

CENTRE FOR THE STUDY OF HISTORIC IRISH HOUSES AND ESTATES,
HISTORY DEPARTMENT, MAYNOOTH UNIVERSITY

BURNING THE BIG HOUSE



Free online lecture series
24 March – 19 May 2022





A series of lectures hosted by the Centre for the Study of Historic Irish Houses and Estates, History Department, Maynooth University, and supported by the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media under the Historical Strand of the Decade of Centenaries Programme.

These talks run in tandem with the exhibition *Burning the Big House: The Story of the Irish Country House in Revolution, 1920-23*, hosted by the Irish Architectural Archives from 21 March to 29 April 2022, and Maynooth University Library in May 2022.

The idea for the lecture series and exhibition was inspired by the Irish Government's decision to initiate a Decade of Centenaries Programme in 2012 to commemorate the historical events of the revolutionary period. Commemoration, the Government decided, was to be carried out in a way that was to be 'broad and inclusive, highlighting the economic and social conditions of the period, the shifts in cultural norms and the experience of the Irish abroad.' The programme was intended to encompass 'the different traditions on the island of Ireland', and to provide 'opportunities to focus on the everyday experience of ordinary people living in extraordinary times'.

The theme of this lecture series fills a gap in the historiographical debate, by focusing on the experiences of the Irish landed gentry and aristocracy during the revolutionary period 1920-23, as seen through the prism of the burning of their Big Houses.

The series will conclude with a wider consideration of the subject, beyond Ireland and the revolutionary period, and examine the phenomenon of country house fires in Britain over the last three hundred years. Whether deliberate or accidental the impact of fire often resulted in the same trauma of death, loss, and homelessness.

Particular thanks are due to Veronica Barry, Muirne Lyons, and Den Stubbs of Stubbs Design.



Macroom Castle burning 1922, with crowds of people passing by.



Charles Phibbs standing in grave dug for him outside his home in Sligo, 1922.

COURTESY OF EINION THOMAS



Kiltannon House in Co Clare, burned on 3 September 1920.

COURTESY OF CLARE COUNTY LIBRARY



SCHEDULE OF LECTURES

Two lectures will be delivered live: the inaugural lecture by Terence Dooley on 24 March 2022 and the last in the series by Christopher Ridgway on 19 May 2022. The remaining six lectures will be pre-recorded.

Each lecture will begin at 7.00pm and will be aired according to the following schedule:

24 MARCH

Terence Dooley *Burning the Big House: the story of the country house during the Irish Revolution, 1920-23*

31 MARCH

Ann O’Riordan *Revolution, agrarianism and the burning of Ballydugan House, Co Galway, 1922*

7 APRIL

Jean Young *‘A barbarous mania of incendiarism’:*
Big House burnings in Co Louth, 1921-23

14 APRIL

Ciarán Reilly *‘A smouldering mass of charred stones’:*
The burning of Big Houses in Offaly, 1920-1923

21 APRIL

Gemma Clark *Munster’s ‘Campaign of fire’:* Big House burnings in Counties Limerick, Tipperary and Waterford during the Civil War, 1922-23

28 APRIL

Glascott Symes *‘Ours must go in time’:* the burning of Senator Sir John Keane’s Cappoquin House, Co Waterford, February 1923

5 MAY

Robert O’Byrne *The ruined Irish Big House:*
reality and perception

12 MAY

Olwen Purdue *‘Such troubled times’:*
the burning of Big Houses in Northern Ireland 1921-1981

19 MAY

Christopher Ridgway *Ablaze! Fire and the country house:*
a perspective beyond Ireland



Mary Gaussen, niece of Lord Bandon, going through the ruins of Castle Bernard. Co Cork.
IRISH ARCHITECTURAL ARCHIVE



Palmerstown House, Co Kildare, after burning.
COURTESY OF MATTIE SHINNORS

THIS IS A FREE LECTURE SERIES

To register, please sign up via our Eventbrite page before 10 March 2022. Please click on the following link:

<https://www.eventbrite.ie/e/burning-the-country-house-online-lecture-series-tickets-241397194507>



Terence Dooley Burning the Big House: the story of the country house during the Irish Revolution, 1920-23

The aim of this first talk in the series is to provide a broad overview of the causes and consequences of Big House burnings in Ireland during the War of Independence and Civil War, 1920-23. The talk will also focus on topics such as Big House looting, compensation claims, and rebuilding.

Terence Dooley is Professor of History at Maynooth University, where he is also Director of the Centre for the Study of Historic Irish Houses and Estates. The author of several monographs, his latest book *Burning the Big House: the Story of the Irish Country House in War and Revolution, 1914-23* will be published by Yale University Press in March 2022.

Ann O’Riordan Revolution, agrarianism and the burning of Ballydugan House, Co Galway, 1922

The Burkes of Ballydugan were an established landed family in east Galway who experienced agrarian agitation and landlord intimidation from the late nineteenth century to the 1930s. At the centre of this talk is Michael Henry Burke whose difficult personality put him on a collision course with some of his tenants and their frustrated wishes for land redistribution. This case study highlights the challenges faced by Big Houses and the former landed elite in the Irish Free State/Republic in the years after independence.

Ann O’Riordan holds an MA in Historic House Studies from Maynooth University; she is a primary school teacher, and also lectures in local history at the University of Limerick.



Ballydugan House after burning.
COURTESY OF CLAIRE BETSYNOE

Jean Young ‘A barbarous mania of incendiarism’: Big House burnings in Co Louth, 1921-23

In 1921-23, seven Big Houses were deliberately burned in Co Louth. In most cases, families, and their staff, were rudely awakened and forced unceremoniously from their homes as the houses were destroyed.

This talk examines why houses were targeted, why some properties were spared, and what motivated the attackers. It also discusses what happened to the houses and their occupants in the aftermath of destruction, as well as the impact of these attacks on neighbours and relatives who lived in fear that they might be next.

Jean Young is the author of ‘Changing Times: the Big House in County Louth, 1912-1923’ in Donal Hall and Martin Maguire (eds.), *County Louth and the Irish Revolution, 1912-1923* (Newbridge, 2017). Her research primarily investigates landed estates and their associated families, particularly in Co Louth, where she has lived since 1995. In 2016 she completed an MA in Irish History at Maynooth University, where she is currently completing a PhD.



Ravensdale Park, Co Louth, before its destruction on 18 June 1921.



Ciarán Reilly ‘A smouldering mass of charred stones’: The burning of Big Houses in Offaly, 1920-1923

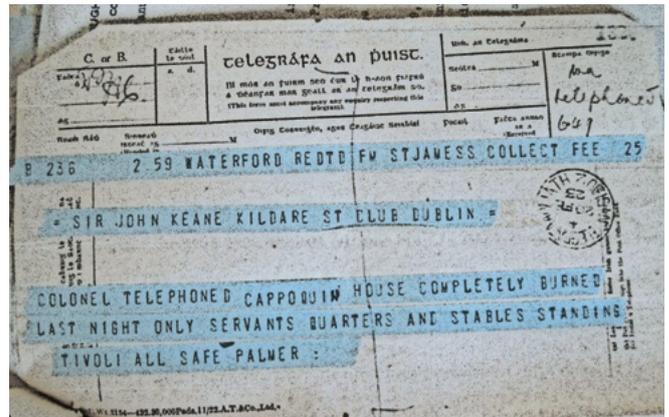
In 1980 the elderly Martin Walsh recalled witnessing the burning of Leap Castle in County Offaly in July 1922. In addition to the helplessness that he and other estate employees felt as flames took hold of one of Offaly’s most significant Big Houses, he also remembered how local crowds gathered on the lawn in front of the castle as its contents were piled high outside, ‘You’d think there was going to be an auction’, he observed.

Leap Castle was just one of fourteen houses destroyed in Offaly during the years 1920-23, while several others were partially burned, attacked, and looted. Using Leap Castle as a case study, this talk will explore the reasons why Offaly houses were attacked during this troubled period.

Ciarán Reilly is an historian of nineteenth- and twentieth-century Ireland based at Maynooth University, and a former Research Fellow with the Centre for the Study of Historic Irish Houses and Estates. He has particular interest in the Great Irish Famine; country houses; landed estates; and the Irish Revolution, 1912-23. His books include: *The Irish Land Agent, 1830-60: the case of King’s County* (2014); *Strokestown and the Great Famine* (2014); and he has edited with Lowri Ann Rees and Annie Tindley, *The Land Agent, 1700-1920* (2018).



IRA training camp, Lough Bawn House, Co Monaghan, 1922.
COURTESY OF MONAGHAN COUNTY MUSEUM



Telegram received by Sir John Keane telling him of the burning of Cappoquin, Co Waterford.

COURTESY OF SIR CHARLES KEANE

Gemma Clark Munster’s ‘Campaign of fire’: Big House burnings in Counties Limerick, Tipperary and Waterford during the Civil War, 1922-23

Drawing on her published study of the Civil War in Munster, and research into fire as a global protest tool, Gemma Clark will explore the burning of Big Houses in Counties Limerick, Tipperary, and Waterford. Case studies of these spectacular acts of violence – from Tullamaine to Dromkeen to Cappoquin – will illustrate the impact of arson on individuals, families, and local communities. The talk will also place the violence in Munster in a wider perspective, explaining the functions of the ‘campaign of fire’ orchestrated by the anti-Treaty IRA (and sometimes perpetrated by disparate revolutionaries). While Ireland’s Civil War was a purging of the remnants of British rule, lethal arson and brutal interpersonal violence were relatively scarce in modern Ireland, where historically conflict has focused on land and property.

Dr Gemma Clark is Senior Lecturer in British and Irish History at the University of Exeter. Since her first book, *Everyday Violence in the Irish Civil War* (2014), Gemma has published on sectarianism, gender-based violence, and arson, in *The Irish Times*, *Irish Historical Studies*, and *The Atlas of the Irish Revolution*. She is currently writing a global history of arson and has received British Academy funding for the project: ‘Exporting Arson: Incendiarism as Protest in the Global Irish Diaspora’.



Cappelquin in the modern day, home of Sir Charles Keane.

Glascott Symes ‘*Ours must go in time*’: the burning of Senator Sir John Keane’s Cappelquin House, Co Waterford, February 1923

This paper examines the causes and consequences of the burning of Sir John Keane’s family home, Cappelquin in Co Waterford in February 1923. After inheriting the family estate Keane embarked on a public life that was to involve amongst other things active organisation of the Co-Operative Movement, and membership of Waterford County Council, and the Irish Farmers’ Union.

Following independence, Keane accepted W.T. Cosgrave’s nomination to the Free State Senate. During the Civil War, senators’ homes became vulnerable to attack by anti-treatyites. Cappelquin was targeted because Keane was a senator but also because of local agrarian tensions. Although compensation was inadequate, Sir John and his English-born wife, Lady Eleanor, quickly set about rebuilding the house to which the family returned in 1930. Keane died in 1956. Cappelquin House is still occupied by his direct descendants.

Glascott Symes is a former biology teacher at The King’s Hospital in Dublin, retiring as Deputy Headmaster. Afterwards he graduated with an MA in Historic House Studies from Maynooth University. He lives in Co Laois and is currently on the board of the Irish Georgian Foundation.

Robert O’Byrne The ruined Irish Big House: reality and perception

In 1843, the German writer Johann Georg Kohl published an account of his travels in Ireland. ‘Of all

the countries in the world’, he remarked, ‘Ireland is the country for ruins. Here you have ruins of every period of history.’ Kohl’s observation is a reminder that ruins of all sizes and dates including country houses have long been a feature of the Irish landscape.

While in the region of 300 Big Houses were burned in 1920-23, many more were demolished or left to decay during the first decades of Irish independence.

These ruins are endowed with a symbolic authority, their hollow shells representative of who were the winners, and losers during the upheavals of the 1920s. Hence even in decay they continue to exert a power over the imagination. In this lecture, Robert O’Byrne will look at Ireland’s ruined country houses, and examine their abiding significance in the national psyche.

Robert O’Byrne is a writer and lecturer specialising in the fine and decorative arts. A former Vice-President of the Irish Georgian Society, he is currently a trustee of the Apollo Foundation. He writes a monthly column for *Apollo* magazine, and also contributes to *The Burlington Magazine* and the *Irish Arts Review*. Since 2012 he has written an award-winning blog, www.theirishaesthete.com, and his book *The Irish Aesthete: Ruins of Ireland* was published in 2019. During 2021-22, in conjunction with the Irish Georgian Society, he is presenting a two-part television documentary on Ireland’s country house gardens.



Tyrone House, Co Galway, whose ruins have become an iconic symbol of the fall of the Irish Big House.

COURTESY OF ROBERT SMITH



Olwen Purdue *'Such troubled times': the burning of Big Houses in Northern Ireland 1921-1981*

On the evening of 21 January 1981, the skies around the village of Tynan, on the Armagh-Monaghan border, turned red as Tynan Abbey, ancestral home of the Stronge family, blazed furiously against the night sky. 1981 was the height of the Northern Ireland 'Troubles', and that night the Provisional IRA broke into the house, took Sir Norman Stronge, former Speaker of the Northern Ireland House of Commons, and his son James outside, shot them, and then set the house alight.

This incident shocked the country and people of all political and religious persuasions who lived in and around Tynan; it was a chilling echo of the threats and burnings that had taken place during the turbulent revolutionary years at the start of the twentieth century, when owners of country houses lived in fear of a bang at the door that was often a prelude to destruction. While the burnings of country houses in the south and west of Ireland have been well-documented, less is known about the country houses in the north. This lecture will address this lacuna in the historiography.

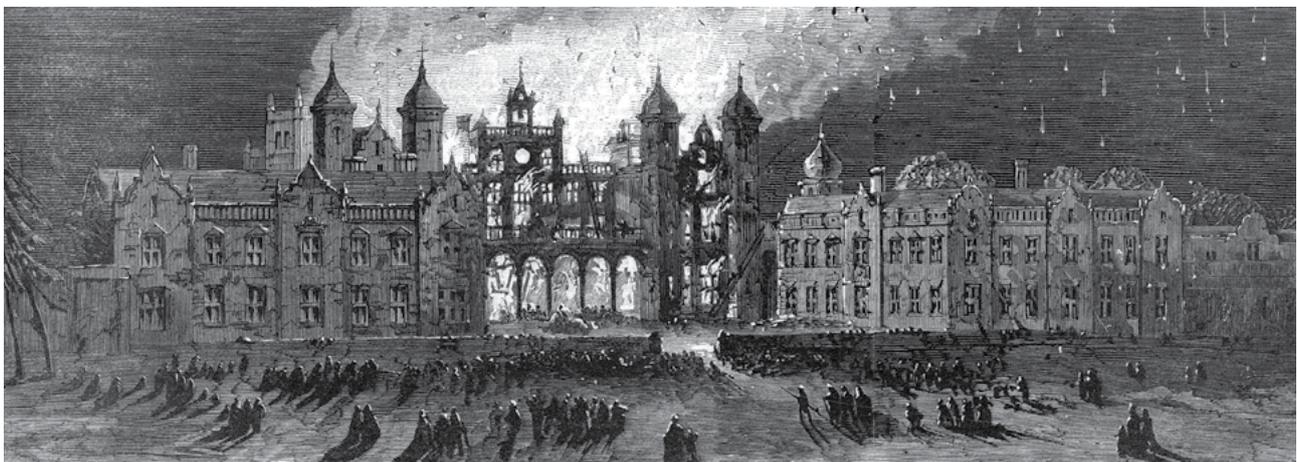
Olwen Purdue is Professor of Modern Social History at Queen's University, Belfast. Her book, *The Big House in the North of Ireland: Land, Power and Social Elites 1870-1960*, published in 2009, was the first work to explore in detail the challenges to landed power in the north of Ireland. Since then, she has turned her attention to urban poverty and welfare and has edited a number of volumes on Ireland's urban and social history. Her monograph, *Workhouse Child: Poverty, Child Welfare and the Poor Law in Industrial Belfast, 1880-1918*, will be published in 2022.

She is Director of the Centre for Public History at Queen's University where she runs the MA in Public History. She is a member of the Academic Advisory Committee for the Ulster Museum's Troubles and Beyond Gallery, Director of the Irish Museums Association, and a Governor of the Linen Hall Library.

Christopher Ridgway *Ablaze! Fire and the country house: a perspective beyond Ireland*

In Britain incidents of arson are rare but accidental fires in country houses have been astonishingly frequent. In earlier times open fires and naked flame lighting presented many risks which, coupled with erratic water supplies and the absence of dedicated emergency services, meant that a small fire could easily become a major conflagration. But accidental fires have continued well into the twenty-first century. Drawing from more than a thousand episodes over the last three hundred years, this talk will examine the impact of fire on country houses and their occupants, from near-misses to total destruction. Who were the culprits – candles, electricity, gas, or carelessness? How were houses protected and how were fires fought? What happened in the aftermath, from homelessness to insurance claim, rebuilding, and inquest?

Christopher Ridgway is curator of Castle Howard in North Yorkshire, which suffered two fires in the 20th century. He is also Adjunct Professor in the Centre for the Study of Historic Irish Houses and Estates, History Department, Maynooth University, and chair of the Yorkshire Country House Partnership. He has published extensively on country houses, and edited several volumes of essays with Terence Dooley.



Fire at Capesthorpe Hall, Cheshire in 1861. THE ILLUSTRATED LONDON NEWS

BURNING THE BIG HOUSE

