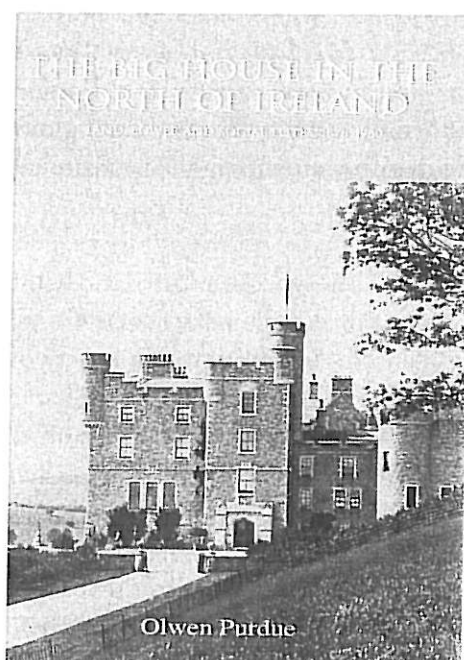


The Big House in the North of Ireland: Land, Power and Social Elites, 1878–1960

by Olwen Purdue. University College Dublin Press, Dublin, 2009. 320pp, €28.
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Cover of *The Big House in the North of Ireland*
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The Big House in the North of Ireland fills a significant research gap by telling the story of the landed elite who occupied estates and country houses in the six counties that became Northern Ireland during the period between the land wars of the 1870s and the last days of the Stormont government in the 1960s. The work thus complements the pioneering work of Terence Dooley whose work *The Decline of the Big House in Ireland: A Study of Irish Landed Families 1860–1960* published in 2001, uncovered much about the fate of the big houses – and those who lived in them – in the 26 counties that became the Irish Free State in 1922. Because socio-economic conditions in the six northeastern counties of Ulster were so different to other parts of Ireland, Dooley made the conscious decision to exclude them from his analysis. Thus, for the first time, the balance is redressed in this new study by Olwen Purdue which provides a fascinating insight into the different and unique experience of the landed elite in this part of the island.

Purdue demonstrates the factors which made the socio-economic profile of the six northeastern counties so distinctive and explores the reasons why, in that part of Ireland, landlord-tenant relations were different too. Economically, the region stood apart from the rest of Ireland because of its relatively higher prosperity. The size and distribution of landed estates in the northeast followed a different pattern to other parts of Ireland, with the result that there was a higher density of great estates, large mansions and titled landowners and conversely, fewer minor gentry families and fewer country houses per county. The prevalent (although by no means universal) practice of the Ulster Custom – which gave tenants greater security and freedom to develop their holdings – provided relative stability in the relationship between the owners of land and the tenants who occupied and farmed it.

Many northern tenants shared the Unionist and Protestant identity of their landlords and were as determined as any tenants – irrespective of their political or religious outlook – to get a fairer deal by securing rent reductions and ultimately, ownership of their holdings. Many tenants achieved this through the land courts and the resultant break-up of estates from the 1880s onwards, but they nevertheless shared political and cultural sympathies with members of the landed elite. A shared set of values to retain Ulster as a British and Protestant state ensured a more constructive political

and visible social leadership role for members of the landed families until well into the 20th century. Thus, whilst the story of the landed elite of northeast Ulster is similar to the landlords of other parts of Ireland in terms of decline – symbolised in general by the sale of their estates and the physical deterioration of many big houses – it is also characterised by the parallel survival of a considerable number of them who continued to play a leading role in society.

In fact, the majority of northern landowners who survived the dramatic changes in land ownership that occurred between the 1880s and 1921 managed to retain their country houses and demesnes, and many of those houses have remained in the hands of their original owners to the present day. Of 110 ‘great’ landowners listed in Bateman’s directory of the *Great Landowners of Great Britain and Ireland* in 1878 whose principal country house was situated in the northeast of Ireland, some 41 of these houses remained in the hands of their original owners by 1960. Whilst these figures represent a considerable drop of 62%, it was the prominent role that the remaining 38% continued to make in society that is of particular significance.

Survivors of particular note included the MacDonnells, earls of Antrim, who continue to inhabit a castle and estate at Glenarm, county Antrim. This family was fortunate to own a particularly large estate, including 70 miles of coastline from Dunluce Castle to Glenarm, in addition to a variety of exploitable natural resources, including coal. As well as managing their large estate and its valuable resources, successive earls and their families demonstrated sound business acumen in many other areas beyond the estate, including establishing charitable trusts, hotels, market gardening and even a furniture factory.

Their survival and that of several others is what makes the story of the landed elite in this part of Ireland covered by this study, unique. Unlike the very small number of southern landlords who survived in other parts of provincial Ireland by keeping a low profile and retreating from public life at local and national levels, the survivors in northeast Ulster which became Northern Ireland in 1921, were enabled to retain a visible social role as a ‘healthy active social group’.

A significant factor in their distinctive experience was the different political turn of events that the northeast began to experience in the aftermath of the land wars, which were ‘largely superseded by the constitutional question and the growth of resistance to Home Rule’. A network of social and family ties to Britain’s landed elite helped to connect these families politically as well as socially, thereby enhancing their status and ensuring they would play leadership roles through such institutions nearer home from the ‘Carlton Club to the Orange Order’, as one of the chapters explores in fascinating detail. Other local institutions such as the Church of Ireland, charitable societies and a host of other local organisations, provided members of the landed elite with the perfect vehicles through which they could sustain their influence.

Indeed, even when members of the rising middle class such as Sir Edward Carson and James Craig assumed political leadership of the Ulster Unionist Party, it was the landed classes who often provided a colourful boost to their political campaigns, organising high-profile meetings on their estates for landmark events such as the signing of the Ulster Covenant in 1912. Meanwhile, gentry ladies such as the Marchioness of Londonderry chaired the Ulster Women’s Unionist Council while Lady Kilmorey and a host of others hosted parties and fundraising events to network with potential supporters. During the third Home Rule crisis of 1912–1914, it was the landed elites who played

a leading role in the mobilisation of local volunteers to resist it. This book provides a particularly fascinating insight to the paternalistic oversight given by many landed gentlemen in the preparation and drilling of these men and in their leadership of what became the Ulster Volunteer Force.

For her comprehensive study, Purdue has made valuable use of a wide range of archival sources available to document the experiences of the landed elite in northeast Ulster. The vast collections of estate papers in the Public Record Office of Northern Ireland (access to which was greatly facilitated by the extensive catalogues and lists available for all of the great estates in the reading room) are used in depth, in addition to Land Commission papers and census data also held there. Materials in smaller repositories such as Armagh County Museum, Ballymoney Museum and the Linen Hall Library, as well as local libraries and the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum at Cultra, have also been tapped, particularly for local and provincial newspaper evidence. In addition, extensive use was made of material remaining in private hands in the country houses themselves, such as the Argory papers from the Argory, county Armagh, seat of the MacGeogh Bond family for around 120 years, which is now under the care of the National Trust. This collection includes family letters, photographs, diaries, account books and miscellaneous material.

In addition to the written archival evidence, Purdue has also made valuable use of oral interviews with surviving members of individual families for her study. The oral evidence is woven into the narrative of her text with particular effect while the personal recollections and memories of members and descendants of the landed elite help the reader to get into the mindset of these people and accurately understand their identity and concerns during the eight-decade period of study.

The Big House in the North of Ireland is another fine production by University College Dublin Press, illustrated with photographs and useful appendices including maps and tables, as well as succinct reference material, and should be of great interest to academic researchers and inquisitive recreational readers alike.

Dr Susan Hood
Representative Church Body Library, Dublin