

Viewpoint

Scottish Catholic Archives: Looking to the Future

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In May 2014 the Scottish History Society organised a meeting of a group of historians, archivists, students and other interested individuals at the University of Dundee to discuss the Scottish Catholic Archives (SCA) – a major Scottish research resource. The meeting was convened following considerable and often heated debate regarding a decision made by the former Cardinal, Keith O’Brien, to relocate the pre-1878 archives from Columba House in Edinburgh to the University of Aberdeen, together with the Blairs College Library, a significant collection of 27,000 books and pamphlets, held since 1974 by the National Library of Scotland in Edinburgh. The additional widely held belief that the Church intended to relocate the post-1878 records to the parishes was also the subject of discussion. The meeting, which was both good natured and constructive, raised a number of issues concerning the SCA archival collections. It also raised wider and more general issues relating to the location of and access to research resources within Scotland.

Within this long-running debate, three key issues have appeared to cause the greatest concern: first, the separation of the pre-1878 records and their transfer to Aberdeen, secondly, the removal of a major research resource from Scotland’s capital city on the basis that it would be less accessible to researchers and finally, the further threat that the remaining records may be further dispersed to the parishes.

The survival and availability of the archives of the Scottish Catholic Church are, and have been, crucial to the writing of many major aspects of Scottish history. The history of the Irish in Scotland, for example, is crucial in ‘broadening the understanding of Modern Scotland’. Other themes, of which there are many, include education and social welfare, and the little researched Highland Catholic Gaeltacht. For this the post-1878 records are vital.¹ It is worth noting that some of the most vocal of those academic voices objecting to the transfer of the SCA to the exemplary storage and access conditions available at the University of Aberdeen had not used the collections in their

¹ Ewen Cameron, Sir William Fraser Professor of Scottish History and Palaeography, University of Edinburgh, meeting regarding SCA, 17 May 2014.

research and publications. The objections appeared to centre primarily round the removal of the Archive from Edinburgh, where the national repositories of the National Records of Scotland and the National Library of Scotland reside.

It is the case that few scholars or archivists favour the splitting of archival collections. Maintaining the provenance, context and ease of access to collections is the ideal. Where that is not possible, such as occurs when collections outgrow existing storage space, when existing accommodation is found to be unsuitable (which can include poor environmental conditions causing brittleness or mould or not conforming to modern access requirements), or when institutional or organisational policy changes require an alternative use of the space, it need not result in diminished access to the collections held. The transfer of the historical pre-1878 records of the SCA and the Blairs Library to the University of Aberdeen resulted from a combination of the above factors.

The impact of the move to Aberdeen with regard to researchers is another issue. In previous decades, personal visits to archives could involve long journeys to widespread locations, with no guarantee that the records held would be useful, or indeed available. Within the modern digital environment, however, much has changed and much preparatory work can be carried out online in advance of any visit to carry out research. Details of opening hours, catalogues, the extent of collections (for example, does the collection hold several metres or several hundred metres of records, which will influence the research time needed), pre-ordering (often required for items held in remote stores) are widely available on archives' websites. The development of international standards for archival description has also helped regulate the way catalogues and catalogue entries are presented to users. Within a commendably short period after the move to the University of Aberdeen's Special Collections Centre, the collection was made available for research in the new state-of-the-art Sir Duncan Rice Library.

The impact on researchers, therefore, has been greatly eased by the speed and the manner in which the collections have been made available. Access is enhanced by the ability to cross-search across all collections and the availability of digital copies, the SCA records 'complementing the important family and estate papers held by the Special Collections Centre'. By May of this year, 6,897 items had been produced for researchers.² Clearly, therefore, access to the pre-1878 documents (following a delay while they were cleaned of significant mould growth and potentially harmful spores removed) has not been affected by the move to Aberdeen.

The second major issue concerning the SCA, the transfer from Edinburgh to Aberdeen, perhaps raised most concern and heated discussion. The basis of the debate was that the SCA should remain in Edinburgh where researchers could also consult the major National Archive and Library collections and other research collections held in the city. While Edinburgh is home to a range

² Siobhán Convery, Head of Special Collections, Library, Special Collections & Museums, University of Aberdeen, meeting regarding SCA, 17 May 2014.

of research resources, that attitude has been widely criticised. It presupposes, for example, that the majority of researchers are based in the central belt, primarily Edinburgh, when in fact, researchers, both academic and leisure, are based all over the country. It ignores the wealth of archival collections held throughout Scotland in universities, local authorities, other specialist archives, such as the Colleges of Physicians and Surgeons, businesses and estate collections across the country from Dumfries in the south, Argyll and the Western Isles, Aberdeen and Dundee in the east, and the Northern islands with their rich archival collections in Orkney and Shetland.³ The term 'national', it was suggested, should reflect the totality of the documentary heritage of Scotland, not simply that based in Edinburgh. Any issue relating to travel to Aberdeen is borne out by the growing usage of the collections.

The final issue, the future of the post-1878 documents, some of which remain in Columba House, is more uncertain with no conclusion being reached as to the future of those records. During discussion it became clear that more information may be needed to enable all appropriate records to be preserved in the long term. A full inventory of Scottish Roman Catholic archives is not available with, for example, the papers of the Bishops' Conference (the assembly which enables Scotland's Roman Catholic Bishops to work together) not held in Columba House. It is clear that the survival of the historical SCA is assured for the foreseeable future. It is now being held in secure and environmentally sound premises with professional curatorship and management. Action is needed to confirm the identification, survival and preservation of the remaining records. To conclude, the move of the historic archives of the Scottish Catholic Church to the University of Aberdeen is one aspect (arguably, at the moment, the most successful one) of the current reorganisation of the Church's archive and it is hoped that the remaining parts of this important collection are preserved securely for future research.

³ The breadth of Scottish (and UK) archives can be seen at <http://apps.nationalarchives.gov.uk/archon/>.