houses again, and the minister should co-operate with the Land Commission in regard to them, instead of allowing every Tom, Dick and

⁶⁹ *I.T.*, 21 Mar. 1933.

Harry who can do so to put down £300 or £400 for these places and to sell all the timber and roofing at a huge profit.⁷⁰

Yet even the virulently nationalist Fine Gael T.D. for Meath-Westmeath, Captain Patrick Giles, did not agree with Broderick. He stated:

When large estates in county Meath are divided there is always the problem of the disposal of the big mansion. There are many of these mansions, built of the best of granite, with stabling and lofts that any man would envy, but, unfortunately, under the blind policy of the Land Commission for a number of years, men have come with axes and crowbars, have torn them down and made roads from the material, while people in the country are crying out for granaries for the storage of grain. It is the duty of the Land Commission to see that buildings of that type, which are roofed with the best slates and timber, are not allowed to fall into a condition of complete neglect, and it is their duty to leave an adequate supply of land with these places so that the community, whether religious or otherwise, may take it over and make a success of it. It is terrible that we who regard as a difficult problem the provision of labourers' cottages should tear down these great monuments. They may be monuments of inequity in the past, built on the sweat of slaves, but they are there at present, and they are Irish property, and the Land Commission should think twice before tearing down even one of them. I ask the Land Commission to realise that they are more valuable than as material for making yards and roads. Let them be utilised for something.⁷¹

Twenty years later, however, this hot-headed T.D. blustered: 'those old houses should be blown sky-high. They were built with slave labour and the blood of decent men. Two or three of them were blown up by the Land Commission in county Meath and I was delighted'.⁷² This illustrates that Big Houses and their historical associations were always considered negatively by Giles; it was only their possible use, when separated from their original owners, that made these properties worthy of preservation.

The influence of the Minister for Lands on the Land Commission's policy in relation to houses they acquired with lands could, if the minister was interested in making his mark, be significant, as will be discussed in chapter five. Fianna Fáil T.D. for Cork North, Seán Moylan, who was Minister for Lands from June 1944 to February 1948, certainly had strong

⁷⁰ *Dáil Éireann deb.*, lxxxii, 1435 (3 Apr. 1941).

⁷¹ *Dáil Éireann deb.*, lxxxii, 2006-2007 (30 Apr. 1941).

⁷² *Dáil Éireann deb.*, cxci, 1330 (19 July 1961).

views on the matter. He had been very influential in the struggle in Cork during the War of Independence and no doubt this shaped his opinion. On the subject of Big Houses acquired by the commission Moylan stated his view clearly that

the Land Commission, of course, and every other department have permitted the destruction of certain houses, with which I do not agree. But, in general, the majority of these big houses that I know, and I am very familiar with them, are not structurally sound, have no artistic value and no historic interest. From my unregenerate point of view, I choose to regard them as tombstones of a departed ascendancy and the sooner they go down the better – they are no use.⁷³

Dooley has also cited Moylan as an example of how: ‘after independence, Free State/Irish Republic governments were slow to show any type of sympathy or concern for the plight of Big Houses. There was little appreciation in government circles for their cultural heritage value’.⁷⁴ He argued that illustrative of such attitudes was when, in February 1944, Seán Flanagan T.D. asked Moylan, as Minister for Lands, if he would hand over the country houses situate on Land Commission-divided estate lands, instead of allowing them to fall into decay or to be demolished. Moylan replied: ‘residences on lands acquired by the Land Commission for division which are not suitable for disposal to allottees may be demolished in order to provide material for building smaller houses for allottees or may be sold by public auction, at which it is open for such bodies as the deputy mentions to bid for them’.⁷⁵ Moylan only spoke about the destruction of houses which were of no use here, however, he also embodied the views of this Fianna Fáil government who, despite growing public and political concern, viewed the position of the Big Houses with apathy or indifference, the concern of private individuals or even as a natural consequence, an inevitable by-product, of the reclaiming of Ireland for the Irish, which the government was intent on being seen to do.

⁷³ *Dáil Éireann deb.*, xciii, 52 (2 May 1944).

⁷⁴ Dooley, *The big house and landed estates of Ireland: a research guide* (Dublin, 2007), p. 137.

⁷⁵ *Dáil Éireann deb.*, xcii, 1518 (23 Feb. 1944).

Such an attitude also seems to have been pervasive in local authorities who allowed no relief on rates due on these houses, even when put to new uses by national organisations. An Taisce, the National Trust for Ireland, which had been created in 1948 by Robert Lloyd Praegar, was restricted in its work because it was not given exemptions from rates or duties on properties. Furthermore, in 1944 the *Irish Press* reported that a great barrier to the extension of An Óige, the Irish youth hostel association founded in 1931, was a lack of hostels, but Big Houses could only be taken on for such purposes if there was a reduction in rates.⁷⁶ The article described how all over Ireland:

there are to be found, in various states of preservation, fine Georgian structures that were formally seats of the landowners. Many have already been razed to the ground; others are in danger of suffering a similar fate. There must surely be a sufficient number which could be adapted as hostels for youth and it would be hard to find a better use for them.⁷⁷

A few days later the paper reported that their suggestion that disused mansions be converted into youth hostels had been ‘warmly commended’ by leaders of An Óige and the Irish Tourist Association (I.T.A.), which promoted tourism in the Free State⁷⁸ and carried out their own detailed survey on the tourism potential of areas in Ireland from 1943–4, including old houses and ruins.⁷⁹ This article quoted David Barry, secretary of the I.T.A., who had said that the paper’s suggestion was very good if the mansions were in holiday districts and that the conversion of a number of the old mansions would meet the need for more accommodation and some might even be set aside for holiday hostels for adults.⁸⁰ J. J. Waldron, national secretary of An Óige, had replied that ‘the big empty houses in these areas would ... be ideal for hostels, but if they were made available on free loan there would have to be some

⁷⁶ *Irish Press*, 15 July 1944.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

⁷⁸ In 1939 Bord Cuartaóichta na hÉireann was established by an act of the Dáil. This organisation took over from the I.T.A. It was then succeeded by Bord Fáilte Éireann which was created in 1955 under the Tourist Traffic Act.

⁷⁹ *Irish Press*, 19 July 1944.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

concession in the matter of rates, as in Britain and other countries'.⁸¹ Assistant secretary of An Óige, Seaghan O'Brien, also welcomed the suggestion and had pointed out that within its limited resources An Óige had recently purchased Aughavannagh House, county Wicklow, former home of John Redmond for the bargain price of £350. Furthermore, a trustee of An Óige had said that the suggestion was timely as 'a large house which they had been using near New Ross had been bought and demolished for scrap'.⁸² This is particularly notable as this mansion was not lying derelict but being put to good use by an organisation who required it and still it was demolished, suggesting how much more valuable these houses were at this time razed to the ground for their scrap materials, particularly during the Emergency, than left standing, lived in, rented or derelict. The paper added that this type of mansion was being used for youth hostels in Britain and European countries.⁸³

Aside from youth hostels, local corporations were also imaginatively exploring possible uses for these unoccupied mansions. In 1944 the *Irish Independent* reported that they were glad to see that Limerick Corporation was leading the movement to explore the possibility of acquiring a country house for a temporary TB sanatorium. They added: 'coincident with this announcement appears the offer for demolition of two more big mansions. One of them seems to be in perfect order and the other boasts splendid dance floors. Surely a dance floor is just what is needed to accommodate a row of hospital beds'.⁸⁴ The reporter, Gertrude Gaffney, wrote that when one considered the amount of time it would take the ratepayers to provide the £50,000 to £100,000 type of building that was the present 'grandiose standard for institutions of this kind, the demolition of solidly-built mansions that one would not now build for the price of an institution, seems the height of foolishness and

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ *Irish Independent*, 1 Sept. 1944.

vandalism'.⁸⁵ She believed country houses were ideal for agricultural demonstration centres, rural educational and recreation centres, district farm and cookery schools, convalescent homes, holiday homes for workers and children, and sanatoria, all of which, she argued, would be out of the question if they had been newly built, concluding: 'such mansions present so many possibilities for the recreation and the welfare of the people that their destruction should be stopped without delay'.⁸⁶ The *Irish Times* also believed that 'some of the large empty country houses would make excellent sanatoria'.⁸⁷ In contrast, the *Irish Press* reported that three surveys of disused mansions had been made in recent years, and 'from the viewpoint of adopting them as sanatoria, the results have been most disappointing'.⁸⁸ One mansion, at least, did appear to be suitable, however, as in 1944 Ballinderry House, county Westmeath, was bought by Westmeath county council as a temporary sanatorium, thereby proving, despite government reports, that such adaptation was possible in some cases.⁸⁹

In reality, apart from being converted to large schools, novitiates or convents there were not many other purposes to which these houses could be put, particularly by the state. As Allen Warren has argued: 'these houses were never businesses, more objects of consumption to enhance power and status'⁹⁰ and therefore frequently unsuitable for adaptation to other purposes. Dooley has emphasised that by the 1940s 'abandoned and disused mansions were considered only in terms of how they might be used as hospitals in a bid to eradicate the tuberculosis health crisis in Ireland and at another stage how they might be used for the advantage of such organisations as An Óige, the Irish Tourist Board or the

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ *I.T.*, 15 Aug. 1944.

⁸⁸ *Irish Press*, 31 Aug. 1944.

⁸⁹ *I.T.*, 18 Sept. 1944.

⁹⁰ Allen Warren, 'The twilight of the ascendancy and the big house: a view from the twenty-first century' in Terence Dooley and Christopher Ridgway (eds), *The Irish country house; its past, present and future* (Dublin, 2011), p. 251.

Youth Training Body'.⁹¹ This is understandable as it was the only way they could be used and therefore preserved, even practically in terms of being lived in, heated and maintained. However, only a minority was ever put to use and this period was one of the most destructive in terms of the decline and disappearance of the Big House in Ireland. This situation was mirrored, and in fact worse, in England. David Cannadine has argued that between '1945 and 1955, four hundred country houses were destroyed, more than at any other period of modern British history' as they were 'too big, too uneconomical and often damaged beyond repair, the setting for a life and for a class now generally believed to be extinct'.⁹²

III

In 1943 the government responded to increasing public concern over the destruction of houses by commissioning a report on the issue by the Department of Local Government. Cabinet minutes of 30 September 1943 record that it had been decided that the department should have a survey made of disused country mansions and should examine the question of their utilisation in consultation with other concerned departments.⁹³ A note of 8 December reported that the department had 'circularised county managers for a list of disused country mansions and that when the reports were received the houses would be inspected by the department and housing inspectors' and a memorandum would be prepared for government.⁹⁴ It was 17 May 1945 when the Department of Local Government and Public Health compiled this memorandum. The department's housing inspectors carried out the survey and submitted reports on 330 buildings. Copies of the reports were forwarded to the Departments of Defence, Industry and Commerce, Lands and the Office of Public Works. The Department of Defence had replied that 'the experience gained by the use of such buildings for the

⁹¹ Dooley, *The big house and landed estates of Ireland*, p. 138.

⁹² David Cannadine, *The decline and fall of the British aristocracy* (Revised ed., London, 2005), p. 643.

⁹³ Department of An Taoiseach cabinet minutes, 30 Sept. 1943 (N.A.I., Dept. of An Taoiseach files, S13344A).

⁹⁴ 'Disused country mansions', 8 Dec. 1943 (N.A.I., Dept. of An Taoiseach files, S13344A).

accommodation of troops during the Emergency indicates that they are quite unsuitable for military purposes, and accordingly that the department is not interested in their future use'.⁹⁵ The O.P.W. stated that it was very unlikely that any of the premises could be economically useable for service for which accommodation was normally provided by that office, while the Department of Lands had no special observations to offer regarding the utilisation of disused mansions covered by the reports. The Department of Industry and Commerce forwarded the reports to the Irish Tourist Board who had taken the particulars of a number of houses which could have been of possible interest to the board, although they considered many of the houses as 'suitable only for demolition and salvage'.⁹⁶ They were interested in this aspect of the question as the salvaged materials could have made it possible for them to proceed with the construction of, for example, holiday camps. This is particularly interesting as the body responsible for the promotion of tourism in Ireland at this time was thereby concluding that these houses were not important as tourist attractions. As this was obviously based on their figures and experience, it was therefore rational of them to assert that they were primarily not useful for their purposes, unless their materials could be used for construction. However, the Irish Tourist Board had acquired one such house, Monea House, county Waterford, and proposed to acquire Glenart Castle, Courtown House and Marlfield House, county Wicklow, and Classiebawn Castle, county Sligo.

A number of the buildings included in the Department of Local Government and Public Health's report had also been considered in light of the possibility of adapting them for use as accommodation for tuberculosis patients, but were ultimately deemed unsuitable. The memorandum concluded that the net result of the investigations into the possible usefulness of these mansions was that five (as a provisional number) were suitable for

⁹⁵ Department of Local Government and Public Health memorandum for government, 17 May 1945 (N.A.I., Dept. of An Taoiseach files, S13344B).

⁹⁶ Ibid.

accommodation and 325 were unsuitable for any public purpose.⁹⁷ Thus the enquiry into the usefulness of such Big Houses to the state for conversion to other uses was overwhelmingly negative. This memorandum was sent to the various government departments on 23 May and was to be considered at the next government meeting.⁹⁸ It was examined when government met on 29 May; however, no decision was taken on the findings of the report, other than to note its contents.⁹⁹ Dooley has elucidated how: ‘in the end only a handful of big houses passed into government hands at this time’ such as those adapted as agricultural training centres, namely Johnstown Castle, Wexford, acquired by government by an act of 1945 and Ballyhaise, county Cavan.¹⁰⁰ This was because the government, while displaying enough interest to conduct a report into their possible use, concluded that there was no way the state could preserve these Big Houses by putting them to new use. In none of the responses recorded in the report, including that of the Irish Tourist Board, was the possible value of their historic, architectural or aesthetic importance as mansions mentioned at all. They were solely considered by all departments in terms of possible departmental use. The results of the report appear almost shocking retrospectively. On the other hand, it is important to remember that there was very little tourism in Ireland at this time and the government was, like the press, not aware of the possible potential of these houses as valuable attractions. Similarly in England, Mandler has argued that ‘the general public’s near-total indifference to the fate of the country house in the 1920s and 1930s – callous and inexplicably philistine as it may seem today – is fully intelligible in its proper context. There was, first of all, little concept of “the country house”’.¹⁰¹

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Department of Local Government and Public Health to secretary for government, 23 May 1945 (N.A.I., Dept. of An Taoiseach files, S13344B).

⁹⁹ Department of An Taoiseach cabinet minutes, 29 May 1945 (N.A.I., Dept. of An Taoiseach files, S13344B).

¹⁰⁰ Dooley, *The big house and landed estates of Ireland*, p. 139.

¹⁰¹ Mandler, *The fall and rise of the stately home*, p. 254.

Hence, the government could not afford to take on even a portion of the over 300 financially draining old mansions, for which they had no need, use or demand. This problem was so immediate at the time because, as Dooley has argued: ‘it was not the destruction of a minority of big houses, probably less than 10 per cent, during the revolutionary period that was most significant, but rather the abandonment and/or demolition of a much higher proportion in the decades that followed.’¹⁰² A similar situation, though to an even greater extent, was facing the English country house. Mandler has shown how among various adaptations of country houses in England some:

were advertised to let – great Knole itself in 1921, Levens Hall in Lancashire in 1928. Montacute, which had been let off and on for years, failed to sell at auction in 1929 and was only saved from dereliction by the intervention of Ernest Cook ... Cook conveyed it to the National Trust, which accepted its first major country house with some reluctance, alarmed by the potential maintenance costs.¹⁰³

However, he maintained that ‘this kind of holding operation could be mounted for a few of the greatest olden time mansions, but it was neither possible nor desirable in the case of the vast majority of large country houses now surplus to requirements. Hundreds of them were demolished; by one estimate, 7 per cent of the total stock of country houses’.¹⁰⁴ Mandler also argued that in England, as in Ireland, the abandonment and destruction of the country house was not solely caused by governments’ policies. He wrote:

Insofar as culture and history remained concerns of the aristocracy, few could afford any longer to attach these qualities to large country houses. Not only were big houses ruinous to maintain, hard in straitened times, but they were just not consistent with modern standards of good taste and comfort. Lord Crawford himself granted that, were it not for the presence of his beloved art and book collections, Haigh Hall would

¹⁰² Terence Dooley, ‘National patrimony and political perceptions of the Irish country house in post-independence Ireland’ in idem (ed.), *Ireland’s polemical past: views of Irish history in honour of R. V. Comerford* (Dublin, 2010), p. 196.

¹⁰³ John Gaze, *Figures in a landscape: a history of the national trust* (London, 1988), pp 92–3.

¹⁰⁴ Mandler, *The fall and rise of the stately home*, p. 245.

be ‘uninhabitable’. Many owners both of town and country palaces laid them down with relief.¹⁰⁵

Despite this, significant blame for the destruction of the house has often been laid at governments’ doors in Ireland. Dooley has written about the position of landlords in the Irish Free State after World War I: ‘while in Britain their position was merely resented, in Ireland it was detested particularly because the culture they represented was the one that the new order in Ireland was attempting to suppress. While their isolation in the past had been voluntary, it now became enforced’.¹⁰⁶ Purdue has similarly argued: ‘many Irish big houses disappeared either through the inability of the owner to maintain them, through violent destruction, or because, no longer having any role in the new Ireland that had been created to exclude them, their owners simply closed the door behind them and left’.¹⁰⁷ It has also been claimed by Dooley and Irene Furlong that the Irish government made exceptions for Big Houses associated with national figures. In this regard Dooley cited Avondale House, Wicklow, former home of nationalist leader, Charles Stewart Parnell, which around the beginning of the Emergency, had been turned into a museum approaching the fiftieth anniversary of his death in 1891. Irene Furlong has concluded:

The moral climate obtaining in Ireland in the 1930s and 1940s was such that literary works and their authors were fair game, and the physical legacy of an ascendancy figure such as Gregory was not regarded as a desirable part of the cultural heritage of the nation. On the other hand, the political fervour of the ‘soldiers of destiny’ easily enabled the establishment of a museum to honour the ‘Great Chief’ at a time when Ireland’s neutral stance required the bolstering of its isolated psyche by nationalist memorials.¹⁰⁸

Avondale was not bought at this time but much earlier, in 1903, when Ireland was not governed independently, and just opened as a museum in this period for which there was

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Dooley, *The decline of the big house*, p. 243.

¹⁰⁷ Purdue, *The big house in the North of Ireland*, p. 119.

¹⁰⁸ Irene Furlong, ‘State promotion of tourism in independent Ireland 1925–55’ (Ph.D. Thesis, National University of Ireland, Maynooth, 2002), p. 329.

obviously an interested market. Opening an already acquired house as a museum was therefore a much less expensive project, using a property already in state ownership for public access and use, as opposed to acquiring, for example, Lady Gregory's home at Coole Park, county Galway, although certainly the government was willing to spend the money on establishing a museum at Avondale.

Another such house was Derrynane, county Kerry, former home of Daniel O'Connell and following the offer from its owners to dispose of the property to the state in April 1945 the government did investigate possible uses for the house, if acquired. They believed 'that the house might be acquired by the Tourist Board and preserved by them as a memorial of Daniel O'Connell, that the Land Commission should consider the question of the best use to which the lands might be put, and the forestry division of the Department of Lands consider the utilisation of part of the lands for afforestation purposes'.¹⁰⁹ A memorandum on the case prepared by the Taoiseach's department outlined that the Tourist Board had said they saw 'no possibility of the board purchasing the property and maintaining it as an O'Connell museum, as they could not certify ... that the proposal would be "a work of profit-earning character" for the purpose of their act'.¹¹⁰ Nevertheless, they did agree that this was one of a number of properties which should be preserved to the nation through state acquisition and maintenance and suggested that 'this should be done by means of a body set up under state auspices on the lines of the National Trust in Great Britain'.¹¹¹ On 23 May the Department of Industry and Commerce had informed the Taoiseach's department that they understood the Tourist Board would submit a report, at a very early date, on the creation of a National Trust in this country with powers to acquire properties, such as Derrynane, which should be preserved to the

¹⁰⁹ Department of An Taoiseach, memorandum for government, 16 June 1945 (N.A.I., Dept. of An Taoiseach files, S13649A).

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

nation.¹¹² Furthermore, cabinet minutes from July 1945 recorded that ‘it was decided that the question of the establishment of a National Trust should be actively pursued’.¹¹³ In spite of this, the suggested establishment of a National Trust does not appear to have developed much further, with the Department of Industry and Commerce and the Department of Finance going back and forth over whose responsibility it was to even investigate the possibility, with neither department eager to do so.¹¹⁴

On 27 September 1945 the Commissioners of Public Works wrote to the Department of Finance in relation to the possibility of acquiring Derrynane Abbey under the National Monuments Act. They stated that ‘there could be no question of our acquiring any more than the house, its site and such portion of an adjoining site as would be required to provide the necessary means of access and to cover in or fence the monument or preserve the amenities thereof’.¹¹⁵ This would have excluded about 315 acres of the total 332 acres. Therefore they believed:

unless it be decided to adopt the original suggestion for the establishment of a National Trust for the purpose, we think that acquisition by the Land Commission of the entire estate would be the preferable course. The Land Commission could then vest in us, as a national monument, the house and such of the adjoining land as it would be desirable to retain with it.¹¹⁶

This would also have meant dispossessing the then owners to adhere to the terms of the 1930 act.

As a result, the Department of Finance wrote to the Taoiseach’s department that it was apparent ‘from the terms of the report that the Commissioners of Public Works do not

¹¹²Department of Industry and Commerce to Department of An Taoiseach, 23 May 1945 (N.A.I., Dept. of An Taoiseach files, S13649A).

¹¹³ Department of An Taoiseach cabinet minutes, 3 July 1945 (N.A.I., Dept. of An Taoiseach files, S13649A).

¹¹⁴ Department of An Taoiseach minute, 20 Aug. 1945 (N.A.I., Dept. of An Taoiseach files, S13649A).

¹¹⁵ Commissioners of Public Works to Department of Finance, 27 Sept. 1945 (N.A.I., Dept. of An Taoiseach files, S13649A).

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

regard the taking of action under the National Monuments Act in regard to the acquisition of the property as either feasible or desirable'.¹¹⁷ The suggestion that action be taken by the Land Commission 'would not appear to be practicable in view of the report of the Department of Lands on the subject'.¹¹⁸ The bottom line for the Department of Finance either way was the excessive cost involved, just as it had been in the offer of Russborough, despite Derrynane's nationalist associations and the Taoiseach's views. Their letter concluded: 'in view of the uncertainty as to the purchase price, the capital expenditure involved in putting the premises to rights and the large recurring expenditure entailed in maintenance the minister does not favour state acquisition by way of special act'.¹¹⁹ Furthermore, the department official emphasised: 'the minister considers the establishment of a National Trust for this purpose as wholly objectionable'.¹²⁰ Although no reason was given, the establishment of a National Trust would have inevitably led to either considerable expense in endowments or loss in terms of reductions in rates for the Department of Finance and other government departments.

In contrast, de Valera was obviously still interested in trying to acquire the property and in a minute of 9 October the Taoiseach's department suggested: 'if the matter were approached in a sympathetic manner it should be possible to convince one's self that it would be necessary to acquire all the land adjoining the house in order to preserve the amenities thereof'.¹²¹ This illustrates that where they deemed it desirable some members of the Department of the Taoiseach, at least, thought the National Monuments Act could be stretched to suit a need. They also commented that the cost of maintenance and repairs estimated by the O.P.W. was not excessive, as an immediate expenditure of £2,000 would be

¹¹⁷ Department of Finance to Department of An Taoiseach, 8 Oct. 1945 (N.A.I., Dept. of An Taoiseach files, S13649A).

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ Department of An Taoiseach minute, 9 Oct. 1945 (N.A.I., Dept. of An Taoiseach files, S13649A).

sufficient to put the old buildings into a good state of repair, while the annual maintenance charges were estimated at £100.¹²² The minute concluded: ‘the taking over of the property by a National Trust would probably be the ideal solution, but even if it were decided to establish a National Trust in this country a very considerable time must elapse before it would be in active operation’.¹²³

The finance solicitor agreed, writing on the subject of Derrynane: ‘I do not think, in view of its long association with O’Connell, that there could be any difficulty in classing it as a “national monument” as defined by the act’.¹²⁴ While in other cases the relatively modern construction of Big Houses was given as a reason against their acquisition, here it seems that the over-riding association with O’Connell, meant that it could undoubtedly, in the opinion of the finance solicitor, come under the protection of the National Monuments Act. He stated that if the owners intended to present the abbey to the state, it could be done under section ten of the act, but the lands would be excluded.¹²⁵ The solicitor highlighted that ‘the Land Commission could, of course, under their statutory powers, acquire both lands and house, subsequently vest the house in the board as a national monument and dispose of the surplus land for their own purposes or by way of resale’.¹²⁶ However, he doubted they would favour such action as the land was primarily unsuitable for their purposes.¹²⁷ Therefore the solicitor concluded that while the house could be considered a national monument, he found it difficult to see how Derrynane Abbey with its entire lands could be dealt with under the 1930 act beyond making a preservation order in respect of the buildings.¹²⁸

¹²² Ibid.

¹²³ Ibid.

¹²⁴ Finance solicitor to the secretary of the Department of An Taoiseach, 22 June 1946 (N.A.I., Dept. of An Taoiseach files, S13649A).

¹²⁵ Ibid.

¹²⁶ Ibid.

¹²⁷ Ibid.

¹²⁸ Ibid.

Despite such difficulties the Department of the Taoiseach still wanted to discuss possible *ad hoc* legislation which would make the preservation possible; however, the arguments of the other departments were obviously persuasive as the state did not act to put forward such legislation and the house was taken over by a group of interested parties who formed the Derrynane Trust, under the leadership of Denis Guiney.¹²⁹ Ownership was later assumed by the state from this trust and the Abbey is now in the care of the O.P.W.

¹²⁹ Department of An Taoiseach memorandum for government, 22 Aug. 1946 (N.A.I., Dept. of An Taoiseach files, S13649A).

IV



Fig. 2.1, Hazelwood House, county Sligo.

Source: Sligo County Council,

<http://www.sligotoday.ie/details.php?id=22823&PHPSESSID=d505b13626a7c66f3fc883cc03d0c9a7> [date accessed: 25 Apr. 2013]

Hazelwood House, county Sligo, an eighteenth-century house designed by Richard Castle, was another Big House garnering a lot of press attention surrounding its fate and is an interesting case for illustrating public concern and government reaction to the decline of Big Houses at this time. The case study is particularly illuminating as, in many ways, it embodies many of the factors which were leading to the decline of Big Houses at this time, such as its sale and value for demolition rather than residential use, the lack of public interest in its fate,

the minority, including the *Irish Times*, who were attempting to champion its cause and the varying attitudes displayed by government, which, in the end, resulted in no action in this case.

In 1946 Hazelwood House was put up for sale by the Land Commission for demolition. The *Irish Times* covered the case extensively and on 12 January 1946 ran almost a full page spread on the house entitled: 'Historic county Sligo mansion to be sold for demolition'.¹³⁰ Despite this level of coverage, suggesting public concern or at least interest, the paper began their article: 'Hazelwood House is going to be demolished, and the people of Sligo, with few exceptions, do not care'.¹³¹ Like other publications, it believed that Hazelwood was one of the finest mansions in Ireland, although the article described the residents of Sligo as 'not interested'.¹³² This was backed up by the claims of an *Irish Times* reporter who wrote:

I discussed the demolition of Hazelwood with several prominent citizens of Sligo. One said: 'I don't think anybody in Sligo cares a hoot what happens to Hazelwood.' Another said: 'I suppose it is a pity that such a historic place should be pulled down, but really I can't see that it is much use to anyone.' Others did not consider that the destruction of Hazelwood called for any comment, and only one appears to feel sufficiently strongly about it to protest. That man is Mr W. J. Tolan, senior Alderman. He said: 'I feel that it is a great pity to pull down a building like Hazelwood in these times. Surely it could be used as a sanatorium or something like that. I think that the Department of Local Government and Public Health should take it over for conversion'.¹³³

The paper recounted that the house had been sold to the Land Commission some years previously and during the war years had been used by the army, but questioned what its future use might be. Suggestions had been made to turn it into a hotel, boarding school, a hospital or a sanatorium. It reported that the building had deteriorated a good deal during recent years, but was still in a basically sound condition and had been fitted with a lighting

¹³⁰ *I.T.*, 12 Jan. 1946.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*

¹³² *Ibid.*

¹³³ *Ibid.*

plant, a pumping plant and a modern sewerage system. A builder commented: ‘undoubtedly, it would cost quite a considerable sum to convert the house into a hospital, but it does seem a pity, in these times when many new buildings are urgently needed, to pull down a good, solid structure like this’.¹³⁴

However, in general the paper claimed that local people were not interested, reporting:

people in Sligo who know the house say that it is too low-lying for a sanatorium, and they already have a hospital in Sligo, anyway. They say that it is too big and too far out for a school. They say that the place has not sufficient amenities for a hotel. They do not even seem to think seriously about it; they just say ‘there isn’t really anything you can do with Hazelwood,’ and leave it at that.¹³⁵

This was an attitude replicated in England where Mandler has shown how:

the larger houses of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries had been so consistently depreciated from all quarters that they had become almost completely emptied of meaning. They resembled ‘hotels or hydros rather than private residences,’ wrote one correspondent to *The Times* ... Another writer condemned as ‘foolish’ the idea that because these buildings are old, they are necessarily beautiful ... Clough Williams-Ellis, in calling for preservation of the ‘honest-to-God stately homes of England’, stressed the need to cut them off in the public mind from ‘the considerable tail of merely large or pretentious houses’. G. M. Trevelyan granted that an empty palace was ‘a somewhat melancholy affair’, difficult to insinuate into the public’s affection.¹³⁶

The *Irish Times* seemed to ignore the fact that the government could find no use for Hazelwood, no one would buy it, and even the local people were satisfied that it should be demolished as they could not see that it could serve any purpose. As such, the article concluded despairingly that, owing to local apathy: ‘within the next couple of months a historic old mansion in one of the loveliest settings in Ireland, ideally situated for a hotel –

¹³⁴ Ibid.

¹³⁵ Ibid.

¹³⁶ Mandler, *The fall and rise of the stately home*, pp 254–5.

similar mansions in much less attractive surroundings have made very successful hotels – will be pulled down and carried away brick by brick’.¹³⁷

The paper also devoted its ‘Irishman’s Diary’ section to the topic. An indication that the *Irish Times* believed what they had reported as local indifference to the fate of the house was to some extent based on a prejudice towards the property because of its associations with landlordism was evident in this column which stated: ‘the Wynnes may have been planters. In fact, they were: for the first of them came across to Ireland with King William and took part in the Battle of the Boyne. But what does that matter?’¹³⁸ The next section was addressed directly to the Minister for Lands, Seán Moylan, and read: ‘surely, Mr Moylan, this act of consummate vandalism cannot be allowed to happen ... Will you allow such a house as Hazelwood to be demolished – no matter how much lead the vandals will find on the roof?’¹³⁹ The diarist claimed: ‘there are many uses to which such a house could be put. One, may I suggest, is to establish it as a youth hostel, for it is in almost ideal surroundings. The Tourist Association could find a use for it. It could be made into a convalescent home for children – anything but demolished!’¹⁴⁰ In an attempt to urge the minister to consider Ireland’s reputation internationally in terms of cultural heritage, the diarist wrote:

If this little country of ours is ever to mean anything in the world of culture and art ... vandalism of all kinds must be extirpated. Yeats’s *Lake Isle of Inisfree* is little more than a stone’s throw from Hazelwood. He would turn in his lonely grave if he knew the fate that is being prepared for one of the finest houses of its kind in Ireland.¹⁴¹

However, all were not in agreement with this paper’s stance and four days later a letter to the editor of the *Irish Times*, signed ‘Oliver Cromwell’, Dublin, portrayed a different view of the situation. It began:

¹³⁷ *I.T.*, 12 Jan. 1946.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*

At the auction on [22] January, Hazelwood House will be ‘knocked down’ (!) to a demolition contractor for a comparatively small sum. The value of the arising useful materials is largely offset by the heavy expense involved in demolishing and removing many hundreds of tons of rubble and masonry. Now, Mr. Editor, time and again you have paid ‘lip service and mouth honour’ to private enterprise. Here is an excellent opportunity of putting your principles into practice. If you, sir, Mr Robinson, Mr Robertson, and all the other art connoisseurs put your heads and your spare cash together and approach the Land Commission to withdraw its demolition clause from the auction, then ‘Art Connoisseurs Unlimited’ will be able to outbid the ‘vandals’ and so preserve for ever a historic monument of Ireland’s struggle for freedom! Even if you fail with Hazelwood House, there are scores of similar mansions with similar historic associations all over the country waiting to be saved. And, if they are the wonderful adaptable structures you make them out to be, they will be a great money-making investment, apart from the praise-worthy cause of preserving good examples of architecture.¹⁴²

The letter was written in this sarcastic tone throughout. Nonetheless, in the next paragraph ‘Cromwell’ did not limit his negative views to the subtleties of irony and stated: ‘unfortunately, one must not allow an enthusiasm for art preservation to warp one’s judgment of the practical uses of these whited sepulchers’.¹⁴³ The next remark, however, is where the letter becomes particularly interesting and is presumably why the cutting was contained in the O.P.W.’s files on old mansions. It appears from all the signatures at the side of this clipping that all important officers and clerks in the department saw the extract. Written on the clipping was the question, ‘a Minister of State?’, motivated by the next section of the letter which read:

As one who has taken pleasure in ordering the entire destruction of scores of these large, neglected mansions and castles, may I inform you that, however suitable these buildings may be for museums, they are absolutely useless from a utility point of view. If you could have obtained the services of a few thousand prisoners from Belsen or some other continental slave camp, it might have been feasible, but in this land of acute domestic shortage, these mansions are useless.¹⁴⁴

While he did admit that it was true that they could be renovated and converted, ‘the outlay would be excessive and the result far from satisfactory. Far better to start afresh when

¹⁴² *I.T.*, 16 Jan. 1946 (N.A.I., O.P.W. files, F94/574/1).

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

materials are available and give some promising young architect an opportunity of designing a building to suit its particular purpose, to be labour-saving, to please the eye, and to fit in with the surrounding countryside'.¹⁴⁵ This section is most revealing as one would assume, as the O.P.W. evidently did, that if the writer of this letter was one who had ordered the demolition of scores of historic houses then it was must have been the Minister for Lands, Moylan, who had been directly addressed in the 'Irishman's Diary' section of the paper a few days previously. If this was the case, it was evidently not good practice for the minister to address the issue with so little cover of identity in a virulent and ironic letter to a national paper, which did not justify governmental decisions in reasonable terms, but instead chose to reveal the fact that he took pleasure in ordering the destruction of mansions. He concluded that it was too late to talk about saving the Irish country house because:

from the moment the Irish Land Commission decided to split up large estates and ranches into small holdings, the Irish mansion was doomed. That was the time for preservation action to be taken, not now when this country's building trade is practically at a standstill through lack of timber, and will be for the next two years. All through the emergency there were no imports of seasoned timber, and native timber was only suitable for certain types of work. The timber, slates, lead and fittings, which were salvaged from mansions were immediately put into use, and numbers of urgent factory extensions and commercial buildings owe their presence to mansion demolition activity. It is interesting that there are people who wax indignant over the destruction of a useless empty country mansion with one hundred rooms, but remain complacent about some of our town 'mansions' with ten persons living in each room.¹⁴⁶

This comparison was not misplaced as the discussion of the slum tenements of Georgian Dublin at the beginning of this chapter has shown.

On 18 January the *Evening Mail* reported that the sale by the Land Commission of Hazelwood had been cancelled. The paper highlighted how the original advertisement for sale had 'pointed out that there was a high proportion of lead in the roof, and stipulated, on

¹⁴⁵ Ibid.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid.

the instructions of the Land Commission, that the purchaser “shall demolish the building and remove all materials, clear and level the site”.¹⁴⁷ However the *Evening Mail* claimed that Hazelwood House was ‘one of the finest mansions in Ireland’ and added their belief that the public were concerned, reporting: ‘since the advertisement appeared, people all over the country have been asking why this fine historic house should be demolished, and why the government could not find some use for it as an hospital or an hotel’.¹⁴⁸

Despite the cancellation of sale pending the investigation of tentative offers for purchase which had been made to the Land Commission,¹⁴⁹ debate continued to take place over the subject in letters to the editor of the *Irish Times*. Hubert Butler, writer, essayist, and himself a member of the Protestant population of Southern Ireland, argued in a letter to the paper that in more populous countries these houses were used by a National Trust or converted into museums, rest homes or youth hostels.¹⁵⁰ However, Ireland had not the public to support these solutions. Nonetheless, he suggested the houses might allow for several different uses simultaneously.¹⁵¹ In this respect he referenced the preservation of Temple Newsam, Yorkshire, although he realised such a project in Ireland would have to adapt to a smaller population and resources and would need to be associated with other similar projects. He described how Temple Newsam was now more alive than ever and in the summer swarming with interested visitors.¹⁵² Yet, in reality, finding viable uses for these houses proved difficult in England too. In contrast, another writer believed: ‘the responsibility for the preservation of Anglo-Irish historic houses rests primarily with the Anglo-Irish. They do not, in Éire, appear to take it very seriously’.¹⁵³ While this statement certainly bears traces of a

¹⁴⁷ *Evening Mail*, 18 Jan. 1946.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁹ *I.T.*, 19 Jan. 1946.

¹⁵⁰ For more on Butler, see Robert Tobin, *The minority voice: Hubert Butler and southern Irish Protestantism, 1900–1991* (Oxford, 2012).

¹⁵¹ *I.T.*, 21 Jan. 1946.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*

nativist prejudice, there is perhaps something in the fact that it is rarely addressed that the owners of many of these properties, the subject of so much political and public discussion, had often sold their properties voluntarily to the Land Commission or demolition squads or abandoned them completely to their fate, something Moylan stressed above. Although some may have done so reluctantly, given the amount abandoned it must also be the case that many others left the new state by choice and were unconcerned with what fate befell the house after their departure. The survival of the Big House had, nonetheless, become difficult, with little or no land to keep the houses viable and servants increasingly difficult to obtain, to say nothing of the rates and taxes which were driving owners themselves to pull the roofs off their houses and abandon them to ruin. In some cases too, gambling debts or ostentatious living had also left a legacy of ancestral debt from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries that could no longer be fed by the house and estate. Hazelwood House, however, was one of the lucky ones and was not demolished at this time. Instead it was bought in 1947 by the Department of Health for use as a psychiatric hospital, before again being turned to a new use in 1969 when purchased by an Italian business group, SNIA, proving that as a structure it could be adapted, although in later years its historical integrity was severely compromised.

Conclusion

The Fianna Fáil government under Éamon de Valera who succeeded to power in 1932 was undoubtedly more protectionist and republican than its predecessor, Cumann na nGaedheal, and less conciliatory toward the British government and any remains of their authority or representatives in Ireland. They were also less concerned with the protection of heritage and no act was passed with the aim of heritage protection during this period. Furthermore, while Muckross estate was acquired, primarily for the amenity value of its parkland, no other Big House was procured as a national monument. The 1933 Land Act continued, and in many cases completed, the division of land from great estates to former tenants and the incumbent

destruction, isolation or sale of the associated Big Houses. These houses were also being abandoned during this period because of the expense of rates and taxes imposed by the government – although primarily inherited from the British administration – or simply the apathy of owners themselves. Big Houses starkly neglected and going to ruin in the Irish countryside began to stir public consciousness for the first time in the 1940s and arguments began to be voiced in the media and in the Oireachtas that the government should acquire these houses to put them to various uses as schools, hospitals or sanatoria. The houses, emptied of their owners, were now seen by the public to be acceptable to adopt as part of the Irish government's concern, if they could be of some practical use. The government responded to this pressure by commissioning a report into their possible usefulness to the state; however, no government department concluded that they could be adapted for such purposes and so the government could not justifiably act on the emphatic results of this report, even if the report gave them what they wanted to hear. Nevertheless, their policies did not make it any easier for houses not to reach the point of abandon either. In fact, during this period owners found their financial position even more perilous, while ironically their houses gained value for the first time in years for their salvaged materials during and after the Emergency, so that destruction and disuse became the fate of many Big Houses at this time.

Hazelwood embodies several of the difficulties facing the Big House in this period. It went up for sale for demolition in 1946 when many such houses were being put on the market. Unlike the 1920s and 30s, by the 1940s, particularly during and after the Emergency, there was a ready market for their lead and other salvage. This material had helped to build factories and roads, for example, in the country when raw materials were in short supply.¹⁵⁴ Furthermore, there was little public interest in saving Hazelwood from demolition. It was primarily the *Irish Times*, accompanied by those from the landed class or aesthetes such as

¹⁵⁴ For example, the rubble from Tubberdaly House and Ballylin House, both county Offaly, was used to build power stations at Rhode and Ferbane, county Offaly, respectively.

Hubert Butler, who led calls for its preservation. Even so, these appeals realistically proposed that Hazelwood could only survive if put to alternative use as a youth hostel, school or TB sanatorium. In spite of this, the government's conclusive report into the usefulness of such properties was echoed in Moylan's statement that they were primarily unsuited to such purposes. While this may have been true in many cases, depending on the condition of the house on sale, Hazelwood proved in its use thereafter that it was at least possible to adapt these houses to other uses, although their historical integrity was, in most conversions, compromised. Nonetheless, use was often the only salvation for the many houses that were pouring onto the market by the 1950s when governments were unwilling to preserve them on their own merits, and no substantial section of the public was pressurising them to do so. The complexities behind this governmental attitude will be examined in the next chapter.

Chapter Three

The Office of Public Works and the Big House, 1930–60

The Board of Works, established by an act of parliament passed in 1831, continued to carry out its functions after independence. Throughout this time the office was called either the Office of Public Works or the Board of Works before eventually the former (hereafter the O.P.W.) took precedence in government documents and official title.¹ The office primarily functioned under legislation from the previous administration until the Saorstát government passed the 1930 National Monuments Act. An examination of the O.P.W. needs to be addressed on its own and in detail as the only body with a specific responsibility and mandate to act in relation to monuments it deemed eligible for preservation under this act. This is further necessary because the office appears for most of the period to have worked on the issue of national monuments and historic houses relatively independently of government ministers with civil servants, staff and the Inspector of National Monuments the most important figures in relation to decisions and action, while changing ministers were rarely mentioned. This was not least because this was not an area where any government was particularly concerned or sought to make its mark, since it was never an ‘election issue’ and always languished behind more pressing social concerns in terms of interest and funding. The O.P.W.’s interpretation and implementation of this 1930 act throughout the period from 1930–60 will be examined in this chapter to assess what their attitudes towards Big Houses were, whether they deemed them worthy of preservation, the reasons behind their decisions and how this impacted on both their actions and the fate of Big Houses brought to their

¹ The National Archives have also acknowledged this difficulty, noting: ‘the exact original title of the Office of Public Works is obscure. It has been known as the Office of Public Works, the Board of Works and the Board of Public Works. All of these titles have appeared on letter-heads and registration stamps from 1830’. Rena Lohan, ‘The archives of the Office of Public Works and their value as a source for local history’, available at: The National Archives, http://www.nationalarchives.ie/topics/OPW/LH_archives.html [date accessed: 8 Apr. 2013].

attention during this period. A case study of Dunsandle House, county Galway, will examine how the O.P.W.'s policies influenced their action in an individual case.

I

What powers had the O.P.W. to preserve Big Houses in this period? Their primary means was under the National Monuments Act 1930 which made provision 'for the protection and preservation of national monuments and for the preservation of archaeological objects in Saorstát Éireann'.² For the purposes of this act, a national monument was defined as a monument or its remains 'the preservation of which is a matter of national importance by reason of the historical, architectural, traditional, artistic, or archaeological interest attaching thereto'.³ The 1930 act also established the National Monuments Advisory Council (hereafter the N.M.A.C.) for giving advice and assistance to the commissioners in relation to the enactment of this legislation, including the Keeper of Irish Antiquities at the National Museum and an officer of the Commissioners of Public Works, as well as other nominated members.

It needs to be remembered that the O.P.W. was not specifically charged with the preservation of historic buildings or more particularly Big Houses; it was their interpretation of the National Monuments Act which could have made this a possibility for them. In fact no government body had specific responsibility for preserving these buildings which frequently fell through the cracks between the duties of departments and organisations. The O.P.W. was the office in the best possible position to do so, but this was dependent on their officers' interpretation of their own powers under legislation, their brief and remit and also the limitations imposed on them by their resources of both personnel and finance. Furthermore,

² *National Monuments Act, 1930. An act to make provision for the protection and preservation of national monuments and for the preservation of archaeological objects in Saorstát Éireann and to make provision for other matters connected with the matters aforesaid* (26 Feb. 1930).

³ *Ibid.*

the O.P.W. was a state body answerable to government and this may also have influenced their attitude or freedom to act on this issue, particularly in relation to budget.

In 1953 the *Irish Independent* drew attention to this gap in terms of responsibility or power to act in relation to the protection of the Big House and historic buildings generally. Its article examined whether any particular body was ‘charged with the sole responsibility of maintaining or preserving for the nation buildings of historical value’.⁴ Reportedly there were at least four bodies with some responsibilities in relation to historical buildings, namely: Bord Fáilte, the Land Commission, the Board of Works and An Taisce, the embryonic National Trust for Ireland which had been founded in 1948. The *Irish Independent* believed that the functions of all of these bodies in relation to historic buildings preservation lacked definition ‘with the result that there is some confusion as to the ultimate responsibility for the preservation of places such as the Henry Grattan house’, Tinnehinch, which had recently been partially demolished.⁵ They explained that a section of the Tourist Act under which Bord Fáilte had been set up the previous year had empowered the board to protect and maintain national monuments and historic buildings, sites and shrines and places of scenic or historical interest to the public. However, despite this, a spokesman for Bord Fáilte was unable to say whether the interpretation of this section was wide enough to permit them to acquire and preserve buildings, such as Tinnehinch, which were in danger of destruction and ‘would be a total loss to the nation’.⁶ All Bord Fáilte had been enabled to do so far was to provide amenities at places like Newgrange. The Commissioners of Public Works had a statutory responsibility for the preservation and maintenance of what were described as ‘scheduled national monuments which were of first importance historically as ancient ruins’.⁷ However, the paper emphasised: ‘they have no function or responsibility in the acquisition of

⁴ *Irish Independent*, 20 Oct. 1953

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*

historical buildings'.⁸ On the other hand, from time to time various properties with land attached could be acquired compulsorily or otherwise by the Land Commission, but not for historical reasons. Furthermore, the report emphasised: 'neither is it obliged to preserve any building of a historical character which it acquires; and not infrequently such buildings are disposed of in other ways. Some have gone to the forestry department and others to the Department of Agriculture. Others have been demolished, the permission of the local authority having been first obtained'.⁹ In the view of the *Irish Independent*, the only one of the four bodies mentioned which had any clearly defined functions and responsibilities in this area was An Taisce, whose memorandum of incorporation as a limited company entitled it 'to acquire by gift, purchase or grant, any lands, buildings or property of value to the nation for their historical associations or natural beauty'.¹⁰ It was also entitled to protect and improve such properties. However, An Taisce was little more than advisory in capacity as it had no funding from government to exercise its powers, unlike the English National Trust which had wide powers, government recognition and financial assistance. In contrast, An Taisce had to depend on 'the support of its members, the interest of the public, and the goodwill of local authorities: but it has never received any official recognition'.¹¹

II

As the previous chapter has documented, when public concern began to be raised in the 1940s, the interested members of the public saw it as the government's responsibility to act in relation to the preservation of Big Houses. More specifically it was thought the duty of the O.P.W., to whom such concerns were primarily addressed by members of the public or

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

forwarded to by other government departments, emphasising that the latter also saw this issue as one the O.P.W. could or should address.

Around this time the possibility for the O.P.W.'s preservation of Tinnehinch House, county Wicklow arose. In January 1943 Allen and Townsend chartered surveyors wrote to the O.P.W. to inform them that they were instructed to offer for sale Tinnehinch, the residence of the late Sir Henry Grattan Bellew, which comprised a mansion house and lands presented by the nation to Grattan. They noted that the buildings were in poor condition but wrote that before offering the property elsewhere, they wondered if Leask's department or the government would be interested in the property.¹² In response, Leask, the Inspector of National Monuments, wrote to division C of the O.P.W. stating that, apart from the historic association of the house with Grattan, he did not see that the place had any special interest from the national monuments point of view.¹³ Division C of the O.P.W. was principally the drainage division although, judging by this correspondence, staff of this division were also involved with the issue of national monuments. In Leask's opinion, Tinnehinch house was 'not particularly distinguished', adding: 'it is not one of the great Georgian mansions for which the country is remarkable. The house does not appear to be one which could be treated as a national monument'.¹⁴ In March the surveyors were informed that they were not interested¹⁵ and by July the *Irish Independent* reported that Tinnehinch had been bought in trust by Messrs. Hardman and Sons.¹⁶ Ten years later it was partially demolished by its owners without permission.

¹² Allen & Townsend chartered surveyors to H. G. Leask, 13 Jan. 1943 (National Archives of Ireland, O.P.W. files, F94/544/1).

¹³ Note from H. G. Leask to division C, O.P.W., 14 Jan. 1943 (N.A.I., O.P.W. files, F94/544/1).

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ O.P.W. to Messrs. Allen & Townsend, 3 Mar. 1943 (N.A.I., O.P.W. files, F94/544/1).

¹⁶ *Irish Independent*, 19 July 1943.

As a result of the frequency of such cases, in 1945 H. G. Leask and J. Rafferty, joint honorary secretaries of the N.M.A.C., wrote to the O.P.W. to say that the council had discussed:

the wholesale demolition of 18th and 19th century mansions which has taken place in recent years. These houses represent an important phase in the country's politico-social and cultural history and the council deplores the fact that a large number of them have been destroyed without any records of their features having been made.¹⁷

They went on to say that while the council was of the opinion that, in the absence of special legislation, there was no effective method of taking preventative action in cases of threatened destruction, they considered that 'in the cases where such houses are vested in or under the control of the Land Commission that that department might be asked to give notice of intended demolitions in order to give an opportunity for having surveys and records of any which may possess features of artistic interest'¹⁸ and they requested this be brought to the attention of the Land Commission. The O.P.W. was willing to enquire into the feasibility of this suggestion and on 12 April 1945 the O.P.W. wrote to the Land Commission enquiring if they would comply.¹⁹ The Department of Lands replied that they would 'in future give them notice of any demolition of 18th and 19th century mansions contemplated by the department'.²⁰ This illustrates that the Land Commission was willing to agree with such a request to create a record of these mansions, even though it would presumably delay its staff's plans or work on the demolition or sale of the structures on its hands.

They very quickly lived up to their promises and on 3 May 1945 Karl L. Schorman of the forestry division of the Department of Lands wrote to the N.M.A.C to inform them that

¹⁷ H. G. Leask and J. Rafferty, joint honorary secretaries of the N.M.A.C., to the secretary of the O.P.W., 26 Mar. 1945 (N.A.I., O.P.W. files, F94/574/1).

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ W. J. Veale, a/s secretary of the O.P.W. to the secretary of the Land Commission, 12 Apr. 1945 (N.A.I., O.P.W. files, F94/574/1).

²⁰ [D. F.] Nally, secretary of the Department of Lands to the secretary of the O.P.W., 25 Apr. 1945 (N.A.I., O.P.W. files, F94/574/1).

after consultation with the Department of Local Government and Public Health, the department proposed to ‘pull down, with a view to the sale of the materials, the mansion known as Jenkinstown House, county Kilkenny’.²¹ He described how the building was, up to a recent date, in the occupation of the military authorities and was ‘generally in a very bad state of repair’.²² This house was only one of many which had been occupied by the military during the Emergency, including Muckross House, county Kerry, mentioned in chapter one. An attempt had been made in 1940 to dispose of the building and about twenty acres of adjoining land, but no suitable offers were received.²³ It appears from this that the Land Commission was not simply jumping to decisions over demolishing these properties. When it came to them, the commission had attempted to sell it, though with very little acreage adjoining it to make it viable. Only when this was unsuccessful and after consultation with the Department of Local Government and Public Health, who did not propose any use for it, was a decision made to pull it down. However the Land Commission first complied with their agreement to inform the N.M.A.C. so that they could make a record of it.²⁴

Leask was again influential in deciding on the O.P.W.’s actions in this case. On 8 May 1945 he explained to division C that as far as he could ascertain Jenkinstown was ‘not a “Georgian” (18th century) house but modern, not older than the early part of last century ... I greatly doubt if it contains any features worth recording but it would be well to be quite definite on this before replying to the Department of Lands or taking any steps about record work’.²⁵ He recommended that if there was nothing known about the house at O.P.W. headquarters, then the assistant architect might visit it when he was next in Kilkenny.²⁶ The assistant architect did inspect Jenkinstown House, but only from the outside, since the day he

²¹ K. L. Schorman of the Department of Lands to the N.M.A.C., 3 May 1945 (N.A.I., O.P.W. files, F94/574/1).

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ H. G. Leask internal note to division C, O.P.W., 8 May 1945 (N.A.I., O.P.W. files, F94/574/1).

²⁶ Ibid.

visited it was locked. As a result of his report, and unsurprisingly, the N.M.A.C. wrote to the Department of Lands (forestry division) on 15 June to inform them that they did not intend to take steps to even make a survey of Jenkinstown House.²⁷

In the same year J. Darby of the Department of Lands informed the N.M.A.C. that the department had under consideration the question of the demolition of a mansion house known as Beaufield House, on state forest lands near Clonegal, county Wexford.²⁸ When the opportunity to inspect or record Beaufield House was offered to the O.P.W., Leask was again the one who wrote to division C on the subject. He said that as a result of local enquiries ‘addressed to a qualified observer I have ascertained that the only objects of architectural interest in the house are some mantelpieces. These might be acquired and preserved locally by interested persons’.²⁹ He then suitably replied on behalf of the N.M.A.C.³⁰ This is revealing as it appears that neither the O.P.W. nor the N.M.A.C. considered some of these houses worth inspecting, even when the Department of Lands informed them they were available if they wanted simply to make a record of them.

In another case, on 16 March 1954 the Land Commission wrote to the O.P.W. to say that they had for sale, on a Land Commission owned estate in Roscommon, Mote Park House with ‘a suitable area of accommodation land if required’.³¹ They described the mansion as ‘an imposing structure, in an excellent state of repair and would appear to be suitable for use as a hospital, sanatorium, school, etc.’³² The commission enquired if the O.P.W. would be interested in the purchase of the property and declared that if they did not receive a reply in

²⁷ H. G. L. and J. R. joint honorary secretaries of the N.M.A.C. to the secretary of the Department of Lands (forestry division), 15 June 1945 (N.A.I., O.P.W. files, F94/574/1).

²⁸ J. Darby, Department of Lands, to the secretary of the N.M.A.C., 10 May 1945 (N.A.I., O.P.W. files, F94/574/1).

²⁹ H. G. Leask handwritten note to division C, O.P.W., 17 May 1945 on letter from J. Darby, Department of Lands to the N.M.A.C., 10 May 1945 (N.A.I., O.P.W. files, F94/574/1).

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ The Land Commission to the O.P.W., 16 Mar. 1954 (N.A.I., O.P.W. files, F94/1084/1/57).

³² *Ibid.*

twenty-one days they would assume they did not require the property and ‘other arrangements for its disposal will be made’.³³ Ten days later the O.P.W. replied briefly to say that the premises were not required by them, suggesting both in the actual reply and its brevity that no interest was shown by the O.P.W. in the property, despite the willingness of the Land Commission to let them know of it for their further information and the commission’s positive comments about its repair and possible use.³⁴ Three years later the Land Commission contacted the O.P.W. again to inform them that efforts which had been made by the commission ‘to sell the building with certain accommodation lands as a residential holding’, their first preference, had failed and they then proposed to sell the building for demolition. This was only considered when they could not sell the house as a residence and the O.P.W. was not interested in maintaining it. Furthermore, it was not in the Land Commission’s remit or budget to have been able to decide to keep and preserve this house; the O.P.W. was the only department which could do so and, if it refused, the commission was in no position but to sell or, if that proved impossible, demolish. However, even after the O.P.W.’s previous brief response the Land Commission did not demolish without thought and its officer wrote again to the O.P.W. stating:

before any decision is taken in the matter the Land Commission will be glad to know whether the building is of any historical or architectural importance and if so whether you are interested in preserving the building, either as a complete structure or as a roofless shell and whether you would be prepared to take over the building and its site at a nominal sum.³⁵

On 5 November a member of the O.P.W. requested a report from the Inspector of National Monuments on the matter.³⁶ Having received no reply at all from a seemingly unconcerned O.P.W., on 30 November the Land Commission wrote again to them requesting an early

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ O.P.W. to the Land Commission, 26 Mar. 1954 (N.A.I., O.P.W. files, F94/1084/1/57).

³⁵ The Land Commission to the O.P.W., 26 Oct. 1957 (N.A.I., O.P.W. files, F94/1084/1/57).

³⁶ Handwritten note addressed to the Inspector of National Monuments, 5 Nov. 1957 (N.A.I., O.P.W. files, F94/1084/1/57).

reply and reminding them of their previous letters; they did so again in December.³⁷ As a result the O.P.W. sent a reminder to the inspector on 5 December, 2 January and 28 January 1958 asking for his report.³⁸ Nonetheless, the Land Commission was obliged to send a further letter to the O.P.W. on 27 January asking that they deal with the matter urgently.³⁹ The O.P.W. finally replied on 10 February that their Inspector of National Monuments had not yet found it possible to inspect the property to assess if it would be eligible for preservation as a national monument under the 1930 act, but they hoped this would be arranged shortly and would write when it had been.⁴⁰ Their inspector, Leask, was again behind the refusal to recognise Mote Park House as a national monument as when he finally carried out his report he described the house as a ‘large, but not very attractive stone mansion of mid nineteenth-century appearance’.⁴¹ It did not merit the effort of an interior inspection for him and he concluded: ‘there does not appear to be anything worthy of consideration for state care’.⁴² Subsequently the O.P.W. informed the Land Commission: ‘we do not consider that the house ... is of sufficient interest to merit preservation by the state as a national monument’.⁴³ Following this the Land Commission went ahead with arranging for the disposal of the property and on 6 September 1958 the *Irish Independent* ran an advertisement by the Land Commission announcing the sale by tender of Mote Park.⁴⁴ Two options were listed: the first was ‘Mote Park house, steward’s house, out-offices and 112 acres of accommodation lands; the second was ‘alternatively, Mote Park House and some of the buildings for demolition (in lots)’.⁴⁵ Mote Park House was sold under this second option and demolished in 1958,

³⁷ The Land Commission to the O.P.W., 30 Nov. 1957; 31 Dec. 1957 (N.A.I., O.P.W. files, F94/1084/1/57).

³⁸ Handwritten note addressed to the Inspector of National Monuments, 5 Dec. 1957; 2 Jan. 1958; 28 Jan. 1958 (N.A.I., O.P.W. files, F94/1084/1/57).

³⁹ The Land Commission to the O.P.W., 27 Jan. 1958 (N.A.I., O.P.W. files, F94/1084/1/57).

⁴⁰ O.P.W. to the Land Commission, 10 Feb. 1958 (N.A.I., O.P.W. files, F94/1084/1/57).

⁴¹ Handwritten note in O.P.W. files signed H. G., entitled: ‘Mote Park, county Roscommon’, 27 Feb. 1958 (N.A.I., O.P.W. files, F94/1084/1/57).

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ O.P.W. to the Land Commission, 8 Mar. 1958 (N.A.I., O.P.W. files, F94/1084/1/57).

⁴⁴ *Irish Independent*, 6 Sept. 1958.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

although it is clear from the evidence here that this was not the preference of the Land Commission who first enquired if the house could be saved.

III

While these cases illustrate, for the most part, that the O.P.W. did not preserve Big Houses that were in danger of demolition or destruction throughout this period, the motivations behind these refusals must be examined. Apart from individual cases, Leask, as Inspector of National Monuments, was influential in forming O.P.W. opinion and action on this issue more generally.

Concern from members of the public at the increasing numbers of Big Houses being destroyed in the countryside was evident from as early as 1943 when Limerick city executive wrote to the Board of Works. Their executive 'had recently under discussion the destruction and demolition of old mansions throughout the country' and requested that 'all those old mansions that are not falling down should be preserved for the use of the nation'.⁴⁶ On receipt of this, Leask wrote to division C explaining that the letter gave 'expression to a very general feeling that the gradual disappearance, for one cause or another, of large country mansions in Ireland is to be deplored and that steps should be taken to preserve such structures'.⁴⁷ He argued that there was no doubt that this feeling existed and that it was justified to some degree by the 'comparatively rapid destruction which has gone on during the last thirty years'.⁴⁸ The Casino in Marino, Clontarf, was the only eighteenth-century building thus far

⁴⁶ [Proinnsias Ó Udéada] Honorary secretary of Limerick city executive to the secretary of the Board of Works, 9 Oct. 1943 (N.A.I., O.P.W. files, F94/574/1).

⁴⁷ H. G. Leask, Inspector of National Monuments, to division C, O.P.W., 18 Oct. 1943 (N.A.I., O.P.W. files, F94/574/1).

⁴⁸ Ibid.

maintained as a museum in itself, but in Leask's opinion it was not impossible that other cases may arise in the future.⁴⁹

However, while he admitted there had been increasing destruction of Big Houses which justified this concern, he expressed doubt whether its advocates had taken into account the expense and other considerations which would be involved in any such scheme.⁵⁰ He contended that as the owners of such houses knew, the maintenance charges on large eighteenth-century houses were considerable and would be even more so in a building not regularly occupied. Furthermore, there would also be the costs of care, for example, salaries of caretakers, upkeep of grounds and gardens, which he believed were not likely in most cases to be offset by income from visitors' fees.⁵¹ The crucial consideration of expense also spurred his second reason why most of these Big Houses could not be preserved; the scale of costs meant that only a house of exceptional merit would warrant the cost of its preservation. His argument was that: 'while these charges might be quite justified in the case of an 18th century mansion of special architectural interest taken over and maintained as a national monument, this would hardly be so in the average case'.⁵² He further opined that there was a third restriction on their powers to preserve them, as any such property would be subject to a limitation imposed by section five of the National Monuments Act, which prevented the use of such a monument as a dwelling, except by a caretaker and his family. Therefore the houses could not be maintained as historic homes with their families intact under the National Monuments Act, but could only be preserved uninhabited, as museum pieces.⁵³ He concluded

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid.

that the reply to Limerick executive council should state that the commissioners had not the powers required to put such a comprehensive proposal into effect and such a letter was sent.⁵⁴

At this time Leask took the opportunity to inform division C that the *Irish Times* had recently enquired if he knew anything:

of the operations of a syndicate at present engaged, through an agent not named, in buying up or obtaining options on old mansions with the object of demolishing them and selling or exporting for sale such fittings as panelling, mantel-pieces, doors, etc. I was then and still am quite without any information on the subject other than that provided by the query ... it suggests that the danger to old mansions has greatly increased of late.⁵⁵

This was because they had become particularly valuable during the Emergency in Ireland, 1939–45, when the mansions became useful for their materials which could be salvaged from demolition, as discussed in the previous chapter. In Leask's view, any action which would put a stop to 'such needless spoliation for purposes of private gain' was worthy of consideration, although he did not think that the National Monuments Act could be used, except perhaps in some exceptional circumstances, suggesting once again its limits in this regard, or at least the limited way in which the O.P.W. interpreted and enforced it.⁵⁶ Therefore no action was taken by the O.P.W. on these claims, nor was there any investigation as to the truth or scale of the issue.

In the same year, 1943, in a letter from the Irish Tourist Board which was forwarded to the O.P.W. by the Department of Industry and Commerce, the chairman, J. P. O'Brien, wrote that he wanted to submit, on behalf of the board, 'that the demolition of large mansions

⁵⁴ Handwritten notes detailing reply to be sent, approval given and letter acknowledged by Limerick executive council on 1 Nov. 1943 (N.A.I., O.P.W. files, F94/574/1).

⁵⁵ H. G. Leask handwritten note to division C, O.P.W., 31 Dec. 1943 (N.A.I., O.P.W. files, F94/574/1).

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

should be forbidden except under permit from the Department of Supplies'.⁵⁷ The Department of Supplies had come into existence in 1939 for the duration of the period of the Second World War. The board believed the houses should be preserved because they could be of use. O'Brien argued:

My board's interest in the matter is to ensure that no such buildings will be demolished until they have been examined from the point of view of their suitability, either now or after the war, for use as emergency housing; sanatoria or convalescent homes; holiday camps or hotels, or for preservation as historic monuments.⁵⁸

He stressed that a number of houses had already been demolished which, in the opinion of the board, could have been adapted for tourist purposes after the war and would have been worth more to them than their demolition value, although it is evident that this was based on their possible usefulness as buildings, rather than their merit as examples of this specific type of house and the history and style of architecture it represented. The board suggested that it be made necessary to obtain a license from the Department of Supplies before one could demolish a building of £50 valuation or over. O'Brien thought that it should be possible before the issue of licenses to give interested organisations an opportunity to examine the house and, in the event that they found it suitable for some approved purpose, to arrange for their purchase of the property at a figure not less than the demolition value.⁵⁹

With regard to this request, Leask once again released the O.P.W. from the responsibility by suggesting that they could not say whether the Tourist Board's suggestion would be practicable as it was an issue for the Department of Supplies.⁶⁰ On 8 January 1944 division C drafted a reply to the Tourist Board which stressed their reasons for not taking action on this matter. These were mainly based on what they explained were the confines of

⁵⁷ J. P. O'Brien, chairman of the Irish Tourist Board to the secretary of the Department of Supplies, 6 Nov. 1943; forwarded from the Department of Industry and Commerce to the secretary of the O.P.W., 22 Dec. 1943 (N.A.I., O.P.W. files, F94/574/1).

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ H. G. Leask handwritten note to division C, O.P.W., 31 Dec. 1943 (N.A.I., O.P.W. files, F94/574/1).

their functions under the National Monuments Act.⁶¹ They made clear that the act ‘does not permit of the taking over of a building occupied as a dwelling by a person other than a person employed as the caretaker thereof, or the family of that person’.⁶² Furthermore, funds allocated for the preservation of national monuments were limited and only selected examples, therefore, of structures which came under the definition laid down in the act, could be considered for preservation. They concluded: ‘it will be appreciated from the foregoing that the prevention or control of the demolition or destruction of old mansions generally is not a matter in which the powers provided in the National Monuments Act could be invoked’.⁶³ However, a member of the O.P.W. became worried that this draft letter might result in pressure on the O.P.W. to issue preservation orders in unjustified cases. They recommended confining the reply to a statement that it appeared that the buildings referred to in the Irish Tourist Board’s letter were ‘of modern date and construction and would not, save in very exceptional circumstances, be suitable for preservation under the National Monuments Act’.⁶⁴ Again in this case the O.P.W. refused to act on the basis that the buildings were generally not considered old enough by them to be considered national monuments.

On 4 April 1944 public pressure was once more brought to bear on the O.P.W. when a resolution passed by Tipperary Urban District Council was sent to them.⁶⁵ It had unanimously resolved:

that we protect against the facilities given to syndicates and others which enable them to purchase old places of historic interest for the purpose of demolishing same, thereby denuding the countryside of old land marks very dear to the local people and very often enshrouded in their connection with glorious episodes of our former history and that we place on record our appreciation of Muintir na Tíre for rescuing Thomastown Castle from those, who for gain, would desecrate it and destroy the

⁶¹ Draft letter from O.P.W. to Department of Industry and Commerce, Jan. 1944 (N.A.I., O.P.W. files, F94/574/1).

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Signed internal note in reply to division C of the O.P.W.’s handwritten note, 18 Jan. 1944 (N.A.I., O.P.W. files, F94/574/1).

⁶⁵ Town clerk of Tipperary Urban District Council to the O.P.W., 4 Apr. 1944 (N.A.I., O.P.W. files, F94/574/1).

former home of a great Tipperary family who gave to Ireland the venerable, patriotic and well beloved Fr Theobald Mathew O.F.M. Cap. And that we call on the government of the country once and for all to enact legislation preventing the exploitation of those old sacred places so dear to all true Irishmen.⁶⁶

It must be noted in this case that the association of the castle with Fr Mathew appears to have been the main motivation behind this resolution. Furthermore their concern about syndicates was perhaps not unwarranted as companies, domestic and foreign, may have been buying up Big Houses which were on the market at low prices, demolishing them, and selling the materials for profit. Leask had already been contacted by the *Irish Times* about such a possibility as documented above, but neither he nor the O.P.W. decided that this claim warranted investigation or action.⁶⁷

On 12 April Leask wrote a note on the bottom of this letter to division C to say that he did not see that the O.P.W. could take any action on the resolution and that it would involve legislation of a very comprehensive character which would apply to structures outside the scope of the National Monuments Act.⁶⁸ Once again the primary reason for inaction was that Leask, on behalf of the O.P.W., appeared to interpret the law very tightly in terms of not stretching their office beyond the strict confines of their functions under the National Monuments Act. A draft reply was then drawn up which stated that the O.P.W.'s interest in such matters was confined to the functions they carried out in accordance with the National Monuments Act, 1930. They were prepared to investigate any specific case brought to their attention of a structure in danger of being demolished, which came within the definition of a national monument as contained in the act. The wording of the resolution, however, 'suggested to them that the "old places" referred to were mansions or houses of comparatively modern date and construction, and these would not, save in very exceptional

⁶⁶ Ibid; Muintir na Tíre is the national association for the promotion of community development in Ireland.

⁶⁷ H. G. Leask handwritten note to division C, O.P.W., 31 Dec. 1943 (N.A.I., O.P.W. files, F94/574/1).

⁶⁸ Handwritten note from H. G. Leask, 12 Apr. 1944 on letter from town clerk of Tipperary Urban District Council to the O.P.W., 4 Apr. 1944 (N.A.I., O.P.W. files, F94/574/1).

circumstances, be suitable for preservation under the act'.⁶⁹ This draft was sent, the resolution acknowledged and the O.P.W. considered no further action needed to be taken.⁷⁰ Again the dating of the buildings appears the most pertinent reason for the O.P.W.'s refusal to get involved in preserving many Big Houses throughout this period. The O.P.W. primarily excluded large houses and mansions from the definition, and hence protection of the National Monuments Act, because of their perceived 'modern' construction. However, ironically, the act was not the Ancient Monuments Act, but the National Monuments Act which specified no date limits, yet the date of construction, a metric undefined by this legislation, was the reason why the O.P.W. refused to include these mansions under the protections of this act.

The rising volume of individual cases of houses in danger did not go unnoticed by the N.M.A.C. and in 1945 H. G. Leask and Joseph Raftery, its joint honorary secretaries, wrote to the O.P.W. that the council:

having had before it the matter of the increasing demolition of country houses and mansions or proposals therefore (four cases having been reported by the Land Commission within recent months in addition to statements in the public press) views the position with alarm and has passed a resolution which we are directed to convey to the commissioners. The resolution is as follows: – 'That the council deeply deplores the destruction of monuments with cultural and historic associations and urgently advises the setting up of a committee representative of the departments of state concerned, the Irish Tourist Board, the architectural associations and learned societies to consider the best means of taking action for the preservation of such monuments'.⁷¹

The council realised that 'much which is valuable may pass away before such a body could be set up (or if set up, become operative) and is of opinion that steps should be taken to have records made of any features of architectural and artistic interest which the buildings referred

⁶⁹ Draft letter from O.P.W. to Tipperary Urban District Council, Apr. 1944 (N.A.I., O.P.W. files, F94/574/1).

⁷⁰ Handwritten O.P.W. internal note, 20 Apr. 1944 (N.A.I., O.P.W. files, F94/574/1).

⁷¹ H. G. Leask and Joseph Raftery, joint honorary secretaries of the N.M.A.C. to the secretary of the O.P.W., 5 Oct. 1945 (N.A.I., O.P.W. files, F94/574/1).

to may possess'.⁷² One suggestion was that an annual sum be provided for a survey of houses or monuments likely to be demolished.⁷³

On the basis of this letter division C wrote to Leask, who had co-signed the letter, requesting his attention to the matter. He was requested to supply particulars of some of the press statements that had been mentioned in the letter and to furnish an estimate of the annual sum which would be needed to cover expenses in giving effect to the council's second resolution. Thirdly the inspector's views generally on the subject matter of both resolutions were sought in so far as they would affect the functions of the commissioners.⁷⁴ In relation to their first query about press attention, the particular case Leask had in mind was Coole Park House, county Galway.⁷⁵ Coole, former home of Lady Gregory, co-founder of the Abbey Theatre, had been demolished in 1941 while in state ownership. He admitted: 'I do not know if the house was of architectural interest but it certainly was a case of destruction without record'.⁷⁶ Cases brought to their attention recently had been Jenkinstown, county Kilkenny, Beaufield, county Wexford, although neither of these had proved of interest, Castledaly, county Galway, which photographs showed to have some interest, and Hazelwood, county Sligo. To illustrate the scale of the problem, he wrote: 'it is of general interest to note as showing how destruction goes on – that of 256 houses of the 18th century listed in 1913 by the Georgian Society 20, to my certain knowledge, and probably a greater number in actual fact, have gone'.⁷⁷ In his opinion, these figures drew attention to a problem:

which, if not immediately a matter for the board, is one that will become so if any 18th century house of major architectural and artistic importance comes up for consideration as a national monument. This is by no means an unlikely contingency. There can be no doubt that the 'big house' problem is a real one or that the lesser

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Handwritten note from division C, O.P.W. to the Inspector of National Monuments, 15 Oct. 1945 (N.A.I., O.P.W. files, F94/574/1).

⁷⁵ H. G. Leask to division C, O.P.W., 30 Oct. 1945 (N.A.I., O.P.W. files, F94/574/1).

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

houses also are part of the national cultural development and that, as such, their disappearance is to be deplored.⁷⁸

The problem was full of difficulties, however, and Leask's view was that the commissioners' function in the present state of the matter could not be more than to transmit the council's resolution to the departments concerned, presumably that of An Taoiseach, Finance and Industry and Commerce.⁷⁹

Leask was placed here in a most unusual position. He was behind the resolution addressed to the O.P.W. from the N.M.A.C. as their joint honorary secretary and also the person advising the O.P.W. as their Inspector of National Monuments that nothing could be done by the O.P.W. about the resolution. His response to the second resolution was that:

the recording of work which may be destroyed – particularly in the interim which is inevitable before any comprehensive scheme could be worked out – is a matter which may be considered as coming within the scope of the Architectural Survey which, though naturally concentrating on work of an earlier period (the vastly more numerous prehistoric, early and medieval remains) endeavours to include all old work of interest.⁸⁰

He concluded that only the suggestion of recording could come within the commissioners' functions.

Based on Leask's advice an O.P.W. departmental minute stated that no action was required on their part in relation to the first resolution, but that a copy might be issued to the Departments of An Taoiseach, Lands, Industry and Commerce and Finance for any action they might consider desirable.⁸¹ Leask had considered that the second resolution might come under the scope of the archaeological survey, the first stage of which was expected to be completed in 1946 when the second or field work stage would begin. The minute noted:

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ O.P.W. departmental minute, undated, unsigned (N.A.I., O.P.W. files, F94/574/1).

It is rather difficult to estimate the number of houses [of the type concerned by the proposal] or monuments likely to be destroyed in, say a year, but on the assumption that the average would be as low as 3 it should not be outside the capabilities of the ... staff to be engaged for the field-work of the archaeological survey to deal with them.⁸²

The minute also noted that the board's local architects could assist in some cases if the board agreed. Nonetheless, it concluded that it was doubtful that the work envisaged could come under the scope of the 1930 National Monuments Act. The O.P.W. appear at times to have used the perceived limits of this act, when convenient, to avoid any work that they would not be legally obliged to cover or houses that they would not have to preserve under its terms, perhaps necessarily so due to the limits of their budget or staff. A draft reply was composed on 5 December. In this the O.P.W. noted that the subject of the preservation of mansions had been raised with them on numerous occasions since October 1943. Their attitude had been that they were only concerned with the matter if any structure qualified for preservation under the National Monuments Act. The internal note recorded that while some of the houses brought to their attention since 1934 may have been of limited interest on politico-social grounds, not one of them had been considered a national monument under the conditions of the act by reason of its 'historical, architectural, traditional, artistic or archaeological interest', thereby clearing the O.P.W. of any responsibility toward them.⁸³

In addition, the O.P.W. was not pleased with the proposal of the council and argued that unless the mansions concerned were national monuments, the council was stretching its terms of reference in raising the matter with the Commissioners of Public Works. However, it is worth questioning to whom could the N.M.A.C. have brought their concerns about these old mansions? No 'body' was officially or specifically concerned with historic houses and so the O.P.W. was the only organisation they could approach and the one which had the greatest

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ O.P.W. internal handwritten note, 5 Dec. 1945 (N.A.I., O.P.W. files, F94/574/1).

possibility of being able to preserve them. The draft suggested a reply to the effect that as the buildings referred to in their first resolution did not appear to be national monuments within that meaning of the act, then the commissioners had no function to perform in respect of them and that the setting up of a committee on the lines they suggested was not a matter for the commissioners. The civil servant dealing with the case thought they might add that the board was not certain there was a necessity for such a committee anyway. In regard to the second proposal, they stated that they did not think that provision of the type suggested, that is, a budget to make a record of the buildings, was appropriate to their vote, but that they were prepared to continue on the basis they had been in recent years by arranging for the examination of any specific cases brought to their notice for possible treatment under the act.⁸⁴ Once again what is evident here is that the O.P.W. took no interest in even pursuing or supporting an investigation into the question of the demolition of these mansions, once they were not obliged to do so by the legislation under which they operated.

IV

Limited financial resources was another, and the most important, factor which influenced the O.P.W.'s reluctance to become involved in the preservation of Big Houses. This is evident in an internal O.P.W. letter of 24 January 1958 to a Mr Cullinane about the present position of a number of monuments which had been recommended for preservation by the National Monuments Advisory Council.⁸⁵ There were some 500 monuments or groups of monuments already in state care for preservation and in 1956 the inspector had reported that some 200 of them were awaiting more or less urgent works. The civil servant wrote:

the figures quoted would appear to indicate that unless the Department of Finance would be prepared to authorise a substantial increase in the field maintenance staff and allot increased funds for the national monuments service, it would be pointless for

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ O.P.W. internal letter to Mr Cullinane, 24 Jan. 1958 (N.A.I., O.P.W. files, F94/1085/1/57).

the commissioners to take on additional liabilities at this stage by way of accepting further monuments for state care, when they already have in their charge some hundreds which are awaiting urgent repair works.⁸⁶

This indicates that there were two principal factors here restricting the O.P.W.'s preservation of Big Houses, namely a lack of funds and staff. While it was admitted that some of the five hundred or so monuments already in state care required little or no maintenance attention, such as earthworks, the majority required periodic attention by field staff to maintain them in a presentable condition. Most of them, scattered throughout the country, could not be maintained properly by two clerks of works. Hence the fact that the acquisition of Big Houses would leave the O.P.W. open to criticism over their maintenance was another reason its officers would not get involved in the issue. The O.P.W. officer therefore stated:

with the money and maintenance staff available it is considered that, numerically, saturation point has been reached. The service is subject to a fair share of publicity from time to time, mostly adverse, and the acceptance of further monuments which may have to remain unattended perhaps for years after being taken in charge, will leave the commissioners open to criticism which would be difficult to counter effectively. It is submitted that it would be preferable to leave monuments unattended and liable to destruction, rather than have them taken into state care and left lying derelict until they can be attended to at some indeterminate time after acceptance.⁸⁷

It was considered, however, that a decision to refuse to accept additional monuments might perhaps be considered too drastic and that there were very many monuments in the country eminently worthy of state care and which would probably be referred to the commissioners for preservation at some future date. In fact, some of the forty-four cases of buildings which had been recommended for preservation were, in their opinion, more important and worthy of state care than several which were already in their charge.⁸⁸ Despite this, it was concluded that it was not unreasonable to submit that in existing conditions a decision be taken either to refuse to accept any further monuments for preservation by the state or, alternatively, of the

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

monuments which may be offered, only those which could be said to be of outstanding merit should be considered, provided that they could be fitted into the inspector's programme of maintenance and repair work within a reasonable period after acceptance.⁸⁹

Apart from their views on various cases brought to their attention, the strongest statement on the O.P.W.'s own general policy and attitude comes from a memorandum from 1 January 1946 written by the chairman of the O.P.W., Joseph Connolly, for the subject of a board conference on old mansions and Big Houses. Even the motivation behind this memorandum is revealing, highlighting that the O.P.W. was seemingly more concerned about answering adverse criticism on this issue, rather than the issue of the disappearance of Big Houses themselves. The first paragraph read:

the whole question of preserving mansions and big houses which, owing to the changes in social conditions and land policy, are no longer required as residences, has been the subject of considerable comment. A great deal of the comment has been ill-informed with the inevitable misrepresentation and charges of neglect by this department.⁹⁰

The chairman criticised a school of thought which 'considers that any house in which anyone ever wrote a play or a poem should be preserved as a place of pilgrimage'.⁹¹ The recent agitation over Coole was cited as an example. While Connolly, an ardent nationalist, acknowledged that perhaps the house at Coole should have been preserved for architectural or other reasons, the arguments which had been made were based not on these reasons, but on Lady Gregory's connection with the literary and theatre movement. Acceding that no-one would deny Lady Gregory's claims to a place of honour in Anglo-Irish literature, he thought

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Chairman of the O.P.W.'s notes for a board conference on old mansions and Big Houses, 1 Jan. 1946 (N.A.I., O.P.W. files, F94/574/1).

⁹¹ Ibid.

it would be stretching it somewhat to suggest that her home should be preserved as a national monument on that account.⁹²

Connolly emphasised that the most important reason that underpinned the O.P.W.'s decisions not to preserve these mansions was excessive cost, writing:

it is quite clear that the majority of the big houses must under modern conditions be demolished for the simple reason that the cost of future maintenance would in most cases be entirely prohibitive. The exceptions are I think where: – (1) The house can be used by the state. (2) The house can be used by a local authority. (3) The house can be used by a religious community. (4) Where the historical or architectural merits of the building are such as to justify the maintenance of the house as a national monument.⁹³

This appears a reasonable conclusion; that a Big House could be preserved if it was fit for use by any private or public body or could be preserved as a national monument. Therefore, the second reason behind the O.P.W.'s reluctance to take on these houses was lack of use for them. Furthermore, he explained: 'there are comparatively few of our people who can afford to maintain them in proper order as residences and of those few a very small number indeed would consider it worth their while to do so'.⁹⁴ His views from this are clear, the life of the house as a sustainable residence was over. If it could not be used, and if not of such considerable historical or architectural interest to merit becoming a protected national monument, then the Big House must be sold or demolished, regardless of sentiment relating to its associations with figures or works.

Discussing their possible use for state purposes he noted that such uses were limited to agricultural colleges or forestry centres, but whether the Department of Agriculture or the forestry branch of the Land Commission would want to add to their number of existing schools was a matter for those departments. Either way the numbers they could use would not seriously affect the overall problem, which was of considerable scale. Furthermore, the

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

suggestion that these residences might be acquired by religious orders was a matter on which there was a definite difference of opinion amongst church authorities. Connolly was equally pessimistic about the possibility of the houses being acquired by local authorities, stating that while in certain cases they might find it possible to use some of these houses either for local offices, vocational schools, or for the activities of the agricultural committee, he did not believe there would be many cases in which they would be found suitable.⁹⁵ The report carried out between 1943 and 1945 by the Department of Local Government and Public Health into possible use by government departments of these mansions discussed in the previous chapter would support the chairman's opinion, since only five out of 325 houses examined were considered suitable for any public purpose.⁹⁶

Nevertheless, the chairman did argue:

Whatever about the ultimate fate of these houses it would, of course, be desirable that either we or some department of state should have full particulars of them before disposal or demolition occurs. In the cases of such residences as have been or may be taken over by the Land Commission it seems to me that it should be possible for their inspectors in the course of their inspections to prepare a survey plan and report on the house which could be passed either to the National Monuments Advisory Council or to the O.P.W.'s inspector who could advise on the ultimate fate of the building.⁹⁷

In addition, regarding the disposal of Big Houses by private owners he could not see that, under existing circumstances, they had any right to intervene and thought: 'no doubt any house of special interest from the historical or architectural point of view would come under our direct notice or be brought to our attention by the National Monuments Advisory Council'.⁹⁸ This is an important point. He highlighted the fact that primarily these Big Houses were private properties and were treated as such by their owners in terms of their care,

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Department of Local Government and Public Health, memorandum for government, 17 May 1945 (N.A.I., Dept. of An Taoiseach files, S13344B).

⁹⁷ Chairman of the O.P.W.'s notes for a board conference on old mansions and Big Houses, 1 Jan. 1946 (N.A.I., O.P.W. files, F94/574/1).

⁹⁸ Ibid.

preservation, use or sale, yet public pressure over specific houses had begun to suggest and even assert that the government had a responsibility to preserve these homes as part of the national built heritage. This draws attention to another important reason why the O.P.W. did not often step in to preserve Big Houses; they believed they had no right to intervene.

The subject of public justifiability for the O.P.W.'s decisions, which was obviously important to the office, was then addressed. Connolly thought it would be desirable, if possible, to make it known to the public generally: 'the real reasons if any for the preservation of such houses and above all the extremely heavy expenditure involved if the houses are to be preserved and maintained. It is quite clear that the public misled by irresponsible and dishonest attacks, has only the vaguest notions of what it is desirable to preserve and all that such preservation involves'.⁹⁹ This suggests that the chairman believed there might not be any reason which would justify the preservation of Big Houses. He thought that the N.M.A.C. would be more helpful if they faced the problem 'realistically' and indicated what, in their opinion, was the extent of the problem, and the houses which should be considered for preservation and why, in order, it seems, to convince the chairman of the O.P.W.¹⁰⁰

V

When Dunsandle House, county Galway, was reported to the O.P.W. as in danger of demolition in June 1954 the O.P.W. was hesitant, because of previous considerations mentioned, to get involved. The case of Dunsandle will be examined in detail here as it was typical of the situation many Big Houses were in at this time. In contrast, unlike most of the cases which came to the attention of the O.P.W. during this period, the discussion within the O.P.W. on the preservation of Dunsandle illustrates the diverse opinions and the subjective

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

nature of many of the decisions taken in such cases given that the 1930 act and the 1954 amendment act were broad in their scope and contained no limitations surrounding the dating of monuments.

The N.M.A.C. had recommended a preservation order for Dunsandle in 1954 and a member of the O.P.W.'s division F staff supported this course, arguing: 'the house is one of the finest late 18th – early 19th century houses in the country and it contains fine plasterwork and fireplaces of the period. The three-part architectural composition of the house is a good example of the finest work of its time'.¹⁰¹ Division F of the O.P.W. was divided into two parts; one named marine and the other miscellaneous. It is presumed that division F (misc.) was involved in this case. As such, a draft preservation order was drawn up for Dunsandle under section 8 (1) of the National Monuments Act, 1930. It read:

where it appears to the Minister for Finance on a report made by the Advisory Council or otherwise that a monument which in the minister's opinion is a national monument is in danger of being or is actually being destroyed, injured or removed, or is falling into decay through neglect, the minister may by order entrust the preservation of such a monument to the Commissioners of Public Works in Ireland.¹⁰²

However, a local commissioner did not recommend the issue of a preservation order as the house was only 140 years old and did 'not appear to be of much historic interest', although he thought an old castle, possibly of Norman origin, on the estate might be.¹⁰³ The furnishings of Dunsandle were sold at an auction in July, while the Land Commission was negotiating for the purchase of the lands, excluding 100 acres and the house, in which they were not interested, given that the Land Commission had no use for such a house. The owner of the property, Major Bowes-Daly, who was then living in South Africa, intended to offer the house for sale together with 100 acres and a member of the O.P.W. believed that this

¹⁰¹ O.P.W. minute to division F, 4 June 1954 (N.A.I., O.P.W. files, F94:940/1/54).

¹⁰² Draft preservation order for Dunsandle House (N.A.I., O.P.W. files, F94:940/1/54).

¹⁰³ Internal minute to Mr O'Donnellan, June 1954 (N.A.I., O.P.W. files, F94:940/1/54).

indicated that he did not expect to have to sell for demolition. They argued then that to interfere by issuing a preservation order could reduce the owner's chances of a sale to a person who would live in the house and so could defeat their objective.¹⁰⁴

Discussing the issue more generally the note stated: 'this case and the case of Drimnagh Castle raises again the general question of the preservation of large habitable houses of some hospitable or architectural interest'.¹⁰⁵ This had already been considered by the board. The extent of the 'problem' had been indicated to some degree they believed in a report dated 30 October 1945, in which, as noted above, Leask, the inspector of national monuments, had estimated that at least twenty out of the 256 houses of the eighteenth century listed in 1913 by the Georgian Society had disappeared from the landscape.¹⁰⁶ The line taken by the board was generally that they could not undertake the burden of preventing the destruction of the numerous Big Houses 'which through changes in social conditions and by reason of increased maintenance charges were being put on the market in increasing numbers'.¹⁰⁷ In spite of this, it was recognised that there would occasionally be cases coming to notice 'where the historical or architectural merits of a house were such as to justify its maintenance as a national monument'.¹⁰⁸ Nonetheless, the cost of upkeep of houses of this kind would be heavy in comparison with 'the usual type of monument'.¹⁰⁹ It was emphasised that it had never been suggested that the preservation of Big Houses from destruction could be achieved by preservation orders, which were deemed unsuitable unless subsequent guardianship was intended. Therefore, in the case of Dunsandle a preservation order was

¹⁰⁴ Submission in O.P.W. files, unsigned, undated (N.A.I., O.P.W. files, F94:940/1/54).

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

considered of doubtful value and the recommendation in this submission was that it should not be undertaken.¹¹⁰

In fact, in July 1954 a civil servant in the O.P.W pressed for a reconsideration of the issue of the Big House more generally. He/she argued:

in 1946 it appeared unlikely that many of the most architecturally distinguished houses had any future as residences ... but even by 1947 conditions had changed ... and since then the existence of fine 18th century houses in Ireland has attracted a number of wealthy people to take up residence here. About ten days ago I visited Russborough House, county Wicklow, and found that a great deal of money is being spent on it by its new owner.¹¹¹

Nevertheless, this thesis will discuss how overall the decline of the Big House continued and only later in the century was there a change in attitudes, and were exemptions legislated for, which aimed to promote its continued survival. The civil servant emphasised that it was now the case that the state had power to prevent houses of outstanding merit from being sold for demolition or without prior consent, since the National Monuments Act, as amended in 1954, provided for the issue of preservation orders for houses used as dwellings, which the 1930 act had previously disallowed. He/she wrote that in some cases this could mean that the market value of the houses would be reduced so as to make them a reasonable proposition for purchasers who wished to live in them. In all cases, in his/her opinion, preservation orders could be used to delay destruction and this could mean that some would be spared long enough for them to find a suitable owner. Despite this, the civil servant highlighted:

as far as I know Ireland is the only country in Europe where no government action has been taken to preserve country houses in the face of changing social and economic conditions. Republican France is sufficiently far-sighted to spend very large sums on the preservation of royal palaces and the residences of the nobility. It is most unlikely that, in proportion to our resources, the problem here is anything to compare with the problem there; but no realistic assessment of the magnitude of the problem in Ireland can be made without a country-wide survey of country houses, which would be part of the Archaeological Survey. In any case the issue of preservation orders for houses

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ O.P.W. internal minute to division F, 7 July 1954 (N.A.I., O.P.W. files, F94:940/1/54).

in danger does not involve the expenditure of state funds and it appears to be the minimum action that should be taken to preserve some of the finest pieces of architecture in the country and, of the 18th century, some of the finest works in the British Isles.¹¹²

Returning to Dunsandle, the O.P.W. believed that in this type of case, a preservation order could result in loss to the owner and was also likely to result, sooner or later, in pressure on the board to spend money on maintaining the building. Therefore ‘the special importance of, and the danger to, the house would need to be established beyond doubt before the issue of a preservation order could be justified’.¹¹³ Enquiries about Dunsandle did not confirm that the house was at the time in serious danger of demolition and so it was recommended that the question of a preservation order should not be acted on until it was seen whether the house would find a purchaser who would maintain it.¹¹⁴ A departmental colleague also stressed that the issue of preservation orders frequently involved owners in some loss of personal profits. Furthermore, there was no way the board could be pressed into contributing towards the maintenance of an occupied dwelling house. Therefore, since in their view the danger to a house could only be established when it was bought by a firm for demolition, they stated:

the issue of a preservation order at that stage would be most inopportune since the buyer would have bought in good faith at a price based on the value of the house as scrap. If, however, it is made clear that the house may not be demolished, no such buyers will bid and it will not be possible to assess what they would have been prepared to offer.¹¹⁵

Cullinane, in contrast, had agreed to the N.M.A.C.’s call for a preservation order to be issued and, while he was aware that the proposal would create a precedent, he argued: ‘the matter of country houses in Ireland should be brought under control so that, when a proper evaluation of the situation can be made, some coherent policy can be laid down. I would point out that a

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ O.P.W. internal minute submitted to Mr Cullinane, 15 July 1954 (N.A.I., O.P.W. files, F94:940/1/54).

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ O.P.W. internal minute submitted to Mr Cullinane, 26 July 1954 (N.A.I., O.P.W. files, F94:940/1/54).

P.O. [preservation order] can be revoked and that Dunsandle would provide a good test'.¹¹⁶ However, he was overruled by departmental staff who did not think that the O.P.W. should in any circumstances undertake guardianship in this case, and thought it unwise of the office to interfere, prior to the result of the auction of Dunsandle on 11 August being known.¹¹⁷

The advertisement for Dunsandle in the *Irish Times* of July 1954 read: 'Magnificent gentleman's residence on 131 acres – freehold. Suitable for religious institution, etc.', and did not refer to its demolition value.¹¹⁸ The house was described as 'one of the finest examples of Georgian architecture of its period in Ireland'.¹¹⁹ It had central heating throughout and all modern convenience, while all the downstairs rooms were described as having fine Adam and marble fireplaces and the large salon had 'magnificent Italian walls'.¹²⁰ Yet at an auction of Dunsandle on 11 August 1954 there was little interest with only eight attendees.¹²¹ The auctioneer asked for an opening bid of £12,000, but on receiving none had reduced that figure to £5,000. When there was still no bid the property was withdrawn.¹²²

On 15 October the N.M.A.C. wrote to the O.P.W. to say that they had been informed that the commissioners had decided not to recommend issuing a preservation order for Dunsandle.¹²³ During their discussion 'the question of the preservation of representative historic houses generally was raised' and it was decided to place it on the agenda for their next meeting. They therefore wrote that it would be of considerable assistance to this discussion if the commissioner's reasons for their decision on Dunsandle were made

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

¹¹⁷ Handwritten note to the commissioners and chairman of the O.P.W., 28 July 1954 (N.A.I., O.P.W. files, F94:940/1/54).

¹¹⁸ *Irish Times*, 24 July 1954.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ Handwritten note submitted to O.P.W., 12 Aug. 1954 (N.A.I., O.P.W. files, F94:940/1/54).

¹²² Ibid.

¹²³ N.M.A.C. to O.P.W., 15 Oct. 1954 (N.A.I., O.P.W. files, F94:940/1/54).

available.¹²⁴ The draft reply from the O.P.W. declared succinctly that they were not satisfied that Dunsandle House was ‘one which merits permanent conservation as a national monument. It is of little historical or archaeological significance’.¹²⁵

In spite of this, the O.P.W. was still under pressure to preserve Dunsandle and in December 1954 Galway county council wrote to the O.P.W. to inform their commissioners that at a recent meeting of the local national monuments advisory committee of county Galway a resolution was passed: ‘that the Commissioners for Public Works be requested to take immediate steps for the preservation of Dunsandle House which is a very important eighteenth-century Georgian house, the only one of its kind in county Galway. It is indeed believed to be the best example of Georgian architecture in the west of Ireland’.¹²⁶ The county manager had written to the Minister for Health to suggest that some religious order might take the house as a home for children with mental disabilities, but the minister had not thought that action necessary as such homes were being established in Sligo and Limerick. Furthermore, it was unlikely that the premises would, at any time, be required by the county council for such purposes. He also understood that the N.M.A.C. was very anxious that a preservation order be made and requested the matter be attended to as quickly as possible.¹²⁷ No action was taken by the O.P.W., however, except to inform the Department of Finance of the representations received and Dunsandle was sold in 1954 and in 1958 mostly demolished with only a few walls left standing.

¹²⁴ Ibid.

¹²⁵ O.P.W. to N.M.A.C., Nov. 1954 (N.A.I., O.P.W. files, F94:940/1/54).

¹²⁶ Galway county council to the O.P.W., 11 Dec. 1954 (N.A.I., O.P.W. files, F94:940/1/54).

¹²⁷ Ibid.



Fig. 3.1, Dunsandle, county Galway.

Source: Chris Deakin at Nobody Home; forgotten buildings of Ireland,
<http://www.nobodyhome.ie/2dh/dunsandlehouse.html> [date accessed: 25 Apr. 2013].

Conclusion

The period from 1930 to 1960 was one of the most dramatic in terms of the decline, dereliction and demolition of the Big House in Ireland. It was therefore the period during which the O.P.W. began to be put under pressure from the public, local authorities and those concerned with tourism in terms of how they could cease this destruction by preserving these houses. As can be seen from all the houses brought to the O.P.W.'s attention during this period which have been mentioned here, including Dunsandle, the O.P.W. was not enthusiastic about doing so. From the above examination of the office's correspondence and action, their reluctance can be seen to be based on a number of reasons. Firstly, the O.P.W. stated repeatedly that the only powers it had were the ones given to it under the 1930 National Monuments Act and its staff did not think a Big House would qualify as being of sufficient historical, architectural, traditional, artistic, or archaeological interest to merit preservation under this legislation. While in some cases the O.P.W. acknowledged the politico-social importance attached to these houses, this was not believed to make them worthy of preservation under the 1930 act and it appears that the O.P.W. quite often stuck to the letter of the law to avoid becoming involved in the issue of their preservation. Another reason the O.P.W. thought the Big House unsuitable for preservation under this act was because they were too modern and most of the structures which the office had previously preserved dated prior to the seventeenth-century at this time. Aware of the number of houses which were being abandoned, sold or demolished for their materials, and also aware that they had no market value and were hugely expensive to maintain, the O.P.W. did not want to set a precedent in this regard by taking on newer buildings and ending up in a position of responsibility for the many Big Houses in danger at this time. If they took one, they could not refuse others on any solid ground and therefore stuck rigidly to their principles. As previously

stated, this disregard for more ‘modern’ sites as national monuments also applied to vernacular architecture.

In addition, the monuments which the O.P.W. had previously preserved were primarily ruins and sites which took little more than a fence or sign to establish their position as national monuments, very achievable with limited budget and staff.¹²⁸ The O.P.W. had emphasised in the case of Russborough that if they took on these houses it would significantly restrict their resources. It would also mean they would be unable to obtain many other monuments which they could preserve for the same cost as one Big House, such as Russborough.¹²⁹ A living house to be preserved as such would be a constant drain on their finances and the O.P.W. feared adverse publicity if they took on monuments they could not maintain. They thought it better for a Big House to go to ruin privately so that blame would not be apportioned to their office for its demise. This limited budget is important, as while it seems from the evidence that the O.P.W. tried to avoid taking on these buildings, this may also have been because they were not in a position to do so and the National Monuments Act or their modern construction gave them sufficient excuse to refuse without placing the blame on their own government. The O.P.W.’s budget was very low in relation to national monuments at this time, especially since there were many other pressing social issues and both the budget and small field staff meant that the O.P.W. was constrained in being able to take on these structures. The Department of Finance was controlling the O.P.W.’s limited resources which restricted them from acting, although there is no evidence in O.P.W. files of their staff contacting, let alone pressurising, the Department of Finance for an increased budget. In fact, when the N.M.A.C. had proposed amendments to the 1930 Act, as documented in the previous chapter, the O.P.W. acknowledged that there was more important

¹²⁸ Department of Finance to the secretary to the President of the Executive Council, 2 Nov. 1930 (N.A.I., Dept. of An Taoiseach files, S5935).

¹²⁹ Department of Finance to the secretary to the President of the Executive Council, 2 Nov. 1930 (N.A.I., Dept. of An Taoiseach files, S5935).

legislation for government to be concerned with and this may also have been a consideration of the O.P.W.'s in relation to the budgetary constraints of the government from 1930 to the 1960s and beyond.

The figure who appears most influential throughout this period was the Inspector of National Monuments, H. G. Leask – and this was a post he occupied from 1923 to 1949 – because he himself did not consider that Big Houses could be deemed part of the national heritage.¹³⁰ Furthermore, his view was of paramount importance as the sole full-time employee of the National Monuments Branch of the O.P.W. for most of his twenty-six year term in office.¹³¹ One can see from his published works and his term as president of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland that his passion and knowledge were particularly focussed on more ancient monuments.¹³² However, he was also significant in the enlightened acquisition by the state of the guardianship and also the repair of the Casino at Marino in Dublin in 1932. While Anne Carey has argued that Leask did not have a *carte blanche* to dictate what monuments should be accepted by the state, it appears in every case examined in this chapter that his opinion was the one which was influential.¹³³ In fact, she also admitted that ‘the acquisition of new monuments did not see the flood gates open for post AD 1700 century structures, which the [1930] Act had allowed for’.¹³⁴ Congruent with this chapter’s arguments, she attributed this to a lack of resources, but also an absence of clear policy regarding the conservation of roofed structures.

In conclusion, during this period from 1930 to 1960 the O.P.W. generally did not preserve Big Houses, nor did they consider it their responsibility to do so. In all the cases

¹³⁰ A. T. Lucas, ‘Harold G. Leask, M.Arch., Litt.D., past president’ in *The Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland*, xcvi, no. 1 (1966), pp 1–2.

¹³¹ Anne Carey, ‘Harold G. Leask: aspects of his work as Inspector of National Monuments’ in *The Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland*, cxxxiii (2003), pp 24–35.

¹³² For published works see Lucas, ‘Harold G. Leask, M.Arch., Litt.D., past president’, pp 3–6.

¹³³ Carey, ‘Harold G. Leask: aspects of his work as Inspector of National Monuments’, p. 28.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*

brought to their attention detailed above they refused to take them on as national monuments, and often even considered them unworthy of survey or record. The changes of minister or governments did not really affect the O.P.W., which as an office kept working without any noticeable difference in policy as new governments came to power, uninterested in making their mark in this area. Leask continually declined to recognise Big Houses as national monuments and therefore worthy of preservation under the 1930 act. While on a number of occasions he adverted to the possibility that exceptional examples, particularly of Georgian architecture, might qualify under these terms, in none of the examples documented above, of which no others are available in O.P.W. files on this issue at present, was any Big House preserved as a national monument. It is also true that the O.P.W. had no real public mandate to preserve the Big House. The government report of 1943–5, discussed in the previous chapter, had already concluded that these houses were not useful for government purposes and there was no tourism industry to support them. So while there was increasing public concern in this period this did not mean that the general public would have sustained these houses in any tourism capacity. Terence Dooley has contended that it was not really until the 1990s that

big houses became a major tourist attraction in Ireland, attractive to the indigenous population as well as to foreign tourists. For the three years from 1992 to 1994, the cumulative number of visitors to the fifty or so big houses opened to the public averaged around 1.48 million per year, almost twice as many as in 1975 ... It was a long time after the big house had been stripped of its landed estates and political power, that their symbolic nature was put to one side and their owners no longer regarded with the degree of enmity and suspicion that had been inherited from their ancestors.¹³⁵

The O.P.W. were thus really only given their mandate to acquire such houses in the 1990s, when they could also be hopeful that tourism would provide the income to maintain them, and in 1992, for example, acquired Castletown House, county Kildare, which is currently

¹³⁵ Terence Dooley, *The decline of the big house in Ireland: a study of Irish landed families, 1860–1960* (Dublin, 2001), pp 254–55.

open to the public. Castletown, however, had originally been saved by the private individual efforts of Desmond Guinness who, recognising the importance of the house, purchased Castletown in 1967, after which it became the headquarters of the Irish Georgian Society and was greatly restored through fundraising and private initiative.¹³⁶

¹³⁶ Ibid., p. 278.

Chapter Four

Political change and silent decline, 1948–57

The period from 1948 to 1957 was one of the most unstable in Irish political history as an inter-party coalition government led by Fine Gael and a single party Fianna Fáil government wrestled each other in and out of power. This resulted in a very fractured period in terms of politics and policy, with neither administration in power long enough to make significant changes. The inter-party government was also the first of its kind and had to attempt to appease its varied membership when in power, so while this period was a quickly changing one for governments, in terms of wider public policy, much remained static. Furthermore, with little time in power the government cabinets in this period had to prioritise the issues they would deal with and, as such, private historic mansions hardly featured on their agenda. The little discussion on this subject which did take place came from the press or interest groups such as An Taisce or the National Monuments Advisory Council (N.M.A.C.). This chapter will examine governmental attitudes to the Big House during this period, whether there were any changes in perceptions or if the Big House even featured as a matter of political or public concern.

I

In February 1948 de Valera's sixteen year reign as leader of a Fianna Fáil government came to an end and the first inter-party government under Fine Gael Taoiseach John A. Costello came to power. However, as Dermot Keogh has shown, Fine Gael was only back in power:

as the largest party in a 'coalition' which included the Labour Party, the splinter group called National Labour (which was to reunite with the parent party in 1950), Clann na Talmhan, and Clann na Poblachta. This was one of the most ideologically divided governments in the history of the state, united only by the unanimous wish to see

Eamon de Valera and his party on the opposition benches and the desire to hold on to power for as long as possible. It very soon became faction-ridden.¹

They were pushed aside in June 1951 by de Valera's Fianna Fáil, although this was to be for an equally short period. Just three years later, Costello once again led an inter-party government, constituted of the same parties as three years earlier, into Dáil Éireann in June 1954. However, in line with the pattern of the previous administrations, this was again only a three year tenure, ending in March 1957. While Southern politics was dominated by primarily middle-class parties and farming interests, the situation was very different in Northern Ireland and Britain. There, Olwen Purdue has argued:

perhaps the most remarkable manifestation of landed political survival was that three out of Northern Ireland's six prime ministers came from old landed families. While this was very far from the situation that existed in the Free State and later in the Republic of Ireland, it could also be perceived as an aberration from the prevailing pattern in British politics. Closer analysis shows, however, that the resurgence of landed political leadership in Northern Ireland actually mirrored a similar phenomenon in Britain ... when war threatened British society in the 1940s ... the country once more found itself with a prime minister from an old aristocratic family in the form of Winston Churchill, grandson of the seventh duke of Marlborough.²

Purdue has argued that the continued political and social importance of the Northern gentry was a significant factor in the survival of the landed class in the North longer than the South as it maintained their confidence as a group and encouraged them to retain their ancestral homes, 'therefore extending the life of big house society in Northern Ireland long after it had gone into serious decline elsewhere on the island'.³

One of the initial and most significant undertakings of the first inter-party government in the South was the decision to repeal the External Relations Act in the summer of 1948,

¹ Dermot Keogh, *Twentieth-century Ireland: nation and state* (Dublin, 1994), p. 185.

² Olwen Purdue, *The big house in the north of Ireland: land, power and social elites, 1878–1960* (Dublin, 2009), pp 197-8.

³ Purdue, *The big house in the north of Ireland*, p. 231.

making Ireland a state ‘associated with, but not a member of, the Commonwealth’.⁴ Furthermore, Costello made this move public on a trip to Canada. F. J. McEvoy has claimed that while Fine Gael ‘was the party traditionally most favourable to the Commonwealth [connection]’ the government decided on the repeal ‘under the influence of its more radical elements’, particularly the other parties who were part of the government and more left-wing than Fine Gael.⁵ The Republic of Ireland was formally established on Easter Monday 1949 – the thirty-second anniversary of the 1916 Rising. Nonetheless, Keogh has argued that

it was a hollow victory which led to a ‘sense of renewed tension’ between Dublin and London, but the outcome could have been far worse for Anglo-Irish relations. It could not have been much worse for the future relationship between the two states on the island ... [because] the act resulted ... in further institutionalising partition. The Ireland Act of 1949 declared that ‘the part of Ireland heretofore known as Éire ceased as from the eighteenth day of April 1949 to be part of His Majesty’s dominions.’ It gave a guarantee that ‘in no event will Northern Ireland or any part thereof cease to be a part of His Majesty’s dominions and of the United Kingdom without the consent of the parliament of Northern Ireland’.⁶

Nonetheless, the declaration itself was not in fact a radical departure. McEvoy has shown how in July 1945 de Valera stated that ‘Ireland was, in fact, a republic “associated as a matter of our external policy with states of the British Commonwealth”’.⁷ Furthermore, the constitutional Amendment (No. 27) Bill, which had been enacted on 11 December 1936 under Fianna Fáil’s governance:

removed all references to the crown and governor general from the constitution while the Executive Authority (External Relations) Bill, enacted the next day, recognised the crown only for purposes of diplomatic representation and international agreements. These two measures, commonly referred to as the External Relations Act, left Ireland a more or less undeclared republic with ambiguous links to the Commonwealth.⁸

⁴ F. J. McEvoy, ‘Canada, Ireland and the commonwealth: The declaration of the Irish Republic, 1948–9’, in *Irish Historical Studies*, xxiv, no. 96 (Nov. 1985), p. 508.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Keogh, *Twentieth-century Ireland*, p. 191.

⁷ McEvoy, ‘Canada, Ireland and the commonwealth’, p. 506.

⁸ *Ibid.*

This had been part of de Valera's project of continuing to create distance between Britain and Ireland, but it was Cosgrave's government that made the break official. The British response to the repeal of the External Relations Act in 1949, the Ireland Act, made 'provision for the changed circumstances following the declaration of the republic'.⁹ However, 'the bill also contained a guarantee that no change would be made in the position of Northern Ireland without its consent. The result was an immediate storm of protest and an abrupt end to the goodwill so recently exhibited'.¹⁰ This period of change and instability in the Irish political establishment thus began with a hardening of relations with Britain.

Anti-British sentiment was also still being expressed by some of the more staunchly nationalist deputies in Dáil chambers. For example, in 1953 debate surrounded the utilisation of Dublin Castle and its architectural symbolism. Fine Gael T.D. for Galway South, Patrick Cawley, asked: 'was it not a pity that it [Dublin Castle] did not fall down long ago?'¹¹ Robert Briscoe, Fianna Fáil T.D. for Dublin South-West, supported this suggestion, adding: 'I would be delighted to help the deputy to knock it down'.¹² While in another debate Fine Gael T.D. for Meath, and outspoken nationalist, Captain Giles, extended this argument, proclaiming: 'I want Dublin Castle blown sky-high and nothing put in its place. I want to see the houses of parliament here closed down and to have houses of parliament built in the country'.¹³

II

As these politics were playing out on the national stage, the landed gentry, who had been in demise since before the beginning of the century, were by this time an ever-diminishing minority isolated in the new Republic. Given their decreasing numbers, the fact that they no longer had any part in the politics of the state, and were alienated in the remaining Big

⁹ Ibid., p. 521.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ *Dáil Éireann deb.*, cxliii, 1828 (9 Dec. 1953).

¹² Ibid.

¹³ *Dáil Éireann deb.*, cxxxvii, 687 (19 Mar. 1953).

Houses, their demise continued barely noticed. The *Irish Times*, when discussing the seventeenth edition of *Burke's landed gentry* which was published in 1952, noted that half the included gentry now owned no land at all.¹⁴ This reflected the social revolution which had taken place in Ireland over the preceding seventy years. The paper reported that the landed gentry were 'dying hard', their most savage threat being death duties imposed by the government, which have been documented in chapter two.¹⁵ The status of the landed class was questioned again in 1955 when it was reported that a new edition of the *Landed Gentry of Ireland* was being prepared for publication. L. G. Pine, director of Burke's Peerage Limited, had declared entitlement to entry was based on 'property and pedigree'. However, while applicants were supposed to have property of 500 acres or more, they recognised 'that some people for economic reasons, have had to sell their property, but, at the same time, have been in Ireland for centuries. It is felt that it would be unjustifiable to preclude such families from entry'.¹⁶ This further reflected the drastically altered position of this 'landed' gentry as the foundations on which their identity as a class were built were, by the mid-1950s, either no longer valid, such as 'landed class', or irrelevant, as in the case of their 'ascendancy', and any distinctions which remained were continually being eroded, particularly their position as Big House owners.

The perception that Big House owners were a social group which were dying out was popular throughout this study period. Instead of being considered part of the rural communities in which they lived, they were now generally perceived as eccentrics who were rarely seen. Terence Dooley has argued that 'for those who remained, rural Ireland became a lonely, isolated place of residence'.¹⁷ He maintained that 'their feelings of not belonging to

¹⁴ *Irish Times*, 6 Oct. 1952

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 8 Nov. 1955.

¹⁷ Terence Dooley, *The decline of the big house in Ireland: a study of Irish landed families, 1860–1960* (Dublin, 2001), p. 268.

mainstream Irish life were linked to the growth of a new nationalism that made them question their position and identity in Ireland', but also admitted that they 'became very much turned in upon themselves and subsequently often became regarded as eccentrics in local communities quite often simply because they spoke differently from locals or they dressed differently or they had different cultural tastes and values'.¹⁸ Yet, this was not the only reason and Brian Casey has suggested that the landlord class largely refused to admit or appreciate that their former tenants could play an important role in the sphere of politics and this sense of hubris also served to distance them from their tenants.¹⁹

By the 1950s owners were often being ridiculed or stereotyped in the national press.

In an article in the *Irish Times* in 1952, the paper alleged:

the Anglo-Irish are still there, still using words as intoxicants in their lively, irresponsible fashion – emerging at times, especially in horse show week, as a kind of social entity under the glittering chandeliers of cocktail bars in Dublin's fashionable hotels. But, as a political entity, they are either caught up in the life of the new state or, like the French aristocracy, financially impoverished and exiled in a dream world of their own invention.²⁰

This would suggest that perhaps the *Irish Times*, always regarded as an establishment newspaper of the upper classes, was attempting to appeal to a wider readership or awaken their own readership to the realities of their position in modern Ireland at this time. Furthermore, the editor at the time, Robert M. Smyllie, was attempting to establish a more modern profile for the one time ascendancy paper during his time in charge.²¹ With the press fuelling these stereotypes, the image of the remaining Big House owners as eccentrics and oddities gained increasing common credence at this time, cementing it in popular perception. In 1953 the *Irish Times* reported on an American journalist, Ernest O. Hauser, who had

¹⁸ Dooley, *The decline of the big house*, p. 269.

¹⁹ Brian Joseph Casey, 'Land, politics and religion on the Clancarty estate, east Galway, 1851–1914' (Ph.D. Thesis, National University of Ireland, Maynooth, 2011). pp 293–4.

²⁰ *I.T.*, 10 Dec. 1952.

²¹ Robert M. Smyllie was editor of the *Irish Times* from 1934 until 1954.

written of his rather clichéd impressions of Ireland in an article in the American magazine, *Saturday Evening Post*, further fuelling these caricatures. He spoke of the ‘Englishmen’ who decided to stay on in Ireland after independence and said that ‘banking, insurance, and, to a lesser extent, big business, are considered an Anglo-Saxon preserve, and British accents are discernible both in the legal profession and in the higher brackets of the civil service’.²² The *Irish Times* quoted him as saying:

still known as the ascendancy group, these thoroughly domesticated despots hold on to their exclusive rendezvous; Dublin’s bumptious Kildare street club remains a redoubt of ascendancy strength. They print their own respected daily, the *Irish Times* and, forever arranging spring festivals and horse shows, they play a surprisingly vigorous role in the community.²³

He had also maintained that ‘up-country, in some particularly pleasant spots, Britannic gentry carry on as usual, subscribing to the *Tatler*, riding to the hounds, and bundling junior off to Eton’.²⁴ However, this idea that the owners of historic houses were continuing to live the lifestyle of a century before was not an accurate portrayal. Those who remained were a small isolated group, no longer involved in the exclusive social life of the city.²⁵ In 1954 the *Irish Times* portrayed the reality more honestly when they reported on the decline of the Big House stating:

the ruling class whose power was broken in the last half century has not been replaced. The fall of the Big House has meant more than the destruction of fine buildings; for the Big House was a focal point in a system of society – it gave the people a feeling of community, even where it only served to unite them against itself.²⁶

Nevertheless, the stereotypes which had developed around the landlord class continued in popular perception and added to the mystique that surrounded them. In fact L. P.

²² *I.T.*, 3 Nov. 1953

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ For a discussion of the club life of the landed class from 1914–50, see Dooley, *The decline of the big house*, pp 267–8.

²⁶ *I.T.*, 7 Sept. 1954.

Curtis has highlighted the remarkably ‘enduring nature of these negative images both north and south of the border long after the old gentry had ceased to lord it over their largely Catholic tenantry’.²⁷ He maintained that

despite creeping insolvency, the decimation of the officer class on the Western Front, the voluntary or compulsory sale of estates, arson attacks on over 250 Big Houses and emigration, the former landlords remained an object of abuse or derision in the popular imagination. In this scenario of denigration, myth played a major role.²⁸

However, rather than providing the subject for political debate, as at the beginning of the Free State, they had now simply become media fodder, or the perfect odd family around which to base a plotline. In fact, they lived on in drama and fiction throughout the century longer and with greater presence than their actual contribution to Irish life would suggest.²⁹ Lennox Robinson’s 1926 play *The Big House* about a decaying and isolated Big House family was often performed on stage or on radio. In 1949 the revival of Brinsley McNamara’s play, *The Grand House in the City*, twelve years after it had been last performed, reflected the reality of the demise of Big House life at this time. Its central theme was the conflict between the ‘effete, ineffectual survivor of the old landed gentry ... the loud, vulgar, land-grabber’, and a journalist writing articles about ruined houses.³⁰

In spite of such portrayals, behind the crumbling walls some owners tenaciously hung on, as evidenced in the fact that up to the 1950s and after the *Irish Times* still ran advertisements such as: ‘cook seeks post with gentry’,³¹ although those seeking a position in service were becoming more rare. In fact, after the World Wars had brought people into factories and industry, owners had difficulty filling posts in domestic service, viewed now as

²⁷ L. P. Curtis, Jr., ‘Demonising the Irish landlords since the Famine’ in Brian Casey (ed.) *Defying the law of the land: agrarian radicals in Irish history* (Dublin, 2013), p. 21.

²⁸ Curtis Jr., ‘Demonising the Irish landlords since the Famine’, p. 22.

²⁹ For more on this subject, see Otto Rauchbauer (ed.), *Ancestral voices: the big house in Anglo-Irish literature: a collection of interpretations* (Dublin, 1992); Vera Kreilkamp, *The Anglo-Irish novel and the big house* (Syracuse, 1998).

³⁰ *I.T.*, 1 Feb. 1949.

³¹ *I.T.*, 10 May 1950.

an anachronistic mode of employment. Dooley has argued similarly in the aftermath of World War One how:

much changed in the post-war period. There was to be no rejuvenation of the domestic service industry. With the spread of education and new ideas and alternative forms of employment domestic service went into irreversible decline. Young women were no longer prepared to be perceived or treated as skivvies in an age when social equality was gaining more and more credence and any work deemed to be demeaning was considered unacceptable. As the twentieth century progressed, those who retained Big Houses in Ireland found themselves increasingly unable to replace servants as their old ones died.³²

This once again illustrates that there were numerous national and international factors which contributed to the decline of the Big House in Ireland.

As recounted above, governments in this period were changing quickly and had many other more prominent and pressing issues than this to discuss. Hence, during this time, voices bemoaning the demise of the landed class and the passing of the Big House were no longer frequently heard in the Oireachtas. Rather it fell to newspapers, such as the sympathetic *Irish Times*, and also groups like An Taisce – the National Trust for Ireland – to chart their passing. As An Taisce was financially struggling at this time, with no government assistance or reliefs from rates or duties, they were incapable of action. Hence their main function in this period was more to highlight the plight of historic houses in the media and they performed this well, maintaining an awareness of the issue at least occasionally in the national press, as houses continued to silently disappear from the landscape.

One such house was Castle Freke, county Cork, which in 1952 was dismantled and left to ruin, only thirty-nine years after Lord Carberry had celebrated his coming of age ball there in 1913. Very shortly after this he had been compelled by financial difficulties to sell in the 1920s. Based on the figures calculated from Mark Bence-Jones, *A guide to Irish country*

³² Dooley, *The decline of the big house*, p. 170.

houses, listed in chapter two, the period from 1950 to 1960 was the most destructive decade for the Big House in the twentieth-century, with at least twenty-three houses destroyed, compared with figures of ten and under for houses definitely demolished in every other decade up to 1970.³³

In 1952 the *Irish Independent* ran a series of articles on the preservation of monuments in Ireland, the second of which focused on An Taisce and the difficulties it faced. The paper reported that, according to many authorities, the preservation of monuments in Ireland suffered from weaknesses in the National Monuments Act, the primary limitation being the inability of the Board of Works to acquire houses in which there were occupants. Furthermore, the county councils could not spend money on ancient monuments, but could not get rid of them, while the Board of Works would not spend money unless they had obtained guardianship of the monuments.³⁴ A member of An Taisce told the paper: ‘the real trouble is not so much a lack of money, but the fact that the whole position is in a bit of a mess. The Board of Works is hopelessly inadequate to deal with the work. There is only one man in charge of all this work with two or three gangers’.³⁵ Another difficulty for the trust was the demand by government for rates and taxes on properties offered to them, a point brought up by T. H. Mason at the annual meeting of An Taisce the previous year. When speaking of properties offered to them by owners unable to maintain them, he had said that ‘unless the Trust found some means of providing or avoiding the large amounts required for rates and income tax, the Trust could not undertake the responsibility’.³⁶

Therefore, the biggest obstacle to preservation for An Taisce was actually money owed to government and local government themselves, illustrating that finance still held

³³ Figures compiled by author from houses listed as having been demolished specifically in these decades by Mark Bence-Jones in his *A guide to Irish country houses* (Revised ed., London, 1988). For more information on these estimates and figures, see chapter two.

³⁴ *Irish Independent*, 2 Oct. 1952.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ *Ibid.*

much more weight for government than preservation, to the point of obstructing An Taisce in its work of acquiring and preserving property. This was a question of crucial importance if An Taisce was to be able to carry out its functions. Mason compared their position to the situation to England, where in 1945 the government had given the National Trust £60,000, because in England and Scotland:

the National Trusts were regarded as charities, so that property and legacies bequeathed to them were exempted from death duties and, by an act of 1937, they enjoyed immunity from many other taxes in a manner which did not exist here. Local authorities were also given power to contribute towards the purchase of Trust properties, and to contribute annually to their upkeep.³⁷

Peter Mandler has shown how the English government:

had by the end of 1947 slipped into the ownership of a small but growing collection of country houses, both through endowing the National Trust and in its own right ... Under the influence of their own scholars at the national museums and the ancient monuments service, ministers could now be heard advocating the educational value of great houses intact with their collections (but not with their owners).³⁸

This idea of country houses being valuable or useful without their owners is something that would be important to the re-imagining of the country house as Irish heritage, and importantly, the heritage of all, in later years. Similarly in England at this time, while ‘most country houses were still destined for alternative use’, when ‘reconceptualised as national museums, a sample of the very best country houses was now deemed a worthy target of public expenditure’.³⁹ Furthermore, with assistance from the Historic Buildings Council, ‘the number of houses held by the Trust grew from forty-two in 1950 to seventy-five in 1960 and their physical state improved markedly’.⁴⁰

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Peter Mandler, *The fall and rise of the stately home* (New Haven & London, 1997), p. 340.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 348.

In Ireland, despite its limitations, An Taisce did act to take on the task of voicing concern about these properties and the need to preserve them, even when predominantly unable to act. As the law stood, An Taisce had to pay full rates and income tax on bequests or any property which they acquired. Therefore, however penal the tax system, it can be seen from this that it was not just leveled at original owners as no organisation, however 'national' its outlook, was exempt. Furthermore, despite these arguments claiming that the rates and taxes due on a property rendered An Taisce unable to act or meant that owners were unable to keep their properties, there was still no change in government policy. Therefore it was left to newspapers or public committees to discuss individual cases or attempt to raise funds necessary to save properties. The need to change this situation was emphasised in an article in the *Irish Times* in January 1957. It reported that An Taisce was shortly to make representations to the government in an effort to ensure that historic buildings in the country were preserved. A spokesman for the trust had said: 'until we get new legislation to put the trust in as favourable a position as the British National Trust, we can make very little advance'.⁴¹ The paper emphasised that

houses of the greatest historic value in Ireland were being destroyed because of the very high rates payable on them. The National Trust here received no real government support and, even if it could acquire some valuable property which it knows should be preserved, no relaxation of rates and taxes would be allowed. Property acquired by the British National Trust was allowed to be occupied and the public had access to it on certain days.⁴²

The article went on to say that while in Northern Ireland, Castle Coole, near Enniskillen, had been acquired by the British Trust for £50,000, in the Republic, Henry Grattan's house at Tinnehinch, Enniskerry, county Wicklow, was demolished, as documented in the previous chapter. It further highlighted that some years previously Lady Gregory's house had been destroyed and the spokesperson for the trust 'considered that the ancestral residence of a

⁴¹ *I.T.*, 11 Jan. 1957.

⁴² *Ibid.*

person so outstanding in the cultural history of the country as Lady Gregory, should not have been allowed to be pulled down'.⁴³

III

The inter-party government under Costello did take steps to improve the situation of tourism, arts and heritage in Ireland. Keogh has written of how 'Costello felt very strongly about the need to assist culture and the arts. [Minister for External Affairs Seán] MacBride appointed members to the first Cultural Relations Committee, which had been planned by the previous government'.⁴⁴ Dr Thomas Bodkin, a former director of the National Gallery of Ireland and at the time director of the Barber Institute in Birmingham, who had first submitted a report on culture and the arts to the Irish government in 1922, was commissioned again in 1948 by the government to investigate the state of the arts in the twenty-six counties. Although this was a wide-ranging report, Bodkin addressed the issue of historic houses and was not optimistic that they could support themselves without a particular use. His report described how the recently founded National Trust was aimed at supplementing the activities of the O.P.W. in relation to monuments and sites. The first council of the trust had been elected in 1949 and, in emulation of the National Trust in England, aimed at being self-supporting, although Bodkin noted that if it operated extensively it was 'hardly likely to achieve that ambition'.⁴⁵ He also explained that the English Trust derived considerable income from several hundred farms which it controlled and 'from fees paid by tourists for admission to historic houses, often lavishly furnished, and to famous gardens'.⁴⁶ The report additionally noted that the English Trust had been incorporated by an Act of Parliament. Furthermore, although the State allowed it generous tax exemptions and it administered more than 142,000 acres of land, it

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Keogh, *Twentieth-century Ireland*, p. 200.

⁴⁵ Extract from report to the government of Ireland on various institutions and activities concerned with the arts in Ireland, 30 Sept. 1949 (National Archives of Ireland, Dept. of An Taoiseach files, S8488B).

⁴⁶ Ibid.

was ‘only just solvent at present’.⁴⁷ In contrast, Bodkin believed that ‘such historic houses in Ireland as may eventually come under the control of the Irish National Trust are not likely, either by virtue of their architectural interest or as repositories of beautiful objects, to attract great numbers of tourists’.⁴⁸ This was the opinion of an individual concerned with the preservation of arts and architecture and hence one of the most subjective and sensitive in this regard, yet even he acknowledged that it was doubtful if there was sufficient, if any, market in Ireland to sustain a Big House as a national monument for tourism purposes.

Bodkin’s report was positively influential though and motivated the Taoiseach, Costello, as head of the inter-party government, to introduce the Arts Act, 1951.⁴⁹ The act established the Arts Council, An Chomhairle Ealaíon, which was to be charged with stimulating public interest in the arts and improving artistic standards. This government also enacted the first changes to the National Monuments Act, 1930, with a 1954 Amendment Act. Although this act did not make many modifications, it was at least an attempt to remedy some of the difficulties with the original legislation. The amended act allowed for the issuing of temporary preservation orders to last six months for properties considered important, thus attempting to place protections on buildings which had sometimes been destroyed in the interim period of delay when a full preservation order was waiting to be issued. The act also extended the term for those on the N.M.A.C.⁵⁰ However, the term of this inter-party government was halted suddenly when it fell on the mother-and-child scheme issue and,

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ *Arts Act, 1951. An act to stimulate public interest in, and to promote the knowledge, appreciation, and practice of, the arts and, for these and other purposes, to establish an arts council, and to provide for other matters in connection with the matters aforesaid* (8 May 1951).

⁵⁰ *National Monuments (Amendment) Act, 1954. An act to amend the National Monuments Act, 1930* (22 Dec. 1954).

while the election which followed had an indecisive outcome, Fianna Fáil scraped back into power.⁵¹

When Fianna Fáil assumed power in the three year period between this inter-party government's terms, the Big House hardly featured on their agenda. Furthermore, while the second inter-party government again attempted to make some improvements in terms of heritage protections more generally when they returned to power in 1954, their short term in office and more pressing demands once again demoted the importance of this issue, not least of all because the 1950s were a decade marked by huge levels of emigration. By one estimate 40,000 Irish people left the country during the decade.⁵² Hence it fell to the N.M.A.C. to attempt to keep this issue on the government's agenda. On 4 July 1955 they wrote to the O.P.W. about the preservation of houses of historic and architectural interest. Their letter stated: 'the question of preserving such monuments is involved and needed careful deliberation, in consequence of which a special sub-committee was appointed to deal with the whole matter'.⁵³ At a following meeting of the council the report of this sub-committee was considered.⁵⁴ However, it was decided that the matter would require further consideration and so would be discussed again at the next meeting. In the meantime they forwarded a copy of this report to the O.P.W. to enquire if they had any observations to offer.⁵⁵

Their report on lands and buildings of architectural and historic interest ineligible for preservation under the National Monuments Act began by explaining that the National Monuments Acts of 1930 and 1954 enabled the state to provide funds for the preservation of buildings of architectural and historic interest. However, houses occupied as dwellings and churches in use were specifically excluded and in practice buildings fully used for other

⁵¹ Keogh, *Twentieth-century Ireland*, p. 213.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 215.

⁵³ Copy of letter from the N.M.A.C. to the O.P.W. re: Dunsandle House, county Galway, 26 May 1955 (N.A.I., O.P.W. files, F94/574/1).

⁵⁴ N.M.A.C. to the O.P.W., 4 July 1955 (N.A.I., O.P.W. files, F94/574/1).

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

purposes had not been regarded for preservation either. Furthermore, ‘although the acts allow for buying buildings for preservation as national monuments it has not been the policy to do so. This means that until a building becomes disused and of no significant commercial value (this usually means until it has become more or less ruinous) no action is normally taken by the state to preserve it’.⁵⁶ Here the N.M.A.C revealed how the 1930 National Monuments Act, while quite broad in its scope, was implemented in a very limited fashion by the O.P.W. As discussed in the previous chapter, the O.P.W. had primarily preserved ancient monuments under this act, not least of all because these required less finances and personnel to maintain. The advisory council’s committee admitted that, in the case of medieval buildings where most of their perishable materials were already lost, the preservation of their stonework was sufficient. However, this did not apply to more modern buildings, particularly from the seventeenth century and later where ‘the internal architectural effect depends to a very large extent on features and decorations made of perishable materials’.⁵⁷ In the case of these buildings, ‘the stone or brick shell represent only a fraction of the architectural effect and the shell itself usually becomes structurally unstable when deprived of the support and protection of perishable structural features such as the floors and roofs’.⁵⁸ Therefore they maintained that such buildings could only be adequately preserved more or less complete, adding:

it is also desirable, for good maintenance and for economy, that they should be put to some suitable use. Ideally they should remain used for their original purpose, so that their contents, which contribute greatly to the internal effect, will be appropriate; this cannot always be ensured, but it is felt that a mitigation of economic pressure will save many buildings of merit from destruction and enable some of them to be preserved in their original use and in their original setting.⁵⁹

⁵⁶ National Monuments Council: report of committee on lands and buildings of architectural and historic interest ineligible for preservation under the National Monuments Act attached to a letter from the N.M.A.C. to the O.P.W., 4 July 1955 (N.A.I., O.P.W. files, F94/574/1).

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

The most extensive category of buildings under consideration was large and small houses in the country, where their only practical use was residential. The committee argued:

in the preservation of buildings in the occupation of state and semi-state bodies and local authorities the chief disability seems to be the lack of competent professional advice which leads to thoughtless alterations, structural neglect and in some cases unnecessary demolition because those in authority have not been made aware that the architectural qualities of some of these buildings amply justify special treatment.⁶⁰

Examples of this were country town market houses, court houses and government or local authority offices located in Georgian houses. Maintenance was entrusted in some cases to engineers and was usually unsatisfactory, but they also added: ‘it is disappointing, however, to find that in many cases where buildings of merit are maintained under the supervision of architects they are not immune from thoughtless mutilation’.⁶¹ The language of this sentence alone conveys the anger of the committee at examples of such action, which they had obviously seen take place in government care. They did, however, admit that full and complete maintenance of every property might not be possible and thought that in towns it might be desirable to preserve even the facades of buildings which, although of no great architectural interest in themselves, formed part of a street, crescent, or square, and so had qualities transcending that of the individual building.

The N.M.A.C. committee was primarily concerned with three main categories of buildings: houses for which no alternative use could be found, but their maintenance as a dwelling was uneconomic; old buildings used by public bodies; and buildings which formed part of a large-scale architectural composition.⁶² In relation to the first category of houses, the council recommended that the owners of such properties should be encouraged ‘to maintain houses of merit, and their essential setting, by reducing the economic pressure that has led in

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid.

the past to the destruction of some of the finest houses'.⁶³ The suggestion was that this objective would be achieved by a remission of rates and income tax in whole or in part on the house and its setting, remission of income tax in whole or in part on certified necessary expenditure on the maintenance of the house and its setting, and a remission of death duties on the value of the house and its setting. In return for these concessions:

owners would be required to admit the public to the principal parts of the house and grounds on certain specified days; owners would be encouraged to charge an agreed entrance fee to be set against the costs they would incur in supervising visitors; owners would be prohibited from carrying out any alterations without permission and repairs would have to be carried out by them when necessary and in an approved manner.⁶⁴

Such proposals were well thought out and way ahead of their time in terms of the proposed exchange of tax breaks for a level of public access, something which would not be introduced by Irish governments until the 1980s. Furthermore, the importance of the historical integrity of these buildings was highlighted, such that their preservation was not considered successful where they were taken over and used as offices, for example, if their interiors were not respected or maintained.⁶⁵ To establish the proposed system, legislation would be needed, and it was foreseen that such a bill should incorporate a schedule of houses and lands to which it would apply. A list could be prepared from easily available sources of information and owners of houses on this list would be invited to permit the inclusion of their houses in the local schedule. Provision would also have to be made for compulsory inclusion coupled with proportional remission of rates and taxes and with control over repairs and alterations, but excluding compulsory admission of the public to either the house or the grounds. In the case of an owner willing to have his house included but unwilling to admit the public at all, or to the extent required, they could also receive some reasonable portion of the

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

concessions. In such a scheme, additions to the schedule could be made by the minister on recommendations received or on application by an owner, though such applications would have to be submitted with floor plans, an historical and architectural report, a condition report and interior and exterior photographs. This procedure, apart from its value in assessing the merits of a building, would also be a deterrent to any frivolous applications, the committee argued. Estimates had shown that the number of houses likely to qualify was about one hundred and if this proved true they believed that initial inspections and subsequent supervision and administration were not likely to constitute an insuperable problem.⁶⁶

The second category suggested for preservation were old buildings used by public bodies, that is, buildings of merit still used for their original purposes, such as court houses, and a larger number of buildings, mostly houses, converted for use as offices, schools and monasteries.⁶⁷ In the council's view, since these buildings were controlled by responsible bodies, the only action necessary would be to make the owners aware of the importance of the buildings and to induce them to treat them with respect. Therefore, this was not so much a financial problem as an administrative one, but would still call for more specialist architectural advice than was available at present. The third category was buildings forming part of a large-scale architectural composition which had to be entrusted to the care of town planning authorities, although it was still considered useful to list what were considered the best examples so as to draw attention to them.⁶⁸

The report estimated that a rough annual cost of the scheme would be: £14,500 on remission of rates, £24,000 on remission of income tax and £1,500 on death duties, giving a total of £40,000.⁶⁹ This was a considered and applicable report which, if acted on, could have

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

changed the entire position of the country house in Ireland and led to the preservation of more houses than remain standing today. Furthermore, the council was not pushing for financial aid in grants and donations from government, but rather only concessions for historic property owners in terms of taxes and rates which, if their calculations were correct, would only have reduced government receipts by £40,000. In addition, there was public gain for this loss to the exchequer in terms of the public access stipulation proposed, although it was doubtful that there was any public interest in visiting these Big Houses at this time. In any case, the O.P.W. was characteristically, as the previous chapter has shown, unwilling to get involved in any such scheme. They did not even offer any observations on the report and took no action on it.⁷⁰ Furthermore, while the governments in this period, both inter-party and Fianna Fáil, were attempting to secure their seats in power and address the more pressing issues that would secure their vote on polling day, they avoided becoming embroiled in the still contentious, and financial vacuum, that was ‘the Big House problem’. In addition, in this case, as in most others, the civil servants in the O.P.W. were the ones directing the affairs of this office anyway, while the frequent changes in government at ministerial level had little impact on their work, and they were unwilling to let the O.P.W. shoulder the responsibility for these houses.

IV

This government’s avoidance of this issue was not always easy as frequently these cases arrived on their desks. While this period was generally a quiet one in terms of government being put under pressure to preserve individual houses, remarkably so given that it was the most destructive period for the Big House, a prominent case which did arise during the inter-party’s second term was that of Killarney House and the Kenmare estate in Killarney, county Kerry. This case will be examined here as it is interesting that while there was a Big House

⁷⁰ O.P.W. to the N.M.A.C., 17 Aug. 1955 (N.A.I., O.P.W. files, F94/574/1).

involved which had been, through various rebuildings, at the centre of a landed estate, it was the estate land in this case which garnered all the attention and concern when it was put up for sale. The house, on the other hand, was ignored in debates, not least of all because it was not one of the grander style historic houses and had been rebuilt. It eventually fell into ruin, while its estate became part of the state's portfolio of national parks.



Figure 4.1 Killarney House, county Kerry.

Source: R.T.É. News, <http://www.rte.ie/news/2011/0730/304417-kenmare/>

[date accessed: 25 Apr. 2013]

The estate was put up for sale in 1956 by its owner, Beatrice Grosvenor, who claimed that the cost of death duties had driven her to sell.⁷¹ Lord Kenmare had died in February 1952 and the title had become extinct. Interestingly, most of the attention surrounding this sale was because of the lands of this estate, particularly given their position beside the national park

⁷¹ *I.T.*, 10 Aug. 1956.

incorporating Muckross House, Killarney, which the government had acquired in 1932. This highlights again that public concern was often for the amenity value of the demesne, rather than the house itself in appeals for the preservation of Big Houses. On 12 June 1956 the *Irish Times* reported that the directors of the Killarney Tourist Development Company Ltd. announced that because of 'its importance to the people of Killarney and the nation, it was prepared to undertake the purchase of the Kenmare Estate' if they could raise the funds.⁷² It noted further that Dublin City Council, at its meeting the previous night had passed a resolution 'exhorting the government to take the necessary steps to prevent the Kenmare Estate from being disposed of by any foreign agency and to examine the possibility of having the estate acquired by the National Trust', which belies at least some nativist prejudice.⁷³ The paper revealed that 'the greater part of the death duties – the payment of which has forced the trustees of the estate to put it on the public market – is due to the Irish government',⁷⁴ while one prominent Killarney man pointed out that the government was crying out for the development of the tourist industry and, at the same time, was crippling the industry with taxation.⁷⁵ This is a notable situation, since the exaction of death duties by the state was forcing the sale of this estate, and therefore inciting local pressure on the state for its acquisition, in which case they would be burdened with the maintenance of this property, bordering the large estate at Muckross which they already held in Killarney.

On 16 June 1956 Felix E. Hackett, President of An Taisce, wrote a letter to the *Irish Independent* voicing his grave concern about the possible exploitation of the Kenmare estate. He believed that it should instead, with the Bourn Vincent Memorial Park, form 'one great area of scenic beauty which requires to be under some such state control as is provided by the

⁷² *I.T.*, 12 June 1956.

⁷³ *Ibid.*

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

National Park and Access to the Countryside Act 1949' in Britain.⁷⁶ This act was intended 'to make provision for national parks and the establishment of a National Parks Commission'.⁷⁷ Hackett also lamented that there was not available for this emergency amongst the acts of the Oireachtas, a provision similar to that setting up the Ulster Land Fund in the Finance Act of 1948 of Northern Ireland.⁷⁸ This act gave the Ministry of Finance power to accept property in satisfaction or in part satisfaction of any estate duty, settlement estate duty, succession duty, or legal duty. He noted that this legislation in Northern Ireland had allowed for the purchase of properties, such as Castle Coole and Florencecourt in county Fermanagh. Since no such legislation existed in Ireland he recommended a special act that would allow the government to purchase the property on behalf of the nation.⁷⁹

Under increasing pressure on 24 July 1956 the O.P.W. summarised the situation in a memorandum.⁸⁰ The land already in their possession under the Bourn Vincent Memorial Park Act of 1932 and the buildings and mansion, at the time vacant, despite the offsetting of gate receipts, cost in estate expenditure almost double their income. The public had free access to the estate and the park included many of the features of interest in Killarney, including Muckross Abbey. With no information as to the administration costs, or standards of maintenance on the Kenmare Estate, the O.P.W. concluded:

in relation to the notice of motion quoted in the memorandum for the government dated 21 June, 1956, by An Taoiseach, viz. 'to request the government to take all

⁷⁶ *Irish Independent*, 16 June 1956.

⁷⁷ *National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act, 1949. An act to make provision for national parks and the establishment of a national parks commission; to confer on the nature conservancy and local authorities powers for the establishment and maintenance of nature reserves; to make further provision for the recording, creation, maintenance and improvement of public paths and for securing access to open country, and to amend the law relating to rights of way; to confer further powers for preserving and enhancing natural beauty; and for matters connected with the purposes aforesaid* (16 Dec. 1949).

⁷⁸ *Finance Act (Northern Ireland) 1948. An act to alter certain duties of excise (including entertainments duty and duties on licences for mechanically-propelled vehicles) and stamp duties; to amend the law relating to the duties aforesaid and to death duties; to abolish certain duties; to provide for certain payments; and to make further provision in connection with finance* (10 Aug. 1948).

⁷⁹ *Irish Independent*, 16 June 1956.

⁸⁰ O.P.W. memorandum on the proposed sale of the Kenmare Estate and of the middle and lower lakes of Killarney, 24 July 1956 (N.A.I., Dept. of An Taoiseach files, S16047A).

possible steps, if necessary by legislation, to acquire the Kenmare Estate as a National Trust' the Commissioners of Public Works having regard to experience in the administration and cost of the Bourn Vincent Memorial Park, are of opinion that the acquisition of the Kenmare property by the state should be avoided if possible.⁸¹

This illustrates that those in the O.P.W. were aware that the expenditure and scale of the undertaking was too great to recommend and adamantly resisted acquiring the estate.

However, public pressure continued, and the *Irish Times* of 7 August 1956 reported: 'the formation of a Trust, on the lines of the National Trust in Britain, and the launching of an appeal for a national subscription to cover the purchase price of the Kenmare Estate are urged in the latest edition of *The Irish Hotelier*, official organ of the Irish Hotel's Federation and of the Hotel and Restaurant Association'.⁸² They went on to discuss that it seemed that in An Taisce, 'we already have in embryo the Trust we envisage'.⁸³ Nonetheless, just three days later the same paper reported that they understood the negotiations for the sale of the Kenmare Estate were almost complete.⁸⁴ The report highlighted again that 'the payment of death duties on the estate has been given as the reason for the projected sale, and it is understood that the biggest portion of this duty is payable to the Irish government, which has announced its concern that national interests should not be prejudiced by the sale'.⁸⁵

The main concern, however, was coming from the public, particularly local groups. On 11 August 1956 the *Kerryman* reported on prospective buyers for the estate including the Killarney Tourist Development Company who 'hope to be able to make their purchase offer soon', as they had thus far raised a purchase fund of £10,000.⁸⁶ John Boland, a former M.P. for South Kerry now living in London sent a telegram to the effect that he would form a local committee in London to aid the Killarney fund. Furthermore, Killarney Sinn Féin cumann

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² *I.T.*, 7 Aug. 1956.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 10 Aug. 1956.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ *Kerryman*, 11 Aug. 1956.

sought the acquisition for very different reasons. They wanted ‘the entire Kenmare estate taken over by the government and divided among the landless people in the area who would be willing to work it’ and argued that ‘the descendants of those who were evicted to form the estate be given back their holdings and compensated for any loss incurred since the eviction’.⁸⁷ This demonstrates that in the 1950s bitter historical memories associated with such estates had not entirely disappeared, at least not from the rhetoric used by some more nationalist organisations. The committee of the fund to purchase the estate had quite an alternative suggestion. They were of the opinion that the money raised should be used to establish a factory which would employ about 200 people to give the working people of Killarney a chance to stem the flow of emigration, while the house could be converted into an agricultural college.⁸⁸

In 1972 the state did purchase part of the lands of the Kenmare Estate as an extension to Killarney National Park, but Kenmare House was bought by an American syndicate and then sold onto John McShain, an Irish-American philanthropist, who eventually sold it to the state for a nominal sum. However, the house was allowed to fall into decay and it was not until 2011 that the government announced they would spend seven million euro on its restoration as a centre for biodiversity and a visitor centre for the park of Kenmare Estate.⁸⁹

Conclusion

The preservation of the Big House or the financial position of their owners was not a major concern for members of governments during this period who, instead, were focusing on trying to establish a secure tenure in power and tackle issues that affected the entire population, particularly the soaring levels of emigration. While Fianna Fáil’s brief three-year

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ ‘€7 m restoration for Killarney House announced’ available at R.T.É. News, <http://www.rte.ie/news/2011/0730/304417-kenmare/> [date accessed 6 Apr. 2013].

term under de Valera saw the Big House problem ignored, the inter-party government's two terms under Costello were more pro-active in relation to the arts and heritage more generally, commissioning the 1949 report into the state of the arts in Ireland, establishing the Arts Council and, in 1954, amending the National Monuments Act. Despite such movements forward, it still fell to bodies specifically concerned with the preservation of the built heritage, in particular An Taisce and the National Monuments Advisory Council, to keep the issue of the country house alive in the media and to press government for changes in policy or for a reduction in rates and taxes on such houses which was leading them to sale, as in the case of Kenmare House, or, frequently, demolition. However, during this period of political change governments were silent on the question of proposals for the preservation of the Big House, or indeed any scheme that would make its survival more likely. Then again, any action by governments which would have made the sustainability of living in, what were still seen as old mansions, easier, in a time when the country was struggling with economic stagnation, massive unemployment and emigration, would have been hugely unpopular. Therefore, these short-lived governments were careful to avoid the potentially inflammatory issue. Instead, the substantial decline of the Big House in this period went either unnoticed or ignored, while for the remaining owners of such houses their increasing minority status and isolation from the communities in which they lived, the latter often by choice, meant that they began to become caricatured in popular perception as a class of eccentrics. This pointed increasingly to the fact that if the Big House was ever to appeal more popularly, its cause would have to be separated from its original owners in perceptions, and in reality, as had happened in England.

Chapter Five

The Irish Land Commission and the Big House, 1940–65

*I have lived in important places, times
When great events were decided, who owned
That half a rood of rock, a no-man's land
Surrounded by our pitchfork-armed claims.
I heard the Duffys shouting "Damn your soul!"
And old McCabe stripped to the waist, seen
Step the plot defying blue cast-steel –
"Here is the march along these iron stones"¹*

Under the 1881 Land Law (Ireland) Act the Irish Land Commission was created as a rent-fixing commission. It further developed into a body which mediated and controlled tenant purchase under the 1885 Ashbourne Act. These land acts and later ones began to facilitate the transfer of land from landlords to tenant farmers although the 1903 Wyndham Land Act was one of the most influential in this regard. It greatly expedited the process as it induced landlords to sell by making available the payment of the entire purchase money in cash and a 12 per cent bonus on the sale of estates. It also made purchase a realistic goal for tenants and guaranteed that the annuity payable would represent a substantial reduction on their formal rent.² Many landlords availed of the opportunity and sold their land for a good return. This began the significant re-carving of Ireland's landed estates, many of which passed from the hands of a minority elite to those of the majority tenants farmers. This chapter examines the attitudes and policy of the Irish Land Commission towards Big Houses situated on landed estates which it was charged with the task of dividing or acquiring. Terence Dooley has argued that

if no other issue dominated rural society as much as access to land, no other body was as important to the people living in the Irish countryside for most of the twentieth

¹ Patrick Kavanagh, 'Epic' in *Patrick Kavanagh: collected poems* (2nd ed., London, 1972), p. 136.

² Terence Dooley, *The decline of the big house in Ireland: a study of Irish landed families, 1860–1960* (Dublin, 2001), p. 113.

century as the Land Commission. It is hardly an exaggeration to claim that its impact on Irish society was matched only by that of the Catholic Church.³

Questions that will be addressed in this chapter include: What was the commission's action in relation to such houses? How did it dispose of them and what motivated its policy and decisions? These issues will be addressed in order to assess the commission's attitudes toward the country house under different Ministers for Lands.

I

The fact that the first land act passed by the Free State was in 1923, just a year after the Cumann na nGaedheal government came to power, illustrates how serious an issue this was for the electorate.⁴ It had to be swiftly addressed, and importantly had to be seen to be addressed, by the first independent government, as has been documented in chapter one. Dooley has maintained that 'the 1923 Land Act was one of the most important pieces of legislation passed by an independent Irish government, and probably the most important piece of social legislation'.⁵ While it was a land purchase act, it also introduced a much more dramatic and unprecedented policy of tackling the relief of congestion through the compulsory acquisition and redistribution of lands, thus making it very difficult for the Big House to survive.⁶ This was an extraordinary policy whereby land, which was owned by landlords, graziers and large farmers, was forcibly taken from them by the state in return for

³ Idem., *The land for the people: the land question in independent Ireland* (Dublin, 2004), p. 19. Interestingly, Dooley notes that despite the immense importance of the Land Commission 'one will search largely in vain to find even the most cursory reference to it in any of the standard text books'. Ibid., p. 20. This has also been the experience of the author in relation to the topic of the division of land, the ending of landlordism and the decline of the Big Houses in Ireland. This topic is almost completely absent from most broad Irish histories, including: R. F. Foster, *Modern Ireland, 1600–1972* (2nd ed., London, 1989); Alvin Jackson, *Ireland 1798–1998* (Oxford, 1999); Dermot Keogh, *Twentieth-century Ireland: nation and state* (Dublin, 1994), among others.

⁴ *Land Act, 1923. An act to amend the law relating to the occupation and ownership of land and for other purposes relating thereto* (9 Aug. 1923).

⁵ Dooley, *The land for the people*, p. 18.

⁶ Ibid.

compensation in an act which landed families condemned as ‘little better than expropriation’.⁷ Accordingly, Dooley has emphasised that:

it was largely with confiscation in mind that the terms of the Land Act of 1923 were formulated. Under its terms: ‘all tenanted land wherever situated and all untenanted land situated in any congested districts county and such untenanted land situated elsewhere as the Land Commission shall before the appointed day, declare to be required for the purpose of relieving congestion or of facilitating the resale of tenanted land, shall by virtue of this act vest in the Land Commission on the appointed day’.⁸

There were to be limited exceptions, such as land purchased under previous land acts, as well as home farms and demesnes, although these exceptions could be overcome by the Land Commission if it needed the land to relieve congestion.⁹ However, the process was slow and hindered by the administration of appeals against land chosen for acquisition and the exploitation of loopholes such as the protection of demesnes which allowed some landlords to hold on to much of their land. In fact, this was important as many of the houses which survived into the twenty-first century were those which had managed to retain their demesnes, since they could then be sold on to wealthy new owners seeking privacy, or hotels and country clubs seeking grounds. The 1931 and 1933 acts attempted to overcome the difficulties associated with the 1923 act and speed up the process.¹⁰ In this they were successful so that ‘by the late 1930s, the old landed estates had eventually been broken up in Ireland’.¹¹ The Free State Land Acts had vested 113,800 holdings on just over 3 million acres

⁷ Ibid., p. 90.

⁸ Idem., *The decline of the big house in Ireland*, pp 131–2.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ *Land Act, 1931. An act to make provision for the early vesting of holdings in the purchasers thereof under the land purchase acts and for that and other purposes to amend those acts and the local Registration of Title (Ireland) Act, 1891, and also to make provision in respect of the variation of certain tithe rentcharges and variable rents* (30 Apr. 1931); *Land Act, 1933. An act to amend generally the law, finance, and practice relating to land purchase, and in particular to make further and better provision for the execution of the functions of the judicial and lay commissioners of the Land Commission and to provide for the revision of purchase annuities and certain other annual payments and for the funding of arrears thereof, and to provide for other matters connected with the matters aforesaid* (13 Oct. 1933).

¹¹ Dooley, ‘*The land for the people*’, p. 67.

in the Land Commission for £20.8 million.¹² Furthermore, ‘in the period from 1923 to 1978, 5,686 estates comprising almost 847,000 acres were compulsorily acquired for £45.3 million and a further 4,346 comprising over 510,000 acres were voluntarily sold for £26.5 million’.¹³ Patrick J. Sammon, who worked in the Land Commission for many years, has maintained that 1933 was an important year for the Land Commission. The 1933 act stemmed from Fianna Fáil’s commitment to increase land division to 100,000 acres a year.¹⁴ Furthermore, until 1933 there had been four Land Commissioners, namely: Kevin O’Shiel, Sam Waddell, who was also Chief Inspector, M. J. Heavey, and Michael Deegan, who filled the dual role of commissioner and secretary.¹⁵ After 1933 the number of commissioners was raised to six and the two new positions were filled by Eamon Mainséal (Mansfield) and D. de Brún (Dan Browne).¹⁶

The 1933 and previous land acts were successful at dividing up the landed estates among tenant farmers, migrants, and those on uneconomic holdings. Therefore, while other land acts were passed in the following decades, these primarily refined the previously enacted legislation. 1965 saw the last land act passed by an Irish government; this was aimed at preventing the purchase of land by non-Irish citizens who would not live on or use it.¹⁷ From this time on, the activities of the Land Commission – a body which was responsible for the biggest bloodless social revolution in Ireland and the transfer of most of the country’s land from a minority of owners to a majority of tenants in a relatively short period of time – began to be wound down. Its division of the land among tenants, especially the business of granting land from large estates in the east and midlands to uneconomic landholders from the West (migrants), was not, however, free from contention. The sensitive nature of this issue even

¹² *Idem.*, *The decline of the big house*, p. 134.

¹³ *Idem.*, ‘*The land for the people*’, p. 67.

¹⁴ Patrick J. Sammon, *In the land commission: a memoir, 1933–1978* (Dublin, 1997), p. 9.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Land Act, 1965. An act to amend and extend the land purchase acts* (9 Mar. 1965).

now is attested to by the fact that most of the Land Commission's files are not open to researchers or the general public as are other governmental files, undoubtedly in part in anticipation of the resurrection of age-old feelings and divisions in communities where 'blow-ins' were unwelcome and boundary disputes, such as that immortalised in Patrick Kavanagh's poem above, led to lasting bitterness. This has also meant that this chapter must rely on correspondence which the Land Commission carried out with other departments and the records they kept of them.

II

Erskine Childers became Minister for Lands in March 1957. While his tenure was short – he left in 1959 – it is important to address it here, as his period as minister was significant and different to both his predecessors and his successors.¹⁸ Sammon has written of how, when instituted as minister, Childers 'immediately proceeded to issue queries on all aspects of the work ... We were dealing with a new minister who from the beginning gave the firm impression that he was going to do a root and branch examination into the Land Commission and all his queries merited and got priority treatment.'¹⁹ Indicative of such proactive interest in the working of the Land Commission and with ideas for improvement, in 1958 the office of the Minister for Lands in the Department of Lands compiled a memorandum for government on his request, pressing government departments to formulate a policy which would make the survival of mansions and large houses more feasible. This document, coming as it did during a decade which, as chapter two has shown, was the most destructive for the Big House in Ireland, and compiled under an exceptionally sympathetic Minister for Lands, Erskine Childers, is a significant source which captured a moment in time in the story of the

¹⁸ This is reflected in the fact that Patrick J. Sammon has a section of his memoir of the Land Commission dedicated to discussing his tenure as minister, alone among all Ministers for Land. See Sammon, *In the land commission*, pp 48–57.

¹⁹ Sammon, *In the land commission*, p. 48.

Big House in Ireland when numbers were most severely declining and yet at a time when the tide was on the cusp of turning in concern for its destruction. This document and the responses from government departments reflects the contemporary views on how the Big House had been dealt with in the past, and also pointed to how these departments thought it should be dealt with in the future.

The motivation behind this memorandum came from Childers himself. Such an initiative was not undertaken by any other Minister for Lands or other departments during this time when most government departments, already struggling with tight budgets, did not want to take responsibility for the financially expensive and emotionally fraught issue of the preservation of Big Houses. For the most part, the Land Commission worked as a very independent body under the auspices of the Department of Lands in its various manifestations. Its work had to continue without interruptions and breaks with each passing government. As a result, the minister was predominantly little more than a figure-head of the department, although in other instances, individual ministers such as Childers took a more hands-on approach. Sammon, who worked for decades in the Land Commission, has written of the post of Minister for Lands: ‘it did not rank as one of the more arduous or prestigious of ministerial posts ... Without reflecting on any incumbent, it can be asserted that all ministers must have enjoyed generous spans for their constituency business. Land policy arose as an issue quite infrequently’.²⁰ Dooley has also illustrated how, during evidence given to the commission on banking in 1935, Land Commissioner Michael Deegan informed the banking commission that Land Commissioners made their own rules and regulations.²¹ Hence aside from answering parliamentary questions (in the case of the Land Commission on a very regular basis), annually steering the estimates for the Land Commission through the two houses of the Oireachtas, and ministerial duties in relation to legislation and policy, the Land

²⁰ Ibid., pp 295–6.

²¹ Dooley, *The land for the people*, p. 11.

Commission worked as an exceptionally independent body. Nonetheless, even here, Sammon noted that Childers was ‘unique in his extremely detailed enquiring role’.²²

Childers was particularly proactive in relation to the preservation of Big Houses. The fact that Childers had himself been brought up in a Big House at Glendalough, county Wicklow, was a Protestant, and had been schooled in England, presumably also made him a more sympathetic ally of Big House owners. It appears to have been an issue with which he was especially concerned and anxious to take the initiative in addressing while in government. This is evident even before he was Minister for Lands. The same is not true for other ministers. For example, Tomás Ó Deirg, Fianna Fáil T.D. for Carlow-Kilkenny, and Minister for Lands from 1951–4, does not appear to have had any desire to change the policy of the Land Commission or interfere in their work. During his tenure, the fate of French Park, county Roscommon, was discussed, a case which highlights his complacency on the issue and Childers’s initiative, even when in a different position. Childers, then Minister for Posts and Telegraphs, wrote to the Minister for Lands, Ó Deirg, on the issue, as Childers had been informed that the Land Commission had bought the house for demolition. He argued that while the house was ‘not quite in the first grade of Georgian residences, I am informed, [that it] is worth preserving’.²³ In Childers’s opinion, far more social venues were needed for organisations such as Macra na Feirme, An Óige, and parish councils and he believed: ‘we have now reached a stage when we should do something to avoid the destruction of any more reasonably good Georgian houses. My information may be wrong about the Land Commission. The matter is of real importance. Is there nothing we can do in this case?’²⁴ Ó Deirg’s reply clarified that the commission was not in possession of the property, nor had it any proceedings for its acquisition. In any case, he wrote: ‘I am told that where sizeable

²² Sammon, *In the land commission*, p. 296.

²³ Erskine Childers, Minister for Posts and Telegraphs, to T. Ó Deirg, Minister for Lands, 5 Nov. 1953 (National Archives of Ireland, Dept. of An Taoiseach files, S5004B).

²⁴ *Ibid.*

houses come on their hands, the Land Commission acquaint other government departments of the fact, so that the question of their utilisation for public purposes may be considered'.²⁵ He suggested that it was therefore only when no department expressed an interest in using or preserving such houses that the commission sold them for use or demolition. This is also supported by Sammon's claim that the Land Commission's standard practice was to offer for sale a Big House with 'an appropriate area around it' when such residences were too extensive for even the largest of over-standard migrants. He explained how, through such a policy, 'many splendid properties offered for sale by the Land Commission were purchased by religious orders'.²⁶ In one particular case, he recalled the film director John Huston acquired St Cleran's, a period dwelling house in Craughwell, county Galway, from the commission and was assumed to have spent extensively on its modernisation and refurbishment.²⁷ Returning to the case of French Park, Ó Deirg's use of the term 'I am told' suggests that while he was in the position of Minister for Lands, he did not meddle with the policy of the Land Commission, and that the extent of any one minister's influence appears to have depended mostly on the personal interest the particular minister took in the matter.²⁸

It is suggested from the above that Childers had a real and personal concern over the preservation of the Big House, even when he was not in a position in government to intervene. Hence when he took up the position as Minister for Lands in March 1957, the memorandum on the preservation of mansions and large houses was compiled by his office. Under his direction, this memorandum from the office of the Minister for Lands actually pressurised relevant government departments to formulate a policy on the preservation of Big Houses, even though this was not in the Department of Lands's remit, at a time when their

²⁵ T. Ó Deirg, Minister for Lands, to E. Childers, Minister for Posts and Telegraphs, 10 Nov. 1953 (N.A.I., Dept. of An Taoiseach files, S5004B).

²⁶ Sammon, *In the land commission*, p. 86.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ The interior of French park was dismantled in the 1950s and the ruins demolished in the 1970s, although it was not property of the Land Commission.

rate of destruction was higher than anytime previously.²⁹ This is an invaluable document for revealing the Land Commission's actions in relation to Big Houses it acquired during its work at this time and also for illuminating the attitudes of various government departments towards the importance of this issue and their willingness or unwillingness to act to make the preservation of the Big House more feasible.

On 5 August 1958 E. Ó Dálaigh, secretary of the Department of Lands, wrote to the secretary of the Department of Finance, T. K. Whitaker,³⁰ on the direction of the Minister for Lands, Erskine Childers, and enclosed for their observations a draft memorandum for government on the preservation of mansions and large houses. Copies were also included for distribution to the O.P.W and the General Valuation Office.³¹ Ó Dálaigh stated that 'in acquiring land the Land Commission acquire a number of mansions and large houses in good repair which are unsuitable for their uses. Some of these with accommodation land are sold to persons or institutions for occupation. Some prove unsaleable and have to be demolished'.³² The memorandum noted that other departments, local authorities and state-sponsored bodies may at times have similar properties for disposal, while private owners were finding the upkeep of large houses difficult and some such properties were being demolished.³³ In what can be seen as an effort by the Minister for Lands to keep the department's actions in line with practice in other countries on this challenging issue, Ó Dálaigh remarked how: 'other countries try to encourage the preservation of their mansions and large houses and the Minister for Lands considers that similar encouragement should be considered here'.³⁴ The personal influence of the minister is evident here as this comparison and concern with

²⁹ See chapter two: figures compiled by author from houses listed as having been demolished specifically in this decade by Mark Bence-Jones in his *A guide to Irish country houses* (Revised ed., London, 1988).

³⁰ T. K. Whitaker was secretary of the Department of Finance from 30 May 1956 until 28 Feb. 1969.

³¹ E. Ó Dálaigh, secretary of the Department of Lands, to the secretary of the Department of Finance, 5 Aug. 1958 (N.A.I., Dept. of Finance files, FIN/F63/8/58).

³² Oifig an Aire Tailte summary of memorandum for government: preservation of mansions and large houses, 5 Aug. 1958 (N.A.I., Dept. of Finance files, FIN/F63/8/58).

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

keeping in line with the policy of other countries is very similar to arguments he made just four years previously, when he was Minister for Posts and Telegraphs, with regard to the proposed demolition of French Park, discussed above, to the then Minister for Lands, Tomás Ó Derrig. Childers had similarly argued then that: ‘all over Europe legislation is being passed enabling governments or bodies sponsored by the government to acquire old houses and to turn them to useful purpose’.³⁵ It is evident here that Childers had a particular interest in and desire to have an active role in this sector as minister and this was clear in his intervention in the case of French Park. In this regard, he can be viewed as exceptionally proactive. The memorandum discussed different means by which the preservation of these historic houses would be more feasible, namely under the following broad categories: use, taxation, rates and the establishment of a governmental committee on the issue. The memorandum and responses will thus be discussed under these headings below.

III

In relation to the utilisation of Big Houses, the office of the Minister for Lands’s summary of the memorandum noted that Big Houses could still be put to use as private residences as they had proved very attractive to foreign capital in times of British and European economic unrest. It advised that ‘it would be well to retain them for such contingency’.³⁶ Tax relief or rating concessions were suggested as a help in this regard. Writing in a particularly sympathetic manner about the contribution of these houses to society, the department stated:

large properties give employment, promote advance in agriculture, more particularly in specialised matters such as pedigree breeding and afford example in good husbandry ... Some of these properties might with comparatively little adaptation save the erection of new buildings for institutional use for agricultural education,

³⁵ Erskine Childers, Minister for Posts and Telegraphs, to T. Ó Deirg, Minister for Lands, 5 Nov. 1953 (N.A.I., Dept. of An Taoiseach files, S5004B).

³⁶ Oifig an Aire Tailte summary of memorandum for government: preservation of mansions and large houses, 5 Aug. 1958 (N.A.I., Dept. of Finance files, FIN/F63/8/58).

homes, hospitals, residential schools, etc. or as country type houses to stimulate tourism.³⁷

In contrast, a Department of Local Government report of 1943–5, discussed in chapter two, had found these houses overwhelmingly unsuitable for other uses.³⁸ The Department of Lands acknowledged that the commission often had to take over buildings situated on acquired lands and that these comprised ‘large structures of the mansion type; residences of medium size; or, as in a good many cases, reasonably sized dwelling houses’.³⁹ The memorandum stated that the Department of Lands recognised that their state of repair, which varied considerably, determined their fate. Therefore, while some smaller dwellings which were in reasonable repair were reconstructed and allotted with holdings for division, ‘if their condition is poor, they are demolished by the Land Commission and the salvaged materials sold or retained for use of improvement works; or such premises may be sold for demolition and removal of salvaged materials by the purchaser. Some cases of clearance are for the purpose of replacement by new houses on allotments to migrants’.⁴⁰ However, the department explained that there were other buildings which, although perhaps in a reasonable state of repair, were unsuitable for allotment owing to their size, for example. In such cases:

government departments and local authorities are consulted as to whether they require them. If they do not efforts are made to dispose of them, together with a certain amount of accommodation land, to suitable purchasers, usually by auction. If that method of disposal fails, the question of demolition has at least to be considered, because rates on the properties must be met and no income by way of rent is forthcoming; in any event, it is not a function of the Land Commission to retain such buildings on their hands indefinitely.⁴¹

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ The net result of the investigations into the possible usefulness of these mansions was that five (as a provisional number) were suitable for accommodation and 325 were unsuitable for any public purpose. Department of Local Government and Public Health memorandum for government, 17 May 1945 (N.A.I., Dept. of An Taoiseach files, S13344B).

³⁹ Oifig an Aire Tailte summary of memorandum for government: preservation of mansions and large houses, 5 Aug. 1958 (N.A.I., Dept. of Finance files, FIN/F63/8/58).

⁴⁰ Ibid; Migrants were those who were given an allotment of land in a different county to where they lived causing them to migrate there.

⁴¹ Ibid.

This again suggests that the Land Commission policy was to try to find uses for such houses and only considered demolition when no other option was available and they had not the powers to keep the buildings, although the legislation under which they worked regarding the acquisition of land certainly made the latter likely in many cases. First though, sale by public auction was reported to be the norm. However, if the auction proved abortive or was considered undesirable then sale would be by tender. Sales of property under the Land Acts were not subject to stamp duty. Furthermore, the department clarified that in cases where a house was offered for sale for residential purposes, enough land (usually between twenty and 120 acres) was provided with it in order to make it a saleable proposition. Thus it appears that the Land Commission attempted to sell such houses as residences with at least some land, although not enough to make such houses sustainable on income from land alone. The days when this was possible were long gone and the purchasers sought for such properties were not ones interested in using the house as the centre of a landed estate.

In addition, the department believed that mansions and large houses in good condition in the possession of the Land Commission or other departments or bodies could be put to use, even when sale was impossible, thereby avoiding the necessity to demolish. The memorandum stated that in 1954 the Minister for Health had reported that there was a need for more residential schools for those with intellectual disabilities. However, in reply to an enquiry by the Minister for Lands about the possible use by the Department of Health of mansions on lands acquired by the Land Commission more recently, the Minister for Health, Seán MacEntee, had informed him that, as a result of the slowing down of the hospital building programme, it was unlikely his department would be undertaking any expansion for some time. The minister had also mentioned that a number of the smaller institutions hitherto

used for tuberculosis treatment were becoming redundant and, before acquiring new premises, his department would have to endeavour to find new uses for existing premises.⁴²

The Office of the Minister for Lands then outlined the motivation behind this memorandum stating: ‘the Minister for Lands is aware that it is not the practice outside this country to demolish properties of the mansion type which are in good condition. He feels that the utilisation of large houses in good condition is a national problem which requires decision at government level’.⁴³ The minister proposed that an inter-departmental committee be formed, comprising representatives from his own department, the Department of Finance, the General Valuation Office, the O.P.W., the Department of Industry and Commerce for Bord Fáilte, and the Departments of Health, Education and Local Government. Such a committee could examine the problem generally, but also, aim in particular:

(a) to ascertain future requirements of state and state sponsored bodies and local authorities over the next ten years in regard to large premises intended for various purposes such as institutions, homes, hospitals, educational, agricultural and/or residential establishments, etc., or in respect of tourist amenities; (b) to ascertain and collate particulars of comparative costs of building new premises as compared with renovating or altering existing buildings in reasonable condition; (c) to obtain from local authorities full lists of empty habitable residences; (d) to ascertain from house agents particulars of properties in the rural districts for sale and unsaleable.⁴⁴

An appendix was attached to the memorandum. Table A of the memorandum listed Big Houses in the possession of the Land Commission.⁴⁵ Four of the large houses that were part of this table were considered to be of use for a migrant or to be offered for sale with land. However, the memorandum reported that an auction of Mote Park House, county Roscommon, with 112 acres had proved abortive and so it was to be offered for sale, firstly with accommodation lands or alternatively the buildings only for demolition, although this was clearly a last resort. Furthermore, both Dalystown House, county Galway and Franckfort

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ See Appendix One for tables.

Castle, county Offaly, the latter dating from the twelfth century approximately, were identified as the only two large houses suitable only for demolition. Franckfort's condition was described as very bad, and demolition appears to have been considered for these houses mainly when their condition was deemed too bad to make them eligible for use or sale. In the category 'medium houses', only one (unnamed) house on the Bennett estate, county Offaly, was, presumably owing to its poor repair, similarly deemed 'suitable only for demolition'.⁴⁶ List two within Table A provides a record of properties the department thought likely to come into the hands of the commission in the near future. Two large houses were included. The first, Oakley Park, Offaly, was thought to be 'suitable only for demolition', due to its 'very poor condition'.⁴⁷ Similarly, Kill House in Offaly was said to have been in 'bad repair'.⁴⁸

Table B tabulated the results of auctions and sales by tender of Land Commission houses over the previous four years approximately. Three large houses and one small/medium house were listed as having been sold by auction. The second group listed those sold by tender, including private treaty after abortive auction. These included two large houses and three small/medium houses. In the third category, 'Abortive auction or tender', two large houses were listed: Mote Park House and Shanbally Castle.⁴⁹ An auction of Mote Park with 112 acres had been aborted in 1956 as discussed above. Therefore it was to be offered for sale by tender with accommodation lands or else buildings for demolition.⁵⁰ However, in the case of this house, all options for sale as a viable residence failed and the third and only other option was to sell the buildings for demolition, indicating how small the market was for these houses in the mid twentieth-century. This adds weight to the argument

⁴⁶ Table A, appendix to Oifig an Aire Tailte summary of memorandum for government: preservation of mansions and large houses, 5 Aug. 1958 (N.A.I., Dept. of Finance files, FIN/F63/8/58).

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Table B, appendix to Oifig an Aire Tailte summary of memorandum for government: preservation of mansions and large houses, 5 Aug. 1958 (N.A.I., Dept. of Finance files, FIN/F63/8/58).

⁵⁰ Ibid.

that they would have been liabilities on the hands of government or the commission, neither of whom had any use for them. The second property on this list was Shanbally Castle. Sammon remembers that while he was in the secretariat, ‘the Land Commission was under fire from the press because of the demolition of Shanbally Castle in county Tipperary, in the course of land division operations. There were Dáil questions and the minister was in a vulnerable position. Over time, the criticisms and allegations of vandalism slowly abated.’⁵¹



Fig. 5.1, Shanbally Castle, county Tipperary.

Source: Archiseek, <http://archiseek.com/2012/1806-shanbally-castle-clogheen-co-tipperary/#.UXlnzbhOOM8> [date accessed: 25 Apr. 2013].

Shanbally was described in the table as late Georgian, of imitation Tudor design, and 150 years old. Table B in the memorandum illustrates revealingly that the Land Commission did not simply demolish the castle when they got their hands on it. Rather, it was first offered

⁵¹ Sammon, *In the land commission*, p. 45.

for sale by tender in November 1956 with 173 acres, no doubt intended as an incentive to buy the property as a residence, but not as a self-sustaining one. However, the sale was abortive, and it was as a last resort that the buildings were sold for demolition in August 1957. It is easy to remonstrate against such decisions in hindsight, but no other body or organisation stepped forward at the time to preserve the property and the preservation of such properties was not the Land Commission's remit, particularly when they had neither use for them nor the resources to conserve them. They had also stated, as noted above, that before demolishing a property they always first informed government departments and enquired if they had any use for it. Assuming this was also done in this case, no government department, including the O.P.W., offered to take on this property and maintain it. Therefore the Land Commission had very little option but to sell to the only market there was – demolition – and face the post-demolition concern from politicians and press, when these groups were then in a position to do so comfortably, without being drawn on the possible uses for the castle while it was standing.

The memorandum's third table, C, is a record of the premises which had been acquired by the Land Commission and were demolished during the previous four years approximately. These included Pallas House, county Wexford, Lissard House, Longford, and Leamlara House and Castleharrison, both situated in Cork. Each are described as in 'very poor repair' or suitable only for demolition.⁵² Shanbally Castle is listed again here. From this table it can be seen that five large houses in Land Commission hands were demolished in the period 1954–8, a relatively low number, even despite the short period. Furthermore, only four small/medium houses were demolished in the same time-frame.⁵³ This period was one of the most destructive periods for the Big House in terms of demolition and dismantling. During

⁵² Table C, appendix to Oifig an Aire Tailte summary of memorandum for government: preservation of mansions and large houses, 5 Aug. 1958 (N.A.I., Dept. of Finance files, FIN/F63/8/58).

⁵³ Ibid.

this time the Land Commission had acquired in the course of its land division work a total of thirty-six houses, nine of which were demolished, only a quarter of the total acquired.⁵⁴ This illustrates that three-quarters of the houses acquired by the Land Commission in this time-frame were either put to use or sold on. Furthermore, those demolished appear to be only the houses that were in poor repair or could not be sold. This is also less than half the number of houses which were definitely demolished between 1950 and 1960 as was calculated in chapter two from Mark Bence-Jones's listings in *A guide to Irish country houses*, when the estimated total demolished in this decade was twenty-three, although the total is probably much greater.⁵⁵ This suggests that possibly more than half of the houses which disappeared during this period were destroyed by owners themselves leaving them to ruin or selling for demolition.

In the main, houses acquired by the commission during this time were primarily located in Leinster, a total of sixteen, while the numbers from Munster and Connaught were similar at ten and nine respectively. There was only one house listed for Ulster – Fern Hill, in county Donegal. Leinster was presumably the province where most houses were acquired, as this was where the commission was most active in dividing large estates among economically disadvantaged migrants from the West, particularly Connaught.⁵⁶

By September, the Minister for Lands was growing anxious for a response to the memorandum from the Department of Finance who were compiling the responses from all departments concerned.⁵⁷ However, the department could not reply as they had not yet

⁵⁴ Appendix to Oifig an Aire Tailte summary of memorandum for government: preservation of mansions and large houses, 5 Aug. 1958 (N.A.I., Dept. of Finance files, FIN/F63/8/58).

⁵⁵ Figures compiled by author from houses listed as having been demolished specifically in this decade by Mark Bence-Jones in his *A guide to Irish country houses* (Revised ed., London, 1988). For more detail see chapter two.

⁵⁶ Appendix to Oifig an Aire Tailte summary of memorandum for government: preservation of mansions and large houses, 5 Aug. 1958 (N.A.I., Dept. of Finance files, FIN/F63/8/58).

⁵⁷ [J. McMahan] Land Commission to the secretary of the Department of Finance, 30 Sept. 1958 (N.A.I., Dept. of Finance files, FIN/F63/8/58).

received the responses of the O.P.W. Therefore, on 7 October 1958, the Department of Finance wrote to the O.P.W. requesting their observations as soon as possible.⁵⁸ Yet, by 21 November no response had been received and following another request from the Land Commission to speed up the reply, the O.P.W. was contacted again, proving that it was the Minister for Lands who was pressing for policy and suggestions on this issue, while the O.P.W. appear to have been reticent.⁵⁹ The Commissioners of Public Works eventually sent their reply to the Department of Finance after a lengthy delay of four months, possibly suggesting their lack of interest in the subject and their reluctance to get involved in the preservation of the Big House, a presumption which is supported by the evidence elucidated in chapter three.

The secretary of the Commissioners of Public Works laid out their views. The commissioners asserted that the proposal to establish an inter-departmental committee to examine the problem was a matter of policy and they offered no views on it, again belying their reluctance to be involved in such a scheme.⁶⁰ While they had no objections to being on such a committee, they pointed out that because of other commitments the amount of assistance their architects could give would be limited.

They argued:

with regard to the question of renovating and altering the buildings in question to meet the needs of modern institutions, schools etc., we have to state that in our opinion few, if any, of those buildings, which were of course designed as private residences, would economically lend themselves in lay-out to adaptation for the purposes mentioned, while defects arising from age, faulty initial construction, dry rot, etc. are liable to be encountered in very many cases and would almost certainly prove very costly to remedy. Furthermore maintenance costs would be very high. In general, having regard to our experiences, particularly at Shelton Abbey, county

⁵⁸ J. Mooney, Department of Finance to the secretary of the O.P.W., 7 Oct. 1958 (N.A.I., Dept. of Finance files, FIN/F63/8/58).

⁵⁹ Handwritten note on J. Mooney, Department of Finance to the secretary of the O.P.W., 7 Oct. 1958, dated 21 Nov. 1958 (N.A.I., Dept. of Finance files, FIN/F63/8/58).

⁶⁰ The secretary of the Commissioners of Public Works, O.P.W. to the secretary of the Department of Finance, 30 Dec. 1958 (N.A.I., Dept. of Finance files, FIN/F63/8/58).

Wicklow, and Johnstown Castle, county Wexford, we would be averse to the acquisition of such properties with a view to their adaptation for any of the purposes with which we are likely to be concerned, and we consider that the erection of new purpose designed buildings would be much more economical and satisfactory.⁶¹

In this, the Commissioners of Public Works (C.P.W.) practically echoed the views expressed by the Minister for Lands, Fianna Fáil T.D. for Cork North, Seán Moylan, given a number of years earlier, when he declared that these mansions were predominantly unsuitable for adaptation and therefore were demolished.⁶² The writer of a letter to the editor of the *Irish Times* during debates over Hazelwood House, county Sligo, which has been examined in a previous chapter, (presumably Moylan again), also maintained that new buildings were preferable for housing institutions as they would be more suitable and serviceable.⁶³ Notable here is the fact that it was the Minister for Lands that took the initiative, circulated an extensive memorandum on these properties, suggested breaks in taxation and rates to encourage owners to keep them, proposed uses for the rest, and pressed for urgent responses to the memorandum. In contrast, the Commissioners of Public Works submitted a late response, only when pressed for it, and concluded that the houses would be useless for the purposes proposed and that they would be opposed to their acquisition for ‘any’ of the suggested uses. Based on their experience with Shelton Abbey and Johnstown Castle, they wanted nothing to do with the proposals. However, this comprehensive judgment, based on only two properties, is possibly questioned somewhat in terms of the long-term value of such properties given that both are still being used by the state today. Nonetheless, the commissioners implicitly recommended demolition when they stated that they considered the erection of new buildings more economical and satisfactory. The Commissioners of Public Works also discouraged the suggested compilation of lists of empty and habitable and unsaleable houses by inquiries directed to the local authorities and house agents on the

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² *Dáil Éireann deb.*, xciii, 52 (2 May 1944); Moylan was Minister for Lands from July 1943 until Feb. 1948.

⁶³ *Irish Times*, 16 Jan. 1946.

grounds that such enquiries could 'give rise to undesirable publicity and perhaps misunderstandings'.⁶⁴ Instead, they suggested that it might be possible to procure such information through the local officers of the departments on any proposed committee.⁶⁵

In contrast, a draft letter prepared in the Department of Finance claimed that the Minister for Finance believed: 'where additional accommodation is required by government departments it would be generally desirable to make use of old abandoned mansions for the purpose'.⁶⁶ This contrast is notable, given that the commissioners responsible for the preservation of national monuments in the country were against investigating uses for these houses, while the Department of Finance recommended their use. It may have been the case that the commissioners knew from their particular expertise and experience that these houses were unsuited to other uses; however, the Department of Finance was also the department who would have been most concerned with frugality above sentimentality, if these houses were unsuitable.

IV

The memorandum from the office of the Minister for Lands also addressed the issue of taxation and its effect on the viability of the Big House. It stated:

In relation to the national economy the following comments occur in regard to the possibility of furthering the disposal of medium-sized properties:- (a) Whilst the inflation of property values which was a feature of the post-war years has largely ceased, it might recur to a similar, or even greater, extent in the event of, say, a further disturbance throughout Europe or the accession to office of a Labour government in England; (b) A revival of home confidence might stimulate demand or interest in acquiring such properties; (c) So also might alteration in future taxation policy by the government in regard to estate duties; or concession in regard to rating abatements, even for a period of years, after the properties have been acquired by their new owners. Such abatement would cost local authorities nothing for as things stand the

⁶⁴ The secretary of the Commissioners of Public Works, O.P.W. to the secretary of the Department of Finance, 30 Dec. 1958 (N.A.I., Dept. of Finance files, FIN/F63/8/58).

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Draft letter from J. W., Department of Finance, to the Department of Lands, Feb. 1959 (N.A.I., Dept. of Finance files, FIN/F63/8/58).

homes will be demolished, whereas if preserved they will continue to yield some rate revenue.⁶⁷

Furthermore, in relation to the sustainability of private houses, where the Department of Lands definitively did not have a duty of care, it was observed: 'it is possible that some owners of large residences are not aware of the possibility of having valuation revised on the plea of reduced letting value. Publication of this possibility might save some of these houses'.⁶⁸ The department expressed the view that the question of taxation necessitated urgent study. In addition, attention was drawn to the fact that 2.7 persons were employed on every estate of 200 acres and upwards and on average one person on estates from 100 to 200 acres as agricultural workers. This figure was not inclusive of employees such as gardeners, domestic help, and so on. The department thus emphasised a view that was not very current in the popular rhetoric of the day: that some owners not only provided good employment, but exercised good husbandry methods and developed pedigree stock. The Minister for Finance, Dr James Ryan, had also intimated his desire to attract persons from outside the state with a view to their residing in the rural districts of this country and so the Department of Lands thought it worthy of consideration whether such persons should be accorded tax concessions and incentives for certain types of specialist production.⁶⁹

On 2 September 1958 the office of the Revenue Commissioners responded to the Department of Lands' suggestions in relation to taxation. This office observed that the draft memorandum, while mentioning tax relief, made no specific recommendation, particularly for the type of tax concessions they had in mind for foreigners with unearned incomes who purchased large properties in the country.⁷⁰ It had also stated that alteration in future taxation

⁶⁷ Oifig an Aire Tailte summary of memorandum for government: preservation of mansions and large houses, 5 Aug. 1958 (N.A.I., Dept. of Finance files, FIN/F63/8/58).

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Office of the Revenue Commissioners to the Department of Finance, 2 Sept. 1958 (N.A.I., Dept. of Finance files, FIN/F63/8/58).

policy with regard to death duties might stimulate demand or interest in acquiring medium-sized properties. However, the Revenue Commissioners maintained that the question of death duties did not arise in relation to most of the proposals for disposal of these types of property, that is, buildings earmarked as teacher training or agricultural training centres. They concluded: 'in the case of private ownership it is suggested that, in view of the restricted market for such properties, their market value would scarcely be so considerable that any reduction in death duties could be said to constitute an incentive towards the acquisition of properties'.⁷¹

On the issue of granting taxation concessions and abatements for Big Houses, the Commissioners of Public Works' objection was that while the question of granting tax and rating concessions in the case of any of the properties mentioned, with a view to attracting purchasers from outside the state, was a matter of policy, it seemed that if such a proposal was made a strong case could be put forward for the application of similar concessions to other properties. However, a Department of Finance official wrote in a note on this: 'but what harm would it be to inquire into the matter?' indicating that some civil servants in the Department of Finance, the department which would be most affected by any such financial concessions, viewed the suggestion favourably.⁷²

The reply from the Commissioners of Public Works then went on to deal with the matter of the preservation of the mansions for their own merits, noting that the draft memorandum did not contain any specific reference to the question of the preservation of mansions and large houses for architectural or historical reasons. They recalled that one of the two resolutions passed by the National Monuments Advisory Council at a meeting in 1945 called for 'the setting up of a committee representative of the Departments of State

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Department of Finance handwritten note on letter from the Commissioners of Public Works to the Department of Finance, 30 Dec. 1958 (N.A.I., Dept. of Finance files, FIN/F63/8/58).

concerned, the Irish Tourist Board, and the architectural associations and learned societies to consider the best means of taking action for the preservation of such monuments'.⁷³ Furthermore, they had sent a minute to the Department of Finance in July 1946 which had stated that, as far as the above resolution was concerned, their interest in the question of the demolition of country houses and mansions was confined to the functions which they carried out in accordance with the National Monuments Act. They had written:

it seemed clear that country houses and mansions of the type to which attention had been drawn from time to time would not qualify for treatment under the act, save in exceptional cases which would probably be brought to our notice specifically and that accordingly we had no special views as to the desirability or otherwise of setting up a committee such as was visualised in the resolution.⁷⁴

The council had also suggested that, pending the outcome of a decision by the proposed committee, an annual sum should be provided for a survey of houses or monuments likely to be demolished. The Commissioners of Public Works believed that such a survey would, in addition to yielding information about which houses or mansions ought to be regarded as monuments with cultural/and historical associations, simultaneously eliminate the need for setting up a committee along the lines proposed by the N.M.A.C. In the meantime they had conducted inspections of several buildings brought to their notice, in one way or another, as being likely to be demolished and, where considered necessary, had drawings and photographs made. However, the commissioners added: 'none of the premises inspected was accepted for preservation by the state as a national monument'.⁷⁵ As such, they believed that making a record of exceptional buildings that were to be destroyed was enough, that such mansions were useless for any substantial purposes, and that the subject was not of pressing public concern. The Commissioners of Public Works wrote:

⁷³ The secretary of the Commissioners of Public Works, O.P.W. to the secretary of the Department of Finance, 30 Dec. 1958 (N.A.I., Dept. of Finance files, FIN/F63/8/58).

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

the problem is obviously a very vexed one and has from time to time been the subject of a good deal of comment, much of which has been ill-informed. We doubt if the general body of the public have any real interest in the matter and in our opinion the preservation by the state of any of the buildings in question as could not economically be utilised for some specific purpose would involve disproportionate expenditure of public moneys. There may be a case for the preservation of a few such buildings as show places or as places of general, etc., interest, but this might perhaps be best done by a body other than one of the government departments.⁷⁶

In this matter their principal architect had pointed out that while the British Ministry of Works was not empowered to take over houses which were still inhabited or not yet ruined, the preservation of outstanding country houses was undertaken by the National Trust, founded in 1895, and by this time it owned over 500 places of scenic, historic or architectural interest. They understood that the trust had statutory powers to hold such properties in permanent trust and received no government subsidy; however, in reality it did. The Commissioners of Public Works suggested that a study of the trust's activities be part of any inter-departmental inquiry into the question of the preservation of mansions and large houses in this country and that the views of An Taisce might be useful.⁷⁷

A civil servant in the Department of Finance, identified only as J. W., also offered his views in a draft letter on the issue of taxation, which had been raised by the Department of Lands' draft memorandum. His draft letter explained that in the absence of detail, the Minister for Finance, Fianna Fáil T.D. for Wexford Dr James Ryan, had no particular views on tax concessions and incentives for certain types of specialist production undertaken by persons with unearned incomes coming to live in the country. J. W. did point out though: 'it would be well to remember that when a small number of persons from Great Britain settled here after the war, there was such an outcry about it that the Oireachtas imposed a penal rate

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

of stamp duty on house and land acquisitions by non-nationals'.⁷⁸ However, this finance official believed that, in light of current economic thought, particularly as enunciated in the 'Programme for Economic Development', 'it is questionable if that xenophobic attitude was correct'.⁷⁹ Similarly, in another internal Department of Finance note on the subject from a J. M. to a Mr Hogan, it was suggested that stamp duty relief for purchases by non-nationals might be called for.⁸⁰ This note concluded with a proposal that, if this suggestion was favoured, and before any approach to the government, a conference should be held in the Department of Lands and attended by representatives of the departments concerned, in order to explore the matter and settle the terms of reference of the committee of inquiry. This proposal was to be forwarded to the Department of Lands.⁸¹

V

One of the most significant views on the issue of rates brought up by the Department of Lands' memorandum was that of the Commissioner of Valuation. On 21 October the observations of the Commissioner of Valuation were received by the Department of Finance.⁸² Given that his office was responsible for the setting of rates, his views on this topic were the most significant and also the most influential in terms of whether the status quo on this subject would change or not. Firstly he outlined the valuation of the houses, excluding those only fit for demolition, which had been listed in table A. Using that year's estimates, he calculated the rates on these houses: the maximum being between £150 and £3200 per annum in the case of two of the largest houses. He added that 'normal annual maintenance expenses would amount to at least twice the rates and to more than ten times the rates where valuations

⁷⁸ Draft letter from J. W., Department of Finance, to the Department of Lands, Feb. 1959 (N.A.I., Dept. of Finance files, FIN/F63/8/58).

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ The only information which could be obtained on these individuals from the sources.

⁸¹ J. M., Department of Finance to Mr Hogan, Department of Finance, 10 Feb. 1959 (N.A.I., Dept. of Finance files, FIN/F63/8/58).

⁸² Valuation office to the secretary of the Department of Finance, 21 Oct. 1958 (N.A.I., Dept. of Finance files, FIN/F63/8/58).

are low. Adequate domestic staff for these houses would probably cost at least twice the maintenance expenses'.⁸³ It is worth noting that rates were given as the reason throughout this period for sale and demolition by owners and also as a reason preventing the take-over of such properties by An Óige or the National Trust, as has been documented in previous chapters. In spite of this, here the Commissioner of Valuation, a figure in one of the best positions to assess the relative value and effect of rates, stated that they were only a portion of the monies that would be spent on maintenance of the house alone, perhaps ten times less in some cases. The commissioner stated that if thirteen of the eighteen houses listed in table A were completely de-rated, the occupier would gain less than £2 a week. In none of the cases would complete de-rating save the occupier £4 per week, that is, less than the cost of a maidservant. Therefore, in the commissioner's opinion, complete de-rating would be much too small a subvention to couple effectively with guarantees as to the use and proper maintenance of any property and rating abatements to occupiers of mansions would not be worth considering if they amounted to less than complete de-rating.

Furthermore, the commissioner elucidated on the wider implications of such a scheme, which he regarded as controversial, commenting:

there are more occupied than unoccupied mansions and large houses. An increase in rate poundages would inevitably follow the legislators' unwillingness to offer to future occupiers of currently unoccupied mansions a relief which was to be withheld from, say, religious communities caring for mental defectives or epileptics in similar mansions. How could the legislator defend derating of the native, not to mention the foreign, occupier of a mansion to the cottier, the widow or the father who gets no relief from a burden which normally represents a higher proportion of net income the lower the income group to which the ratepayer belongs?⁸⁴

There is no evidence in any other government file on the issue of Big Houses examined for this thesis that the work of the Valuation Office and the Land Commission intertwined like

⁸³ Observations of the Commissioner of Valuation on Oifig an Aire Tailte's summary of memorandum for government: preservation of mansions and large houses, 21 Oct. 1958 (N.A.I., Dept. of Finance files, FIN/F63/8/58).

⁸⁴ Ibid.

this, pointing again to the fact that this 1958 memorandum was exceptional in its pan-departmental approach to the question of the preservation of Big House from the perspective of many different departments and angles, including the issue of its possible use and the subject of taxation and rating.

The Commissioner of Valuation concluded that rates were relatively insignificant in the economics of running a mansion. In his view their irrelevance jettisoned the suggestion that owners could be made aware of the possibility of having their house valuation revised on the plea of reduced letting value. He believed that the spread of valuations of the properties on the commission's hands indicated the danger of making any generalisation about valuations, since, if the mansions were fully occupied, revision could result in more increases than decreases in valuation. Furthermore, he anticipated that advertising appeals for revision of valuation would have an undoubtedly provocative effect on thousands whose valuations had been increased in recent years. The commissioner also indicated that opportunities for reductions in valuation were actually known to those who advised occupiers of property. In addition, he explained that the Valuation Office did not agree that the properties might increase in value with a growing housing trade or another disturbance in Europe, arguing: 'state departments are particularly unsuited to speculation in property. The maintenance expenses involved in holding mansions for a rise in value would tend to be much higher in the case of the state department than in the case of the private speculator'.⁸⁵ Instead he maintained that if a reasonable opportunity for speculation did exist, the commission should be able to sell such properties to a private speculator. In any case, the commissioner believed that what attracted the rich foreigner was general freedom from taxation or low rates of tax, which were applicable to all residents.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

The Valuation Office then outlined the Commissioner of Valuation's criteria for whether these mansions should be preserved or disposed of, highlighting:

Architectural interest, historical associations etc. are factors which influence the decision as to whether a premises is worthy of preservation as a national monument. The taxpayer can fairly demand that if an old mansion is not the subject of a preservation order by the Commissioners of Public Works as a national monument it should be treated as an ordinary surplus property and disposed of as early as possible – the saving in maintenance expenses and the loss in value due to vacancy being the prime considerations.⁸⁶

Furthermore, the Land Commission's investment in the property listed in the first group of Table A was of interest to the Valuation Office as it sought to arrive at a decision about how much consideration ought be given to the commissioner's problem of realising the investment. The commissioner remarked that the market value of the buildings listed at two of Table A must be less than £2,000. In conclusion, the Commissioner of Valuation did not see a necessity for setting up an inter-departmental committee.⁸⁷ This was a significant conclusion given that one of the main suggestions which necessitated the need for a committee to be set up by the Department of Lands was the question of the reduction of rates in order to make the position of the Big House more viable. However, since the person in charge of this area of valuation, the commissioner, definitively stated that a reduction in rates would be of negligible value and did not need to be discussed further, this disposed of the Department of Lands' proposal to pursue this suggestion.

A Department of Finance official, J. W., also addressed the issue of rates in his draft reply to the Department of Lands. He wrote that it was the opinion of the Department of Finance that these houses could be used in two ways: occupied for private purposes, or for

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

public or institutional purposes. The question was whether either course was feasible or practicable.⁸⁸ Discussing the first use, J. W. stated:

As regards occupation by private persons, it is obvious that these Big Houses, particularly when located down the country, are no longer popular. Most of them were built for the landed gentry at a time when their share of the national income was much higher than it is today and when they could afford to get the two things necessary for keeping their houses comfortable and in good repair, namely, cheap servants and cheap fuel. The landed gentry have since been virtually wiped out by, inter alia, the Land Commission and high taxation. It is no longer possible to get servants and fuel cheaply. This problem could not be overcome by rating concessions, as suggested in paragraph 20 (c) of the draft memorandum, because remission of most, if not all, of the rates on a large mansion would still leave servants and fuel too dear for the man who finds one-fifth, one-quarter or even one-third of his income taken from him in taxation.⁸⁹

Tellingly, he went on: 'it is hard to see the Oireachtas agreeing to any change in this'.⁹⁰ This is interesting as normally it was the Department of Finance controlling decisions on these Big Houses, since it controlled the purse strings. However, here this departmental official was suggesting that these proposals would not so much be received badly by the Department of Finance's staff, but by the wider political body. Also notable is that at no stage in the course of these discussions was the Department of the Taoiseach consulted. The sentence about the Oireachtas, however, was crossed out. It was replaced with a statement which did not so specifically locate the blame for a prospective refusal of taxation reliefs for Big Houses. This read: 'it is hard to see the position in this regard being altered for many years to come, so the melancholy fact must be faced that the day of the Big House is almost over as far as occupation by the private individual is concerned'.⁹¹

On 10 February 1959, another civil servant in the Department of Finance, J. M. wrote internally to a colleague in the department, Mr Hogan, outlining a different view. J. M.

⁸⁸ Draft letter from J. W., Department of Finance, to the Department of Lands, Feb. 1959 (N.A.I., Dept. of Finance files, FIN/F63/8/58).

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Ibid.

thought that the attitude displayed by the Revenue Commissioners, the O.P.W. and particularly the Valuation Office was: 'rather unsympathetic, uncooperative and perhaps unrealistic. *Prima facie*, the present system of valuation and rating, etc., encourages the destruction of large old buildings and old buildings in general'.⁹² Despite the fact that the Commissioner of Valuation asserted in his letter that rates would have no effect, here a Department of Finance official stated clearly that the current policy of rates and taxation encouraged the destruction of the Big House. J. M. wrote: 'it has been a common experience in the Irish countryside to see old buildings in fair condition being deliberately pulled down or de-roofed to escape valuation and rating. This is done even where the valuation is insignificant in amount'.⁹³ He believed that as a result of this: 'unlike other countries, we have practically no real buildings, apart from ruins, left in the country'.⁹⁴ His view was that 'the factor that determines the fate of the building is not so much the amount for the rates but the obligation to pay any rates at all on a building that is not fully suitable for the owner's purposes'.⁹⁵ In his opinion, farmers particularly regarded rates as a levy for which they got no return and he thought that the Commissioner of Valuation did not appreciate this fully.⁹⁶ The Land Commission in some cases allocated the Big House situated on acquired lands with the divided land to the allottee. In most cases, these allottees were farmers who did not have uses for these houses or the resources to maintain them, as this finance official highlighted.

VI

A draft letter from the Department of Finance advocated replying to the Department of Lands that the Minister for Finance considered that no useful purpose would be served by the setting up of an inter-departmental committee and suggested that the Minister for Lands should not

⁹² J. M., Department of Finance, to Mr Hogan, Department of Finance, 10 Feb. 1959 (N.A.I., Dept. of Finance files, FIN/F63/8/58).

⁹³ *Ibid.*

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

pursue the matter.⁹⁷ In contrast, J. M. of the Department of Finance, who appears to have been a particularly considerate civil servant in this regard, argued that ‘a more sympathetic and non-committal attitude is called for. An investigation by an inter-departmental committee as advocated by the Department of Lands should do no harm and might yield fruitful results, i.e., give a line for practical policy’.⁹⁸ In his view, the terms of reference of the proposed committee should include specific direction to enquire into the system of valuation, rating, taxation and the law which affected properties of the kind concerned and the feasibility of modifications which could be calculated to encourage their preservation. He argued: ‘if grants and reliefs from rates on new buildings are warranted to stimulate building, it is arguable that some kind of corresponding assistance and reliefs for a limited category of old buildings of historical interest might be justified to encourage their continued use and preservation. Indeed, in theory at any rate, they might be more justified’.⁹⁹

Despite this, another finance civil servant, identified as L. Ó N, writing internally to a Mr [R]ooney, requested it be said that on the information that was presently available, the Department of Finance doubted whether there was a problem which would require the attention of an inter-departmental committee on the lines suggested. It was therefore thought premature to approach government on the issue until the *prima facie* considerations of policy had been further examined. Instead it was suggested that if the Minister for Lands desired to pursue the question, before formulating a submission to government the Department of Lands might arrange a conference of representatives from the interested departments.¹⁰⁰ These suggestions were obviously favoured by those in power in the Department of Finance as they

⁹⁷ Draft letter from Department of Finance to the Department of Lands, undated (N.A.I., Dept. of Finance files, FIN/F63/8/58).

⁹⁸ J. M., Department of Finance, to Mr Hogan, Department of Finance, 10 Feb. 1959 (N.A.I., Dept. of Finance files, FIN/F63/8/58).

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁰ Handwritten note from L. Ó N to Mr [R]ooney, Department of Finance, 10 Feb. 1959 on letter from J. M., Department of Finance to Mr Hogan, Department of Finance, 10 Feb. 1959 (N.A.I., Dept. of Finance files, FIN/F63/8/58).

comprised the reply sent to the Department of Lands on 16 February, with copies forwarded to the other departments involved.¹⁰¹ In spite of this, in July 1959 Childers left the position of Minister for Lands and when Michael Moran succeeded him it does not appear that this proposal was pursued further, suggesting that the drive to construct a policy was coming from Childers, and appeared to leave with him.

It is also possible that his initiative was thwarted by top ranking officials in the Land Commission itself, who may have been only too happy to let this extra work drop when Childers was not pushing it, work which they were not obliged to do by their brief. Sammon has shown how in one case the secretary of the Land Commission did not let Childers see a draft speech containing new ideas for the Land Commission to adopt and instead was ‘fed’ an ‘orthodox draft speech’.¹⁰² Speaking of the impact Childers then had, Sammon wrote that in the end: ‘no great decisions of any real worth were taken by the minister’, although admitting that the fact that ‘he had grandiose ideas when he arrived in the Land Commission cannot be questioned’.¹⁰³ Sammon even thought that these high-ranking officials within the commission ‘had an inkling that Erskine Childers was not long for the Land Commission’ and so what was fed to him from these officials was ‘the stale old diet which was dished up, year after year, on the estimate for lands’.¹⁰⁴ As such:

in his efforts to reform and improve the performance and the work of the Land Commission, Erskine Childers found his way blocked by both politicians and by his top advisors ... In the wider sphere of his hopes to introduce a more modern and effective land settlement policy, Erskine was spangled firmly by the secretary and AS [assistant secretary]. On his record, he must fall into the broad category of ministers who allowed themselves to be won round to the status quo by hide-bound top civil servants. All his ideas and hopes of transforming the Land Commission

¹⁰¹ Department of Finance to the Department of Lands, 16 Feb. 1959 (N.A.I., Dept. of Finance files, FIN/F63/8/58).

¹⁰² Sammon, *In the land commission*, pp 54–5.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, p. 55.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 56.

failed to come through to the stage of action. Erskine Childers was, accordingly, a disappointment in the Land Commission.¹⁰⁵

The 1958 memorandum sent on his initiative is illustrative of his desire to be an involved and pro-active minister and it was compiled by his office in the department. However, it is also an invaluable resource, which reveals the Department of Lands and the Land Commission's policy toward country houses. The department and the Land Commission appear to have worked very closely on this and the Land Commission was really the nerve-centre of the workings on land, while the department looked after the other portfolios often lumped together with lands, such as forestry and fisheries. The department therefore predominantly took a hands-off approach to the question of lands and thus relied on the expertise and experience of the Land Commission. The memorandum reveals privately to other government departments the policy of the Land Commission in relation to Big Houses which came into their possession, at least from 1954–8. This appears to have been a practical policy, born out by the comments of various ministers below, and it was also a policy that was not questioned in this document. Rather the memorandum's aim was to attempt to address the issue of the preservation of historic houses more generally. As such it is mostly concerned with recommendations on rates and taxation to make the ownership of such properties easier for owners and organisations, the possible utilisation of these houses by government departments, and also the proposal that this issue merited an inter-departmental committee to seek ways to halt the destruction of the Big House.

One can see Childers's own hand very much at work here as most of these suggestions were far beyond the remit and work of the commission and hence were not followed up by its staff or other departments when Childers vacated the ministerial seat. This does not necessarily reveal the commission's apathy, however. They were an incredibly busy

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., p. 57.

government body which did not have a portfolio to discuss the preservation of Big Houses more generally among government – their main concern was land. Nonetheless it is an enlightening document for revealing not only the Land Commission's policy when it acquired these houses at this time, but also the reluctance of every government department contacted to give any concessions to the suggestions proposed. Most emphatic in their opposition were the O.P.W.'s officers, headed up by its commissioners – a conclusion which could have been foreseen from the findings of chapter three – as well as the Valuation Office and Revenue Commissioners. In fact, some enlightened civil servants in the Department of Finance were among the most sympathetic, perhaps owing to the change in attitude which was coming about there, as around this time the *First Programme for Economic Expansion* was published under the new and progressive secretary of the Department of Finance, T. K. Whitaker. This heralded a more outward and progressive looking economic policy for the nation.

In the end the suggestions proposed by the memorandum came to nothing. An initiative motivated by the personal interest of the minister was not welcomed by the Commissioners of Public Works, the Revenue Commissioners or the Valuation Office, for many different reasons. The commissioners could be seen in chapter three to be reluctant to take on any of these houses for fear of setting a precedent and ending up with Big Houses on their hands for which they had not the money, nor the staff to maintain. Furthermore, they did not think these houses were their concern since their Inspector of National monuments did not consider them eligible for preservation under the National Monuments Act. The Valuation Office and Revenue Commissioners were also reluctant to agree to any concessions for the owners of such mansions, when it would not be given to ordinary house owners or organisations and they too feared the public response. Significantly, however, the Commissioner of Valuation also justifiably asserted that if such houses were not national monuments eligible for state preservation then they were not the state's concern and should

be sold on immediately as this was in the best interests of the taxpayer. In essence, these offices and departments felt they could not justify concessions for these Big Houses when they were not national monuments eligible for public funding and were mostly unsuitable for adaptation to other government uses. Probably owing to a combination of their limited budgets and staff, a reluctance to become responsible for this difficult and emotionally-loaded issue, and a realisation that the preservation of the Big House was not then justifiable under public expenditure, these departments were overwhelmingly negative in their response to the proposed state intervention toward preserving these houses.

VII

The Land Commission and the Department of Lands at times attracted criticism over the handling of Big Houses which they acquired during their land division work, such as in the case of Shanbally Castle, demolished in 1957. Another case which drew adverse criticism to the Department of Lands' policy in relation to Big Houses was that of Dromore Castle, when Tomás Ó Deirg was Minister for Lands. On 26 October 1953 the *Irish Independent* reported that the Limerick castle 'must be demolished at the insistence of the Department of Lands as a condition of the purchase of the premises with one hundred acres of woodland by the forestry division of the department'.¹⁰⁶ According to the paper the castle had been built by the third Earl of Limerick in 1878 at a cost of £40,000. It had been purchased by Morgan McMahon, owner of a Limerick Sawmills, in 1937 and occupied by him until 1948, but had been vacant since. The owners were reported to have obtained permission to demolish the castle, allowing the sale to the Department of Lands to go ahead.¹⁰⁷

In a letter dated 30 October 1953 written by S. Mac Piarais of the forestry division of the Department of Lands to Mr Doyle, Mac Piarais explained that Dromore Castle had been

¹⁰⁶ *Irish Independent*, 26 Oct. 1953.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*

unoccupied for many years during which time the owners, Messrs McMahon, had advertised the property for sale on a number of occasions.¹⁰⁸ In March 1953, during negotiations for purchase, Messrs McMahon requested that the department ‘make alternative offers for (1) the estate complete with buildings, and (2) the estate with the buildings demolished, in case it should be to their own advantage to sell the buildings before disposing of the estate for forestry purposes’.¹⁰⁹ The department was not at this stage prepared to make an offer for the estate complete with buildings, but complied with the firm’s request for an offer on the basis of the prior demolition of the buildings, thereby intimating that they would require the demolition of the buildings and the removal of the materials to be concluded before completion of a sale. Messrs McMahon had obtained the county council’s permission to demolish the castle and it was their intention to accept the department’s offer. The department required only such demolition work as would leave the walls in a safe condition and so that the owners would have no further rights to the property after the sale. Mac Piarais clarified the department’s reasoning by explaining:

From the department’s viewpoint, the acquisition of this estate for forestry purposes is highly desirable but the castle would have no value as such to the department. The forestry division would necessarily have had to view with reluctance the purchase of the estate at a price inflated by the inclusion of a castle for which, if the unsuccessful advertisement on Messrs McMahon’s part is any indication, no market could be found but for which Messrs. McMahon would reasonably have expected an appreciable price. The exclusion of the castle at their request was, therefore, fully acceptable from the department’s viewpoint.¹¹⁰

In this case, while at first the insistence of the Department of Lands that the castle be demolished before they purchased may appear to advocate the destruction of an historic building, as the forestry division pointed out, the castle could not be sold, had no market

¹⁰⁸ S. Mac Piarais to Mr Doyle, 30 Oct. 1953 (N.A.I., Dept. of An Taoiseach files, S5004B).

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

value and would be of no use to them, although it would inflate the price at which they could purchase the whole estate which they required only for forestry purposes.

Such cases fuelled negative perceptions of the Department of Lands and the Land Commission's policy as indifferent to, or antagonistic toward, the survival of Big Houses on acquired lands. Dooley has shown how such perceptions were evident, for example, in the *Sligo Champion's* coverage of the case of Hazelwood House, discussed previously. He explained:

in 1946, Hazelwood in County Sligo was put up for sale by the Land Commission with a stipulation that the buyer had to demolish the house, remove all materials and level the site. To encourage potential buyers, the advertisement of sale pointed out that the roof had a high quantity of lead. The editor of the *Sligo Champion*, one of the few to oppose the move, condemned what he perceived to be the Land Commission's policy of acquiring houses simply to demolish them ... [and] sarcastically proclaimed: 'In Ireland the value of such a house is measured by the contents of lead in the roof'.¹¹¹

Desmond Guinness, who established the Irish Georgian Society in 1958, was just as critical of Land Commission policy arguing:

when it came into possession of what is loosely termed nowadays as an 'historic property' the consequences were dire. The buildings were emptied and left shuttered up for years while the dreamers decided how to carve up the place. A favourite ploy was to run the statutory concentration camp fence ten feet or so from the front steps. The trees were cut, the garden went wild and no longer gave any employment. In terms of national investment it was a waste. The house would be advertised for sale, through the means of a five line advertisement on the back page of a local paper, to ensure that no one except the demolition men could possibly be misguided enough to buy it.¹¹²

Furthermore, Dooley has explained that the surviving landed families who managed to retain their historic houses also condemned the fact that 'where the commission acquired lands and

¹¹¹ Dooley, *The decline of the big house*, p. 143.

¹¹² Desmond Guinness, cit. in Dooley, *The decline of the big house*, p. 143.

accompanying houses, all too often it simply demolished the house with no consideration for its architectural or heritage value'.¹¹³

While this may have been true in many cases, it appears from the evidence garnered for this research project that it is possible that the Land Commission had, in theory, a more practical approach in relation to Big Houses acquired on lands for division, at least by the 1950s, as was elucidated in the 1958 memorandum. This is supported by the claims of other Ministers for Lands on this subject, although these too must be viewed with some scepticism as political speeches. When Fianna Fáil T.D. for Cork North, Seán Moylan, was Minister for Lands from June 1944 to February 1948 he maintained that 'residences on lands acquired by the Land Commission for division which are not suitable for disposal to allottees may be demolished in order to provide material for building smaller houses for allottees or may be sold by public auction'.¹¹⁴ This predominantly practical approach of the commission was even elucidated by this minister who did not sympathetically view the preservation of such houses, although it must also be remembered that much of this evidence is necessarily, due the lack of availability of files, based on public rhetoric, and, as such, was sympathetically representative of the Land Commission and its actions. He believed that the majority of Big Houses were 'not structurally sound, have no artistic value and no historic interest' and he argued: 'the sooner they go down the better – they are no use'.¹¹⁵ Fianna Fáil Minister for Lands from 1959–68, Michael Moran, expounded the ostensible practical policy of the Land Commission when he stated in 1964 that there was no policy of deliberately breaking-up demesnes as such. Nevertheless, he maintained that the Land Commission had a duty to help uneconomic holders, and, for this purpose they needed good land. He admitted that 'they have very little use for castles or great mansions and would not acquire woods or

¹¹³ Dooley, *The land for the people*, p. 90.

¹¹⁴ *Dáil Éireann deb.*, xcii, 1518 (23 Feb. 1944).

¹¹⁵ *Dáil Éireann deb.*, xciii, 52 (2 May 1944).

sand-dunes save where they come as adjuncts to substantial areas of good farm land.¹¹⁶ Even so, Moran maintained that the Land Commission recognised that a castle ‘must have a fair share of land around it if it is to survive at all’.¹¹⁷ He re-emphasised this policy in the Seanad in 1965 where he specified that the general policy of the Land Commission was to apportion a considerably larger amount of land than twenty-five acres with such houses in order to enable people to sell this type of residence. In his opinion, ‘it is a good thing from a public policy point of view that these places should be preserved’.¹¹⁸ Furthermore, he admitted that in many cases the owners of such properties gave good employment and that it took a substantial income in these days to be able to afford to take over one of those places, and the costs involved in keeping them.¹¹⁹ He elaborated:

as a matter of policy, we try to have them maintained. When they take over an estate with one of these big mansions, and when it is being prepared for division ... the Land Commission allocate what they consider to be a sufficient amount of amenity land to these Big Houses to make them attractive from the point of view of a purchaser and to encourage them to be taken over by someone who can maintain them ... we know that if we do not do that, so far as the economics are concerned we have them for their scrap value, which serves no purpose of the Land Commission, or any other purpose. Therefore, it is good business for the Land Commission to allocate a sufficient amount of land to these places and, particularly to ones of historic interest, to ensure that they will be kept going as living concerns ... That has been their practice and their policy to enable such a person to get rid of the place economically, and to ensure that the place would be preserved if it were of any interest at all.¹²⁰

Moran explained that if the Land Commission acquired a very large house, like Oak Park, county Carlow, and it received a demand from the agricultural institute for facilities, the commission automatically gave the house in the public interest. In fact, where there was any question of the public interest, he was adamant that any state department, including the Land Commission, automatically took that into account and he stressed that the department was

¹¹⁶ Department of Lands (Land Commission) draft letter to Lord Mountbatten (N.A.I., Dept. of An Taoiseach files, 98/6/677).

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ *Dáil Éireann deb.*, lviii, 835 (12 Feb. 1965).

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

¹²⁰ *Dáil Éireann deb.*, lviii, 835–6 (12 Feb. 1965).

very conscious of preserving any worthwhile property.¹²¹ It might be argued that this could have been political rhetoric; however, the fact that the same policy was repeated by different ministers over a long time-span, and that it is similarly explained in private government files from the Land Commission in relation to the Dromore Castle case, for example, or the 1958 memorandum, suggests that this may have been the reality of the Land Commission's policy and attitudinal disposition towards these Big Houses.

Conclusion

To conclude, the nature of the land division carried out by the Land Commission over the twentieth century meant that most Big Houses were no longer sustainable and, as such, the Land Commission's work was unquestionably responsible for many Big Houses which were abandoned, left to decay or sold off for other uses or demolition. In fact, Land Commission acquisition and redistribution policy, which they implemented as legislated for by the land acts enacted by independent governments, made the decline of the Big House inevitable. Nonetheless, as has been illustrated in this chapter, when the commission itself acquired Big Houses with land, demolition by the commission appears to have taken place in a minority of cases, at least during the short number of years for which Land Commission statistics are available, and was not the commission's first preference or a matter of policy. In spite of this, prevailing public perceptions and historiography have criticised the commission for their role in the destruction of the Big House in Ireland. In 1992 the *Irish Times* reported that as a body it: 'had its own objectives and they did not include the conservation of colonial history. Too often, the buildings that came into its hands met the fate ... [of] Coole Park ... this was demolished and the stones carted off by the county council. The Land Commission fiat did not, luckily, extend to national monuments'.¹²² While there are no available statistics from the

¹²¹ *Dáil Éireann deb.*, lviii, 838 (12 Feb. 1965).

¹²² *I.T.*, 20 June 1992.

early decades of independence, when land division was at its peak, what is suggested from the 1958 memorandum which attempted to press government to formulate a policy in relation to these houses, and the Land Commission's actions in individual cases examined in this chapter, is that usually the commission would first try to sell a house if acquired with some land attached and also informed government departments of the acquisition to ascertain if they had any use for them. Only when these options of sale or state use failed did they proceed to demolish the house in question. This action is somewhat justifiable considering that in such cases there was no use for these houses, no apparent reason to keep them, no perceived public value in doing so, and no scope for preserving them in the Land Commission's budget or brief. Furthermore, the commission could then put their scrap materials to use, sometimes much needed use, as in the period of the Emergency when such materials were in short supply and required for the building of houses, roads and factories.

The Minister for Lands had a unique role. The commission appears to have continued with its established policy if the minister was not interested or individually motivated to change it. Yet in the case of a minister such as Fianna Fail's Erskine Childers, his very different ideas on the preservation of these houses motivated the Land Commission to propose policy changes for government departments to adopt as part of the 1958 memorandum. Childers in particular took such an interest in the preservation of the Big House that he attempted to push the government to formulate a policy on the issue, even suggesting the abolition of rates and taxes for owners still in possession, that is, on houses not even on the Land Commission's books. As discussed above, however, no department wanted to become responsible for this issue as they did not believe that these houses could be put to use, merited protection as national monuments or concessions in rates and taxation that would be withheld from 'ordinary' citizens. Hence it is clear that until the O.P.W. was willing to class these Big Houses as national monuments, no state department could justify the

expenditure of public funds or concessions to owners of these properties alone when there was no legitimate reason for doing so above an ordinary house or householder.

In addition, while some demolitions appear on paper, and, in hindsight, to be callous decisions, the Land Commission did not ostensibly demolish because of antagonistic attitudes. Evidence suggests the Land Commission's attitude was more pragmatic. The houses were left with a small amount of land to make them sellable as residences, although not enough to make them economically viable on land alone. The houses which were left with some of their demesne fared better in terms of their survival, as they could be sold on as private country homes or country estates later in the decade. The day of one house standing on enough land to make it viable from rental income alone was over and it was the Land Commission's job to ensure that such massive tracts were broken up among migrants, uneconomic landholders and the landless – this was government policy. It is also worth remembering that dramatic demolitions, such as was the case with Shanbally Castle, are always remembered, as befitting the dramatic nature of demolition, while those houses that were sold on, reused, or gradually decayed in the hands of owners, are not. Furthermore, it needs to be emphasised that this chapter is concerned with the attitudinal disposition of the Land Commission toward the Big House and its survival. As such, the evidence available illustrates that the commission did not have overtly antagonistic attitudes towards Big Houses. Rather, if one can take the limited sample data on the years 1954–8 as indicative of their overall policy, it appears that the commission attempted to find uses that would allow for the survival of the historic houses which it acquired. Nonetheless, that is not to say that the work of the Land Commission, particularly after the 1923 act, in compulsorily acquiring landed estates surrounding these houses, was not detrimental to their survival. Many of these houses were primarily surviving on incomes generated from the land in terms of rents received and even the Department of Finance was not wrong to admit that the Land

Commission and high taxation were responsible for the ‘wiping out’ of the landed gentry and the Big House way of life.¹²³ However, other national and international factors also played a role in the demise of the house, such as the worldwide economic depression of the 1920s or the alienation of the landed class politically and socially in the Free State, as have been discussed in previous chapters. Furthermore, a system of disproportionate land ownership, particularly between the Anglo-Irish who owned vast acres and the ‘native’ Irish who were mostly only tenants on the land, was not going to be allowed to continue when an independent government came to power under pressure to address this perceived historical and unjust grievance.

On 9 February 1977 the Department of Lands became the Department of Fisheries, having largely down-scaled its work after the last land act and in 1992 the Irish Land Commission (Dissolution) Act provided for the dissolution of the Irish Land Commission.¹²⁴

¹²³ Draft letter from J. W., Department of Finance, to the Department of Lands, Feb. 1959 (N.A.I., Dept. of Finance files, FIN/F63/8/58).

¹²⁴ *Irish Land Commission (Dissolution) Act, 1992. An act to provide for the dissolution of the Irish Land Commission, for the winding up of the system of land purchase, for the transfer of certain functions exercisable under the land purchase acts, and for other connected matters* (11 Nov. 1992).

Chapter Six

A climate of change, 1957–73

In March 1957 Fianna Fáil returned to power for sixteen years, although their years of unbroken government from 1957 to 1973 saw three different Taoisigh. The first was Éamon de Valera, who resumed the position for the last time from March 1957 until June 1959 when he resigned to become President of Ireland. Seán Lemass took over after de Valera's departure and was Taoiseach until November 1966 when he resigned from government. His successor was Jack Lynch who saw out the last of this term of Fianna Fáil domination which ended in March 1973. This chapter will examine attitudes towards the Big House over this extended period of relative stability in government, but radical changes in society. It will assess to what extent wider international and national shifts in economics and society affected a change in attitudes toward, and perceptions of, the Big House in Ireland. This broad economic and political context will be outlined first because it formed the basis for changing attitudes towards the Big House during this period and also situates the fate of the Big House in the overall national context.

I

After the insular, protectionist attitude which had been adopted by government for many years, particularly Fianna Fáil, when de Valera resigned as Taoiseach his successor Lemass began to argue along with civil servants and economists that Ireland needed to engage more with the European community if it was to develop. In fact, this period is conventionally viewed as one of the turning points in such a re-evaluation of this position and the 1958 publication of the Department of Finance document *Economic Development* and the new Fianna Fáil government's *First Programme for Economic Expansion*: 'is generally heralded

as marking the policy shift from protectionism to outward orientation. Conventional wisdom therefore credits T. K. Whitaker and Seán Lemass, as the key architects of these documents, with effecting the policy shift'.¹ However, Frank Barry has argued:

[The] underlying story is more complicated. The dismantling of Ireland's protectionist tariff barriers began only in 1963, five years after the supposed turning point, while tax relief for export expansion was introduced by Taoiseach John A. Costello, leader of the second inter-party government, in 1956, two years before the supposed turning point. This tax relief, furthermore, represents the genesis of Ireland's low corporation tax regime which Padraic White, long-serving Managing Director of the IDA [Industrial Development Authority], refers to as 'the unique and essential foundation stone of Ireland's foreign investment boom'.²

Barry maintained that proposals for some form of such relief, which had been circulating since the Second World War, were, however, a bone of contention between the Department of Industry and Commerce, who were pushing for it, and the Department of Finance and the Revenue Commissioners who strongly resisted it. The inter-party government, particularly Costello, was anxious to address the issue and 'in a major policy speech delivered to an inter-party meeting on 5 October 1956 ... Costello overruled the long-standing revenue and finance position and announced that E.P.T.R. [Export profits tax relief] would be introduced'.³ As such, Barry argued that Costello and the inter-party government pioneered moves towards increasing incentives for foreign businesses establishing in Ireland and for opening up the Irish market. This was a comparatively radical move to open the country up to foreign influence in a way that had not been allowed since the beginning of the Free State, and would have an effect on how the Big House was viewed. In 1953 Fine Gael produced their own document on the issue, entitled *Blueprint for Prosperity*.⁴ In Barry's opinion, despite de Valera and others still railing, at least in rhetorical flourishes, against foreign

¹ Frank Barry, 'Foreign investment and the politics of export profits tax relief 1956' in *Institute for International Integration Studies (IIIS) Discussion Paper*, no. 357 (Feb. 2011), p. 1 available at Trinity College, <http://www.tcd.ie/iiis/documents/discussion/pdfs/iiisd357.pdf> [date accessed: 21 Nov. 2012].

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

involvement in Irish resources, Costello's speech and the inter-party's position actually forced Lemass to change his tactics and so he began to argue that the inter-party government should have introduced more generous concessions.

Therefore, when Lemass came to power, both he and his Fianna Fáil government had to maintain this attitudinal position. As such, many of the limitations imposed by the Control of Manufactures Acts 'were rescinded with the passage of the Industrial Development (Encouragement of External Investment) Act of 1958', while the acts themselves were 'repealed completely by an act of 1964 which provided that they would cease to operate in 1968'.⁵ Hence Barry emphasised that the drive toward a more open economy and outward looking nation, shaking off its insular, xenophobic shackles which had remained from its War of Independence days, was actually the result of a long process, although it is commonly attributed to Whitaker and Lemass. This development had been instigated by the inter-party government's initiatives, including the establishment of 'the Capital Investment Advisory Committee, the Industrial Development Authority, (the forerunner of) C  ras Tr  cht  la, the extension of the industrial grants scheme, and of course E.P.T.R.'. ⁶ Dermot Keogh has similarly written of how Lemass became Taoiseach at a time when the Irish economy was already strengthening.⁷ The substantive intellectual battle over the move away from protectionism to an open economy had already been decided. Keogh explained that while 'it would be unfair to say that this was a little like reinventing the wheel ... the secretary of the Department of Finance, Whitaker, and Lemass and [Minister for Finance, Dr James] Ryan had gradually and painstakingly nursed politicians away from the false, womb-like security which economic protectionism had allegedly afforded Irish industry'.⁸ This was to affect

⁵ Ibid., pp 16–17.

⁶ Ibid., p. 17.

⁷ Dermot Keogh, *Twentieth-century Ireland: nation and state* (Dublin, 1994), p. 245.

⁸ Ibid.

attitudes which had tended towards xenophobia and moved them to a new appreciation for foreign influence in the country.

Despite this, 1957, the year Lemass took over as Taoiseach and leader of Fianna Fáil, is often considered the turning point when Ireland politically and socially changed from being insularly focused to being a progressively outward looking nation. However, Barry's argument above refutes this radical break theory postulating instead that Lemass followed on from where the coalition government had already laid the ground. Similarly for the Big House, changes in attitudes came about slowly over long time periods and owing to many factors, although they became most apparent at this time. Alvin Jackson also questions this perceived 'faultline in Irish history, marked by the return of the Fianna Fáil government in 1957', writing that 'the geological strata on either side of the apparent divide are evidently related: the economic policies which Lemass and the new Minister of Finance, Dr James Ryan, pursued had been foreshadowed by a variety of initiatives or ideas launched by earlier administrations'.⁹ Jackson elaborated that while Lemass and Whitaker are the figures most associated with the rapid economic growth and the political and social change of the early 1960s:

it was the coalition Minister for Finance, Gerard Sweetman, who had been the critical patron of Whitaker, appointing him to the secretaryship at the age of 40, in 1956. It was Jim Ryan who encouraged Whitaker in the elaboration of his ideas; and it was Ryan who sponsored Whitaker's paper on Economic Development (first outlined as 'Has Ireland a Future?' in December 1957) before the Fianna Fáil cabinet: the full-blown plan was published in 1958.¹⁰

Therefore Jackson argued that it would be unfair to detach the progress of the 1960s both from wider global movements and also the initiatives taken by governments as early as 1940, but particularly by Costello's second inter-party government. In fact, in his view, Lemass and

⁹ Alvin Jackson, *Ireland 1798–1998* (Oxford, 1999), pp 317–8.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp 318–9.

Whitaker both built on these earlier achievements and also came to power at a particularly fortunate time of international economic upswing, although he admits that the *Programme for Economic Expansion* meant that Ireland could capitalise on this international phenomenon.¹¹

Nonetheless, when these economic policies came to fruition they acted as a catalyst for a change in attitude for the governance of the country. John A. Murphy has described it as ‘a new departure also in the more fundamental sense of moving radically away from the old Sinn Féin philosophy of self-sufficiency and industrial protection, which, the programme warned, “can no longer be relied upon as an automatic weapon of defence”’.¹² The effects of this economic policy married with other external modernising factors to make the early 1960s a time of buoyant and rapid change in the Irish economy and outlook. Murphy has shown how the standard of living in Ireland rose, and while there was still serious social disparities in areas such as housing, education and healthcare, there were signs of improvement with new factories opening, more foreign goods available for purchase, an increase in the number of cars and the very influential introduction of a national television service in 1961.¹³ While not all changes were positive, he did argue that ‘after a long period of conservatism, repressiveness and censorship, there began in the 1960s a new frankness of discussion, a spirit of positive self-criticism, a liberalisation of religious thinking with the pontificate of John XXIII, an increase in intellectual maturity, and a rejection of paternalism’.¹⁴ However, in his view ‘the single most powerful agent of change in the moulding of new attitudes was the introduction of a national television service’.¹⁵ All these developments meant that Ireland became an altogether less xenophobic place from the late 1950s. The development of British, European or American business in the country and their ownership of resources was now

¹¹ Ibid., p. 320.

¹² John A. Murphy, *Ireland in the twentieth century* (2nd ed., Dublin, 1989), pp 143–4.

¹³ Ibid., p. 145.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

actively encouraged. As a result, the attitude of the country as a whole began gradually to change, from a nationalist and insular climate to a situation where partnerships with other countries were now seen as the way forward for Ireland's development and prosperity.

This both allowed and made necessary a change, in rhetoric at least, in arguments surrounding the Big House. Now with Britain as allies in terms of accession to the European Economic Community (E.E.C.) and a feeling that the country was becoming more cosmopolitan and modern, arguments voicing concern for the preservation and sustainability of Big Houses became more frequent. The reduction in rates, in order to make it easier for houses to survive, became a subject for discussion in the Oireachtas at this time, with both the increasingly outward looking nation and the temporal remove from the struggle for Independence, making the subject of the preservation of Big Houses not as flammable an issue now and not one which could be seen as unpatriotic to get involved in. Such concerns were most often vocalised in the Seanad where they could be voiced with less publicity and possible consequences. For example, a 1966 debate on a Local Government (Reduction of Valuation) Bill raised the issue of making it easier for private Big Houses to survive by reducing rates. On the subject, Fine Gael Senator Charles McDonald, who came from a Laois farming background and was on the agricultural panel in the Seanad, argued:

the rating system is mainly responsible for the regrettable demolition of many of our Big Houses on estates and farms throughout the country ... I know they are of little use ... but most of these Big Houses are in fair state of repair and they are being demolished solely because the people cannot afford any more to pay the rates on them ... Even though these residences or mansions were built in a period which we do not particularly like in our history, if they are in good repair people should be encouraged to keep them because surely they could be put to better use than just destroying them.¹⁶

However, such views were certainly not universal and another Senator, Labour's Timothy McAuliffe, a former school teacher, stated:

¹⁶ *Seanad Éireann deb.*, lxi, 1233 (29 June 1966).

most of the people are demolishing these Big Houses, and I am not too sorry to see quite a number of them demolished, because we tried on a few occasions to make other use of them and found that we could not ... they were totally out of date as regards converting them into any useful purpose. I have no regrets that these big old mansions ... are going. Nobody wants them no matter how much land they have, because everywhere in the country there is the question of domestic help and you will not get anyone to come into huge barracks of houses and work in them.¹⁷

Nevertheless, arguments for rate reductions continued to be raised and in a 1969 Seanad debate the removal of rates from historic houses was again proposed. Fine Gael Senator Michael O'Higgins maintained that there were 'throughout our land fine mansions and substantial buildings which have been deroofed solely in order to avoid the payment of rates ... I have seen buildings deroofed which it would have been well worthwhile preserving even for their architectural value'.¹⁸ Charles McDonald, the senator quoted above, clearly had a special interest in the preservation of these mansions, particularly those allotted to new owners, which he may have been interested in given his background in farming. Again in a 1970 Seanad debate he reiterated:

in some of these old large mansions the only effective way of having the rates reduced is to take the roof off the building. Surely this is not in the national interest? ... Most of these mansions have been reallocated by the Land Commission and to a great extent they are not occupied by the very wealthy owners for whom they were built. In order to preserve some of these very fine buildings in this category of ownership we should do something to alleviate the burden.¹⁹

This argument proposing that rates were the primary cause behind the ruin of many houses was one which was refuted by the Commissioner of Valuation in the previous chapter.²⁰ In contrast, though, the Department of Finance thought that while it may not have been the cause of the abandonment of houses for original owners, it was certainly influential for

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ *Seanad Éireann deb.*, lxxvii, 78 (12 Nov. 1969).

¹⁹ *Seanad Éireann deb.*, lxxix, 100–101 (16 Dec. 1970).

²⁰ Observations of the Commissioner of Valuation on Oifig an Aire Tailte's summary of memorandum for government: preservation of mansions and large houses, 21 Oct. 1958 (National Archives of Ireland, Dept. of Finance files, FIN/F63/8/58).

ordinary farmers who received houses on land from the Land Commission.²¹ However, such cases may have been infrequent, as Patrick J. Sammon has claimed that the Land Commission did not allocate houses that would be too big for ordinary migrants and instead tried to sell such mansions.²²

II

By the 1960s the government realised that appropriating Big Houses into the canon of Irish heritage could be economically valuable to the state owing to their growing tourism appeal. Therefore, from the 1970s onward there were increasing arguments hailing them as buildings of great artistic merit and interest and part of the national heritage. Terence Dooley has elucidated on the importance of this classification in the Irish context. He stated:

Heritage can be used to exclude as well as include, and in the early years of independence ascendancy cultural artefacts were not presented as an acceptable part of ‘a narrative of national achievement’²³... So, there remained for decades the widely held perception that the architectural grandeur of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries symbolised the dominant elitism of landlords built to the impoverishment of the Irish people. Historical associations overrode architectural significance.²⁴

This attitude had been gradually changing, much influenced during this period by an increasing awareness of Ireland’s place in Europe, catalysed by attempts to join the E.E.C.

Irish governments were eager to become part of the E.E.C. because of the large grants available through Europe, particularly to the farming sector and the large subsidy programmes that they would be eligible for under the Common Agricultural Policy. Yet when Ireland first began to sound out the possibility of their membership, the dominant developed

²¹ J. M., Department of Finance, to Mr Hogan, Department of Finance, 10 Feb. 1959 (N.A.I., Dept. of Finance files, FIN/F63/8/58).

²² Patrick J. Sammon, *In the land commission: a memoir, 1933–1978* (Dublin, 1997), p. 86.

²³ Harry Teggins, ‘*Domus Britannicus*: what future for the country house?’ in *The Architect’s Journal*, (24 Jan. 1979), p. 166, cit. in Terence Dooley, ‘National patrimony and political perceptions of the Irish country house in post-independence Ireland’ in Idem (ed.) *Ireland’s polemical past: views of Irish history in honour of R. V. Comerford* (Dublin, 2010), p. 199.

²⁴ Dooley, ‘National patrimony and political perceptions of the Irish country house’, p. 199.

economies of the E.E.C. were not sure Ireland was suitable for membership, given its agriculturally-based economy, its policy of protectionism, its dependence on the British market, and the poverty, unemployment, and emigration that were still crippling the country.²⁵ Furthermore, the Irish government's decision to remain neutral during World War II was not popular. As a result Ireland's first application to join the E.E.C. in July 1961 was rejected just a few weeks later.²⁶ Enda Delaney has argued that despite this, while 'Ireland would have to wait a decade for entry ... this did not stop its focus gradually turning from the Anglo-Irish and the global to the European in the enforced interim'.²⁷ In addition, after the introduction of the measures and economic plans detailed above, in attempts both to improve the economy and prove to Europe that Ireland was willing to embrace a broader policy in its relations with other countries, the Fianna Fáil government continued to press for E.E.C. membership and in 1972 the Treaty of Accession was signed. This was put to the Irish people in a referendum the same year and passed by 83 per cent.²⁸ It came into force on 1 January 1973. This was a substantial shift in policy from an Ireland which, in the decades following independence, particularly during Fianna Fáil dominance since 1932, had taken such a hardline nationalist and protectionist viewpoint. Accession meant a softening of this blinkered nationalist view and climate in which any views that could be deemed anti-nationalist were not tolerated and unwelcome, to a situation where, from this time onward, tentative arguments for the preservation of Big Houses, for example, could begin to be voiced without an automatic subtext that 'foreign' or 'British' architecture was being protected and the labelling of the advocate as unpatriotic.

²⁵ Keogh, *Twentieth-century Ireland*, p. 247.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ Enda Delaney, 'Emigration, political cultures and the evolution of post-war society' in Brian Girvin and Gary Murphy (eds), *The Lemass era: politics and society in the Ireland of Seán Lemass* (Dublin, 2005), p. 87.

²⁸ Keogh, *Twentieth-century Ireland*, p. 318.

As early as 1961 the European heritage aspect of these buildings was beginning to be stressed. In a 1961 Seanad debate Professor William Stanford argued: ‘we have had tourists coming over purely to see the Georgian houses and the gardens of Ireland. I hope we will do all we can ... to preserve their amenities’.²⁹ Senator Denis Burke was even stronger in his beliefs stating that, although there might be disagreement with the history behind the building of Big Houses, they were now something which could be objects of pride. He maintained: ‘our Georgian houses are part of our heritage. Some of these houses are wonderful examples of architecture, decoration and stucco work. Great European artists and architects worked on many of them. We should now use them as a tourist potential because they have become our heritage’.³⁰ These calls for their preservation were often based on a realisation of their possible economic value to the country. To make their preservation justifiable and to make it possible for them to be promoted as part of Irish heritage to tourists, then basic attitudes, or at least the rhetoric surrounding these houses, had to change. Therefore, pushed by such considerations as tourism potential and pressure from Europe after accession to preserve the built heritage, Big Houses began to be re-imagined and re-presented as Irish heritage, reclaiming them as part of Irish history and also setting them outside the usual negative stranglehold of Anglo-Irish relations. This re-framing of the house allowed for what could have otherwise been seen as a U-turn on attitudes, or viewed critically as still lauding a particularly British form of influence in Ireland. Instead the British origins of such houses were often ignored and, instead, either their Irish or European influences brought to the fore and highlighted as will be shown below.³¹

²⁹ *Seanad Éireann deb.*, liv, 1581 (2 Aug. 1961).

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ The endurance of this rhetorical re-presentation of the house is evidenced by the fact that many years later, in 2004, then Taoiseach, Bertie Ahern, opened the Third Annual Historic Houses of Ireland Conference at the National University of Ireland, Maynooth, with the following words: ‘For too long the historic house was not seen by many as part of a shared Irish heritage – nor indeed was it viewed as a heritage worth preserving. Fortunately, times and opinions have changed radically since then. The Irish big house is increasingly valued today for its architectural significance; for the wealth of design created for the most part by Irish craftspeople;

As discussed in the introduction, the claiming of the Big House, once viewed as foreign, as part of the Irish national heritage at this time, thereby enabling it to avail of the protections for such heritage, was possible only because the concept of national heritage and the nation itself are malleable categories, the boundaries of which can be set by those in control of their definition to suit the needs of a particular time.³² By the 1960s and 1970s the ‘canon’ of national heritage had been expanded so that the Big House was increasingly considered eligible for inclusion.

Also justifying its inclusion were arguments which stressed that such buildings must be preserved as examples of a turbulent period of national history, or as symbols of an unpleasant past, thereby encouraging their preservation without necessarily celebrating them or their presence. For example, in 1962 Fine Gael T.D. James Dillon discussed the acquisition by the National Library of the Gormanstown register, a book which registered the title deeds of the Lords of Gormanstown. He stated:

if the papers had not been found and finally deposited with the National Library that side of the story might have perished altogether, the story of a landlord ... these old family documents constitute a very vital and essential part of the social history of our people ... We should not be such fools as to suffer these treasures to perish simply because we associate them with a source of which we have bitter memories.³³

A year later, Fine Gael T.D. for Dublin South-Central, Maurice. E. Dockrell, expressed similar sentiments, arguing:

we have all sorts of lovely monuments in Ireland, some of which may be associated with various sad periods of our history. That, however, does not mean necessarily they were always associated with sad periods. Still less does it mean that the men who built and designed these beautiful buildings were not in themselves Irish architects or Irish craftsmen or Irish workmen. Therefore it is very good to see that we are proud of these things of the past, proud of what Irishmen, and, I am sure, Irishwomen too, did

and for the valuable insight it offers us into an era that had had such an influence on shaping our history’. An Taoiseach, Bertie Ahern’s speech at the Third Annual Historic Houses of Ireland Conference, NUI Maynooth, Sept. 2004, available at: www.taoiseach.gov.ie/index.asp?docID=2145 [5 July 2012].

³² See, for example, R. V. Comerford, *Ireland: inventing the nation* (London, 2003), p. 2.

³³ *Dáil Éireann deb.*, cxciv, 352–4 (22 Mar. 1962).

in building them and maintaining them and that we are going to hand on the beautiful and interesting things of the past.³⁴

Such rhetoric which re-presented the houses as part of Irish or European heritage freed them from associations with an antagonistic Anglo-Irish history and asserted their 'nativeness'. This was also a result of the shift in Ireland's perception of itself in relation to Britain and Europe. Brian Girvin and Gary Murphy have concluded that Ireland's attempts to become integrated into the international economy through accession to the E.E.C. had two significant consequences of long-term importance:

in the short-run it made Ireland very dependent on Britain, because without the United Kingdom's good will Ireland could and would not have gained entry. But it also shifted policy outwards in a more fundamental fashion than had previously been the case. Policy makers now recognised that Europe was the object of policy and this was quickly internalised. In this respect Ireland had been more pro-European than Britain because in the 1960s it had limited options ...³⁵

The internalisation of the fact that a good relationship with Britain was of positive benefit to Ireland, and this shift in view from Britain to Europe, influenced a softening of attitudes towards the Big House as a lessening of antagonism felt toward Britain was reflected in attitudes towards these houses, often seen as remnants of the British administration in Ireland. The focus shift to Europe meant that to hold antagonistic attitudes towards these houses because they were owned by foreigners or because of their history was now looked on as a rather archaic and xenophobic view. Therefore politicians and the media became anxious to distance themselves from this view by championing the cause of the Big House.

Such attempts to reconstitute the meaning of historical architecture from the period of British rule can also be seen in debates surrounding the utilisation of Dublin Castle. This illustrates that the place of such architectural heritage in the nation's history was not now deemed necessary to blot out. Furthermore, it reveals that an emerging sense of such

³⁴ *Dáil Éireann deb.*, ccii, 1475 (14 May 1963).

³⁵ Brian Girvin and Gary Murphy, 'Whose Ireland? The Lemass era' in Idem (eds), *The Lemass Era*, p. 6.

buildings' architectural, artistic, or historical importance, removed from bitter memories, was taking place more generally, rather than just in relation to the country house. In a 1963 Dáil debate there was a deliberation over whether Dublin Castle should be restored. Fianna Fáil T.D. for Sligo-Leitrim, James Gallagher, argued:

these buildings are national monuments and their restoration and maintenance is necessary. They can be looked on with pride. These centres of alien rule must be preserved as a monument to the wonderful effects of the people who fought for and obtained our freedom. Instead of putting a torch to these buildings as was done in the past, we should restore them as memorials to our martyrs.³⁶

This bears the marks of the post-colonial archetype where, though some monuments are destroyed to blot out the memory of the colonial regime, others are appropriated by the former colonised themselves in order not merely to erase, but to take control of, for example, a building, such as Dublin Castle or Leinster House in Dublin. The structure can then be transformed into a symbol of victory and freedom. In this way the preservation of Dublin Castle or some particular historic houses could be argued for when, by argument, the state could make them their own, or claim them as 'theirs'. This is illustrated in the rhetoric surrounding the construction of these houses which were beginning to be portrayed as if they were almost completely the work of Irish labour, craft, and design as will be shown below.

Discussing such colonial transitions, Luke Gibbons has supported Thomas McEville's 'highly schematic but instructive overview of the four stages of culture formation' as an accurate model.³⁷ McEville identifies:

first, the idyllic pre-colonial period, the subject of much subsequent nationalist nostalgia; second, the ordeal of conquest, of alienation, oppression and internal colonisation; third, the nationalist reversal 'which not only denigrates the identity of the coloniser, but also redirects ... attention to the recovery and reconstitution of [a] once scorned and perhaps abandoned identity; and, fourth, the stage ushered in by the generation born after the departure of the colonising forces which is less concerned

³⁶ *Dáil Éireann deb.*, ccii, 1470 (14 May 1963).

³⁷ Luke Gibbons, *Transformations in Irish culture* (Cork, 1996), p 171.

with opposition to the colonial legacy ... It is this latter phase which lends itself to the free play of hybridity and cultural mixing.³⁸

The third stage of this model was in evidence in the Irish case in the years following independence, when the 'coloniser', in Ireland's analogous case, Britain, and all associated with it was denigrated. One can see indications, however, from the late 1950s and 1960s of the schematic-like transition, because of factors already discussed, and also because of the temporal remove, to the latter stage, when politicians had not all necessarily been directly involved in the struggle, nor did every political debate descend into arguments over the conflict. This allowed for a new attitude toward the 'remnants' of the 'colonial' regime, including the Big House, so that rather than destroyed, these could now be appropriated as Ireland's own. This phenomenon can be seen in its nascent form from the 1940s when, as has been shown, arguments began to surface suggesting that Big Houses could be put to some national use. By the 1950s and 1960s the preservation of these buildings could even be reasoned for on the basis of their own merits, simply in terms of architecture or historic interest. A significant point on its re-presentation in later decades is that the Big House was often portrayed as a product of Irish design and workmanship, possibly to be considered more acceptable to the public or to more readily merit state protections and financing.

Furthermore, at this time the Historic Irish Tourist Houses Association (H.I.T.H.A.) was formed, with owners realising that the increasing tourism potential of their houses and the growing acceptance of these houses by the domestic population could also be of benefit to them economically. Nonetheless, the *Irish Times* in 1970 reported that Bord Fáilte had initially been wary of the scheme, but was now giving grants to the association.³⁹ This was presumably influenced by the fact that Bord Fáilte's 1970 figures showed that numbers visiting Irish country houses and gardens had been increasing and therefore they realised the

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ *Irish Times*, 16 May. 1970.

potential for them as draws for domestic and international visitors.⁴⁰ This demonstrates that there was an interest in historic houses and gardens that was becoming more widespread at this time, concurrent with the government's developing sense of the importance of tourism to the country. This manifested itself in greater investments aimed at the expansion of the fledgling tourist market in Ireland. Dermot Keogh has shown how if the policy of an open market economy was to develop then Ireland had to modernise her economy and find new markets and to that end 'there had been imaginative developments in tourism and travel. Aer Lingus recorded an operating surplus of £500,000 in the half-year ending September 1961. The transatlantic route was particularly successful'.⁴¹

Dooley has also emphasised that the government did not invest in the protection of historic houses 'until around the 1970s when the tourist industry realised the potential of country houses, but even then it was primarily those such as Muckross, Killarney House or Glenveagh in Donegal that came with attractive gardens and large parklands'.⁴² The tourism potential of the Big House itself was highlighted in a letter to the *Irish Times* in 1971. The correspondent wrote:

one cannot help regretting the demolition and decay of Coole. What other nation would allow the cradle of its modern literature to be so neglected? But something can yet be salvaged. Fortunately, much of Coole Park is still the property of the nation. It must be preserved if we claim to be a civilised people. But even for material reasons, it is worth restoring as a valuable tourist attraction.⁴³

In contrast, while the Big House was only beginning to open its doors to tourism in the 1970s and later in Ireland, in England the concern at this time was whether the tourist industry alone, which had been developing since the beginning of the century, was sufficient to sustain the country house. Peter Mandler has argued that the motivation in 1972 behind the Historic

⁴⁰ *I.T.*, 20 Oct. 1970.

⁴¹ Keogh, *Twentieth-century Ireland*, p. 245

⁴² Dooley, 'National patrimony and political perceptions of the Irish country house', p. 200.

⁴³ *I.T.*, 16 Jan. 1971.

Houses Committee of the British Tourist Authority's commissioning of an independent study of the economic position of the country house was owners' concern about growing dependence on tourism and thus an exploration of the case for further tax exemptions.⁴⁴

III

Irish governments were slow to realise the tourism potential of Big Houses in their ownership, although this was also influenced by the fact that a significant domestic tourism interest was not in evidence for these houses until the 1970s at the earliest. Some houses which governments had acquired were put to use, such as Johnstown Castle, county Wexford, and Shelton Abbey, county Wicklow, mentioned previously, as an agricultural centre and an open prison respectively, while the historic Georgian buildings they had acquired in Dublin were also being put to use as offices for government departments or, in the case of Leinster House, as the seat of parliament. However, they were not so imaginative in finding uses for other buildings in their care. The Royal Hospital Kilmainham, in Dublin, remained vacant in state ownership for many years. So too did Muckross House, which was acquired in 1932, as has been documented in chapter two.

In 1962 Seán Lemass, then Taoiseach, sought to address the latter situation, concerned about the fact that Muckross had been in the possession of the state for thirty years. He wrote to Donough O'Malley, parliamentary secretary to the Minister for Finance: 'I am sure that you agree that we should try to reach an early decision on the future use of Muckross House'.⁴⁵ Lemass explained that there had been a suggestion made by the Institute of Public Administration to make Muckross House a conference centre and, when required, an over-flow for the Great Southern Hotel.⁴⁶ In his opinion, this suggestion had much to

⁴⁴ Peter Mandler, *The fall and rise of the stately home* (New Haven & London, 1997), p. 403.

⁴⁵ Seán Lemass to Donough O'Malley, 30 Apr. 1962 (N.A.I., Dept. of An Taoiseach files, S6355 C/62).

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

recommend it and the Department of Finance had said it would take relatively little expenditure.⁴⁷ On 2 May O'Malley replied to Lemass listing some provisional estimates for such a scheme.⁴⁸ He added:

I have always thought it a pity that such a fine house as Muckross should be unoccupied. I know that other suggestions for using it have been made but since none of them seems likely to reach maturity I favour the broad idea of adopting the building for use as a residential conference centre. If you so wished we could see whether a presidential suite could be worked into the design for the use of the President, or other distinguished persons.⁴⁹

However, on 16 May 1962 Erskine Childers, Minister for Transport and Power, wrote to Lemass discouraging this proposal. He explained: 'I have recently been considering the position of Muckross House because I feel it is a pity to see such a splendid building being put to no use. As you know because of our history there is far too little to see in Ireland. Most of the abbeys and castles are in ruins. We need more presentation of the Irish image'.⁵⁰ It has already been seen in chapter five that Childers was vocal in enquiring as to the possible preservation of French Park, county Roscommon, and pressing for a government policy on the preservation of these houses when Minister for Lands in the late 1950s and had a particular interest in the preservation of Big Houses. This intervention over Muckross House also sheds light on the fact that at this time he was the responsible minister pushing government for approval to be granted to the Electricity Supply Board (E.S.B.) to demolish Georgian houses in Fitzwilliam Street in order to build a new office block. It suggests that there was much more pressure being put to bear on him and government than may have previously been thought, given his views on the value of such architecture in every other case. Childers's proposal was to use Muckross as a museum of Irish heritage and he believed it would be the ideal location as it was in a national park in a renowned tourist area and

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Donough O'Malley to Seán Lemass, 2 May 1962 (N.A.I., Dept. of An Taoiseach files, S6355 C/62).

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Erskine Childers to Seán Lemass, 16 May 1962 (N.A.I., Dept. of An Taoiseach files, S6355 C/62).

would provide an added attraction to the gardens, as well as meeting the need for a heritage museum.⁵¹ In his opinion, this proposal would be more in keeping with the intentions of the donor than would the I.P.A. project.⁵² At the same time the Institute for Public Administration's centre for administrative studies elaborated on their proposal that 'to meet the problem of an effective overall programme of courses, it is proposed that the state should give to the institute as a centre for this activity Muckross House, Killarney'.⁵³ It noted that apart from modernisation of facilities, a new bedroom block would need to be erected, thus enabling the house to act as a 'supplement to hotel accommodation in Killarney', the limits of which in the summer was considered as hampering the tourist trade as a whole.⁵⁴ They hoped that their suggestion would be considered a suitable proposal 'for this so long idle piece of state property'.⁵⁵

However, despite all these suggestions no definitive decision was taken at this time and it was local concern over the utilisation of the house which motivated a public meeting in Killarney in December 1963 to debate the issue. At the meeting, Frank Hilliard suggested that the house should be used as a folk museum and the idea was enthusiastically received.⁵⁶ As a result, a sub-committee of the Killarney Tourist Industry Coordinating Committee was established to explore the feasibility of the matter. Following discussions with Minister for Finance, Dr James Ryan, the committee was granted Muckross House for an initial trial period of five months and the house first opened to the public in June 1964. In that first short season, 19,500 visitors passed through its doors.⁵⁷ Having demonstrated that it could successfully manage the house, the committee was granted a further ten-year lease, on

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Institute of public administration, centre for administrative studies memorandum, June 1962 (N.A.I., Dept. of An Taoiseach files, S6355 C/62).

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ 'The trustees of Muckross House' available at: Muckross House website, <http://www.muckross-house.ie/trustees.htm> [date accessed: 29 Nov. 2011].

⁵⁷ Ibid.

condition that the committee became a limited company and in May 1965, the Trustees of Muckross House (Killarney) Ltd., was incorporated.⁵⁸ The success of their scheme was evident, and the interest in seeing inside these houses demonstrated, when in October 1964 the *Irish Press* reported that almost 20,000 people from over forty countries had visited Muckross House since it had been opened in June of that year, illustrating to government that these houses could now be viably used as tourist attractions, and therefore economic assets, in themselves.⁵⁹

In spite of this, the Fianna Fáil government was unsure of this potential in relation to another house in county Kerry, which for many years they were being pressed to preserve. Earlier in this period, as discussed previously, a trust had acquired Derrynane House, Caherdaniel, county Kerry, former home of ‘The Liberator’, Daniel O’Connell, from its owners in order to preserve it as a memorial to O’Connell’s memory. However they soon ran into financial difficulty and frequently sought governmental aid. For example, on 8 October 1949 Sylvester O’Brien of the Derrynane Trust wrote that to pay for even a portion of the restoration work, the trust were already short and had no prospect of getting the money by public subscription. The trust concluded that if it must fall, it would only be because they were powerless to prevent it; ‘the public is apathetic, yet it will be a shame if this generation does not save Derrynane’.⁶⁰ O’Brien concluded that without government assistance he did not know how the trust could save Derrynane.⁶¹ In September 1959 M. A. Purcell, secretary of Bord Fáilte, wrote to the assistant secretary of the Department of the Taoiseach, Dr N. Ó Nualláin, noting that representations for financial assistance had first been made to the board as far back as 1952. At that time the Department of Industry and Commerce had informed them that, if the board was unable to give assistance, the Minister for Finance was prepared to

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ *Irish Press*, 31 Oct. 1964.

⁶⁰ Sylvester O’Brien to Mr Dillon, 8 Oct. 1949 (N.A.I., Dept. of An Taoiseach files, S3649B).

⁶¹ Ibid.

make available an exchequer contribution and a state grant of £5,000 was given.⁶² Purcell continued:

the board has not felt that Derrynane House is of real significance as a tourist attraction, while appreciating that its preservation is desirable for wider national reasons. In addition, the board's policy, for a number of reasons, is to avoid involvement in annual outgoings and to concentrate on capital grants and make arrangements with other bodies, e. g. local authorities, for maintenance expenses.⁶³

Therefore the initiation of an annual grant for an indefinite period would be a new departure from this policy and he added: 'from a tourism point of view it is questionable whether the Derrynane case merits exceptional treatment'.⁶⁴

Nonetheless, the secretary of Bord Fáilte stated that owing to the Taoiseach's interest in the building the board was anxious to contribute. If a realistic scheme could be worked out with the trust to estimate the costs of making Derrynane House a worthwhile and exploitable tourist attraction, the board would be happy to do what it could within the limits of its funds.⁶⁵ In this respect it was pointed out that the board's budget for the year for all national monuments work was only £5,000. However, in October the trust sought an annual grant of the same figure, £5,000, to maintain this one property, Derrynane.⁶⁶ Given the large costs involved and the reluctance of the state to keep giving large grants to private trusts, the trust eventually advertised the property for sale.⁶⁷ However in 1963, after no buyers came forward, the government took over the house from the trust, this possibly due to the interest Lemass, and particularly de Valera, appeared to take in the property, the latter's interest presumably owing to its nationalist associations. On 21 August 1967 the *Irish Press* reported that de

⁶² M. A. Purcell, secretary of Bord Fáilte Éireann, to Dr N. Ó Nualláin, assistant secretary of the Department of the Taoiseach, 29 Sept. 1959 (N.A.I., Dept. of An Taoiseach files, S3649B).

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ M. J. O'Connor to An Taoiseach, Seán Lemass, 14 Oct. 1959 (N.A.I., Dept. of An Taoiseach files, S3649B).

⁶⁷ M. A. Purcell, secretary Bord Fáilte Éireann, to Dr N. Ó Nualláin, assistant secretary of the Department of the Taoiseach, 29 Sept. 1959 (N.A.I., Dept. of An Taoiseach files, S3649B).

Valera had declared Derrynane House open as a public monument and following restoration Derrynane national historic park was officially opened by President Cearbhall Ó Dálaigh on the bicentenary O’Connell’s birth in 1975 and continues to be administered by the O.P.W.⁶⁸

The *Irish Press* interestingly concentrated their report on the state acquisition of Derrynane with justifications for why O’Connell would have owned a Big House.⁶⁹ They emphasised that ‘the architecture and construction were a matter for local labour and the house was in no way pretentious, although it had to accommodate Dónal [Daniel’s great uncle], his wife, twenty-two children and innumerable followers’.⁷⁰ Furthermore, the paper believed that when O’Connell inherited, ‘his public position forced him to turn the locally imposing eighty year-old mansion into something grander, something that would not produce a smirk or a sneer on the faces of the international figures’.⁷¹ It is notable that in 1964 the newspaper felt it had to justify O’Connell’s ownership of a Big House, indicating that it would not do the cause to preserve Derrynane any favours to be seen as a campaign to preserve a Big House of the ascendancy class, which suggests that there was still a portion of the public at least who had not yet bought into the reconstitution of the Big House as Irish heritage.

IV

In Ireland, as in Britain, there were many more pressing social issues that took priority over the country house ‘problem’ during this period. Dooley has stressed the importance of this wider context within which the government was addressing the Big House issue. He argued that the Irish government was:

⁶⁸ *Irish Press*, 21 Aug. 1967.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 7 Dec. 1964.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

forced for decades after independence to wear a financial straitjacket. There could be no expenditure on the preservation of country houses when so many other social issues had to be addressed ... Social priority was most clearly articulated in the Dáil chambers in 1970 by Kevin Boland, then Fianna Fáil minister for local government, in his now infamous ‘belted earls speech’.⁷² Much quoted as an attack on the Irish Georgian Society and its supporters, this speech is best understood in the context of its time.⁷³

Dooley was right to assert the importance of context in this regard as this speech is often seen simply as criticism directed toward the Irish Georgian Society (I.G.S.). However, as Dooley stresses, in this address Fianna Fáil T.D. for Dublin county and Minister for Local Government, Kevin Boland, unequivocally emphasised the validity the place of urban and rural Georgian architecture had within the canon of national heritage and also elucidated on his own personal appreciation for its merits. He argued:

in so far as Georgian Dublin is concerned I personally agree that it is desirable to preserve as much as is feasible of the Georgian area of my native city. For myself, I dislike much of modern architecture and I will give whatever assistance I can so long as it does not entail any diversion of scarce capital resources from what I consider the more important matters of housing and sanitary services. I agree also that there are many examples of Georgian architecture outside the city of Dublin which are well worth preserving if possible and I also accept unreservedly that this is part of our national heritage, but it is part only.⁷⁴

So while he did state that he appreciated ‘the national importance of many of the examples still extant of this type of architecture and I will do all I reasonably can to preserve that’ and unhesitatingly declared it part of the national heritage, he added the proviso that ‘when it comes to public money, whether provided by the taxpayer or the ratepayer ... there must be priorities’.⁷⁵ Unyielding in this belief he stated, albeit rather derogatorily to those involved in the I.G.S. and the protests over the demolition of Georgian houses in Dublin:

I make no apology whatever for saying that the physical needs of the people must get priority over the aesthetic needs of Lord and Lady Guinness and Deputies Dr

⁷² *Dáil Éireann deb.*, ccxlv, 167 (11 Mar. 1970).

⁷³ Dooley, ‘National patrimony and political perceptions of the Irish country house’, pp 200–1.

⁷⁴ *Dáil Éireann deb.*, ccxlv, 167 (11 Mar. 1970).

⁷⁵ *Dáil Éireann deb.*, ccxlv, 168 (11 Mar. 1970).

FitzGerald, Dr Browne, Desmond and all the other deputy doctors ... desirable as is the preservation of old buildings of architectural merit, while I am Minister for Local Government and while the needs of the people for housing, water and sewerage services remain unfulfilled, not one penny of the capital allocation that it is possible to make available to my department will be spent on such preservation, desirable as it is. That is not to say that every possible effort should not be made to conserve as much as is feasible of this part of our national heritage for as long as possible.⁷⁶

The government had realised earlier the need for a national response to heritage conservation as legislated for in the Local Government Act of 1963.⁷⁷ This led to the establishment of An Foras Forbartha, the development foundation. The establishment in 1964 of a committee of nature and amenity, conservation and development, under this foundation, highlighted issues that needed to be addressed in this area, including the unrealised extent of Ireland's heritage, the enormity of the national problem and the fragmented nature of state responsibility for various parts of heritage.⁷⁸ As a result, in 1967, the Minister for Local Government, Boland, stated that 'the immediate and most important need is for an independent grant-aided body, technically competent and broadly based, and able to command widespread support'.⁷⁹ This proposed body was referred to as the 'Heritage Council', with its envisaged role to include: 'coordinating research, stimulating existing agencies, addressing gaps in voluntary bodies, and promoting legislation'.⁸⁰ Nevertheless, this proposal was not acted on until later years.

V

The 1960s was a decade of radical changes on many fronts, including those mentioned earlier, the introduction of free secondary education for all and the development of the leisure

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ *Local Government (Planning and Development) Act, 1963. An act to make provision, in the interests of the common good, for the proper planning and development of cities, towns and other areas, whether urban or rural (including the preservation and improvement of the amenities thereof), to make certain provisions with respect to acquisition of land, to repeal the town and regional planning acts, 1934 and 1939, and certain other enactments and to make provision for other matters connected with the matters aforesaid* (7 Aug. 1963).

⁷⁸ The history of the heritage council, available at: <http://www.heritagecouncil.ie/about-us/history/> [date accessed: 7 June 2012].

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

and tourism industries, among many others.⁸¹ In addition, the numbers emigrating dropped in the 1960s from the exceptionally high levels of the 1940s and 1950s in particular.⁸² Brian Girvin and Gary Murphy, editors of a volume largely celebrating Lemass' impact in modernising Ireland away from its de Valera era shackles of insular protectionism, were of the view that 'Lemass largely reforged Ireland after he came to office in 1959' and that 'his influence outlived him after his death in 1971'.⁸³ They argued that de Valera had been a constant constraint until he retired as Taoiseach and leader of Fianna Fáil in 1959. As such 'the years between 1945 and 1959 were to all intents and purposes lost years for Ireland. During this time the crisis got worse and the introduction of new policies was postponed. Indeed it was the depth of the crisis that provided Lemass with his opportunity in 1959 when he succeeded de Valera'.⁸⁴ As such they claimed that 'the years between 1945 and 1973 are without any doubt the Lemass era'.⁸⁵

John Horgan agreed with this claim as to the uniqueness of Lemass' period in office and added that 'the main foci of policy formulation in the late 1960s and early 1970s ... were effectively environmental: the Northern crisis after 1969, and the economic crises of the mid-1970s'.⁸⁶ The Troubles in the North are an important and neglected factor in the relationship of those living in southern Ireland to the Big House, its inhabitants and any other issue tinged in any way with antagonistic English-Irish relations. When the Troubles in the North began to intensify in the late 1960s and early 1970s, and as the violence and death rates increased, those living in the South predominantly sought to distance themselves from such views, shocked by the violence it was creating in the North. The effects of this attitudinal change can be seen in the popularity decrease for Easter Rising commemorations from the 1970s. To be a

⁸¹ See Keogh, *Twentieth-century Ireland*, pp 243–4.

⁸² Enda Delaney, 'Emigration, political cultures and the evolution of post-war society', p. 64.

⁸³ Brian Girvin and Gary Murphy, 'Whose Ireland? The Lemass era', p. 2.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

⁸⁶ John Horgan, 'Foreword' in Brian Girvin and Gary Murphy (eds), *The Lemass era*, p. xi.

nationalist now meant an entirely different thing and many in the South swung to the other side, anxious to assert their distance from such radical and violent extremism. The Big House in the twenty-six counties was to be a beneficiary of such a swing and from the 1970s arguments that these houses should not be preserved on historical and anti-British grounds became rare. These movements and changes were also seen in published historical studies. John Regan has written of the difficult position historians were in at this time when a present conflict was being justified on historical terms. He maintained that since 1968 historians of Irish history, and particularly those writing of the Irish revolutionary period and the foundation of the Free State:

found themselves arbitrating on issues critical to a contemporary conflict, particularly competing legitimations of government authority and the use of armed violence to overthrow such authority. Complicating this situation, at least in Ireland, was the southern state's origin in unmandated violence and a public history that until the 1970s celebrated this origin, particularly by identifying the Easter 'rising' as the state's moment of genesis. After 1968 ... radicalised nationalism and any form of violence spreading over the border posed more immediate concerns for the Republic's security and stability. In Ireland, the historical interpretation both of state formation and of the rights of minorities to rebel patently extended beyond solely academic interest. This situation was further complicated, since the onset of violence coincided with the first determined attempts by professional historians, alongside political scientists, to address Irish contemporary history.⁸⁷

Such histories now allowed for a celebration of the Big House and from the 1970s books began to be published on this theme, such as those by Desmond Fitzgerald and Desmond Guinness, both championing the cause for recognition of the importance of these houses at this time.⁸⁸

⁸⁷ John M. Regan, 'Southern Irish nationalism as a historical problem' in *The Historical Journal*, 1, no. 1 (Mar., 2007), p. 199.

⁸⁸ These include Mark Bence-Jones, *Twilight of the ascendancy* (London, 1987); idem, *A guide to Irish county houses* (revised ed., London, 1988); idem, *Life in an Irish country house* (London, 1996); Desmond FitzGerald, David Griffin and Nicholas Robinson, *Vanishing country houses of Ireland* (Dublin, 1988); Desmond Guinness and William Ryan, *Irish houses and castles* (London, 1971); Simon Marsden, *In ruins: the once great houses of Ireland* (Boston & London, 1997), among many others.

The Irish Georgian Society (I.G.S.) was established by Desmond Guinness and his wife Mariga in 1958. The aim of the society was to assist in the recognition of the value and the preservation of Georgian architecture, both through restoring buildings and giving grants to maintain others. The first major acquisition by the society was the purchase of Castletown in 1967, although by the time they took it over much of the original contents of the house had been sold. By the late 1970s the Castletown Foundation assumed ownership of the house from the I.G.S. and many of its original contents were recovered. These were on display when Castletown became the first Big House in Leinster to open its doors to the public.⁸⁹ As stated previously, Castletown was taken into state care in 1994 and is currently maintained by the O.P.W. Dooley has described the work of the I.G.S. in raising awareness about the need for protection of this aspect of the built heritage. He argued:

it was not until the 1950s that the efforts of a small lobby group of aesthetes (most notably Desmond Guinness and his late first wife, Mariga, and later Desmond Fitzgerald, Knight of Glin and Professor Kevin B. Nowlan) brought the plight of Big Houses to the public attention. Through the work of the Irish Georgian Society, these individuals and others sought to preserve Big Houses as part of the Irish national heritage.⁹⁰

Dooley admitted that they continued to face a number of major obstacles, in particular the government's taxation policy toward Big Houses and their owners.⁹¹ However, while this organisation was founded on aesthetic, not political grounds, Comerford has described how it quickly devolved into an organisation which was viewed as having entrenched dogmatic attitudes. In his opinion:

faced with the absolutist (and largely philistine) attitudes of established national leadership, the challenging wave represented by An Taisce and the Irish Georgian Society developed its own dogmatic attitude. Very understandably, they responded to the indifference of the politicians in respect of historic buildings, and to the even more menacing interest of the politicians' developer friends in the same properties, by

⁸⁹ Terence Dooley, *The decline of the big house in Ireland: a study of Irish landed families, 1860-1960* (Dublin, 2001), p. 253.

⁹⁰ *Idem*, *The big house and landed estates of Ireland: a research guide* (Dublin, 2007), p. 141.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

formulating a morally charged, uncompromising notion of preservation, or restoration to a supposed pristine state. Opposition in these terms suited developers very well because it could be depicted as cranky or simply unrealistic.⁹²

Dooley has similarly maintained that while there were indications of a change in attitudes toward these houses in this period, at least in rhetoric, this was still only a cause being championed, albeit for the first time, by a minority. He argued that there remained a dichotomy in Irish society between ‘the minority who viewed historic houses as the creations of master architects and craftsmen, cultural artefacts worth preserving for future generations, and the majority who would quite gladly have seen them razed to the ground’ either through apathy or else perceptions of the houses as symbolic of colonial oppression.⁹³ One figure who continued, at least into the early 1960s, to represent virulently nationalist ideals in rhetorical flourishes was Fine Gael T.D. for Meath, Captain Giles, who in 1961 argued that a landed estate ‘should belong to the Irish people. I hope the Land Commission will take it over and that decent people will be planted on it and that the old house on it will be blown sky-high’.⁹⁴ In the same year, referring to the Anglo-Irish class, he argued that ‘throughout the country ... sons of the exploiters are forming game protection associations in many areas ... It is time that we stopped taking our hats off to them and bowing and scraping. Our game laws should be in the hands of the Irish farmers and not under the control of the exploiter’.⁹⁵ In a similar vein in a debate on lands, Michael Donnellan, Clann na Talmhan T.D. for Galway North, argued: ‘that it is not the remnants of the landlord class that count in the country’.⁹⁶ Giles was, however, one of the most openly antagonistic deputies toward these houses surviving with their original owners in this period.

⁹² Comerford, ‘Foreword’, p. 12.

⁹³ Dooley, *The big house and landed estates of Ireland*, p. 141.

⁹⁴ *Dáil Éireann deb.*, cxci, 1331 (19 July 1961).

⁹⁵ *Dáil Éireann deb.*, cxci, 1332 (19 July 1961).

⁹⁶ *Dáil Éireann deb.*, clxi, 218 (24 Apr. 1957).

Nonetheless, by the late 1950s the demolition of abandoned Big Houses was continuing, although their demise drew little attention. The reality for many houses was highlighted in 1957 in a *Connaught Tribune* feature on Dunsandle House, discussed in chapter three, which stated:

here is a picture of one of the Big Houses that are disappearing ... Dunsandle House, Loughrea, which is being demolished for its scrap value ... Dunsandle is now no more. Much of the estate is held by the forestry division of the Department of Lands, the long driveway from the entrance gates of the estate is deeply rutted, and the house where, a short time ago, the Galway Blazers often met, is in ruins.⁹⁷

However, a correspondent to the *Irish Independent* took a less nostalgic view in a letter entitled: ‘These houses are not our heritage’.⁹⁸ They argued that in a recent *Late, Late show* ‘there was much moaning and groaning because of the passing out of the “Big Houses”’, including Dunsandle, Galway which was then a ruin.⁹⁹ The correspondent wrote:

here I think we have a clear case of nemesis catching up ... I wonder would the unfortunate ‘vermin’ whom the tyrant sent adrift, cheer or moan if they now saw his then lovely house in its present state of ruin? Or do the people of An Taisce think that the descendants of ‘the vermin’ should now be asked to ‘fork out’ to prevent such houses falling into decay? It beats me how those Big Houses should or could be regarded as part of our Irish heritage, though I do admit we should make some exceptions as for instance, the homes of such people as Lady Gregory and Edward Martin ... They are, to my mind, emblems of religious and political oppression and are in no sense part of our Irish heritage and deserve neither veneration nor respect.¹⁰⁰

Courtown House, county Wexford, was another house which was demolished in late 1950s, and in letter to the *Irish Times* a writer was disappointed to learn that Killusty Castle may also be demolished. The correspondent noted: ‘it is sometimes objected that our castles are merely “symbols of English domination,” but this is a narrow, uniformed viewpoint’.¹⁰¹ A similar opinion was expressed in a 1959 letter to the editor of the *Irish Times* in which a

⁹⁷ *Connaught Tribune*, 16 Nov. 1957.

⁹⁸ *Irish Independent*, 18 Feb. 1977.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁰¹ *I.T.*, 8 Sept. 1958

correspondent wrote that the Big House at Kilakee estate, county Dublin, had been completely cleared away, but uselessly so, stating:

nothing has been gained from its demolition except the scrap and the remission of rates which should have been remissable anyway ... any worthwhile Big House or castle – like that fairytale one at Shanbally last year, or the Roscommon and Kilkenny ones that are now in danger – should be exempted from rates on being taken into the national parks system, at least until new uses are found for them.¹⁰²

On the other hand, calls for an appreciation of the merits of such architecture from An Taisce and the Irish Georgian Society were becoming tarnished, as the latter in particular was gaining a reputation as an upper class club, while in reality for most, preservation of Georgian architecture, especially concessions for those still used as private mansions, was at best a luxury and unimportant to the mass of the populace, or else was viewed critically as charity supporting privilege. In 1968 the *Irish Times* criticised what it saw as Fianna Fáil's antagonistic party line on preservation of Georgian architecture because of the upper class stigma attached to it. They maintained:

this was the kind of shoneen patriotism which gutted rural Ireland of many fine mansions and many valuable collections of old books and manuscripts: today some of the arsonists of those days recognised the artistic vandalism they perpetrated yet their whizz-kid sons, now in the cumainn, see it as no crime against an ancient nation to pull down an architectural heritage of houses or waterways in the interests of an economic society and party political advantage. The Georgian sponsorship of Desmond Guinness was, after all, a blessing: he was comfortably 'Big House' and was only one against the hungry peasant-punters who controlled the political riches at the polling booth.¹⁰³

VI

Media attention highlighted that, while there may have been a softening in attitudes towards the Big House as historical building, there was no such reprieve in antagonistic attitudes

¹⁰² *I.T.*, 17 Jan. 1959.

¹⁰³ *I.T.*, 6 Feb. 1968.

towards their owners during this period. In 1964 General Tom Barry, who had been the commander of a flying column in Cork during the revolutionary period, protested at the Earl of Rosse, owner of Birr Castle, receiving an invitation to open the International Choral Festival in Cork. Barry maintained that he and his supporters were ‘making a dignified protest against their betrayal and their history and insult to their people’.¹⁰⁴ He said the earl was part of ‘the lords of conquest’ and they did not want him put forward as a representative of the Irish people to visitors from other countries.¹⁰⁵ In spite of this, the *Sunday Independent* reported that the Cork Tóstal Committee were standing by their decision, while in a letter to the editor a correspondent wrote: ‘Tom Barry has not and did not object to the worthy Earl (quite an anachronism in this modern age and “Republic”) on account of his religion or race. He simply objected to this individual because he represents the ascendancy class, nothing less, nothing more’.¹⁰⁶ Another letter berated the *Irish Times* stating: ‘your leading article on the subject of Tom Barry’s objection to Lord Rosse, exemplifies the West British outlook which is expected of you’.¹⁰⁷ The correspondent argued that ‘General Barry based his objection on the fact that Lord Rosse is a member of a class which oppressed and exploited the Irish people for centuries, which was and is, socially and culturally, a foreign colonial minority. He contends that the earl is thus an unsuitable person to represent the people of Cork or Ireland on an occasion of international significance’.¹⁰⁸

Further illustrating that this was not just the particular complaint of one or two individuals, at the opening of the festival it was reported that

some 200 students ... from University College Cork marched from the college to the City Hall, carrying banners which said: ‘Go home Rosse, Cork does not want you’; ‘Lords of the conquest not wanted in Ireland’; ‘Who banned our Irish culture? –

¹⁰⁴ *I.T.*, 20 May 1964

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁶ *Sunday Independent*, 7 June 1964.

¹⁰⁷ *I.T.*, 22 May 1964.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

British lords'; 'Why not a citizen of Cork to open a Cork festival?'; and '1920 British murder gang in Cork – 1964 British Earl is welcomed in Cork, why?'¹⁰⁹

However, the *Irish Times* also recorded that such attitudes were not universal and 'the entry of the Earl of Rosse and the Lord Mayor to the concert hall was greeted with loud applause and each was given a big ovation when he spoke subsequently'.¹¹⁰ The earl took the opportunity to counter arguments raised by the protest. In his address he stated:

I cannot allow a statement insinuating that I am not an Irishman ... I am Irish, my family came here first about twenty years before the Mayflower went to America, and if I am not Irish there is no American who is not a Red Indian. Another point I would like to make is that my family have never been aggressors. They have always sought to work for Ireland according to their best lights, and the only member of my family who ever took a prominent part in politics, was my great-grandfather, who was one of the leaders against the Act of Union and was a great friend of Wolfe Tone. I mention that, because I think I have as good a right to be called an Irish man as anyone else.¹¹¹

While such organised displays of antagonism were rare, negative attitudes towards Big House owners simmered on, despite changes in attitudes towards these houses, although in fact those of the class who remained in Ireland were now barely even a perceptible presence. In 1965 the *Irish Times* recounted the isolation of the class of Big House owners that had been highlighted the previous year at the protest in Cork, stating: 'the Big House of the past symbolised, with its surrounding high wall, the tragic isolation of a class which might have contributed so much to their country but, with a few notable exceptions, did not aspire to or rise to leadership'.¹¹²

Olwen Purdue has shown how different the situation was in Northern Ireland, where, although by 1960 a majority of landed families had disappeared and their houses were no longer private homes, a significant minority were still living in their ancestral homes and keeping their estates running through careful estate management and creative economic

¹⁰⁹ *I.T.*, 21 May. 1964.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹¹² *I.T.*, 2 Feb. 1965.

activity.¹¹³ In more dramatic contrast to the position of such owners in the Republic, Purdue maintained that those who remained were sufficiently numerous ‘to operate as a healthy, active social group. Their numerical density was still sufficient to provide enough social interaction with others of their class to give them a sense of belonging to a wider group, and encouraged them to remain living in Northern Ireland rather than move to Britain or further afield in search of like-minded society’.¹¹⁴ Purdue has highlighted this continuing sense of living as part of a viable and vibrant group of people as an important factor in the continued survival of this class in the North, particularly compared to their counterparts in the South. This was made possible because, while in the Republic the upper middle classes were predominately Catholic and nationalist, in Northern Ireland they were largely Protestant and Unionist and therefore shared the same values of the landed class, with a sense of greater understanding and connection, often even emulating their way of life. In this regard she cited the example of two families, the Mulhollands and the Craigs, who acquired titles, land and Big Houses, ‘thus helping to keep big house society alive by the infusion of new blood to replace those families that had left or died away’.¹¹⁵

The contrasting alienation of the landed class from the rest of the population in the South was highlighted in 1959 when the *Irish Farmer’s Journal* covered a sale of house contents and furniture. The reporter commented: ‘although I lived within a townland of this Big House, I had never been inside it and I had never talked to the ladies who were the last owners. They were gentry ... The old gentry and generally were a strange, lonely sort of people, living out their lives in isolation surrounded by high walls and with very little communication with the ordinary people’.¹¹⁶ In addition, in 1965 the *Irish Times* ran an

¹¹³ Olwen Purdue, *The big house in the north of Ireland: land, power and social elites, 1878–1960* (Dublin, 2009), p. 237.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp 237–8.

¹¹⁶ *Irish Farmers Journal*, 21 Mar. 1959.

article on ‘West Britons’ concluding: ‘whatever he may once have had in common with the Britain he’s west of, is now a revered illusion. In Wilson’s Britain he would be an anachronism; in Lemass’ Ireland he is an irrelevance ... – these are part of a sub-culture in its death-throes, not only in Ireland, but in the U.K. ... And their decline is one of privilege, not religion’.¹¹⁷ More underlying negative attitudes towards the Big House way of life were later unearthed when in 1969 Charles Haughey, then Fianna Fáil Minister for Finance, bought the Georgian house, Abbeville in Kinsealy. The *Irish Times* reported that within Fianna Fáil ‘some of its older, more Republican members were bitterly affronted by Haughey’s enthusiasm for such “ascendancy” past-times’ as hunting and horses’.¹¹⁸ The paper did report, however, that it was the ‘older’ members of the party who held these views pointing, perhaps, to a more enlightened new crop of politicians who benefited from their temporal remove from the revolutionary period.

In 1968 a writer to the editor of the *Irish Times* also exhibited historical grievance. In a letter entitled ‘Aristocratic Sneer’, the correspondent declared that not all mansions were gutted by ‘rabble’, but were often broken up and sold off by the gentry themselves, with contents:

hauled off to Sotheby’s or broken up *in situ* as the impoverished remnants of a dilapidated and repudiated gentry made off for the shores where the flag still flew and the natives knew their places ... libraries sold off that no ‘arsonist’ ever laid hands on. It was no ‘rabble’ broke up Castletown House, one of the marvels of Europe, and then sold the empty shell to the Georgian Society.¹¹⁹

This letter is notable for acknowledging that while some houses were demolished by government departments or others left to ruin because owners could not afford them, owners often took little or none of the responsibility for this decline. The mismanagement of

¹¹⁷ *I.T.*, 26 Mar. 1965.

¹¹⁸ *I.T.*, 11 June 1969.

¹¹⁹ *I.T.*, 24 Feb. 1968.

finances, lack of ambition and initiative in trying to keep the house going or exploit its potential as an income-producing asset, attempted in numerous inventive ways by some owners, particularly in Britain, also contributed to the demise of some houses. In addition, a refusal to acknowledge that the privileged life which had once sustained these houses had passed away and its gentlemen and ladies now needed to work was another factor which contributed to their demise. Furthermore, other owners simply sold up and happily left a country they had never deigned to be part of when it was no longer a desirable place to live. For example, the owner of Dunsandle House, county Galway, Major Bowes-Daly, moved to South Africa, and only afterwards attempted to sell the house to any prospective buyer, regardless of their intentions. As such, in June 1954 it was reported to the O.P.W. as in danger of demolition.¹²⁰ However, as documented in chapter three, the O.P.W. was not satisfied that Dunsandle merited permanent conservation as a national monument as it was ‘of little historical or archaeological significance and its architectural or artistic features could, if considered necessary, be recorded by way of an architectural survey’.¹²¹ No action was taken by the O.P.W. and Dunsandle, which had been abandoned to its fate by its owner, was sold in 1954 and in 1958 mostly demolished with only a few walls left standing.

¹²⁰ O.P.W. minute to division F, 4 June 1954 (N.A.I., O.P.W. files, F94:940/1/54).

¹²¹ O.P.W. to the N.M.A.C., Nov. 1954 (N.A.I., O.P.W. files, F94:940/1/54).

VII



Fig. 6.1, Bishopscourt, county Kildare.

Source: Archiseek, <http://archiseek.com/2010/1790-bishops-court-house-naas-co-kildare/#.UXlwWbhOOM8> [date accessed: 25 Apr. 2013].

Another particularly interesting case of a Big House offered for state ownership in this period is that of Bishopscourt House and estate in Straffan, county Kildare. This case is worth examining here in order to illuminate how state bodies acted in an individual case, the influence of individual figures at the head of government and also to what extent the changes in wider society documented in this chapter were influential or irrelevant when a Big House was actually offered for state ownership. Bishopscourt in particular is useful to analyse in detail as the actions and attitudes of some state departments involved, such as the O.P.W. and the Land Commission, appear atypical in relation to all the other cases examined in chapters three and five respectively. Furthermore, the changes in government and extensive delays

between departmental and ministerial discussions on the offer of Bishops court illustrate how difficult it was to reach a consensus in government on such an offer when the varying relevant departments had different interests in such a property. The decline in the absolute power which the Department of Finance had held up until the late 1950s over government decisions is also evident given that their recommendation was not final in this instance and this was undoubtedly one factor which led to discussion and negotiation of this offer dragging on for many years.

Originally built by John Ponsonby, Bishops court had by the 1950s passed through numerous sales to Patricia McGillicuddy, who put the estate up for sale in June 1955. The advertisements described the house as ‘one of the finest Georgian houses in Ireland’.¹²² The Land Commission became interested in the property and inspected the estate in September 1955. The L.C. inspector condemned the buildings which he described as ‘a “nightmarish” collection’ with the mansion ‘old, rambling and cavernous’.¹²³ He asserted: ‘I do not believe any organisation or community would take on this building and ... regard it as a subject for the crowbar’.¹²⁴ The report found the house ‘not likely to prove of much value to the Land Commission and in too poor repair to be converted into any institution at reasonable cost’.¹²⁵ It did contain ‘valuable lead and saleable slates and fittings’, yet the cost of demolition would have been great.¹²⁶ Nonetheless, negotiations for purchase began in November 1955, but two years later had not progressed and in 1957 the property was withdrawn from sale.¹²⁷

¹²² *I.T.*, 9 July 1955.

¹²³ Land Commission report on inspection of Bishops court estate, Sept. 1955, quoted in letter from Department of Lands to Department of An Taoiseach, 31 Mar. 1966 (N.A.I., Dept. of An Taoiseach files, 99/1/466).

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*

¹²⁷ Land Commission report on negotiations for Bishops court purchase, Apr. 1955, quoted in letter from the Department of Lands to the Department of An Taoiseach, 31 Mar. 1966 (N.A.I., Dept. of An Taoiseach files, 99/1/466); McMahon & Tweedy solicitors to the Land Commission, 1 Oct. 1957 (N.A.I., Dept. of An Taoiseach files, 99/1/466).

Almost ten years later, on 24 March 1966, Patricia McGillicuddy wrote to the Taoiseach, Seán Lemass, to offer Bishops court estate to the nation, with about 450 acres, ‘so that it would be preserved intact for future generations and used for a worthy national purpose’.¹²⁸ The next day Lemass appeared anxious to accept, as government departments were asked to consider the offer ‘as expeditiously as possible’ because, if they saw no objection, ‘the Taoiseach would like to convey acceptance ... as soon as possible ... without waiting for the completion of any detailed examination’.¹²⁹ The Department of Lands responded, referring to the 1955 Land Commission report of the buildings ‘as having many shortcomings and unless they have been redecorated and reconditioned in the meantime, they could prove to be in the “white elephant” class’.¹³⁰ Similarly, the Department of Finance replied that it would be to the state’s advantage to obtain possession of the lands without having to preserve the house, as reports suggested it was ‘in poor condition and not worthwhile taking over’.¹³¹ Finance minister, Jack Lynch, recommended examination of the property before taking a decision and the O.P.W. and Department of Agriculture inspected it on 27 May.

The O.P.W. report of the house is significant, coming eleven years after the Land Commission had designated it a ‘subject for the crowbar’. Their architect, G. McNicholl, considered the house to be ‘extraordinarily attractive’, ‘of considerable architectural interest and ... a splendid place for reception and entertaining ... a very beautiful and valuable property’.¹³² McNicholl added that the structure appeared generally sound and concluded that, subject to reservations, it ‘could be kept in good shape without excessive

¹²⁸ Patricia McGillicuddy to Seán Lemass, 24 Mar. 1966 (N.A.I., Dept. of An Taoiseach files, 99/1/466).

¹²⁹ Department of An Taoiseach to other government departments, 25 Mar. 1966 (N.A.I., Dept. of An Taoiseach files, 99/1/466).

¹³⁰ Department of Lands to the Department of An Taoiseach, 31 Mar. 1966 (N.A.I., Dept. of An Taoiseach files, 99/1/466).

¹³¹ Department of Finance to the Department of An Taoiseach, 21 Apr. 1966 (N.A.I., Dept. of An Taoiseach files, 99/1/466).

¹³² G. McNicholl, O.P.W. report on examination of Bishops court house, 2 June 1966 (N.A.I., Dept. of An Taoiseach files, 99/1/466).

expenditure'.¹³³ In contrast, the Department of Finance noted that the agriculture report found the lands suitable, briefly mentioned the O.P.W.'s report, but concentrated on the 1955 report, concluding that a commitment to preserve the house intact for future generations 'could prove to be very onerous and expensive' and recommended that it should not be undertaken.¹³⁴ The Taoiseach's department summarised the responses on 25 August, emphasising that the Department of Finance had highlighted three drawbacks to acceptance, namely the loss of estate duty, the cost of maintaining and staffing the house as a residence, and the liability involved in preserving it 'intact for future generations'.¹³⁵ The report stated that 'no one would presumably favour acceptance of the liability' of the third option.¹³⁶ Comparison was made with Chevening House and Chequers in Britain which had trust funds, but there was no indication that Bishops court would bring a fund with it. This report concluded that acceptance or refusal be based on whether it would be practical or desirable to maintain it as a residence for the Taoiseach or otherwise.¹³⁷

On 30 August 1966 Lemass wrote to Patricia McGillicuddy seeking clarification on whether the government would have immediate use of the lands and if spending on preservation of the house would be at the finance minister's discretion. He concluded: 'subject to clarification on these points, the government are very pleased to accept your offer'.¹³⁸ Patricia McGillicuddy replied: 'I am emphatic that the preservation of the house together with its lands ... stay together'.¹³⁹ She reiterated that she was offering the entire estate on her death 'as a trust ... for the nation'.¹⁴⁰ In her view, Bishops court 'must be its own Trust – with the income from the lands, gardens, woods and their sporting rights, being

¹³³ Ibid.

¹³⁴ Department of Finance to the Department of An Taoiseach, 3 Aug. 1966 (N.A.I., Dept. of An Taoiseach files, 99/1/466).

¹³⁵ Department of An Taoiseach memorandum, 25 Aug. 1966 (N.A.I., Dept. of An Taoiseach files, 99/1/466).

¹³⁶ Ibid.

¹³⁷ Ibid.

¹³⁸ Seán Lemass to Mrs Dermot McGillicuddy, 30 Aug. 1966 (N.A.I., Dept. of An Taoiseach files, 99/1/466).

¹³⁹ Patricia McGillicuddy to Seán Lemass, 6 Oct. 1966 (N.A.I., Dept. of An Taoiseach files, 2002/8/353).

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

ploughed back into itself'.¹⁴¹ Furthermore, an estimation by Sibthorpes at this time concluded the house was 'good for another 200 years or more'.¹⁴²

On 7 November at a government meeting the Department of Finance recommended that the government in office at the time of Mrs McGillicuddy's death should decide on the gift, as the lands were not immediately available and such an 'unqualified commitment ... could not be agreed to at this juncture'.¹⁴³ The O.P.W. representative agreed as he 'could not quantify the likely cost of preservation of the residence and having had some bad experience with old residences was, on the whole, pessimistic about preservation expense'.¹⁴⁴ As chapter three has shown, this attitude was typical of the O.P.W. and illustrates their reluctance to become responsible for these houses. The Taoiseach's secretary believed that Patricia McGillicuddy had clarified none of the issues in such a way that the Taoiseach should change from acceptance to refusal; however, the Department of Finance disagreed.

This memorandum did admit: 'the residence is a gamble. The term for its preservation is not, however, precisely defined. The 200 year ... estimate ... could ... be taken as the maximum length of the term'.¹⁴⁵ This is notable as in no other files on Big Houses offered to the state examined, is the natural demise of the house considered in a decision on its acceptance, as a time when the government would no longer be responsible for it. The memorandum also stated that the property would be useful 'if in the life of the residence it should be decided ... to provide a first class week-end or general residence for any office holder or ... accommodation for foreign guests'.¹⁴⁶ While it did recommend acceptance, it noted against this that 'gamble[s] with other large residences – particularly Shelton Abbey and

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

¹⁴² Ibid.

¹⁴³ Department of An Taoiseach minutes of departmental meeting, 7 Nov. 1966 (N.A.I., Dept. of An Taoiseach files, 99/1/466).

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid.

Johnstown Castle – have proved very costly to the state ... and could ... mean ... the liability arising from the residence could outweigh the value of the other assets of Bishopscourt'.¹⁴⁷ As noted previously, these two properties were given as examples in various cases of how governments' attempts to utilise Big Houses had not paid off, yet both are still being used for the purposes for which they were acquired by the state today. The memorandum noted additionally that to use Bishopscourt as an official residence would increase expenditure.¹⁴⁸

Attached to this memorandum was a draft letter accepting the gift, although it was never sent since no agreement was reached.¹⁴⁹ Additionally, only three days later, on 10 November 1966, Lemass resigned as Taoiseach. However, as the former Minister for Finance, Jack Lynch, became Taoiseach, while his post in finance was taken over by Minister for Agriculture, Charles Haughey, there was little delay in continuing with this case. The Department of External Affairs suggested the house 'might be used as a sort of Chequers come Blair House', as they had 'on occasion, been conscious of the absence of some such residence for ... distinguished visitors'.¹⁵⁰ They noted that while such occasional use would probably not justify its sole maintenance, if accepted and the lands used, then the house would certainly be useful.¹⁵¹ On 21 December a letter to the Department of Finance requested their observations 'as a matter of urgency' as 'the Taoiseach is concerned at the delay in reaching a decision on this matter'.¹⁵²

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid.

¹⁴⁹ Draft letter to Mrs McGillicuddy submitted for approval, 7 Nov. 1966 (N.A.I., Dept. of An Taoiseach files, 99/1/466).

¹⁵⁰ Department of External Affairs to the Department of An Taoiseach, 6 Dec. 1966 (N.A.I., Dept. of An Taoiseach files, 99/1/466); Blair House is the guest house of the President of the United States; Chequers is the country house retreat of the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom.

¹⁵¹ Department of External Affairs to the Department of An Taoiseach, 6 Dec. 1966 (N.A.I., Dept. of An Taoiseach files, 99/1/466).

¹⁵² Department of An Taoiseach to the Department of Finance, 21 Dec. 1966 (N.A.I., Dept. of An Taoiseach files, 99/1/466).

Nonetheless, the issue was continually delayed with the Department of Finance¹⁵³ and a year later Patricia McGillicuddy wrote again to the finance minister stressing: ‘if the government do not wish to proceed further with the idea of my “willing” the place to them as a “restricted gift” there is no harm done and I will proceed along an alternative route’.¹⁵⁴ The terms of this ‘restricted gift’ were ‘that it should be preserved intact ... for the use of the Taoiseach as is Chequers in England, and that the lands should continue to be farmed and used as one unit’.¹⁵⁵ The following year she wrote again to Haughey¹⁵⁶ and the minister suggested negotiations were being finalised.¹⁵⁷ In spite of this, the Department of Finance had no record of any further discussions. The next letter from Patricia McGillicuddy was to the Taoiseach in December 1970, seeking his blessing that the place would become property of the nation when she died and that it would be put to use ‘as a country home for the Head of Government’.¹⁵⁸ There was no mention that her private negotiations with the Minister for Finance had furthered the acceptance of the gift and this, along with the extremely private nature of these negotiations, is peculiar. In March 1970 Lynch had written to Haughey enquiring about developments, adding that since it had been under consideration for four years ‘they should make up their mind’,¹⁵⁹ but no response was recorded.

The case was revisited on 26 August 1971. Haughey had been replaced as finance minister by George Colley following his dismissal on foot of the Arms Trial. A memorandum summarised the case. The Department of Finance suggested further discussion, adding that ‘even if the lands were made available for use in a year or so, it is questionable if there is any

¹⁵³ Handwritten notes of 26 Apr. 1967, 28 Mar. 1967 and 15 Mar. 1967 (N.A.I., Dept. of An Taoiseach files, 99/1/466).

¹⁵⁴ Patricia McGillicuddy to Charles Haughey, 24 June 1968 (N.A.I., Dept. of An Taoiseach files, 2002/8/353).

¹⁵⁵ Ibid.

¹⁵⁶ Patricia McGillicuddy to Charles Haughey, extracts from letter of 1 Aug. 1969 (N.A.I., Dept. of An Taoiseach files, 2002/8/353).

¹⁵⁷ Reported letter from Charles Haughey to Patricia McGillicuddy on 26 Aug. 1969 referred to in memorandum for the government ‘Bishopscourt house and lands: offer as gift to the nation’, 26 Aug. 1971 (N.A.I., Dept. of An Taoiseach files, 2002/8/353).

¹⁵⁸ Patricia McGillicuddy to Jack Lynch, 11 Dec. 1970 (N.A.I., Dept. of An Taoiseach files, 2002/8/353).

¹⁵⁹ Jack Lynch to Charles Haughey, 19 Mar. 1970 (N.A.I., Dept. of An Taoiseach files, 99/1/466).

specific need for them’ and that the conditions of the gift ‘could prove costly... to implement’.¹⁶⁰ The Minister for Agriculture maintained that the land was required by his department and would enable them to sell off land elsewhere, the proceeds of which would cover, substantially, the cost of developing Bishops court,¹⁶¹ while the Minister for Lands considered the gift had already been accepted.¹⁶² In contrast, the finance minister concluded that his department did not favour acceptance in a time of budgetary difficulty as it was an indeterminate commitment and one for decision on Mrs McGillicuddy’s death.¹⁶³

Despite this, cabinet minutes from 9 September 1971 show that ‘it was decided that negotiations with a view to the early acceptance of the gift should be pursued’.¹⁶⁴ After further delays, at a meeting with the attorney general in July 1973, Dermot McGillicuddy explained that his wife still wished to make Bishops court a gift to the nation, to be used as an Irish ‘Chequers’, a residence for the Taoiseach, but maintained that she did not want the state to be in a position to use it for other purposes, such as an old persons home, or for the forestry department.¹⁶⁵ Dermot McGillicuddy also noted that they thought the government should build a house for them and provide them with an income (on the basis that the state was obtaining a very valuable income-producing asset).¹⁶⁶ Over the next few months Dermot McGillicuddy became increasingly impatient over the time it was taking the government to decide on this case. He explained: ‘my wife feels the situation has radically changed in the past eighteen months with the enormous escalation in the value of agricultural land, which is

¹⁶⁰ Memorandum for the government ‘Bishops court house and lands: offer as gift to the nation’, 26 Aug. 1971 (N.A.I., Dept. of An Taoiseach files, 2002/8/353).

¹⁶¹ Ibid.

¹⁶² Ibid.

¹⁶³ Ibid.

¹⁶⁴ Cabinet minutes ‘Bishops court house and lands: offer as gift to nation’, 9 Sept. 1971 (N.A.I., Dept. of An Taoiseach files, 2002/8/353).

¹⁶⁵ Attorney general record of meeting with Dermot McGillicuddy, 27 July 1973 (N.A.I., Attorney general files, AGO/2005/77/151).

¹⁶⁶ Ibid.

now making in this area, anything up to £3,000 an acre'.¹⁶⁷ With apparent frustration he added: 'it is difficult to farm this property at a profit in relation to its true capital value, and if the government do not feel inclined to go ahead she would probably put it on the open market'.¹⁶⁸ A number of months later Dermot McGillicuddy wrote again to the attorney general stating that his wife:

quite understands that the government have far more in their minds at the moment than the acquisition of a country residence as a kind of Irish Chequers and that it does not seem worthwhile proceeding with the matter. She finds that life at Bishops court is becoming increasingly difficult due to the proximity of the property to Dublin and she is pestered daily with people looking for building sites, but as you know it has always been her main object to keep the whole estate intact.¹⁶⁹

He revealed that in an effort to do so she had applied for planning permission to make a golf course on the field in front of the house, together with a number of houses to be built along the approach.¹⁷⁰ This illustrates how the value of land in the intervening years had changed and was, by 1973, much more valuable for housing development potential than it was for agricultural use.

In September 1975 the Department of the Taoiseach wrote to the attorney general informing him that once again alternative proposals had been forwarded by the owner. These were either to make an outright gift to the nation of the residence and out-offices together with approximately fifteen acres of land or, alternatively, to offer the entire property, which comprised of the residence, out-offices and approximately 380 acres, to the nation on an arrangement to be agreed whereby Patricia McGillicuddy would receive a certain capital sum immediately together with an annual yearly income.¹⁷¹ Eventually, after consideration of

¹⁶⁷ Dermot McGillicuddy to the attorney general, 9 Oct. 1973 (N.A.I., Attorney general files, AGO/2005/77/151).

¹⁶⁸ Ibid.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid., 16 Jan. 1973.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid.

¹⁷¹ Department of An Taoiseach to the attorney general, 9 Sept. 1975 (N.A.I., Attorney general files, AGO/2005/77/151).

these proposals, on 28 November 1975, the government decided not to proceed with the acquisition¹⁷² and in February 1976 Bishopscourt was put on the market by the McGillyguddys.¹⁷³ The *Irish Times* described it over twenty years after the original critical Land Commission report, as being ‘in good condition throughout’ and reported that ‘a price in excess of half a million pounds would not be surprising for this property’.¹⁷⁴ It was purchased at this time and to this day remains in private ownership.

Conclusion

Bishopscourt is a particular case study which is illuminating for an assessment of wider governmental and public attitudes to the Big House in the period 1957–73. The fact that the Taoiseach, Seán Lemass, was in favour of accepting this gift suggests that he may have had an appreciation for such properties. This is further substantiated by the fact that he took a personal interest in Derrynane and initiated discussion in government over the use of the long-idle Muckross House. His son-in-law, Charles Haughey, appeared to share his interest and purchased the historic Georgian house, Abbeville, in this period.

This government, like all others since 1922, primarily decided on such gifts to the state based on the use to which the property could be put and its economic viability. They knew from experience that these properties were expensive to maintain. It was difficult to justify expenditure on Bishopscourt, for example, as no official residence was required and no other use was suggested for the house. However, one can see evidence of the government’s progressively outward looking policy in their consideration of this possibility with comparison to the stately homes maintained for such purposes in England, for example. In the case of Derrynane, the cost was also difficult for government, although they appear to

¹⁷² Letter from assistant secretary to government to the private secretary to the Minister for Finance, 28 Nov. 1975, forwarded to the attorney general, 2 Dec. 1975 (N.A.I., Attorney general files, AGO/2005/77/151).

¹⁷³ *I.T.*, 13 Feb. 1976.

¹⁷⁴ *I.T.*, 25 June 1976.

have felt obliged to preserve this property when the responsibility was asked of them and when no one else offered to take it on, owing to its national historical importance and possible tourism value, neither of which were associated with Bishopscourt.

The evidence presented in chapter five and previous chapters suggested that predominantly the Land Commission had a practical policy when it came to assessing Big Houses on acquired lands which the commission came into possession of. Yet in the case of Bishopscourt, where it had no obligation in relation to the house as the Taoiseach was thinking of possibly accepting it as a gift, and which would not have come under the care of the Land Commission to maintain, its inspector found in 1955 that it was suitable only for demolition. Yet ten years later the O.P.W.'s architect described it as a house of great historical and architectural significance with little evidence of rot. Chapter three has shown that this too was an unusual stance for the O.P.W. whose officers were overwhelmingly unappreciative or at least reluctant to acknowledge that any Big Houses were important enough historically or architecturally to be classified as national monuments. This case is therefore a surprising exception and highlights the fact that generalisations about the activities of both the Land Commission and the O.P.W. cannot be made. All that can be concluded is a hypothesis based on what the majority of evidence illustrates. It is also worth noting that while the inspector of the O.P.W. was appreciative of the house as a building, the O.P.W. did not recommend accepting this gift. Similarly, the Inspector of National Monuments had recommended not preserving any Big Houses documented in chapter three as national monuments.

The Land Commission's report is difficult to explain. Their inspector was presumably not viewing the houses with the same architectural scrutiny as the O.P.W.'s and therefore may have thought that the house was not structurally sound when he saw any evidence of rot. If so, their reports in other cases may have been similarly flawed. The Land Commission's

inspector, at least, had no reason to be antagonistic toward the possibility of acquiring this house as it was not part of the commission's remit nor would it have become a burden on its books. It is also possible that the McGillicuddys, who were not in financial difficulties, may have restored the house in the intervening ten years between the reports, given that it was their family home. This possibility would also explain why the house would appear to have been in much better condition when the O.P.W. architect inspected. Alternatively, the differing opinions of the Land Commission and O.P.W. inspectors may have merely been the diverse viewpoints of the two individuals who inspected and attempted to come to a weighty recommendation based in both cases on brief inspections.

It may also be significant that the O.P.W.'s report came a decade after the Land Commission's. This decade was a defining threshold for the evolution of attitudes towards the Big House, not least because of Whitaker's economic plans, the establishment of the Irish Georgian Society and applications for, and accession to, the E.E.C., creating a context where an appreciation for historical and international, even 'foreign' or 'British', architecture was becoming more acceptable. The Big House also began to be viewed and repackaged in a different frame as part of the European built heritage rather than as a remnant of the historically-loaded British domination of Ireland. This re-presentation was also motivated by a new eagerness to assimilate these historical mansions into the national heritage where they were beginning to show their value as tourist attractions, something owners too were eager to capitalise on from this time by opening their houses as guesthouses. The development of the tourism industry and the modernisation of the country were also factors in this period of rapidly changing social history, not least of all with the airing of the first Irish television station, Telefís Éireann, in 1961, which opened up the country to outward influences like never before.

Dooley has also stressed the importance of this wider context for influencing the perception, and reception, of the Big House by politicians and public alike. He wrote:

it was a time of relative economic prosperity and increased optimism. Ireland was becoming increasingly urbanised and less obsessed with the land question ... Society became less denominationalised ... Educational improvements, most notably the introduction of free secondary education for all in 1967, gradually widened support amongst an increasingly enlightened and better-educated audience ... the tide had begun to change slowly.¹⁷⁵

As illustrated in this chapter, many of the political and economic movements of this period, attributed to this Fianna Fáil government, had actually been initiated by the previous inter-party government. However, from 1957 both the temporal remove from the struggle for independence, particularly among politicians, and the psychological remove from insular protectionism and xenophobia, meant that while it was not easier financially for the Big House in this period, it began to be viewed with much less hostility. The eruption of the Troubles in the North also meant that most citizens of the Republic were eager to distance themselves from any views which could be deemed nationalist – a label becoming increasingly tarred with the brush of radical and violent extremism – and the Big House was the beneficiary of such attitudinal changes. Arguments for its appreciation were now given an atmosphere where they could be aired and the house actually had a minority that had begun to fight its corner, although the same could not be said for original owners.

¹⁷⁵ Dooley, 'National patrimony and political perceptions of the Irish country house', p. 203.

Conclusion

This thesis examines the attitudes of the Irish state to the Big House in post-independence Ireland from the establishment of the Free State in 1922 until accession to the E.E.C. in 1973. It offers an in-depth study of the wider political, social and economic problems and issues which governments faced throughout this period in order to locate the Big House within the broader history of the state. Through this juxtaposition of aspects of the wider social and economic history of the state with an examination of government attitudes toward the Big House, the thesis provides a framework within which the changing priority of the Big House issue for the state, and public attitudes towards the demise of survival of these houses, can be understood. It also aims to understand the wider aims of legislation that may have had a knock-on effect on the Big House and the motivation behind governments' policies and international political relations which may have influenced public and political attitudes towards the house. Furthermore, it analyses the factors and pressure which were brought to bear on governments in relation to their actions towards the Big House. An exploration of the social position, economic realities or standard of living in Ireland at this particular time allows a greater appreciation of the budgetary allocations that were available for these houses or heritage more generally and also the priority which this issue received by governments. In summary, this thesis reveals the attitudes and reasoning of governments, departments, state bodies and civil servants which were behind the actions and policies taken towards country houses in the twenty-six counties as revealed through a detailed examination of the departmental files for this period.

For the Cumann na nGaedheal government who came to power in 1922, establishing the new state and its civil authority was their primary task in office, and as such the decline of the Big House was considered a private concern, and not one this government had the time,

finances or support of the public in addressing. Big Houses were considered private homes, not national monuments or sites of historic or national heritage and so the government did not even consider making their plight part of their programme for government. There was little compensation available and, of this, it was never enough to fund the cost of rebuilding Big Houses which had been burned during the revolutionary period. They were now outdated and too expensive to maintain, while their market value was also diminishing. The finances to cover the maintenance of country houses, let alone, rebuilding, were also increasingly insufficient for most owners as land acts were introduced in order to appease the wider electorate and political body for whom land redistribution was one of the primary factors which had motivated the political struggle for independence. Furthermore, in the new and economically struggling state, finances were limited and increased taxation, rates and duties were looked to by those in the Department of Finance to enable the state to establish itself on a sound economic basis. For the owners of Big Houses that by this time often had no land to supply an income to fund the cost of their upkeep, this proved one of the factors which led to their demise in large numbers.

As discussed earlier, in response to a 1958 memorandum on the preservation of Big Houses, the Commissioner of Valuation asserted:

architectural interest, historical associations etc. are factors which influence the decision as to whether a premises is worthy of preservation as a national monument. The taxpayer can fairly demand that if an old mansion is not the subject of a preservation order by the Commissioners of Public Works as a national monument it should be treated as an ordinary surplus property and disposed of as early as possible – the saving in maintenance expenses and the loss in value due to vacancy being the prime considerations.¹

¹ Observations of the Commissioner of Valuation on Oifig an Aire Tailte's summary of memorandum for government: preservation of mansions and large houses, 21 Oct. 1958 (National Archives of Ireland, Dept. of Finance files, FIN/F63/8/58).

This is an important point. If the O.P.W. did not consider these houses national monuments, and chapter three has shown that they overwhelmingly did not, then the government had no real justification for aiding private owners with their preservation.

The concept of heritage was not one which garnered much attention, support or cabinet time in the first half of the century. Nonetheless, Cumann na nGaedheal legislated for the 1930 National Monuments Act in order to provide protections for monuments considered to be of national importance. In terms of dates, the legislation was not specific; however, one can see from chapter three that it was predominantly only implemented to protect monuments dating from the eighteenth century or earlier. In any case, the O.P.W.'s annual budget in 1929, for example, when they were asked to consider accepting the gift of Russborough House, county Wicklow, was only £2,800 for the acquisition, repair and maintenance of all national monuments. Russborough, by contrast, would have cost an estimated £5,000 in initial acquisition costs and over half the annual budget of the O.P.W. to maintain. This made the acquisition of any country houses almost impossible for the O.P.W., because it would take a disproportionate share of their allocated funds away from all other national monuments.

Economics was the primary factor which influenced governments' refusal to accept the gifts of Big Houses and also the factor that limited the O.P.W. in terms of their ability to acquire and preserve such properties. Nonetheless, as this thesis has shown, there were some in government and the civil service who displayed a nativist bias which affected their views on the importance on these houses, such as the secretary of the Department of Finance, J. J. McElligott, who was not in favour of the acquisition of Russborough due to the enormous expense involved, but also because he believed neither the house nor its owners had any real historical importance to the Irish nation.

McElligott was one of the most influential civil servants in the Department of Finance and was secretary from 1927 until 1953, thereby influencing government policy in relation to finance for a very considerable period of time. His belief in keeping expenditure and borrowing to a minimum made his tenure in the department a time of stasis. The Department of Finance was the most influential department in government throughout the period from 1922 to 1973 and their judgement on policy and action in most cases was conclusive. Decisions were chiefly made on economic grounds, rather than on a consideration of heritage or historical importance. In addition, the department had no public mandate in these early decades of independence to expend so much of the state finances on the acquisition, restoration or maintenance of Big Houses or to allow exemptions for their owners when the majority of the citizens of the state were struggling with economic crises, high emigration and poor social and living conditions until at least the 1960s.

In 1932, the 'Big House problem', as it was described by H. G. Leask in 1945, fell to the newly elected Fianna Fáil government under Taoiseach, Éamon de Valera. This government immediately sought to distance the Free State from Britain, which presumably affected those in the Big House who were traditionally seen as representatives of the old regime in Ireland. No act was passed with the aim of heritage protection during this period. Furthermore, while Muckross estate was acquired, chiefly for the amenity value of its parkland, no other Big House was procured as a national monument. In terms of social policy, the 1933 Land Act continued, and in many cases completed, the land division which had already taken place under the 1923 and 1931 land acts. The division of land contributed greatly to the decline of the Big House as the land on which most were dependent for income was now almost completely gone. Owners thus abandoned their houses to ruin because they were unable to sustain them, because they did not wish to be part of the new state, because they felt unwelcome, or even because of apathy toward the fate of their former residences.

The decline, demolition and ruin of the Big Houses motivated a minority of interested members of the public, journalists and politicians to begin to write to government in the 1940s emphasising that these houses could be put to new uses by the state as schools, hospitals or sanatoria. The government's response to this pressure – a report by the Department of Local Government into their possible use – concluded in 1945 that they were overwhelmingly unsuitable for adaptation to any public purpose. Ironically, Big Houses gained value for the first time in years for their salvaged materials during and after the Emergency, so that destruction and disuse became the fate of many more Big Houses at this time. This material helped to build factories and roads in the country when raw materials were in short supply.² Alternatively, new use was often the only other salvation for the many houses that were pouring onto the market by the 1950s when governments were unwilling to preserve them on their own merits and no substantial section of the public was pressurising them to do so. The period from 1930 to 1960 was one of the most dramatic in terms of the decline, dereliction and demolition of the Big House in Ireland.

Furthermore, chapter three has detailed how, restricted by a very limited budget and staff, the O.P.W., and in particular its Inspector of National Monuments, H. G. Leask, refused to classify any Big House brought to its attention during this period as a national monument. Leask believed Big Houses to be too modern to be preserved as national monuments. Most of the structures which the office had previously preserved dated prior to the seventeenth-century. The O.P.W. was also anxious not to set a precedent and receive a flood of applications for protection or acquisition of Big Houses given the number of houses which were being abandoned, sold or demolished for their materials at this time. In addition, the ancient monuments which the O.P.W. had previously preserved were mostly ruins and sites which took little expenditure in terms of maintenance or restoration, unlike the enormous

² For example, the rubble from Tubberdaly House and Ballylin House, both county Offaly, was used to build power stations at Rhode and Ferbane, county Offaly, respectively.

expense involved in the maintenance and repair of country houses. It is also true that the O.P.W. had no real public mandate, like governments, to preserve the Big Houses at this time and there was no developed domestic or international tourism industry to support these properties.

Chapter four examined the period from 1948 until 1957, which was an unstable one in terms of the governance of the country as Fianna Fáil and inter-party governments regained and lost power quickly. It was also a time characterised by soaring levels of emigration. The years from 1950 to 1960 saw the destruction of the highest numbers of Big Houses, not least of all because any owners who had attempted to retain their properties in the Free State after the stripping of their lands could by this time no longer sustain them owing to high taxation, duties, rates, lack of income from land, and often poor returns from stocks and bonds invested in since the sale of land. The inter-party governments under Costello were more pro-active than previous administrations in relation to the arts and heritage more generally. During their tenures in office, the 1949 report into the state of the arts in Ireland was commissioned, the Arts Council was established and, in 1954, the National Monuments Act was amended. Furthermore, there were moves towards a softening of international economic relations and policy on inward investment. An Taisce and the National Monuments Advisory Council continued to press governments for changes in policy which would allow for the survival and protection of at least some Big Houses but, for the most part, these suggestions were never followed up by government. The allocation of the finances or resources of government on this issue however, when the country was crippled by economic stagnation, massive unemployment and emigration, would have been hugely unpopular and this would have been an influential consideration for these short-lived governments who were frequently facing constituents on the campaign trail and dependent on their allegiance in elections.

By the mid-century, owners of such houses were increasingly perceived as eccentrics and caricatured in the national press and literary forms. Arguably, this was something they brought on themselves as many chose to live in isolation from their local communities in which they played no part and preferred to have schooling completed in England. This often meant that no matter how many years they had lived in Ireland, they still differentiated themselves from locals by their accent. Hence, when the Big House was reimagined as national heritage from the late 1960s and 1970s, because of the popular perceptions of its owners as stereotypes or eccentrics, it was more difficult for them to be incorporated in this process of inclusion.

The Land Commission frequently came into possession of Big Houses during its land division work. While some ministers for lands, such as Fianna Fáil's Seán Moylan, were not enthusiastic about the continued presence of the Big House and its owners in the country, in the 1958 memorandum examined in chapter five, the Department of Lands and the Land Commission outlined to government departments their ostensible practical policy in relation to such houses. This policy was to inform other government departments of the commission's acquisition of a Big House during the course of their land division work, in case it was needed for some state use. Alternatively, the commission attempted to sell it with a small piece of land around it, although not enough to make the house economically viable through income from lands alone, as this would have meant the retaining of large tracts of land with these houses. It appears from this 1958 memorandum and the other evidence presented in chapter five that it was only when all these options failed that the Land Commission demolished a Big House. The evidence examined in this chapter suggests that such demolition took place in a minority of cases, at least during the short number of years for which Land Commission statistics are available, and was not the commission's first preference or a matter of policy. In such cases, they could not keep these Big Houses as they

had not the mandate, remit or resources to do so, nor had they any use for them and no other organisation committed to take them on. The 1958 memorandum also shows that predominantly the houses which were demolished were in too poor repair to be sold on or used. However, the sources for this evidence are mainly the speeches of ministers or the correspondence of the commission with other government departments. They must therefore be viewed carefully given the fact that civil servants in the Department of Lands or Land Commission may have been saying what their minister or the opposition wanted to hear rather than outlining an accurate statement of policy. Even so, the fact that multiple different sources repeated the same line of policy suggests its veracity. Furthermore, there are no statistics or sources available to the public documenting the Land Commission's policy in relation to Big Houses in the earlier decades of independence when land division was at its peak.

The acquisition and redistribution of land, as legislated for by independent governments in the 1923, 1931 and 1933 land acts, made the Big House in Ireland unsustainable unless another source of income could be found to adequately replace the income once generated by lands. Hence, the work of the Land Commission was undoubtedly one of the most significant factors in the demise of the Big House in Ireland. The acquisition and redistribution policy as legislated for by the land acts, and which the Land Commission had the responsibility to enforce, made the decline of the Big House inevitable. The responses to the 1958 memorandum from the office of the Minister for Lands which was examined in chapter five also makes clear that no other government department wanted to become responsible for this issue.

An Taisce, the National Trust for Ireland, which was established in 1948, was unable to act with regard to acquiring houses throughout this period owing to a lack of funds – they did not receive any from the state – and also because these houses were so expensive to

maintain. As has been illustrated, those in An Taisce continually blamed the government for their inability to act, especially as they would have received no reduction on rates on such a building if they took it over. They compared their situation to that of the English National Trust which received grants and exemptions. However, it is worth noting that the English National Trust aimed at being a self-supporting charity and also that it was able to make some of its properties economically viable since there was great interest in visiting such stately homes in England. The same was not true of Ireland at this time and it was not until after the 1970s that tourism began to develop and the government began to encourage it.

This factor, among others, stimulated a change in how the Big House was presented, but it does not show that private government attitudes to the Big House were radically different to what they were in chapter one. In the case study of Bishopscourt, county Kildare, for example, many of the departments' viewpoints were similar to those expressed in discussions surrounding one of the very first houses offered to the state, Russborough House, county Wicklow, which formed the case study at the end of chapter one. Furthermore, no Big House had been preserved as a national monument up to the 1970s and so in many ways governments' attitudes which motivated policy on Big Houses remained somewhat static throughout this period. In contrast, the perceived value of the house to the country and its position in relation to the nation and its heritage had begun to be re-appraised in the 1960s and 1970s, until post-1970 when this resulted in changes in government policy.

The similarity in governments' views and the attitudes of various departments across this period is remarkable and is itself an important finding of this thesis. For example, despite the various changes in government throughout this period, in most cases of Big Houses gifted to the state, the consideration of the offer was the same, with the Department of Finance's recommendation the most important factor for determining the government's decision. Until recently, this notable importance of civil servants in government was all too frequently

ignored in historiography.³ High ranking officers in the Department of Finance, who were in such positions for long periods of time – while the various appointed ministers changed much more frequently – were really the ones pulling the strings and influencing policy. Often ministers, as in other departments, only entered the discussion when final authorisation was needed. One of the most influential civil servants, mentioned above, was J. J. McElligott. Furthermore, in 1953 McElligott was replaced as secretary of the Department of Finance by a figure who exercised similar policy principles, next-in-line in the department, Owen Joseph Redmond, rather than with someone with a distinctly different policy. Therefore, McElligott and the civil servants of the Department of Finance were hugely influential in forming government policy throughout most of this period in which expenditure was kept to a minimum. It was not until a new crop of civil servants succeeded to the most important roles in the department in the late 1950s, most particularly T. K. Whitaker, that policy began to change, with significant ripple effects for the country's economic and political outlook and for society at large.

The huge expenditure that would have been required for the preservation and maintenance of a Big House was therefore considered much too extravagant for most of this period. The only gifts of Big Houses accepted by the state were Muckcross, county Kerry, in 1932 and later, in 1975, Barretstown, county Kildare. Importantly, the latter house was offered as a viable gift with endowments and rents receivable, while Muckcross too had gate receipts and livestock on a well-kept property. The state also took over Derrynane, county Kerry, in the period from 1957 to 1973. In this case, the government in power was anxious over expenditure in relation to Derrynane and was constantly pressured for funds from its trust. However, as the trust was reported to be unreliable in relation to work carried out and

³ As previously stated, recent works redressing the balance include: Eda Sagarra, *Kevin O'Shiel: Tyrone nationalist and Irish state-builder* (Kildare, 2013); Martin Maguire, *The civil service and the revolution in Ireland, 1912–38: 'shaking the blood-stained hand of Mr Collins'* (Manchester, 2008).

the appropriation of funds in a number of private letters to government, the government appear to have judged it best that if they were donating money to restore the house, and the trust could not maintain the house, then it would be preferable to acquire it themselves and thus ensure public funds were being properly appropriated. Nonetheless, they were still unsure if Derrynane could be used as a viable tourist attraction.

Throughout this thesis, part of the methodological approach was to use case studies to provide an in-depth analysis of exactly what ministers and civil servants in each government department thought of the merits of these houses and their views of individual cases. The thesis also centres case studies in the wider national issues surrounding country houses. Most of the correspondence examined in these detailed studies is from government files, many of which have never before been examined. They are valuable primary sources that provide a window into the motivation behind governments' actions in individual cases. As these were private discussions, these internal and inter-departmental letters and memoranda are revealing for their frank appraisals and opinions. In these files it is notable that generally governments illustrated little or no antagonistic attitudes towards these houses.

This thesis therefore argues that while prejudice was sometimes present and forward enlightened thinking was often lacking, they were only part ingredients in the story. Above all, in private government discussion and correspondence, practical utility and economics overrode both historical associations and architectural significance and were the most important factors affecting the survival or demise of Big Houses during this period. Predominantly, in fact, it was not narrow-mindedness that caused their destruction, but apathy, a belief that the issue was not the responsibility of the government or state departments and, chiefly, practical decisions based on limited use, limited budgets and a prioritisation of the social and economic problems affecting the majority of citizens of the state at that time. Pragmatism rather than provincial patriotism or historical grievance was the

single most determining factor in Irish governments' attitudes towards, and role in, the gradual demise of the Big House.

Most of these arguments are embodied in a speech given in the Dáil by Kevin Boland, Fianna Fáil Minister for Local Government, in 1970. He stated clearly:

with regard to this whole question of the preservation of decayed and decrepit houses which, although of architectural merit, are no longer functionally suitable, the position of the Minister for Local Government is that, unlike the opposition and unlike these aesthetic hi-jackers, he cannot afford to operate in water-tight compartments. He is painfully aware that, despite the ever-increasing national resources, capital is very far from unlimited. He is aware that pressure for capital for all different purposes far exceeds its availability. He must therefore take cognisance of the fact that demands for capital expenditure for different purposes are in competition with one another. Therefore, expenditure on the retention of buildings, whose sole value now is aesthetic rather than utilitarian ... can only be at the expense of the number of houses which could be provided for the amount of money involved.⁴

He was referring in this last sentence to the housing need, particularly for Dublin city and its citizens, at the time. This necessarily utilitarian perspective, given the government's limited budget, was also influential for the fate of the country house in England. Peter Mandler has shown how in England:

few people can have shared the view that even these olden times mansions were part of a common heritage, fewer still that that heritage was worth preserving as integral to modern identity. Old country houses were more frequently represented as relics of a past standing in the way of, or at least at a distance from modern life ... Houses were demolished to make way for things people really wanted – houses, roads, parks – or converted to modern uses – hospitals, schools, blocks of flats, hotels. Either they retained their traditional and social meanings, in which case they were ultimately doomed, or they lost them and became mere shells for modern uses, leaving behind only a dim spectre of power departed.⁵

Ultimately, whether or not the Irish Big House could be used, and viably so, has affected its survival throughout this period, and continues to be the most important factor, after cost, influencing whether or not the Big House has, will, and can survive.

⁴ *Dáil Éireann deb.*, ccxlv, 176 (11 Mar. 1970).

⁵ Peter Mandler, *The fall and rise of the stately home* (New Haven & London, 1997), pp 258–9.

The period from 1957–73 was a defining threshold for the evolution of attitudes towards the Big House, not least because of new Department of Finance secretary, T. K. Whitaker's, economic plans for an expansion of foreign trade and investment and applications for, and accession to, the E.E.C., creating a context where an appreciation for the Big House, once viewed as foreign, was becoming more acceptable.⁶ The Big House began to be viewed and repackaged as part of the European built heritage rather than as a remnant of the historically-loaded British domination of Ireland. This re-presentation was also motivated by a new eagerness to assimilate these historical mansions into the national heritage where they were beginning to show their value as tourist attractions, something owners too were eager to capitalise on from this time by opening their houses as guesthouses. The development of the tourism industry and the modernisation of the country were also factors in this period of rapidly changing social history that influenced a shift in attitudes toward the Big House and its value to the nation and its heritage.

As illustrated in chapter six, many of the political and economic movements of this period, attributed to this Fianna Fáil government, had actually been initiated by the previous inter-party government, proving how gradual and difficult these shifts in perceptions and attitudes toward the Big House, and the factors which influence their change, are to define. Even as early as the late 1950s and 1960s, one can see the beginnings of tentative attitudinal changes as arguments for using these houses or appreciation for their worth were now given an atmosphere where they could be aired and the house actually had a minority that had

⁶ In addition, affiliation with the European Union (formerly the E.E.C.) also required the Irish government to come in line with E.U. policy on heritage protections. As such they were required, among other moves, to sign up to the *Convention for the protection of the architectural heritage of Europe* (the Granada convention). This was established in 1985, with the aim to protect and promote common European heritage, but was only ratified by an Irish government in 1994. Furthermore, UNESCO's *Convention concerning the protection of the world cultural and natural heritage* was drawn up in 1972, but not ratified in Ireland until 1991. Nonetheless, Dooley has maintained that Ireland's, albeit late, participation in the regulations of the Granada convention, for example, meant that the government was committed 'to safeguarding the built heritage of Ireland for the wider good of the future generations of Europeans'. Terence Dooley, *A future for Irish historic houses? A study of fifty houses* (2003), p. 4.

begun to fight its corner. Importantly, this developing appreciation of their heritage value and historic importance coincided with, and was made possible by, governments' changing economic outlooks, upward economic turns and increasing stability with regard to the state's finances. The same could not be said for original owners, however, who remained an isolated group.

From 1957 the temporal remove from the struggle for independence and the psychological remove from insular protectionism and xenophobia, meant that the Big House began to be viewed with less hostility and the virulent rhetorical flourishes against these houses in the Oireachtas began to be viewed by the majority as old-fashioned views. Despite this, it was only later that financial reliefs for the houses and their owners materialised, in the latter decades of the twentieth century and outside the scope of this period of study.⁷ The Troubles in the North which flared in the 1970s also tarred nationalistic views with associations with violent extremism. The Republic sought to distance itself from this past by moving in the opposite direction. This was in evidence in the language surrounding the house which began to be used by politicians, private interest groups and organisations established

⁷ Rates were abolished in 1977. Furthermore, the 1982 Finance Act introduced by the short-lived Fine Gael/Labour coalition under Garret Fitzgerald recognised specifically, and for the first time in an independent government's finance act, the special position of historic houses. Section nineteen legislated for reliefs in respect of properties determined to have scientific, historical, architectural or aesthetic interest according to the Commissioners of Public Works. A house was deemed to qualify for these reliefs if this interest was ascertained and if, more significantly, the building itself was open for reasonable access to the public for not less than thirty days in a year and at reasonable times and prices so that the public could visit. *Finance Act, 1982. An act to charge and impose certain duties of customs and inland revenue (including excise), to amend the law relating to customs and inland revenue (including excise) and to make further provisions in connection with finance* (17 July 1982), section 19; The most beneficial concession for the Big House in the late twentieth century is commonly referred to as section 482. This was part of the Taxes Consolidation Act, 1997, which legislated for tax relief on maintenance and repairs on historic buildings or gardens declared to be of 'significant scientific, historical, architectural or aesthetic interest' and open to the public for at least sixty days of the year, or in the case of properties used as guest houses, for at least six months of the year and could be advertised as tourist attractions by Bord Fáilte. *Taxes Consolidation Act, 1997. An act to consolidate enactments relating to income tax, corporation tax and capital gains tax, including certain enactments relating also to other taxes and duties* (30 Nov. 1997), section 482; Furthermore, in 1995 the Heritage Council was established as a statutory body under the Heritage Act. *Heritage Act, 1995. An act to promote public interest in and knowledge, appreciation and protection of the national heritage, to establish a body to be known as An Chomhairle Oidhreachta, to define its functions, to provide for the exercise by the Minister for Arts, Culture and the Gaeltacht of functions in relation to the national heritage and to provide for other matters connected with the matters aforesaid* (10 Apr. 1995).

by owners themselves. Colonial or British associations were often ignored and the houses were hailed as if they were entirely designed, built and furnished by local Irish craftsmen and labour. This, however, suggests that public or political attitudes had not completely changed, even post-1970 in Ireland, and that it was still thought prudent by interested parties to portray these historic mansions in a certain light when aiming to present or promote them as attractions or to argue their case for obtaining particular tax reliefs.

Instead, as Hugh Maguire has contended, their role in the convoluted historical process should be fully acknowledged. In fact, Maguire has maintained that an acknowledgment of attitudes toward the Big House as a colonial symbol is essential to finally coming to terms with it, and ultimately to its possible acceptance as national heritage. He argued:

that the Irish house was indeed part of a colonial perception of space is never fully acknowledged by preservationists and to allude to such is to be branded a quasi-terrorist. And yet a fuller analysis of the role of the house as a consolidating element in the colonial process would actually acknowledge a more honest reality, not necessarily engender hostility.⁸

As a post-script, G. B. Shaw maintained: ‘things do not happen in the form of stories and dramas and since they must all be told in some form, all reports, even by eye witnesses, all histories, all stories, all dramatic representations, are only attempts to arrange the facts in a faithful, intelligent, interesting form’.⁹ Therefore, as Lombard, the historian in Brian Friel’s *Making History* argues: ‘a period of history ... may contain within it several possible narratives ... determined by the needs and the demands and expectations of different people and different eras’.¹⁰ After 1973, the narrative of the history of the Big House changed once again and the shifts that were perceptible prior to 1973 in the way Irish governments viewed

⁸ Hugh Maguire, ‘Ireland and the house of invented memory’ in Mark McCarthy (ed.), *Ireland’s heritages: critical perspectives on memory and identity* (Hants, 2005), p. 159.

⁹ G. B. Shaw cit. in Richard Pine, *The diviner: the art of Brian Friel* (2nd ed., Dublin, 1999), p. 209.

¹⁰ Brian Friel, *Making history* (London, 1989), pp 15–16.

the Big House, as documented in this thesis, gradually and progressively developed further. Records and departmental files which will be released in the coming years will shed light on this aspect of their history and continue to enrich the historiography in this field.

APPENDIX ONE

Appendix to the Office of the Minister for Lands, memorandum for the government,

‘Preservation of mansions and large houses’, 5 Aug. 1958

Source: National Archives of Ireland, Dept. of Finance files, FIN/F63/8/58.

APPENDIX – TABLE A

Big Houses on hands of Land Commission

Name	Style	Description	Condition	Disposal
<u>LARGE</u> Westfield House (Laois)	Modern	Adjacent to Castletown village, 2 miles S.W. Mountrath; stone-built (1929) 54’ X 54’, 2 storey tiled roof, 21 aparts. (e.1. h. & c. water)	Very good	May be used for migrant or else offered for sale.
Mote Park House (Roscommon)	Georgian	2 ¾ miles S. Roscommon town. 3 storeys and basement, 23 rooms	Good repair	Auction of house and 112acres accommodation lands proved abortive. To be offered for sale at an early date by tender - (a) with accommodation lands and alternatively (b) buildings only for demolition.

APPENDIX ONE – TABLE A (Contd.)

Dalystown House (Galway)	Georgian	7 mls. S.E. Loughrea, 56’ X 27’, 4 storey.	Reasonably good	Considered to be suitable only for demolition and is therefore unlikely to be available for sale.
Residence on Atkinson Estate (Offaly)	Georgian	½ ml. N.W. Shinrone, 8 mls .S.W. Birr; Rubble- slated, 29 aparts.	Fair	May be used for Land Commission purposes or offered for sale publicly.
Castlelough House (Tipperary)	Non- descript	9 mls. N. Nenagh on shores of Lough Derg. Large mansion, masonry built, 2 storey, basement and attic; 30 aparts. Rere portion old and in poor repair. Front portion built in more recent times and is in fairly sound state of preservation.	Front portion in fairly good condition, Rere portion in poor condition.	
Strancally Castle (Waterford)	Early Pre- Victorian	10 mls. Cappoquin/Youghal. Castellated in imitation Tudor style; 3 storeys and basement (floor space 18,500 sq. ft.) 25 rooms, wired for electricity. £10,000 spent on renovation in 1950.	Fair	Will be offered for sale with 161 acres by tender at an early date.

APPENDIX ONE – TABLE A (Contd.)

Franckfort Castle	12 th century approx.	5 mls. S.E. Roscrea, 90' X 37', 3 storey and basement, 27 aparts.	Very bad	Unlikely to be available for public sale with accommodation lands, (suitable only for demolition).
Castlebellingham (Louth)	Georgian	Adjoining Castlebellingham village on banks of River Glyde, 2 storey in front, 3 storey in rere, some 30 aparts. (extensive farm bdgs. Including cottages, gardener's hse., etc.) Unoccupied 10–15 yrs. and deteriorating.	Poor	Will be offered for sale with 56A by tender at an early date.

APPENDIX ONE – TABLE A (Contd.)

<u>MEDIUM</u>				
Coolamber House (Longford)	Georgian	5 ½ mls. N.E. Edgeworthstown; 14 main rooms, e.l., central heating, out-offices.	Very good	Proposed for sale by auction but now being considered for allotment to institution.
Thomastown House (Offaly)	Do.	4 ½ mls. N.E. .Birr, 2 storey non-basement, stone-built, slated; 12 rooms modernised kitchen, wired for electricity, out- offices.	Do.	May be used for Land Commission purposes or offered for sale publicly.
Lissanode House (Westmeath)	Modern	6 mls. S.W. Ballymore, 2 storey, slated, floor space 6,000 sq. ft. 14 rooms and domestic offices.	Good	Will likely be allotted to a migrant.
Newforest House (Galway)	Non- descript	7 ½ mls. Mountbellew, 2 storey rubble-masonry, extensive out-buildings, E.S.B.	Fair	
Dwellinghouse on Bennett Estate (Offaly)	Georgian	6 mls. E. Birr; 2 storey, basement; 11 rooms and domestic offices.	Poor	Unlikely to be available for public sale with accommodation lands (Suitable only for demolition).

APPENDIX ONE – TABLE A (Contd.)

<u>SMALL</u> Morrinstownbiller House (Kildare)	Georgian	1 ml. Newbridge, 2 storey, stone built, 8 main rooms, electric light, telephone, etc.	Very good	Possibly for public sale with accommodation lands.
Mullacash House (Kildare)	Non- descript	3 mls. S.E. Naas, 4 mls. N.E. Kilcullen, 2 storey, stone-built, slated, e.l.	Good	Will likely be offered for sale publicly with accommodation lands.
Residence adjoining Ardpatrick village (Limerick)	Non- descript	Small mansion-type; 5 mls. S. Kilmallock, 15 rooms.	Fair	Will probably be available for sale with small area.
Fern Hill (Donegal)	Georgian	4 mls. E. Kilmacrennan, 2 storey, 7 rooms.	Poor	Offered for sale by auction – abortive. Still on auctioneer's books.

APPENDIX ONE – TABLE B.

(Results of auctions and sales by tender of Land Commission houses and accommodation plots over past 4 years approximately.)

Name	Style	Description	Disposal
<u>LARGE</u> Glenmalyre House (Laois)	Georgian	4 mls. Portarlinton, 2 storey and basement, 16 rooms.	Sold with 50a. accommodation lands in June 1953.
Isercleran (Galway)	do.	9 mls. Loughrea, 2 storey over semi- basement in front, 3 storey in rere, 19 main rooms, out- offices, lodge etc.	Sold with 75a. in August 1955.
Gowran Castle (Kilkenny)	do. (with wing)	3 mls. Goresbridge, 2 storey semi- basement, 22 rooms, etc. Very good repair.	Sold with 73a. in May 1956.
<u>MEDIUM/SMALL</u> Cooper Hill (Meath)	Built about 1930	3 mls. Drogheda, 2 storey, 7 rooms, very good repair.	Sold with 19a. in October, 1956.

APPENDIX ONE – TABLE B (Contd.)

1. <u>Sales by tender</u> (Including private treaty after abortive auction)			
<u>LARGE</u>			
Garretstown House (Cork)	Non-descript	2 storey, stone-built, slated, 23 rooms, out- offices	Sold with 49a. (February 1954) - tender
Newpark House (Roscommon)	Georgian	½ ml. Kiltoom, 6 ½ mls. Athlone. 3 storey and basement, 18 rooms, out-offices and 10 roomed house.	Sold with 57a. in March 1955 by private treaty after abortive auction.
2. <u>Abortive auction or tender</u>			
<u>SMALL</u>			
Fern Hill (Donegal)	Georgian	4 mls. E. Kilmacrennan, 2 storey, 7 rooms, poor repair.	Auctioned with 13 acres in March 1958. Abortive and auctioneer still seeking offers.

APPENDIX ONE – TABLE C

(Big Houses on hands of Land Commission demolished over past 4 years approximately.)

Name	Style	Description
<p style="text-align: center;"><u>LARGE</u></p> <p>Pallas House (Wexford)</p>		<p>Large mansion 7½ mls. N.E. New Ross, 32 rooms, roof very bad and ceilings collapsing.</p>
<p>Castleharrison (Harrison Estate, Cork)</p>	-	<p>2½mls. Charleville, large 3 storey mansion, stone built slated, 27 apartments, together with range of out-offices all in very poor repair.</p>
<p>Lissard House (Longford)</p>	Georgian	<p>39 rooms, suitable only for demolition.</p>
<p>Shanbally Castle (Tipperary)</p>	<p>Late Georgian of imitated Tudor style (150 years old)</p>	<p>3 mls. Clogheen, 10 mls. Cahir, stone-built, slated roof, 20 principal bed and dressing rooms, bathrooms and ample servant accommodation.</p>
<p>Leamlara House (Cork)</p>	-	<p>4 mls. Carrigtwohill. 2 storey – stone-built, slated, large mansion-type residence and range of outoffices, all in poor repair.</p>

APPENDIX ONE – TABLE C (Contd.)

<u>MEDIUM/SMALL</u>		
Dundullerick House (Cork)	Small mansion type	Ruinous condition. Very old and unfit for occupation (Creagh-Barry Estate)
Residence on Robinson Estate (Westmeath)		2 storey, with annexe, 18 rooms.
Residence on Duan Estate (Galway)		2 storey, 33' X 42', 11 rooms.
Residence on Slattery Estate (Tipperary)		6 mls. S. W. Nenagh, 2 storey with basement, annexe, 11 rooms.

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