



The Big House Library in Ireland: Books in Ulster Country Houses

Mark Purcell

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In 1850 there were perhaps 2000 country houses in Ireland. Each Big House dominated its locality, but by the end of the 20th century, only a few hundred survived intact. No more than a handful were still in the possession of their original owners, or contained many of their original contents, including a substantial library. In some cases, this might well have been the only library in the district, though whether it was a carefully assembled collection or a haphazard accumulation of ancestral books would have varied from place to place. The National Trust in what is now Northern Ireland is responsible for most of the survivors. These collections have survived almost like time capsules, never subject to atmospheric pollution or the attentions of reforming librarians, and not heavily used in modern times. Many of their books contain the bookplates and ownership inscriptions of their long-dead owners, as well as instructions to binders, handwritten marginal notes and prices, and even the odd pressed flower; most are also in their original bindings. Together these features tell us a good deal about the tastes and interests of the people who owned them, and about the use, abuse, and circulation of print across the whole of Ireland over a period of more than 400 years. Drawing on a wide range of previously untapped sources and evidence from the collections themselves, this lavishly-illustrated book is a must for anyone interested in the history of reading, collecting, or country houses in Ireland.



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