

WHITE ELEPHANTS: THE COUNTRY HOUSE AND THE STATE IN INDEPENDENT IRELAND, 1922-1973. By Emer Crooke. Pp xxiii, 263. Dublin: University College Dublin Press. 2018. €40.00

With roots in the legend of the Kings of Siam, who reportedly 'gifted' rare albino elephants to out-of-favour courtiers, the term 'white elephant' is used to describe an extravagant gift that is more trouble than it is worth. Finding that the term crops up repeatedly in source materials, Emer Crooke adopts it as the title of her first monograph, a study based on her doctoral dissertation chronicling the Irish state's relationship with the country house in the first fifty years of independence. It is a challenging story to tell, not least because of the contradictions 'between public rhetoric and private views, and between what was said and was done.' (p.197)

Taking a 'broadly national approach' (p.xvi), and filling a gap in the historiography of the country house, the story revolves around properties offered as gifts to the Irish state, often with conditions that they be maintained and opened to the public, or used for 'worthy' purposes. Several houses feature but case studies - Bishops court, Derrynane, Dunsandle, Hazelwood, Killarney, Muckross, and Russborough - highlight the case-by-case nature of state responses, and differing attitudes of individual government ministers and civil servants. Decisions surrounding the acceptance, preservation, or use, of country houses rested largely with the Department of Finance, and the evidence shows that parsimonious (and perhaps nationalistic) officials were influential in this respect. As Crooke points out, the ways that such houses were or were not regarded as national heritage continue to be factors for their use and survival today. A key theme of the book then is the twentieth-century evolution of the country house as a national heritage asset.

A prevailing question, faced by successive governments, was whether or not it should be the state's responsibility to preserve, maintain or use country houses and estates, when it struggled to provide basic necessities like healthcare, housing, education and employment. Like the white elephants of Siam, they were expensive to maintain and difficult to dispose of, especially when there was no significant tourism industry to support them. Even where there was recognised 'historical, architectural, traditional, artistic, or archaeological interest' (p.72), there was no national policy and it was difficult to justify the level of investment required to make them financially viable. In the absence of an Irish national trust, however, gifts accepted for various reasons by the nascent Irish state were the cultural property and responsibility of the state.

Any discussion of Ireland's national heritage is an exploration in political and economic context and Crooke presents this across six chapters, four of which move the study chronologically from 1922 to 1973. These are punctuated by two thematic chapters dealing with the Office of Public Works (OPW) and the Irish Land Commission, the two 'most important and influential' (p.xvi) public bodies concerned with the (mis)fortunes of the country house during the period in question. During the years between 1930 and 1960, 'the most dramatic in terms of dereliction and demolition' (p.96), the OPW, as the body responsible for heritage preservation, came under increasing pressure from local authorities, members of the public, and tourism stakeholders to intervene. However, for a variety of reasons outlined in chapter three, the country house was

not thought to be of sufficient importance to warrant a survey, not to mention protection as a national monument.

The Land Commission was responsible for land division - a process that ended the landed estate system in the twentieth century and made the decline of the country house inevitable - and acquired many country houses. Crooke argues that although it has been widely criticised for demolishing houses, it was not the Commission's first preference or policy - and had the OPW classified the houses as national monuments, they would have been protected (p.152).

The Commission records at the National Archives of Ireland document the greatest socio-economic transformation in modern Irish history but, unfortunately, they are not yet available to the public for research. This study draws then on state department correspondence, memoranda, and briefing notes contained within files generated by different government offices, published proceedings of the Oireachtas (Dáil and Seanad debates), contemporary newspapers and periodicals, relevant legislation, historiography, and oral history sources, from which snippets are peppered throughout the text. A valuable inclusion is a five-page appendix containing a 1958 government memorandum, transcribed verbatim, detailing large, medium, and small houses (a) then on the hands of the Commission, (b) sold privately or by auction over the previous four years, and (c) demolished over the previous four years. This document also provides the basis for chapter five.

Crooke's examination of the role played by the Irish state in the demise of some of Ireland's finest country houses makes for depressing reading at points, but tales of survival and individual endeavour find light in her prose, which will appeal to academic and general readers alike. Other highlights are judiciously selected primary source quotations, an extensive bibliography and the 22-image colour insert. As well as perspectives on statecraft in a new democracy and the personalism of Irish politics, this national study provides important context for domestic micro-histories and international comparison. Above all, it is a good reminder of the fluidity of such concepts as cultural heritage and national patrimony.

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