

CONUL Collections, Preservation & Conservation Sub-Committee

Survey of Unique & Distinct Collections in CONUL libraries, 2015



Image: Collection QUB

Summary

In 2015 10 CONUL Libraries completed a survey of their Unique and Distinct Collections, capturing a snapshot of their range and size. The holdings were examined by the Collections, Preservation & Conservation Sub-committee and colleagues, to tease out **the accessibility, condition, preservation and other needs** of UDC's, and to expose the findings as a means of identifying and promoting collaborative work packages in an effective way in a climate of restricted resources. Participating Libraries were DIT, QUB, RCSI, RIA, NUI Galway, NUIM, TCD, UCC, UDC, and UU. For operational reasons some of the institutions were unable to input data to the survey.

Collection content

430 named Unique and Distinct Collections have been identified in 10 CONUL Libraries.¹ The size of each of these listings varies from a few items, to tens of thousands items; many different supports, structures and media are included : parchment/vellum manuscripts; paper-based records; printed works; bound volumes; photographs & photograph albums; electronic storage media; audio and audio-visual recordings; maps; deeds; drawings and sketchbooks. The Libraries have identified key collections of great importance not only to their own constituencies, but also to the island of Ireland, and we can begin to see synergies between the collections. All show particular strengths but importantly they collectively tell the story of Ireland, its history, its people, and their preoccupations. Exemplars include well known manuscripts such as the Book of Kells (TCD), the Stowe Missal (RIA), the more recent manuscript compilation, *The Great Book of Ireland*.²

Synergies

Many of the collections complement and overlap each other. For example NUI Galway holds the library of Seamus Ó Duilearga and the collection of rare Irish language pamphlets assembled by the Bairéad family. This material has significant connection with unique collections elsewhere in Ireland, particularly

¹ For a range of reasons, the survey is not comprehensive but it is considered to be complete enough to indicate the scale of the issues facing collections in terms of their management in the short and medium terms.

² Held at UCC, this is a single volume vellum manuscript with the original work of 121 artists, 143 poets and 9 composers (1989 -91). It includes work by Seamus Heaney and Derek Walcott, as well as Samuel Beckett's last poem and poetry by Ciarán Carson, Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill, Theo Dorgan and Derek Mahon. Contributing artists include Robert Ballagh, Cecily Brennan, Barrie Cooke, Michael Farrell, Eithne Jordan, Louis le Brocquy, Tony O'Malley and Kathy Prendergast.

the Special Collections held in UCD and UCC. The archival collections are strong in material relating to theatre and the performing arts, as well as the Irish language, the history of the Northern Ireland Troubles and landed estates in the west and south-west of Ireland. In this regard they complement materials held in the NLI, the UL and the Maynooth-Castletown archive, an initiative in which MU Library participates.

At Queens University Belfast Library the Somerville and Ross Collection (QUB MS 17) - comprising diaries, correspondence, working papers and draft manuscripts relating to the literary activities, personal interests and affairs of Edith Somerville and Violet Martin, and correspondence between Edith Somerville and Dame Ethel Smyth, the British composer and suffragette — has synergies with the Somerville and Ross collection of business correspondence held in TCD.

In the special collections at UU nationally and provincially important literary figures are represented by collections relating to John Hewitt, Denis Johnston, George Shiels (whose plays were staged at the Abbey), Francis Stuart and Harry Barton. The Johnston and Stuart collections complement collections held at TCD and the Southern Illinois University respectively. The collection of Irish language, literature, history and cultural collections include the Library of Henry Morris whose notebooks and papers are held at UCD; and the Natural History Collections with the book/pamphlet collections of A.W. Stelfox & E.N. Carrothers and the pamphlet collection of R.L.Praeger resonates with the Praeger papers held at the RIA.

The Gaelic manuscript collections held across institutions, with those in the RIA and NLI being the strongest, are one of the most noteworthy collections at a national level. Of the many significant collections held by the RIA, the Irish-language manuscript collection is perhaps the most important in terms of content, span and integrity. From a ninth-century tract on the Mass contained in the Stowe Missal, the earliest substantial prose text in Irish, through the great books of Ireland, to the hundreds of 17th-19th century compilations containing histories, genealogies, law, medical tracts, poetry, prose and religious material, in total over 1,400 manuscripts range over a millennium of Gaelic scholarship, attesting to the richness of the Irish language and Gaelic culture and the enduring tradition of manuscript transmission of texts.

Within all CONUL collections of family papers, the archives of writers, politicians and public figures, there are caches of photographic collections that animate our history. These can form minor components within national collections (e.g. Davitt papers and Childers papers held in TCD Library) but there are also instances where the entire collection is the life's work of a photographer. The 1800 + glass plate slides, created by Frank Stephens (TCD), is one such collection. The slides cover a wide range of themes: west of Ireland and Aran Islands in particular; Irish antiquities; dolmens, standing stones, Dublin street

scenes; Irish castles, Irish College in Galway; Book of Kells and other Insular manuscripts; family photos. This type of collection is mirrored by similar collections from the same period held in other institutions, such as: the NLI's Keogh collection for the period 1915-1930 which covers the same timespan as the Frank Stephen's collection but from a political viewpoint; or the Balfour Album of photographs held in NUI Galway and created in 1893-1895 by the Belfast photographer, Robert John Welch, which features the same people and landscape that captured Stephens's interest (some of Welch's images appear in the Stephens collection).

Photographs, more than any other medium, evoke an instant response from the viewer. They are one of the most potent elements of any archive and along with the machine-readable collections (audio tapes, film, DVD etc) are the most vulnerable to rapid deterioration.

Survey Results

The survey data is summarised in the table below. Of significance is the size of the CONUL UDC's. In the 10 institutions surveyed there is an estimated 7.8 kilometres of collections plus over 300,000 individual items, over 6 million volumes, over 11,500 machine readable items, over 600,000 maps, and innumerable photographic items.

Key findings include:

- 62 of the 430 named UDCs are not accessible (14.4%);
 - 77 named UDC's are uncatalogued (17.9%), however 76.7% have an online record;
 - 23 UDCs have been digitised (5.3%);
 - a budget of €53,000 p.a. for conservation represents a spend of €123 per collection.
- Most collections lack a condition survey, although most have indicated a conservation need, and only two Libraries surveyed have conservators on staff.

While these numbers are quite abstract, as each UDC has a unique size (with large variations from a small number of items to tens of thousands of items, they highlight the clear deficits in conservation budgets and digitising programmes across the group.

- Over 11,000 items are machine readable, which represents a substantial risk of loss of collection items due to obsolescence or degradation, and photographic collections which are generally dispersed throughout collections have a high risk of degradation due to environmental issues.

The survey has provided all participating libraries with an opportunity to see connections between collections and common interests. Synergies, complementarity and overlaps as described above run through all the libraries, and exploration of these by CONUL would be the first step to comprehensive and collaborative projects that will expose these rich resources in new and innovative ways.

Recommendations:

There are a number of recommendations that follow the survey work.

- An evaluation of the risks facing the collections should be undertaken
- Identify budgets required for cataloguing, digitising, and conserving those collections that are at greatest risk
- Prioritisation of digitisation projects that have resonance to CONUL libraries and significance to the country
- Identification of grant funding for collaborative projects
- Develop an advocacy programme to highlight the content and significance of the collections
- Identify access short-falls and actions to resolve these
- Summarise the storage requirements for the next 10-20 years
- Conduct a deeper study of specific collection types where findings will give added value to CONUL's strategic plan

Summary of CONUL UDC survey 2015

	DIT	QUB	RCSI	RIA	NUI Galway	MU	TCD	UCC	UCD	UU	Totals
Number of UDCs	3	55	2	33	14	28	135	101	41	18	430
Date range	1910 – 1990's	1145-current	1666-1962	9thC-20thC	1476-2000	3 rd millennium BC - current	3 rd millennium BC - current	1386- current	15 th C-current	1444-current	3 rd millennium BC - current
Size of UDCs	38 linear metres	12,921 items; 439 linear metres; 201 archival boxes; 2,540 volumes; 171 machine readable	800 volumes	53,241 items; 27 linear metres; 164 archive boxes; 2,623 volumes; 212 machine readable	20,780 items; 32,128 vols	72,789 items; 80 boxes; 38,088 volumes; 399 archival boxes (227 MU, 172 St Patricks); 1728 CD's; 790 tape cassettes; 2000 DVDs; Flag from Ogoni Kingdom in Nigeria; 1 cap; 2 Regency table Globes; Catalan flag and crucifix; 65 cuneiform tablets and cones; 1 stamp seal	137,117 items; 5,826,437 volumes; 55 boxes; 595,277 sheets (maps); 3,389 electronic items; Other – 2 Harps, 1 drum, 1 gun MISSING ARCHIVAL BOX COUNT; MS VOLUMES	1260 items; 12740.5 linear feet (3.883kilometres) which includes – 32,178 items, 38,139 volumes, and a number of machine readable ; plus other 290 vols; 3088m ² other material; 11200 other machine readable; plus archives measuring – 5512 items, 829 boxes, 150 books, 3 tapes,	4,565 items; 342 archive boxes; 50,220 volumes	994 items; 362.5 linear metres; 194 archival boxes; 14,400 volumes	OVER: 7,839 kilometres of collection plus over 309,179 items, plus over 5,967,276 volumes, plus over 1435 archive boxes, plus over 16,104 machine readable items, plus over 595,277 single sheet maps, plus over 3,389 electronic items, plus 65 cuneiform tablets, plus 2 harps, 2 globes, 1 drum 1 flag, 1 cap, 1 crucifix, and 1 gun
Number uncatalogued	2	3	0	2, 8 partly	13, 1 partly	11, 2 partly	46, 8 partly	7, 4 partly 42 with archive listing	2, 2 partly	4, 3 partly	77, 27 partly, 42 with archive listing
Number in online catalogue	1	48	2	?	13, 1 partly	5, 3 partly	79	102	23	10	330, 3 partly
Records in RASCAL	0	32	0	8	8	0	0	0	3	14	57
Access restrictions	No access to 3 collns	no	no	No access to 2	no	No access to 7, 2 restricted	No access to 36, 1 restricted	6 restricted	1 restricted	No access to 15, 2	No access to 62, restricted access to 12

										restricted access	
Number digitised	0	3 partly	0	1, 7partly	0	5	12, 23 partly	1, 2 partly	3, 2 partly	1	23, 37 partly
Digitisation outsourced	n/a	yes	n/a	yes	n/a	In-house and outsourced	In-house	yes	no	no	
Condition survey	no	no	no	3 collns partly	1 partly	yes	yes	no	16 collns	no	
Conservation required	yes	unsure	no	yes	Yes for 1	yes	yes	Yes	Yes	unsure	
Conservation in-house	no	no	no	no	no	yes	yes	no	no	no	2 libraries
Annual conservation budget	0	no	no	€10K	?	€10K	€28K	unsure	€5K	no	53K
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Notes about the summary above

- The RIA's survey is a snapshot and not a complete review of the collections.
- Some collections surveyed did not include the size of all UDC's.
- Some collections have machine readable items within a box count, so total is very inaccurate.
- Photographic items are hidden within some UDC counts.
- All surveys were completed within time constraints and represent a broad over-view.

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