

# White Elephants: The County House and the State in Independent Ireland 1922-73 by Emer Crooke

The state and civil servants have much to answer for over Ireland's big houses

Review by Graham Hickey

Social and political attitudes to the big house in Ireland have been extensively analysed since the 1980s. By contrast, the less visible role of the state and its permanent government of mostly faceless civil servants has been largely overlooked.

Reams of mind-numbing interdepartmental correspondence are, perhaps, one reason why publishers have not been clamouring to take on the subject. In *White Elephants*, however, Emer Crooke bravely enters the fray, wading through decades of government files spanning the period from 1922 to Ireland joining the European Union in 1973. In spite of a tendency towards repetition and lengthy exposition, Crooke builds a convincing historical narrative around the state's mercurial attitude towards country-house preservation.

Centre-stage in the early years of the Free State was the Department of Finance under the control of secretary James J McElligott. His office exerted an effective veto on most government policy that affected state finances, often directly dictating the actions of the taoiseach. The proposed acquisition by the state of any historic property, large or small, or the application of resources to manage them, were decided not by architectural conservation experts but by Department of Finance officials. The inevitable result, at a time of fragile nation-building and increasing expenditure on social welfare, was refusal on cost grounds, regardless of a house's architectural or historical significance.

A case in point was Russborough House in Co Wicklow. In 1929, its owner Lady Turton offered the spectacular Palladian mansion and its 432-acre demesne as a gift to the nation on condition it be used "for some worthy national purpose". The taoiseach WT Cosgrave visited on two occasions and reported his admiration for the "beauty of its architecture and situation", though he raised caution about the cost of maintaining the property. The Office of Public Works (OPW) assessed the works and expenditure required to make the mansion suitable for use as a Chequers-style state residence or as a museum.

McElligott recommended declining the offer of Russborough, however, noting that neither the "house nor the family connected with it has ever been associated with any outstanding events or personalities in Irish history". He deployed patriotism to fiscal advantage, observing: "Georgian is not an Irish style of architecture, and there seems no point in an Irish government preserving, as a national monument, a building not distinctively Irish, which will present itself to overseas visitors as only second rate of its kind".

McElligott also observed that the annual maintenance bill of £1,500 would overwhelm the OPW's minuscule budget of £2,800 for preserving "real national monuments" all over the country — a stark illustration of fiscal constraints at the time. So the state formally declined Lady Turton's offer, and she sold the mansion in 1931. Its acquisition by Alfred and

Clementine Beit in 1953 led to Russborough becoming one of the few success stories of the period.

It would be unfair to associate the entire Department of Finance with such nationalist zealotry, and Crooke unearths a number of examples of surprising sensitivity to the country house by its officials and by other arms of government.

Less fortunate were those properties, such as Shanbally Castle in Tipperary, that fell victim to a crippling combination of rates, death-duty taxes and subdivision of their economically supporting lands during the 1940s and 1950s. Tragically, while there were few potential buyers during and after the Emergency, the market price of country houses increased because they were valuable sources of salvage material such as stone and lead.

Central to the “country house question” was the Land Commission, into whose hands fell a substantial number of estates under the government’s policy of redistribution. The commission has been criticised for a perceived antagonism towards preservation, including a common misconception that demolition was a requirement for sale.

In fact, Crooke clearly demonstrates that, by the 1950s, the agency took a “last resort” approach to this option, in most instances following a sequence of offering houses to other state agencies, followed by sale with reduced estate lands, and only then sale for salvage.

The surprising villain of the piece was the OPW, which operated a belligerently hands-off approach to country-house preservation, in spite of being the only state body with expertise of historic buildings. Its failure to advance conservation policy, apply the National Monuments Act when requested, or even recommend fiscal incentives for house owners when invited to do so by less sympathetic arms of state, highlights a sorry bureaucratic culture.

Crooke has hit on an unexpected source of malignancy in state circles in the period — a culture that has no doubt fostered the conservation acts of atonement by the OPW in recent decades.

*UCD Press €40 pp263*