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The Irish Film Archive

In close tally with the proportion of early silent film lost world wide, it is estimated that about 75% of Ireland's film heritage has been lost or destroyed. While it is a commonplace that Ireland has continued to attend to its literary legacy before that of any of the other arts, and while the wranglings over such things as gallery bequests have been familiar to us at least since the time of Yeats and Hugh Lane, there has been insufficient recognition of the efforts afoot to preserve for posterity the newer art of film. The originative motivational forces behind these efforts are well known. While renowned contributions have been made to Irish film generally by institutions from Joyce's Volta Cinema to the Film Company of Ireland, the Irish Film Society and the Irish Film Board, the first steps made specifically towards the official preservation of film happened with the formation of the National Film Institute in 1943. Founded via the redoubtable energies of Archbishop McQuaid, the Institute considered its duty to be 'to direct and encourage the use of the motion picture in the national and cultural interests of the Irish people', and it thereby established a distributing film library that could be used for information and educational purposes throughout the country.

Those involved in the Institute in the early stages (Colm O'Laoghaire, Liam O'Leary, George Morrison, Robert Monks, Patrick Carey ...) were cognisant of the need for the preservation of its materials, for the preservation of other fragile and rare material, and for a centralised archive. Yet, an official archive was not established in this country until 1992. In filling in the story between the founding of the Institute and the present situation of our national Film Archive, the present Curator at the Irish Film Institute in Dublin's Eustace Street, Sunniva O'Flynn, proves a luminary.

'There was always this awareness, this embarrassment in Ireland', O'Flynn remembers, 'that we were one of the last countries in Europe without a film archive and that feeling appeared in many campaigning documents.' She herself began working for the Institute in 1987 at a time when it was gradually being realised that the core material of the Institute's distributing library could provide a decent start for a film archive. As video encroached on the cultural scene in the late eighties and the need for the older type of circulating film library lessened, new demands had to be met and new attitudes to older kinds of film had to be developed. At that stage, when the Institute was in Harcourt Street, she started to isolate the Irish material of its library. The Institute began to systematically approach likely contributors of further Irish material, from individual film-makers to production companies to colleges and small cinemas. Material poured in and the initial few hundred cans held quickly became thousands.

The first major collections to be added to the core material came from the Department of Foreign Affairs and from semi-state bodies like Bord Fáilte (these included numerous copies of such things as the Kennedy visit and of an idyllic fishing documentary called *Happiness is a Rod in the Hand*). The first significant individual contribution came from the director/producer/cameraman Vincent Corcoran, who gave 360 cans that ranged over his entire career. All that was being offered at that stage, observes O'Flynn, was a centralisation of Irish film and really not much else; the Institute had film-handling skills but had no proper preservation vaults.

Nevertheless, the simple matter of physical acquisition is vital in the early stages she says: 'The swelling of our number of cans was very important: to be actually *seen* to be building an archive'.

The Irish Film Archive proper was established in 1992, coinciding with the opening of the Irish Film Centre. With a new premises, the Archive could begin work wholesale and today it contains substantial collections of film and video tape, combined with extensive paper and memorabilia holdings. While material is actively collected as such, acquisition still comes exclusively in the form of donations since, at present at least, the Archive has no purchase remit/budget. The Archive is subdivided into a 'Viewing Collection' consisting of video-tape and positive prints that can be accessed for research and sometimes for loan, and a 'Master Collection' comprised of unique material existing as positive prints and negatives. Broadly, the material held is catalogued under thirteen headings: Feature Films/Shorts/Government Education Films/ Travelogues or Tourism Films/ Sports/ Educational/ Documentary/ Newsreels/ Commercials/ Missionary Films/ Animations/ Amateur non-fiction/ Amateur fiction. The earliest materials preserved are films made by Alexander Promio in Belfast and Dublin in 1897 and recent additions include film from the collection of the Irish Defence Forces covering the years 1929 to the present. Everything from posters to scripts and stills are contained in the paper archive and notable holdings include the Lord Killanin Collection which contains production notes from *The Quiet Man* and some John Ford correspondence.

O'Flynn finds the amateur non-fiction collections especially fascinating. A unique phenomenon in Ireland, she points out, is the number of film collections that have been donated by members of the clergy. Parish priests were very often the only ones who could afford cameras and the great thing about their films is that they transcend the family unit, focusing on such community events as Corpus Christi processions, fairs, and parish life generally. It would, presumably, have been propitious that people generally respected and trusted priests so they wouldn't have met with the same natural suspicions as would have been directed at a lay crew, so to speak. The Irish Film Institute always had clergy on the board and the clergy were also heavily involved in film education in schools. There is a great film in the archive called 'National Film Institute Summer School 1947 in Howth' that records the procedures then in place to familiarise the country's teachers with the ways of cameras. The percentage of amateur film holdings generally is higher in Ireland than in other countries since levels of professional film production have been so comparatively low here. Amateur films come with their own imperatives: they are usually very difficult to catalogue and the archivists are thus delighted when donors sit with them through the process. Donors are diligently maintained as the copyright holders on their own films and are usually pleased also to receive video copies of their material since they are usually not equipped themselves to view old film.

The running of an archive is very expensive O'Flynn insists: '... and yes, we would like more money. The cost of preserving films is enormously high and at present we have to farm everything out to laboratories in the UK.' Much of the material they receive has already contracted 'conditions'. The main problem generally for archivists is what is called 'vinegar syndrome', a chemical deterioration caused mainly by high humidity that results in the production of a damaging and highly contagious acetic acid and that especially affects magnetic sound material. A physical audit of the

existing collection was carried out a year ago and all material with signs of vinegar syndrome was isolated — the syndrome cannot be reversed and thus affected material needs to be instantly copied. There is an infamous world-wide problem with pre 1950s film, notoriously unstable due to its nitrate base and always likely to spontaneously combust. The Institute has its own ‘nitrate project’ in operation. There is a backlog of such material pre-dating the establishment of the Archive proper, and this has been sent to a Hendersons laboratory in England while all newly acquired nitrate material is shipped within the day. Until recently the Archive has not had the budget to convert all this material to safety film but a Heritage Council grant of £10,000 has been gained and the bulk of the material will soon be converted and repatriated. A ‘Nitrate 2000’ project has been in train worldwide whereby all archives have been aiming to have all nitrate film converted by the turn of the millennium. Many countries did not make the deadline, including Ireland, but the new money will enable the Archive to catch up.

The position of Head of the Archive is held by Kasandra O’Connell who has been with the Institute since November. O’Connell is the first qualified archivist to work for the Institute and this naturally gives a new professional energy to the specific matter of archiving. She is complimentary of all those who have thus far held the archival fort: ‘I think the Archive has been really lucky in so far as it’s been really under-resourced for years but the professionalism and enthusiasm of the staff have always made it a first-rate resource.’ O’Connell’s own professional enthusiasm is patent and she is justly proud of the fact that the Institute has now gained full membership of FIAF, the International Federation of Film Archives, a venerable organisation initially formed by the grouping of American, German, French and English archive associations in 1938. To fulfil obligations for membership, O’Connell had to write a detailed report regarding the Institute’s preservation activities, its collections structure, its budgeting and its staff, and the archive at the Film Centre had to pass an inspection by a FIAF official. FIAF run valuable training courses and summer schools that are both intensive and highly specialised. O’Flynn: ‘FIAF tend to be very benevolent. They know we’re pretty penniless here.’

Like all professionals, archivists have their nonpareils and the Irish Archive has had significant help from the exemplary National Film and Television Archive in London, an institution central to the evolution of FIAF. O’Flynn has a particular professional admiration for this institution, pointing out that its cataloguing department is ‘cutting-edge’ and that it produces articles on archiving that are referred to throughout the world. The Institute generally looks to the NFTA for training and a year-long course was designed for them there at a time when there were no academic courses on film archiving available. While there is now a Masters of Film Archiving available in the University of East Anglia and other postgraduate courses are available in the USA, O’Flynn points out that the on-the-job training the NFTA provided was invaluable.

With archiving, coalface skills are vital. In terms of the passive preservation of film, the Institute is doing its best to inhibit any further deterioration in donated collections. They now have the best vaults in the country for long-term preservation, with master vaults that are closely controlled regarding temperature and humidity, and the fire prevention system that surrounds these vaults is state of the art. What money is really needed for now is the active preservation of film, the creation of new copies of unique material and the increasing of public accessibility. The aim is to make film copies of

old material, not just video copies, and this in itself proves expensive. The Archive's Five Year Plan, 1999-2003, highlighted the need for proper conservation policy. The most urgent plans concern the buildings project, launched at the IFC on June 25th by Síle deValera (all the Archive's funding comes more or less from the Arts Council). Even at the current rate of acquisition, the extant archive rooms at the IFC will soon be quite literally full. New master vaults are to be built on off-site locations and the material currently at Eustace Street will be moved, making room for more viewing vaults and allowing for more access points for the public. While O'Connell's initial remit was to mainly consist of the internal workings of the Archive, she is at present wholly immersed in this important project.

Besides O'Connell and O'Flynn, there are currently two other full-time members of staff: Emma Keogh, Librarian, and Eugene Finn, Collections Archivist. A further full-time position of Cataloguer is currently being filled. Keogh, who operates what must surely be one of the most pristine small libraries in the country, has, along with regular librarian duties such as the preservation of the paper archive, been engaged in the collocation of clippings files comprised of material from both periodical and daily publications, a service that always proves invaluable to researchers. She remarks that filmic research still seems to be in its infancy in this country and that the research that is carried out seems to be restricted to what are at this stage stereotypical areas of interest: Film and Northern Ireland, Women in Film. In light of this and in light of the vast holdings yet to be actively consulted, all potential seekers after thesis topics should quickly realise that a veritable gold-mine awaits them in the Archive. Other than full-time staff, support workers are currently provided through the FÁS Community Employment Scheme. At present, there are eight such workers in the Archive, five in the cataloguing department, one in the library, and one in the paper archive (another is a festival co-ordinator). While the provision of these workers by FÁS has been vital to the volume of work carried out in recent years at the Archive, a more permanent staffing structure would seem to be in order since these workers, having been highly trained in specialised areas, can only stay for twelve months and, in any case, FÁS is now phasing out the scheme. O'Connell points out that the Archive is presently in the middle of a multi-annual funding application; so, hopefully, things will soon be looking up for the preservation of Ireland's audio-visual heritage.

Given the rise and rise of the medium, the work engaged in by film archivists is both fascinating and gargantuan. In one sense there is something more satisfactorily challenging about a film archive than the museums and galleries we are generally more familiar with. Museum- and gallery-going are quite conventional activities, assumed prerequisites for the cultivation of one's middle-class aesthetic sensibilities. Museums and galleries can be too easily accused of neutralising culture, of making consumption of the past too easy, a facility matched only by the fact that the consumer himself can in some cases very determinedly be seen to circulate in such places. One cannot however, roam in any way glibly round a film archive. Despite the purists, the close proximity of the arts of writing and film continue to be evident when it comes to archival matters: one can reasonably quickly observe the painting, the piece of sculpture, but to investigate a film archive takes as much time as does properly familiarising oneself with a regular book library. One can only admire the patient preparatory work by archivists that makes such investigation possible.

John Kenny