

A HISTORY OF THE  
IRISH MANUSCRIPTS COMMISSION

Copyrighted material: Irish Manuscripts Commission

RECONSTRUCTING IRELAND'S PAST

A HISTORY OF THE  
IRISH MANUSCRIPTS  
COMMISSION

MICHAEL KENNEDY  
AND  
DEIRDRE McMAHON



IRISH MANUSCRIPTS COMMISSION

2009

*This book is dedicated to the members of the  
Irish Manuscripts Commission past and present.*

Published by  
Irish Manuscripts Commission  
45 Merrion Square  
Dublin 2  
Ireland  
[www.irishmanuscripts.ie](http://www.irishmanuscripts.ie)

ISBN 978-1-874280-50-7

Copyright © Irish Manuscripts Commission 2009

Michael Kennedy and Deirdre McMahon have asserted their right to be identified as the authors of this work in accordance with the Copyright and Related Rights Act 2000, Section 107.

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without prior written permission of the publisher.

Typeset by Carole Lynch in Adobe Garamond  
Printed by ColourBooks, Dublin  
Index prepared by Michael Kennedy

# CONTENTS

FOREWORD	VII	
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	IX	
LIST OF PLATES	XI	
ABBREVIATIONS	XIII	
INTRODUCTION	XV	
Chapter 1	Origins and establishment 1922–28	1
Chapter 2	Years of optimism 1929–32	21
Chapter 3	Years of achievement 1932–39	58
Chapter 4	Emergency challenges 1939–45	80
Chapter 5	Regaining momentum 1945–56	95
Chapter 6	New challenges 1956–73	127
Chapter 7	Fall and rise 1973–2007	144
CONCLUSION	165	
APPENDICES		
Appendix 1	Chairmen of the Irish Manuscripts Commission (1929–2009)	168
Appendix 2	General Editors of <i>Analecta Hibernica</i> (1929–2009)	169
Appendix 3	Members of the Irish Manuscripts Commission (1928–2009)	170
Appendix 4	Secretaries and Administrators of the Irish Manuscripts Commission (1929–2009)	179
Appendix 5	Surveyors of the Business Records Survey (1970–93)	180
Appendix 6	Irish Manuscripts Commission publications (1930–2009)	181
BIBLIOGRAPHY	194	
INDEX	198	

‘We owe it to ourselves and to those who are to come after us to learn and know and make known the records of our country’s past’.

*Eoin MacNeill, first Chairman of the Irish Manuscripts Commission,  
11 November 1929*

‘Trebar cach conoi a fintid oigi foric’/‘Prudent is he who maintains his inheritance entire as he finds it’.

*Irish Manuscript Commission motto since 1931. From the seventh century  
Irish law tract Córus Béscnai, one of the books of the Senchas Már*

‘An irreparable blow was delivered to the compilation of national and local history, not by an alien government or by careless officials, but by Irishmen claiming to be patriots, who blew up the Record Office in 1922’.

*Cork Examiner, 18 November 1947*

‘Fate has not been kind to our archives and historical records’.

*H. A. Wheeler, Irish Times, 28 August 1954*

‘The task of the historian is to reconstruct the past. For this we are dependent on the records of the past’.

*Jocelyn Otway-Ruthven, Irish historiography 1936–70, 1971*

Copyrighted material. Irish Manuscripts Commission

## INTRODUCTION

*'The history of a country is founded upon its archives, and the preservation not only of its public but also of its private documents.'*<sup>1</sup>

It is probably due more to Eoin MacNeill than to anyone else that the Irish Manuscripts Commission was established<sup>2</sup> – this was the view of MacNeill's former student and Irish Manuscripts Commission (IMC) and University College Dublin (UCD) colleague Professor Robert Dudley Edwards.<sup>3</sup> Edwards made a second point: that it was also due to MacNeill that 'Irish historical studies developed so impressively' from the 1920s.<sup>3</sup> The two points were directly related. MacNeill's vision for the IMC, from its foundation in 1928, was for it to make the source materials of Irish history widely available to scholars and the general public alike and thus for the IMC to promote history as a discipline in Ireland and allow it to grow and prosper. MacNeill knew that the development of Irish historical studies was dependent upon access to original documents. Writing in 1924, the historian Fr Brendan Jennings OFM saw an alternative future. Without a body such as the IMC, he held that 'Irish history will never be written, and the Irish race will remain ignorant of its past'.<sup>4</sup> The result of MacNeill's endeavours, and those of the Commission he was instrumental in founding, has been the creation of a more vibrant historical community in Ireland: Jennings's prophesy has not come to pass.

'Adequate documentation' is, as Professor Joe Lee has put it, 'a pre-requisite for the establishment of satisfactory scholarly standards' in academic history.<sup>5</sup> However, before the establishment of the IMC, adequate documentation was not easily available for historians of Ireland. Writing in 1944, Edwards and Professor Theo Moody saw the establishment of the IMC as 'the most important event for the publication of source material in recent years'.<sup>6</sup> Today's multiplicity of online sources and databases, and indeed the work of the IMC itself, may minimise the massive shock to the study of Ireland's history caused by the destruction of the Public Record Office in the Four Courts in Dublin in the early days of the Civil War on 30 June 1922. To the founders of the IMC, the destruction of the PROI, and with it the sources for over 700 years of Irish history, was a cataclysm. Without the sources from which to write the history of Ireland, the underdeveloped state of historical research in Ireland in the early-

<sup>1</sup> Herbert Wood, 'The Public Records of Ireland Before and After 1922', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, fourth series, vol. 13 (1930), pp 17–49, p. 17.

<sup>2</sup> R. Dudley Edwards, 'Professor MacNeill', in F. X. Martin and F. J. Byrne (eds), *The Scholar Revolutionary: Eoin MacNeill, 1867–1945, and the Making of the New Ireland* (Shannon, 1973), pp 279–97, p. 279.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> Comment by Jennings on Eoin MacNeill, 'The Fifteenth Centenary of St Patrick', *Studies*, vol. xiii, no. 50 (June 1924), pp 177–88. Jennings's comments run from pp 194–6, the quote is from p. 194.

<sup>5</sup> J. J. Lee, *Ireland 1912–1985* (Cambridge, 1985), p. 593.

<sup>6</sup> NAI DT S13565, 'Scheme for an Irish Institute of Historical Research proposed by the Irish Committee of Historical Sciences 1944', para 9.

mid-decades of the twentieth century could not be improved; and the 'pseudo-history' of Ireland, often politically inspired or religiously biased, could not be challenged. The IMC's task of improving the availability of the primary sources from which to study Irish history was the first stage in building history as a viable academic discipline in modern Ireland and in giving the people of Ireland easier access to their past.

Some viewed the records destroyed in the Four Courts as merely the records of English rule in Ireland. They were thus not relevant to the history of Ireland except insofar as they showed a record of centuries of foreign domination. That perspective saw in Irish independence the means to take control of the history of Ireland. Independence would allow Irish history to be written from Irish sources and the publication of Irish language manuscripts would promote the writing of Ireland's history from Ireland's native records. Such views forgot that many of these Irish records had also been destroyed in the Four Courts fire. For the IMC it meant that in the early years of the Commission there was at times a difference of opinion between those members who argued that the Commission's role was primarily to publish Irish language documents and those who felt its role was to publish Irish historical documents in any language. This divide petered out by the mid-1930s as the Commission established itself as a publisher of historical source material concerning all aspects of Ireland's histories. The foundation of the Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies (DIAS) in 1940 removed much of the IMC's Irish language publishing function to the School of Celtic Studies at DIAS. By the second half of the twentieth century the sources the IMC published were, if necessarily not Irish language, undoubtedly Irish and representative of all traditions and histories on the island of Ireland.

To those schooled in the rigorous analysis of historical sources, the work of the IMC in making these sources available might seem straightforward. They could argue that the IMC was doing little more than collecting and disseminating material. That is a deceptively simple conclusion. In undertaking its main task of making primary sources available, the IMC provides what is now called 'research infrastructure'. In other words, the IMC provides the neutral historical evidence that enables research into Irish history to take place.

Providing such source material in a relatively unadorned manner and with footnotes and interpretation kept to a minimum was an important achievement for the IMC in the decades after Irish independence. In those times, narrowly focussed histories could easily be used to bolster contemporary political and historical agendas.

The Commission was founded at a time when the Irish Free State was seeking to establish a secure political and cultural foundation. Its establishment was contemporary with other components of this process: the Currency Commission founded in 1927 and the Irish Folklore Commission established in 1935. It is perhaps revealing that the IMC's first collotype facsimile publication was a Brehon law tract: the 1931 reproduction of *The Oldest fragments of the Senchas Már*. That this facsimile was the first to appear was due to MacNeill's strong influence over the IMC's initial publication plans.

At its first meeting after MacNeill's death in 1945, the members of the Commission placed on record 'their profound regret and their sense of loss' at his passing. Their

resolution recorded how MacNeill had presided over the IMC since its establishment and that it had been founded ‘on lines laid down by himself’.<sup>7</sup> MacNeill’s widow Taddie (Agnes), in thanking the Commission for their tribute, affirmed the abiding importance of the Commission’s work to her husband; it ‘was his foremost interest and a source of great satisfaction to him in his later years even to the last days of his life’.<sup>8</sup> MacNeill’s brother Charles echoed her.<sup>9</sup> He wrote that to his brother ‘the work of the Commission was an absorbing interest, work of high public interest under several aspects, and it was his earnest wish that it should contribute towards the growth of a serious and well-informed spirit of dealing with the matters within its scope’.<sup>10</sup>

The learned men and women of the IMC, working under MacNeill’s chairmanship, undertook their task with similar ‘great satisfaction’ and ‘absorbing interest’. The same is true of their successors – Ireland’s senior historians, librarians and archivists; they have joined forces to undertake a massive exploration of Ireland’s past across the ages, the results of which are available nationally and internationally to all interested in Irish history. Since its first meeting in January 1929, the IMC has discovered, recovered, protected and made more accessible the sources underpinning Irish history from the earliest to modern times. Celebrating eighty years of the Commission’s work, this book tells their story. It tells the history of an institution, unique internationally, and of the work of the individuals who, as members of the Irish Manuscripts Commission and as editors of the over 150 individual volumes published by the IMC since 1930, gave and continue to give their services to the IMC on a voluntary basis to make the study of history in Ireland a pursuit that all can follow.

It is not feasible or indeed wise in a volume such as this, which is by and large an administrative and political history of an academic institution, to assess each and every one of the projects the IMC has undertaken since 1929. Rather, the aim is to give a flavour of the work and mission of the IMC over eighty years and to provide an insight into the views of the academics making up the IMC and the work they were undertaking for the Commission. The history of the IMC is that of the actions of motivated members who aimed to develop history as a world-class academic discipline in Ireland.

The academic climate for history in the first years of the Irish Free State was bleak. In the years before 1936, when Moody and Edwards brought ‘scientific history’ to Ireland and founded the Ulster Society for Irish Historical Studies in Belfast and the Irish Historical Society in Dublin,<sup>11</sup> followed by the societies’ joint journal *Irish Historical Studies* (IHS) in 1938, there were few outlets in Ireland for publication for aspiring academics, in particular those interested in publishing important manuscripts or manuscript fragments. It was a cyclical problem: there were few outlets for research and because there were few outlets there was little research. MacNeill knew from his own career path the difficulties facing those wishing to become professional historians

<sup>7</sup> NAI IMC 97/42/2, resolution of 23 Oct. 1945.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., Agnes MacNeill to Brereton, 20 Nov. 1945.

<sup>9</sup> Readers should note that Eoin and Charles spelt their surname differently and the authors have followed their style in this text, thus Charles McNeill and Eoin MacNeill are the forms used.

<sup>10</sup> NAI IMC 97/42/2, Charles McNeill to Brereton, 20 Nov. 1945.

<sup>11</sup> MacNeill encouraged the foundation of the Irish Historical Society and became its first President.



in Ireland. He lamented the situation. While there was, he felt, 'a certain modicum of publication' in the *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy* and in *Ériu*, the journal of the School of Irish Learning,<sup>12</sup> 'the scope of the Academy proceedings and of *Ériu* leaves only little room for the publication of manuscript material, and the small amount of publication effected within the present century has been mainly dependent on Continental periodicals, editors and publishers'.<sup>13</sup> As David Edwards has put it, 'in the early twentieth century Irish history needed to be saved in more ways than one'.<sup>14</sup>

The IMC set about publishing in book form the major primary sources for Irish history, with shorter documents collected together and published in the Commission's occasional journal, *Analecta Hibernica*. Established in 1930, *Analecta Hibernica* was jointly edited by University College Cork (UCC) Professor of History James Hogan and by MacNeill. In reality, Hogan was the driving force behind the journal with MacNeill the intellectual force behind the entire IMC project. The journal was the backbone of the Commission's work through the 1930s and the 1940s as the IMC began to build up a corpus of published source material. In this manner, the IMC created an outlet for new research into Ireland's histories. IMC publications in turn generated research as historians turned to them to provide the foundations for further studies of Ireland's past. Through MacNeill's inspiration, the IMC enabled the 'development of Irish history in the critical years' in which it became 'professionalised and internationally respected'.<sup>15</sup>

The years from 1928 to 1932 saw the lively growth of the IMC. An eager, perhaps over-optimistic, publishing programme was adopted to make available an array of important texts.<sup>16</sup> The initial focus was on Irish language sources from before 1500, with publications coalescing around MacNeill's early Irish texts and the key sources for medieval and early-modern Ireland. Then came the establishment of three long-term multi-volume projects: the *Calendar of Ormond Deeds*, the *Commentarius Rinuccinianus* and the *Civil Survey*. By the end of its first decade, IMC projects and publications had settled into this distinct Early Irish and Early Modern focus, a focus they maintained until the postwar years.

In the wider framework of Irish cultural institutions, the IMC fell under the same government restrictions as did the PROI and the SPO. Direct government intervention in the IMC's activities during its early years was relatively limited. Established under warrant by Executive Council decision and under the remit of the Departments of Education, Finance and the President of the Executive Council, the Commission faced the problem of serving many masters. The involvement of the Department of Education in the IMC was far from regular. It often merely acted as a channel for IMC communications with other departments of state. Yet direct contact with these departments was not always necessary in the Commission's first years. From 1928 to 1932 MacNeill was more likely to solve his problems concerning the IMC

<sup>12</sup> Founded in 1903, the School of Irish Learning was later incorporated into the Royal Irish Academy.

<sup>13</sup> NAI IMC 97/42/1, undated notes in blue type by MacNeill.

<sup>14</sup> David Edwards, 'Salvaging History: Hogan and the Irish Manuscripts Commission', in Donnchadh Ó Corráin (ed.), *James Hogan. Revolutionary, Historian, Political Scientist* (Dublin, 2001), p. 116.

<sup>15</sup> Edwards, 'Professor MacNeill', p. 297.

<sup>16</sup> See appendix 6 for details.

through a private off-the-record chat with Minister for Finance Ernest Blythe or via a discreet letter to President of the Executive Council, William T. Cosgrave.

Fianna Fáil's arrival in power in March 1932 changed this. Like Cosgrave, de Valera was a supporter of the work of the IMC, and MacNeill had recourse to him at important junctures. However, the change of government removed MacNeill's comfortable channel to Blythe. In Blythe's successor, Seán MacEntee, the IMC found itself dealing with a minister with academic leanings and interventionist views. MacEntee was supported by civil servants who, as Gerard O'Brien has put it, 'harboured a deep resentment' of the IMC and similar bodies because they considered they 'were absorbing public money that might have been put to "better use"'.<sup>17</sup> This attitude stemmed from official thinking in a period of overall cutbacks and economies and because, as O'Brien has argued, 'historians, the officials quickly came to believe, did not understand the value of money'.<sup>18</sup> These views dominated Department of Finance thinking on the IMC. Regardless of their Minister's viewpoint, senior officials in the Department, in particular its Secretary, James J. McElligott, and Principal Officer T. S. C. Dagg, harboured a pathological distrust of the workings of the IMC and went to absurd lengths through the 1930s to query and hinder its operations.

Early production schedules began to bear fruit through the mid-1930s as *Analecta Hibernica* appeared regularly and the catalogue of IMC publications grew. The IMC's long-term projects, the *Calendar of Ormond Deeds*, edited by Trinity College Professor of History Edmund Curtis, the *Civil Survey*, edited by Dr Robert Simington, and the *Commentarius Rinuccinianus*, edited by Fr Stanislaus Kavanagh OFM. Cap., were by now underway and their first volumes were appearing. In the pages of *Analecta Hibernica* the evidence of the research and analysis of a new generation of professionally trained Irish historians was also beginning to appear. Edwards and Moody had, from their time at the Institute of Historical Research in London in the early 1930s, been in contact with the IMC as contributors, passing on documents for publication in *Analecta Hibernica*. Edwards even convinced the IMC in the mid-1930s to accept a major though ultimately unsuccessful project to publish the 1641 Depositions, though the work of Moody and Edwards on seventeenth-century Ulster appeared in *Analecta Hibernica* 8. These and the many other IMC publications of the 1930s fulfilled MacNeill's belief in the Commission as a vehicle for academic change in Ireland. Reviewing Edwards' work in *Analecta Hibernica*, Ada Longfield put MacNeill's outlook in practical terms: 'it is of value to have this material so easily accessible to serious students'.<sup>19</sup>

When Moody and Edwards launched *Irish Historical Studies*, they saw their new journal augmenting and building on the work of the IMC. They explained in the preface to the first volume of IHS that the lack of an Irish counterpart to journals such as *History* or the *American Historical Review* was 'the more to be regretted, because in recent years the activities of the Irish Manuscripts Commission ... have been making available a mass of historical material previously unknown or relatively

<sup>17</sup> Gerard O'Brien, *Irish Governments and the Guardianship of Historical Records, 1922–72* (Dublin, 2004), p. 14.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> A. K. Longfield, 'Analecta Hibernica: including the reports of the Irish Manuscripts Commission, No. 8', review in *Irish Historical Studies* vol. 2, no. 5 (Mar., 1940), pp 87–8.

inaccessible to the Irish scholar'.<sup>20</sup> Accordingly Moody and Edwards aimed through IHS 'at [the] co-ordination and co-relation of historical work'.<sup>21</sup> They explained that only 'such documents as would not be likely to obtain publication in *Analecta Hibernica*, *Archivium Hibernicum* and the like will therefore find a place in our pages'.<sup>22</sup>

Irish Manuscript Commission publications would be central to the aims of the new young generation of Irish historians who emerged in the 1930s, spearheaded by Edwards and Moody, and who prided themselves on providing 'value-free' scientific history free from political bias. The IMC acted as a bridge between older antiquarian varieties of Irish history and the new 'scientific history' the graduates of the IHR brought to Ireland. Certainly, it is appropriate to include the work of the IMC within the vast change in approach to the academic study of history in Ireland that took place in the 1930s. More often than not the IMC has been a footnote to that process. In reality, the IMC was a core component of the Moody and Edwards scheme which was, as Ciaran Brady has put it, 'an open-ended research project limited only by the availability and workability of the primary sources'.<sup>23</sup> The IMC provided the raw source materials for this new approach to the writing of Ireland's history. Only by making widely available such source material for Irish history could its pseudo-histories be challenged by the new 'scientific historians'. In 1938 the first edition of IHS highlighted the work of the IMC by publishing a full list of IMC publications from 1930 to 1937.<sup>24</sup> Edwards placed MacNeill in the new cohort of scientific historians for his 'achievements in establishing the scientific basis for the study of early Irish history, its laws and institutions'.<sup>25</sup>

Despite the IMC making progress in the academic sphere in its early years, by the mid-1930s MacNeill was facing nothing less than an attempted takeover of the day-to-day operations of the IMC by the Department of Finance in an attempt to micro-manage all aspects of the IMC's programme down to the type of paper and reproduction processes most suitable for specific works.<sup>26</sup> O'Brien has charitably argued that

in a country racked by emigration, urban slums, rural poverty and tuberculosis, the officials could scarcely be blamed too much for taking the view that the Irish Folklore Commission, the IMC and the Bureau of Military History were expensive luxuries and should be the natural primary targets of any economy drive.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>20</sup> T. W. Moody and R. D. Edwards, 'Preface to *Irish Historical Studies*', in Ciaran Brady (ed.), *Interpreting Irish History* (Dublin, 1994), pp 35–7, p. 35.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 37.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> Ciaran Brady, "Constructive and Instrumental": The Dilemma of Ireland's First "New Historians", in Ciaran Brady (ed.), *Interpreting Irish History* (Dublin, 1994), pp 3–31, p. 5.

<sup>24</sup> 'Publications of the Irish Manuscripts Commission, 1930–7', *Irish Historical Studies*, vol. 1, no. 1 (Mar. 1938), pp 64–7.

<sup>25</sup> R. D. Edwards, 'An agenda for Irish history, 1978–2018', in Ciaran Brady (ed.), *Interpreting Irish History* (Dublin, 1994), pp 54–67, p. 55.

<sup>26</sup> See Chapter 3, pp 66–70.

<sup>27</sup> O'Brien, *Historical Records*, p. 14.

## Chapter 1

### ORIGINS AND ESTABLISHMENT 1922–28

*'The Four Courts can be replaced, but the records in the Record Office are gone for ever.'*<sup>1</sup>

#### *The legacy of the destruction of the Four Courts*

Photographs of a mushroom cloud 'black as ink, 400ft into the sky' hanging over the Four Courts in Dublin's city centre on Friday 30 June 1922 are the permanent reminder of the destruction of the Public Record Office at the Four Courts that afternoon during the opening stages of fighting in the Civil War.<sup>2</sup> The destruction of the PROI, Ireland's 'greatest treasury of legal and public documents', had 'torn whole chapters out of Irish history'.<sup>3</sup> Though to some they were the records of English rule, they were also the records of every-day life in Ireland since 1174. A journalist recorded at the time of the explosion seeing a National Army soldier reading a document from 1460 memorialising that 'Patrick Prendergast bought from John Redmond of Rathmullen, one pair of boots for eightpence'.<sup>4</sup>

Through the red and brown smoke and the dust of the explosion could be seen 'thousands of great white snowflakes, sidling, curtseying, circling as snowflakes do', floating higher and higher, wider and wider; they were the singed fragments of documents from the Four Courts complex.<sup>5</sup> Blown across Dublin city centre they were found in suburban gardens on the outskirts of the city. Reports carried accounts of showers of burning paper, records reduced to heaps of ashes and of irretrievable public loss. The *Irish Times* printed a photograph of a forty-shilling freeholder's lease of 1807 showing signs of burning. It was found in Ringsend, four miles from the PROI. The destruction was, an official of the PROI explained, 'a disaster of the first magnitude'.<sup>6</sup> It remains 'a national calamity'.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Irish Times*, 12 July 1922.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 1 July 1922. This was not the first time a major Irish archive had been destroyed by fire. In 1711, the Old Customs House on Essex Quay, Dublin was destroyed by fire and with it the documents of the Surveyor General's Office. In 1758, fire destroyed a number of Plea Rolls in the Birmingham Tower of Dublin Castle.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.* On a personal level, perhaps it was not so for the unnamed National Army soldier blown from the roof of the PROI by the explosion whose fall was broken by a pile of documents. *Irish Times*, 1 July 1922.

From this ‘national calamity’ emerged both the impetus for the creation of the IMC and its primary task of publishing original historical source materials. Though the majority of the original documents destroyed in the Four Courts at the hands of those Professor Thomas F. O’Rahilly called ‘unpatriotic vandals’<sup>8</sup> could never be replaced and a high proportion of them had never been subject to rigorous historical analysis, ‘fortunately copies of some of them exist, and to that extent the loss is lessened’.<sup>9</sup> Writing to the editor of the *Irish Times* in the days after the destruction of the PROI, a reader signing themselves ‘C. B’. hoped that the destruction might not prove ‘a holocaust and that some of these records may be salvaged’.<sup>10</sup> They hoped that copies of the documents existed elsewhere, explaining that ‘these documents are now like the Sibylline Books’. In a move that anticipated the creation of the IMC by eight years, the writer suggested that the Provisional Government ‘appoint a small committee to locate these hidden treasures and report as to the best means of rendering them available’.

Instead the Provisional Government and the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland (RSAI) attempted to induce the return of documents found by the public after the Four Courts explosion. The wording of the call – ‘the government desire to impress upon the public the grievous wrong that may be done either to the public or to individuals by the retention of any such documents’ – did little towards achieving the desired result.<sup>11</sup> Herbert Wood,<sup>12</sup> the Deputy Keeper of Records at the PROI, who had based himself at the RSAI’s premises on Merrion Square in Dublin to receive returned records, described the result of the appeal as ‘meagre in the extreme’.<sup>13</sup> The initiative was a failure.

Some important sources survived the destruction of June 1922. For example ‘although nearly all the original Statute Rolls perished in the Four Courts, luckily the Record Commissioners’ Transcripts of the Statutes 12 & 13 Ed. IV’ had survived.<sup>14</sup> Future IMC member James Hogan later stoically viewed the destruction in the Four Courts:

there seems to have been an almost complete holocaust of originals. But I gather ... that many volumes of valuable transcripts, including the transcripts of Inquisitions made by the Record Commissioners have survived.<sup>15</sup>

Robert C. Simington, who would later contribute greatly to the work of the IMC as an editor of the *Civil Survey* and the *Down Survey*, also saw opportunity emerging from the ashes of the PROI:

<sup>8</sup> Comment by Professor O’Rahilly on Eoin MacNeill, ‘The Fifteenth Centenary of St Patrick’, *Studies*, vol. xiii, no. 50 (June 1924), pp 177–88. O’Rahilly’s comments were published on pp 198–200, the quote is from p. 199.

<sup>9</sup> *Irish Times*, 12 July 1922.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 13 July 1922.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 28 July 1922.

<sup>12</sup> Herbert Wood (died 1955), joined the PROI in 1884; Assistant Keeper of Records (1912–14); Assistant Deputy Keeper (1914–21); Deputy Keeper (1921–23).

<sup>13</sup> *Irish Times*, 5 Aug. 1922.

<sup>14</sup> NAI IMC 97/42/35, ‘Memorandum received from Professor James Hogan MA’, undated, but 1929.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

Its disappearance has focussed attention on other sources of enlightenment and which, though much less comprehensive in their contents, are of great importance to the student and explorer of national, topographical and personal history. It is most desirable that these sources should be, in commercial language, well and widely advertised.<sup>16</sup>

Government estimates for the financial year 1922 to 1923 provided just over £12,000 for the running of the ruined PROI. In January 1923, tenders were invited for the reconstruction of its premises. The question of searching for and making available material replacing or complementing that lost in the destruction of the PROI remained.

### *The Seanad Committee on Irish Manuscripts*

On the late afternoon of 19 April 1923, the Seanad discussed the translation of Old Irish manuscripts into new editions. Senator W. B. Yeats explained that this was work which ‘any Government in the world would feel justified in undertaking’.<sup>17</sup> There was he explained a ‘great need for critical editions of the *Annals*, the *Annals of Boyle*, *Innisfallen* and *Connaught*, and above all, perhaps there is need for a dictionary of the old language’. Yeats suggested the provision of ‘a small sum annually’ to allow ‘certain young scholars’ from the NUI and TCD to undertake the work. It was not just a scholarly exercise, but part of national regeneration. Yeats felt the enterprise would

build up again the idealism of Ireland. We have had the old form of wild, wasteful historic idealism. The country got into that position, but, like a spendthrift coming into possession of his inheritance, it has wasted that idealism in a year of civil war. We have to build up again in its place an idealism of labour and of thought and it is not asking much that the few hundreds a year necessary should be spent to begin what may grow to be a very important work of national scholarship, a work for which all the scholars of the world will be grateful, a work which will enhance the reputation of this country.<sup>18</sup>

Towards this end he proposed that

a Committee of the Seanad be appointed to submit to the Government a scheme for the editing, indexing, and publishing of manuscripts in the Irish language now lying in the Royal Irish Academy, Trinity College and elsewhere; for the scientific investigation of the living dialects; for the compiling and publishing of an adequate dictionary of the older language.

The Committee would consist of four Senators: Yeats, genealogist and Irish language enthusiast Edward MacLysaght (who would later head the IMC), historian Alice Stopford Green and folklorist Eileen (Ellen) Costello.

<sup>16</sup> NAI IMC 97/42/41, ‘Sources of History. The Quit Rent Office’, R.C. Simington, 30 Jan. 1930.

<sup>17</sup> *Seanad Deb.*, 1:993, 23 Apr. 1923.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 1:994–5, 23 Apr. 1923.

Senator Stopford Green backed up Yeats, strongly suggesting Eoin MacNeill's involvement in the proposed project as he was 'the most illuminating interpreter that we have yet had of Irish material, especially what relates to old Irish history'.<sup>19</sup> Eschewing the work of insufficiently trained enthusiasts she called for the laying of foundations to 'give back to Ireland the dignity that she has so long missed' and to provide 'the real basis for an honourable pride in the country'. Conscious too of the past year of civil war, Green wished for

the spiritual tie that is necessary to bind the nation together in a feeling of real tradition and of history of which it might be rightly proud ... if we encourage and allow these scholars to do their work ... there will be no intelligent person living in Ireland who will not have a new sense of a lively spiritual patriotism.

The Seanad Committee took its evidence from April to June 1923 and once in May 1924. It heard from Professor Osborn Bergin and Professor Tomás Ó Máille of UCD, Dr Richard Best of the National Library of Ireland, Professor Edward J. Gwynn of TCD, Dr Douglas Hyde, founder of the Gaelic League, Professor T. F. O'Rahilly of TCD, Dr Richard L. Praeger of the Royal Irish Academy, Reverend Dr Lawlor<sup>20</sup> and Richard Foley (Risteárd Ó Foghludha).

Discussing the Committee's work, the Seanad considered the printing of facsimiles of significant documents and the protection of old manuscripts. Senator Stopford Green then transferred the Seanad's attention to 'modern documents from about the 16th century on'.<sup>21</sup> She held that they were 'very numerous, and have not been fully examined ... that is the most important side of the business, perhaps the most controversial in details'. Further, she explained that there was

practically no history, in the proper sense of the word, of any period of Ireland. Histories have been drawn up ... with great labour and industry, based on the State Papers of the English Government here, but there has been no reference whatever to the State Papers of the Irish people, and until we get at these and examine what their written tradition was we shall be quite unable to make any history, acceptable at all or of any value.

She expected that 'really expert and skilled scholars' would 'break the path through an unknown wilderness [and] find out by degrees the relative value of the various manuscripts, where they can be placed, and what use can be made of them'. In fact the explosion at the Four Courts had also destroyed 'countless sources dealing with Gaelic lineages'.<sup>22</sup>

Stopford Green's Seanad colleague Sir Thomas Esmonde called specifically for the creation of 'an Irish Record Commission'.<sup>23</sup> He suggested that it have an international

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 1:997–8, 23 Apr. 1923.

<sup>20</sup> Rev. H. J. Lawlor, Dean of St Patrick's Cathedral Dublin and author of *Fasti of St Patrick's, Dublin* (Dundalk, 1930).

<sup>21</sup> *Seanad Deb.*, 1:2201–2, 8 Aug. 1923.

<sup>22</sup> Edwards, 'Hogan', p. 117.

<sup>23</sup> *Seanad Deb.*, 1:2203, 8 Aug. 1923.

remit, hoping that its members or appointees would travel far and wide to collect and collate documents scattered across Europe, in particular the libraries at Simancas, Bobbio, Paris, Naples, Rouen and the Vatican, from which a history of Ireland from Irish sources would be written. Esmonde's intervention, Stopford Green's vision and Yeats's proposal all contained in embryo the strands that would later form the IMC but for the time being they would remain simply wishes and thoughts of future possibilities.

The Seanad Committee on Irish Manuscripts issued its final report on 4 June 1924. Within that report, and the debates surrounding it, the basic ideas that would later underpin the IMC were again put forward – though the IMC's final structure, composition and institutional position would be somewhat different to what the Seanad proposed. Introducing the report to the Seanad, Yeats explained that

for the first time in many centuries our country, free and independent, is charged with the pious duty of preserving and making accessible to Irishmen the mass of learning and tradition which forms the basis of our National history.<sup>24</sup>

The Committee realised 'the overwhelming claims on the Government' due to reconstruction after the civil war but felt 'it to be of great importance that some earnest should at once be given of its sympathy with the national desire to renew and broaden its historical tradition and faith'.<sup>25</sup> Its recommendations were wide ranging, but in relation to the later creation of the IMC a number were of particular importance.<sup>26</sup> It recommended by funding through grant-in-aid the 'editing and publishing of important texts, both of the early and the classical periods and of modern times, considering Irish literature as forming one indivisible whole'.<sup>27</sup> Publication would include 'photographic facsimiles of important Codices by the latest scientific processes' as such volumes were 'most essential for purposes of study'.<sup>28</sup> Further, the publication of catalogues of manuscripts was of great importance for students and such 'should be compiled not only for the Royal Irish Academy but for collections elsewhere, as for example, in the Franciscan Convent (sic), and the King's Inns, the National Library, and many others in Ireland or outside'.<sup>29</sup> Overall control was to be placed in the Irish Studies Committee of the RIA as it was 'fully qualified, trained in this special work, generous in outlook, and easy of access to all'.<sup>30</sup> As eventually established, the IMC was instead to be an independent institution.

Proposing the report Yeats asked the Seanad 'to urge upon the Government to do a work for learning, a work for literature and a work for history which any Government

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 3:162, 4 June 1924.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 3:166, 4 June 1924.

<sup>26</sup> The Committee's report also recommended the provision of extra funding for the RIA's Dictionary of Old Irish project, the investigation of living dialects of the Irish language, the recording of folklore, songs and traditions and excavations under scientific direction of the more important archaeological sites. These proposals were later to be established by bodies such as the Irish Folklore Commission.

<sup>27</sup> *Seanad Deb.*, 3:164, 4 June 1924.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 3:167, 4 June 1924.



in the world would consider its duty and its privilege'.<sup>31</sup> Listing the locations of the great collections of Irish manuscripts, Yeats viewed them as 'a historical trust to this nation ... they should be interpreted, edited, indexed, and catalogued'.<sup>32</sup> Seconding, Stopford Green highlighted 'the preparation of the material for the coming scholars', facsimiles were essential, particularly of 'manuscripts which exist in a single copy, which are far away from Ireland in many cases, and which must be here for the scholars to work on'.<sup>33</sup> She challenged the Seanad to say whether whilst reading 'tomes of monotonous detail' they had ever 'got any clear comprehension of Irish history' other than as 'the most God-forsaken country in the civilised world' because the writers were using 'stacks of English State Papers'. Stopford Green exclaimed

where are what we call the Irish State Papers, the writing of our own people? They have been neglected, burned, buried, drowned, torn in pieces as badly as ever the Danes had done. They do not come at all into reckoning with the writers of history. The result is that Ireland has history that is no history at all. We cannot be a self-respecting nation until we have the Irish State Papers ... [I]f we wish to encourage the self-respect of the Irish nation and the respect of other people for this nation there must be the most generous effort made to give us our history, and to give it to us on lines of full and adequate knowledge.<sup>34</sup>

Sir Thomas Esmonde explained in a less excited manner that

every self-respecting country has an interest in its own history and records, and in this country, with the assistance of the Government, we should have every possible light and information that is to be had in connection with our ancient history and language, and also with the various stages of civilisation through which the country has passed in the course of its long history.<sup>35</sup>

The Seanad Commission did not play any direct role in the later establishment of the IMC but in its report and debates it discussed and publicised the ideas and role of an Irish historical manuscripts commission as one of a number of cultural and historical bodies that the new state might establish. During their discussions Seanad members had frequently mentioned the name of Eoin MacNeill, Professor of Early Irish History at UCD, and his pioneering work on the Irish language and on early Irish law.

*MacNeill's 'Monumenta Hiberniae' and his early plans for a manuscripts commission*

Concurrent with the Seanad investigations MacNeill, then Minister for Education as well as Professor of Early Irish History at UCD, was investigating the establishment of an equivalent Irish series to the *Monumenta Germaniae Historica* which had been

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 3:168, 4 June 1924.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 3:171, 4 June 1924.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 3:174, 4 June 1924.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 3:177, 4 June 1924.

founded in 1819 to edit and publish sources for German history from the end of the Roman Empire to 1500. MacNeill's ideas had found initial expression in the preface to his *Celtic Ireland*:

Should any benefactor be inspired to promote work that will make our Nation's ancient story attractive to young Irish intellectuals and that will also give it the place it deserves in the world's history, my appeal would be for the endowment of research based strictly on the joint study of Irish history and archaeology and of Irish philology, and for such endowment as will ensure the publication of any piece of research work well done.<sup>36</sup>

In the summer of 1924 MacNeill returned to this idea. He sent an article to Fr P. J. Connolly, the editor of the Jesuit journal *Studies*, ostensibly concerning the marking of the fifteenth centenary of St Patrick. Its conclusion revealed its real purpose: a call for 'something lasting and fruitful and potent for Irish learning, for our national language – teanga Phádraig "Patrick's language" as our tradition calls it, for our national history, and for our national education'.<sup>37</sup> MacNeill called for the establishment of a 'Monumenta Hiberniae' as a lasting memorial to St Patrick, the first writer of Irish history. Connolly thanked MacNeill for his 'interesting article' and told him that he was 'asking experts in various fields of study to comment' on the proposal, 'indicating the documents which they consider ought to find a place in the projected "Monumenta"'.<sup>38</sup> He could not see why 'the Government would not guarantee £10,000 on condition the public guarantee another £10,000. After all, the British Government spent a lot of money on the Irish Rolls series, on [the] Historical MSS Commission, and on the Record Office. Is an Irish Government to spend nothing?'

MacNeill's article appeared in *Studies* in June 1924 and called for 'the institution of a Library of Monumenta Hiberniae, in the form of a continuous series of uniform volumes to be published under the direction of a corporate body of competent scholars with a suitable endowment to be administered under the terms of a permanent definite trust'.<sup>39</sup> Elsewhere in the article MacNeill declared that 'for Irish History what is needed most and is severely needed, is the publication of documents, the raw material of historical study'.<sup>40</sup> He began his conclusion with a detailed list of unpublished manuscript sources in Irish and other libraries. Included were the Annals of Tighernach, the Annals of Loch Cé and the Genealogies, this last of which MacNeill described as 'a lexicographical and philological mine which has never been

<sup>36</sup> Eoin MacNeill, *Celtic Ireland* (London and Dublin, 1921), pp xiv–xvi, quoted in R. Dudley Edwards, 'Professor MacNeill', in F. X. Martin and F. J. Byrne (eds), *The Scholar Revolutionary: Eoin MacNeill, 1867–1945, and the Making of the New Ireland* (Shannon, 1973), pp 279–97, p. 279. A related contemporary suggestion was that of MacNeill's friend Bulmer Hobson to J. J. O'Neill, the Librarian of UCD, and to J. H. Delargy, to found a Manuscripts and Records Society of Ireland.

<sup>37</sup> Eoin MacNeill, 'The Fifteenth Centenary of St Patrick', *Studies*, vol. xiii, no. 50 (June 1924), pp 177–88, p. 186.

<sup>38</sup> UCDA MNP LAI/K/26, Connolly to MacNeill, 12 May 1924.

<sup>39</sup> MacNeill, 'Fifteenth Centenary', p. 188.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 186.

methodologically explored', and his particular area of study, the ancient Irish law tracts which 'belong not less to the history of Europe than to the history of Ireland'.<sup>41</sup>

There was significant academic support for MacNeill's suggestion. When Fr Connolly informed MacNeill he was submitting his article for comment it was not simply to undertake what would later be called peer review, rather it was to concurrently receive and publish expert opinions backing MacNeill's proposal. Reverend Professor Paul Walsh, Fr Brendan Jennings OFM,<sup>42</sup> Dom Louis Gougaud OSB<sup>43</sup> and Professor Thomas F. O'Rahilly<sup>44</sup> joined with Dr Daniel Binchy<sup>45</sup> to 'heartily welcome' and endorse the proposal, citing European examples of similar projects from Wales and England, to France, Germany, Austria, Denmark, Poland and Hungary and giving examples of Irish-related collections deemed suitable for publication in edited works.<sup>46</sup>

In the final commentary on MacNeill's thoughts Professor O'Rahilly concluded that MacNeill's article made 'refreshing reading' and that even if it 'should do no more than make people realise that there is need to do something to remedy our backwardness in national research, it will have done a great service to the country'.<sup>47</sup>

During the years between the report of the Seanad Committee, his article in *Studies* and the establishment of the IMC in 1928 MacNeill worked out further details of his plan for an Irish historical manuscripts commission. An undated mid-1920s memorandum set out in detail his early vision. The 'Commission' would be located in Dublin, because 'much of the MS materials is to be found in Dublin libraries' and would undertake the 'publication of Irish Historical Manuscripts ... especially manuscripts in the Irish language'.<sup>48</sup> It would undertake the publication of these sources and train postgraduate students of 'early Irish, Irish history, and ancillary subjects' by engaging them in transcription and collation work for the commission under the supervision of senior academics who would edit the work for final publication. In the first stage, it would, MacNeill suggested, 'devote its main attention to materials older than the modern period, which, for Ireland, may be dated from the discovery of America'.

Since the establishment of the NUI, the work done by professors and students of Irish history had led to comparatively little outcome in terms of publications. The main reason was 'the want of means of publication'. A proper outlet for publications was essential as the 'necessary incentive' for them to continue their studies. In the absence of

the recognition and encouragement which publication would afford, they cannot be expected to continue their studies as an occupation. Hence, so far as

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., p. 187 and p. 188.

<sup>42</sup> See appendix 3 for biographical details for Jennings and Walsh.

<sup>43</sup> Benedictine scholar of the Irish medieval church.

<sup>44</sup> Later Director of the School of Celtic Studies at DIAS.

<sup>45</sup> Professor of Jurisprudence and Legal History, UCD, later a member of the Irish diplomatic service.

<sup>46</sup> Daniel Binchy, comment on MacNeill's article, 'No. II', *Studies*, vol. xiii, no. 50 (June 1924), pp 191–4, p. 191.

<sup>47</sup> T. F. O'Rahilly, comment on MacNeill's article, 'No. V', *Studies*, vol. xiii, no. 50 (June 1924), pp 198–200, p. 200.

<sup>48</sup> UCDA MNP LA1/F/126.

most students, and some very brilliant and competent students are concerned, the university teaching provided in early Irish philological and historical studies is left nearly sterile.

MacNeill's plan was that transcription, editorial and collation work on manuscripts along with the writing of introductions, the preparation of indices and ultimately publication by the commission of the final work would create a proper outlet and so encourage promising students of Irish history to continue their studies. In this manner MacNeill wished 'to establish a close connection between the work of the commission and the work of university professors and students'. MacNeill hoped his scheme would lead to an increase in the number of scholarly posts available and by doing so increase the number of young scholars choosing history as a career. It was essential to develop a strong viable academic community in Ireland for the study of Irish history.

Membership of the Commission would 'be formed largely from university professors of Irish and History'. With himself as chairman MacNeill suggested a membership with a strong foundation in both fields:

Professor Osborn Bergin (University College Dublin);  
 Dr Richard I. Best (National Library of Ireland);  
 Professor James Hogan (University College Cork);  
 Professor Tomás Ó Máille (University College Galway);  
 Professor Thomas F. O'Rahilly (Trinity College Dublin).

There was a strong overlap with those who gave evidence to the Seanad Committee. MacNeill later dropped Bergin, Ó Máille and O'Rahilly when it was agreed at government level that the future IMC would concentrate on historical rather than linguistic material. The Commission would have paid secretarial support provided, the chairman would get an annual salary, and members of the body would provide their services on an unpaid voluntary basis. The Minister for Education would appoint the members of the commission for terms of a limited duration and so the Commission's remit could be wholly revised at the expiration of its initial term. The ideas expressed by MacNeill in his *Studies* article and in his subsequent memorandum won general approval but nothing was done to implement them. The project was 'still in ordine ideali when Dr MacNeill retired from the Government in 1925 and returned to his University post'.<sup>49</sup> MacNeill was 'determined to give it reality and laboured, day in day out, over a long period, to impress its importance on his late colleagues'.<sup>50</sup>

### *Creating the IMC: from informal discussions to the formal announcement of the IMC*

The creation of the IMC moved a step closer after an informal meeting on 29 August 1927 between President of the Executive Council W. T. Cosgrave and his Executive Council colleagues Ernest Blythe, John Marcus O'Sullivan, Patrick McGilligan, and

<sup>49</sup> *AH 17* (1949), p. 351.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*

Richard Mulcahy.<sup>51</sup> The meeting agreed to set up an 'Irish Historical Manuscripts Commission for the publication of Irish Historical Records especially in the Irish language'.<sup>52</sup> MacNeill, who had recently failed to be re-elected to the Dáil for the National University constituency, was to be the 'chief' of the Commission 'for at least a limited number of years'. In taking up the post MacNeill would resign his chair at UCD as he did not want it 'to be in the power of some critic of the Government or the appointment' to say that he was holding two posts at the same time. Cosgrave noted that MacNeill considered he 'would do more valuable work for the Nation than in politics. His position in politics [was] unchanged'. In fact MacNeill did not resign his chair in UCD. The decision taken by the five members of the Executive Council was not a formal Executive Council decision but it represented the official acceptance of MacNeill's plan to establish what became the IMC.<sup>53</sup>

In a memorandum to the Department of the President Dr W. F. Butler, Assistant Commissioner for Secondary Education at the Department of Education and former Professor of Languages at UCC, augmented MacNeill's plans. Butler favoured the creation of an unpaid commission to 'survey the whole field of work to be covered' which would report its findings to the Dáil or the Executive Council. The commission would examine and report on what sources had been published, what sources were known but unpublished and worthy of publication, and what areas of historical research in Ireland and abroad deserved exploration in the hope of finding additional records. If given sanction to proceed the commission would direct the work of 'paid experts' assembling and publishing the chosen sources.<sup>54</sup> Butler proposed the examination of 'Gaelic records, or Latin records dealing with the Gaelic side of Irish life and history', down to at least the middle of the seventeenth century and perhaps later.<sup>55</sup> Conscious of the loss of seventeenth and eighteenth century material in the PROI fire Butler held that

it is the writings of later date that are in most danger of loss. Our older manuscripts are nearly all in safe keeping in public libraries; all that is needed is time to edit them.

But there still may be records of the 17th and 18th centuries preserved on the Continent, or even here or there in Ireland or England in private hands, and not in safe keeping. The preservation of such documents should be a primary aim of the Commission.

A second aim proposed by Butler was for the Commission to

<sup>51</sup> Both McGilligan (Minister for External Affairs) and O'Sullivan (Minister for Education) were academics, holding professorial posts in law and history respectively at UCD.

<sup>52</sup> NAI DT S5509A, note by Cosgrave, 29 Aug. 1927.

<sup>53</sup> Assistant Cabinet Secretary Michael McDunphy noted on his minute of the meeting that the conclusion was 'not to be regarded as a decision of the Ex. Council but rather as a record of the unanimous views of the individual Ministers' (NAI DT S5509A).

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 'Historical Manuscripts Commission', note by Butler, 16 Jan. 1928.

<sup>55</sup> Butler was also in favour of including within the scope of the Commission documentation in English and French 'which throws light on the social history of Ireland as a whole'.

publish an appeal to all persons possessing certified copies of documents from the Public Record Office, of which the originals have perished, to place such copies at the disposal of the Commission. This body could then either deposit these certified copies in the new Record Office, making a copy to be handed back to the original donors, or could copy them, and hand back the original certified copies.

He did not think this would be a costly exercise, rather time was of the essence and

the need for speedy action is very great here. The documents I speak of are mostly to be found in the offices of solicitors, or in private houses in the country. As Land Purchase is completed such documents will become of no practical use to the possessors, and run the risk of destruction as so much waste paper.

If the Seanad Commission report laid out a general aspirational overview of the tasks an Irish historical manuscripts commission might undertake, MacNeill and Butler put form on its remit and future work. The views of the two men were closely connected with the Executive Council's ultimate decision to establish the Commission and the form of the Commission the Executive Council created.

On 21 March 1928 Minister for Finance Ernest Blythe announced in the Dáil in response to a question from Cumann na nGaedheal deputy for Donegal Hugh A. Law that the Government intended to establish an Irish Manuscripts Commission 'entrusted with the publication of Irish manuscripts and other documents of literary and historical interest to the people of Ireland'.<sup>56</sup> The IMC would be an independent academic body and would not, as the Seanad report of 1924 had suggested, be housed within the structure of the RIA.

Picking up on Blythe the *Irish Times* published an editorial on the proposed commission which estimated that 'the manuscript remains of Old and Middle Irish amount in bulk to about ten times the volume of the classical literature of Rome'.<sup>57</sup> When manuscripts in modern Irish were added 'the immensity of the field may be gauged'. As most sources outside libraries and archives were only available from the pages of learned journals or from small numbers of copies it was impossible for the 'ordinary student to acquire a direct conspectus of Irish life and thought prior to the middle of the seventeenth century'. Until the sources for Irish history were published 'the social and political history of the Middle Ages in Ireland must remain obscure'. The destruction of the Four Courts, the small number of trained historians in Ireland, the lack of access to continental archives and a slowness in the analysis of sources hampered 'every branch of Irish historical research and we cannot expect the promised Commission to give us more than a lean ration every year of matter published from Irish manuscripts'. However, the *Irish Times* did expect swift progress in the reproduction of books and other printed materials by early modern Irish writers and

<sup>56</sup> *Irish Times*, 22 Mar. 1928.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*

also of foreign language accounts of Ireland. The editorial concluded that ‘the arrears of centuries in the printing of Irish records must be overtaken; and since manuscripts are as important as monuments, it is fitting that the State should facilitate the work’.

A week later the writer of ‘An Irishman’s Diary’ in the *Irish Times* made reference to the Commission. Reflecting on the establishment in the late nineteenth century of the British Historical Manuscripts Commission, the columnist explained that ‘a notable stimulus was given to historical investigation’ as owners of all manner of historical documents began to take note of the material in their possession. Publishing copies to allow academic work was of course important, but so too was making copies ‘as an additional security against those accidents to which all manuscripts are exposed – accidents which, in more ways than one, have already inflicted irreparable injury on the historical and biographical literature of this country’. Though the quotation was from a member of the British Commission, the column concluded that ‘in Ireland the events of a few years ago were an unfortunate instance of the accidents to which historical manuscripts are exposed’.<sup>58</sup> The destruction of 1922 was never far away and it would be at the forefront of the IMC’s work to recover from surviving sources copies of documents lost in the fire at the PROI. It was a thus a matter of deep irony that the very establishment of the IMC may have impeded a proposed commission of inquiry into the state of the PROI and the SPO. The inquiry was postponed because it was ‘thought better to watch the progress of that body [the IMC] for some time before taking any separate action’.<sup>59</sup>

The *Irish Times* was universally supportive of the proposed IMC, gushing that ‘there is one Commission appointed by the Free State government which has the entire approval of all creeds and parties in the country, and that is the Commission on Irish Manuscripts’.<sup>60</sup>

### *The IMC’s terms of reference and personnel*

In July 1928 the Executive Council returned to the creation of the IMC having ‘at last had an opportunity of going into the question’ of its establishment.<sup>61</sup> The IMC’s terms of reference were ‘sufficiently wide to cover every possible contingency [and] any possible publication of Irish texts which the Commission might be inclined to recommend’. It was expected that the Commission’s mandate ‘would cover certain work in respect of which grants have already been made’ and as the Minister for Education was to approve of the IMC’s programme of work it would ‘prevent any danger of overlapping’ with the work of bodies such as the RIA. The Executive Council was anxious to have the appointment of the Commission completed by early September 1928. Secretary to the Executive Council Diarmuid O’Hegarty asked Butler and MacNeill to review the Commission’s draft terms of reference. Though the Executive Council would establish the IMC ‘along the lines [MacNeill] had suggested’,

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 29 Mar. 1928.

<sup>59</sup> NLI R. I. Best Papers, MS 11005 (6). Draft letter from Department of Justice to President’s Department, Oct. 1928. This letter referred to Cosgrave’s ‘personal interest’ in the commission of inquiry and acknowledged Justice’s neglect of the PROI since 1922.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 30 June 1928.

<sup>61</sup> NAI IMC 97/42/1, O’Hegarty to MacNeill, 8 Aug. 1928.