

## *Viewpoint*

# **Scottish Catholic Archives: A 2013 to Remember**

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For historians working in the field of Scottish Catholic history, 2013 marked the end of a long and agitated campaign to persuade the Roman Catholic Bishops of Scotland not to remove the 'Historic Archives', dating from 1177 to 1878, from Edinburgh to the University of Aberdeen. The one million documents in question were labelled 'Historic' after being somewhat summarily categorised as such in a microfiche produced by the firm Chadwyck-Healey in the 1980s. The date of 1878 is the year in which the Roman Catholic Hierarchy was restored in Scotland.

The plan in itself appeared to be beguilingly comprehensive and far-sighted; it had been devised and agreed upon as long ago as 2002, and finally signed off in 2013 by Cardinal Keith O'Brien in spite of private misgivings. As time passed, however, it became clear that it involved too many dominoes having to fall in the correct sequence for the plan to be successful.

Conceived in the bullish days preceding the global Credit Crunch of 2007–08 and driven by a commendable desire to enhance the status of Aberdeen as a world centre for research into Scottish Catholic history, the plan had as its main thrust the removal of the 'Historic Archives' from Edinburgh to Aberdeen. An ancillary purpose was to create a 'Catholic cultural hot spot' in the area by linking the Historic Archives with a reinvented former seminary at Blairs, five miles outside Aberdeen. Here it was proposed to create a hotel, conference centre, private housing and a championship golf course, with the former seminary chapel and adjacent Blairs Museum as the heart of a leisure and tourism complex. Today, this project remains unfulfilled.

The rationale for the radical reordering of the Scottish Catholic Archives (SCA) was also partly based on what was asserted to be the inadequacy of the (1819) Edinburgh townhouse at No. 16 Drummond Place which housed most of the SCA's collection of three million items in its 2,680 sq ft (248.78m<sup>2</sup>) of floor space. The house was said to be too small, too old, not adapted for wheelchair users, and at the mercy of flash floods from the street into its basement, spills from the flats above and 'water ingress' from the very soil on which the building had been constructed in the early nineteenth century. Columba House was also one of the many British victims of the Sanskrit scholar Oliver Fallon, who in 2006 covertly removed 288 documents from the

collection and is believed to have done much the same thing in many other distinguished British repositories.

The third, less visible part of the plan was to update and streamline the disparate Church agencies scattered through Glasgow and the West of Scotland. This would be done by centralising them in a former convent at Hamilton Avenue in Pollokshields, Glasgow, along with the remaining two million post-1878 Archives from 16 Drummond Place in Edinburgh, thus effectively removing the last part of the SCA collection from the capital.

Accordingly, in November 2013, the management structure of the SCA was dismantled, as had always been envisaged, in preparation for the transfer of the Historic Archives from Edinburgh to Aberdeen. The services of the Archivist and Keeper, along with the Assistant Keeper, were dispensed with and the five-days-a-week opening of Columba House reduced to one or two days, depending on user demand. Earlier, the Scottish Catholic Heritage Commission, tasked with advising the Scottish Bishops on the plan, had broken up in confusion and has evidently not met since.

Although historians and researchers were aware that the Historic Archives would in time be moving to Aberdeen, a promise of a planned and orderly transfer in stages had been made by the University of Aberdeen to allow work in progress to be completed.

Then, out of the blue, it became known that many of the documents at Columba House were covered in mould that had developed since November 2013. Arrangements for the transfer of the Historic Archives to Aberdeen were hurriedly prioritised but nothing could be done until the strain of mould was identified. The SCA was suddenly closed to all readers and Columba House, with its reading room and its daily access to three million documents, was no longer available.

It transpired that the mould was harmless and easily removed, and would remain dormant as long as the appropriate levels of temperature, humidity and air circulation were maintained. The Church management that introduced the sporadic opening regime had learnt a hard lesson.

Along with the Historic Archives, some 27,000 books of the Blairs Library on loan to the National Library, were also transferred to the University of Aberdeen. Thus ended what proved to have been a relatively short association with Scotland's capital city where they, along with the three million documents of the SCA, had been brought from Aberdeen beginning in the 1950s, in order to be close to the major national institutions such as the then National Archives of Scotland, the National Library, National Museum and National Galleries.

Three options for the future of the SCA had been presented to the Bishops in 2002. First, keep all three million documents at Columba House in No. 16 Drummond Place. Second, move them all to what is now the Gillis Centre in Whitehouse Loan, Edinburgh to create a centre for Catholic history and theology, affiliated to the University of Edinburgh. Third, move the Historic Archives to Aberdeen and the post-1878 papers to Glasgow, a city where the Glasgow Archdiocesan Archives were also already located.

It appeared that the sole virtue of Columba House, originally donated by the son of the Third Marquess of Bute, was its market value. The plan evidently was to sell it and the former seminary at Scotus in Glasgow and so offset the increasing financial burdens challenging the Bishops. However, to date neither building appears to have been sold.

Today, in 2015, Columba House remains under a suspended sentence of closure. It still contains two million post-1878 documents but its future is uncertain. It is open to users on an appointment-only basis, as the facility at Hamilton Avenue is not ready for the Archives nor for the Church agencies.

However, partly because of the apparent collapse of the Scottish Catholic Heritage Commission, three options for the Collection have been left unexplored. If No. 16 Drummond Place were to close as an archive repository, the National Records of Scotland might be a logical alternative; the major religious denominations in Scotland have already deposited their archives there. The National Library of Scotland might also be an appropriate alternative location, as would the University of Edinburgh's Centre for Research Collections, which holds a significant group of medieval Church documents as well as post-Reformation material relating to the Scots College in Paris.

The Archives of the Scots Colleges in Rome and in Spain remain largely untouched in the Bishops' planning. In the absence of a Keeper and Archivist no one appears to have oversight of the whole archival legacy of the Catholic Church in Scotland, both at home and abroad. There is no visible organisational coherence.

Initial reports from users indicate that the University of Aberdeen provides excellent facilities and the digitisation of documents is available on demand. However, the Historic Archives are at Aberdeen on a 30-year loan only. As the relatively short-lived sojourn of the Blairs Library in the National Library of Scotland testifies, 30 years is not a long time in the history of the Catholic Church and it is a time-frame that may give the Bishops an opportunity to find a universally accepted solution to the burden of maintaining the SCA that better fits the needs of researchers and historians.

The argument between the Scottish Bishops and the largely lay historians leaves a bitter taste behind, as it was not directly a question of faith or morals but one in which the voice of the users (the historians) was not provided with an effective forum for debate. The present dispersal of the SCA raises an important question for users and archivists alike. Should archives be centralised or dispersed? My understanding is that, once centralised, it is not good practice to separate an Archive's components geographically, particularly because, in the case of the Scottish Catholic community's records, the documents had been centralised from so many outlying parts of Scotland and Europe in order to achieve economies of scale and internal coherence.

Today, the SCA website states that:

The Historic Collection, dating from 1177, is believed to be the largest body of pre and post reformation Scottish Catholic documentary history in the UK and

Ireland. The Historic Collection is now on long-term loan and can be consulted by researchers at the Special Collections Centre of the Sir Duncan Rice Library at the University of Aberdeen ... Archives of the post-1878 dioceses of Aberdeen, Dunkeld, Argyll and the Isles, Galloway, Motherwell and the Archdiocese of St Andrews and Edinburgh are located at Columba House where they can be consulted, by appointment, by researchers.<sup>1</sup>

The response from the community of historians to the relocation of the pre-1878 material to Aberdeen was a symposium held at the University of Dundee in the Spring of 2014 on the future of the post-1878 collections of the Scottish Catholic Archives, one of its recommendations being the initiation of a scoping survey to identify the location and nature of all those archives which relate to Scottish Catholic history. The symposium was followed by an article in the *Innes Review* which called for ‘a clear plan for the future’ of the two million post-1878 documents.<sup>2</sup>

‘There are various institutions’, continues the article, ‘universities, archives, libraries – that possess expertise and which would be worth approaching to help build a collaborative group to develop such a plan’.

Let us hope that the olive branch will be accepted in the spirit in which it was proffered.

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.scottishcatholicarchives.org.uk/About/MoreabouttheScottishCatholicArchives/tabid/141/Default.aspx>.

<sup>2</sup> D. Tierney, S. K. Kehoe and E. A. Cameron, ‘The Scottish Catholic Archives and Scottish historical studies’, *Innes Review*, 65, no. 2 (2014), 79–94 (91–2).