The Northern Ireland Political Collection at the Linen Hall Library

A unique collection and its cataloguing and indexing needs

John Gray

Despite the social and political divisions of Northern Ireland, a unique archive of materials documenting the ‘Troubles’ has been established. This article briefly examines how the collection was built up, noting some of the difficulties inherent in this process, and discusses the issues to be resolved in cataloguing and indexing this very diverse collection to maximize access for both academic researchers and the local community.

The 250,000 items in the Linen Hall Library’s Northern Ireland Political Collection constitute the only systematic archive, at least in terms of printed material, covering the Northern Ireland conflict of the last 30 years or more. It may have a wider significance than that; as the distinguished journalist and author on a variety of conflict situations, Robert Fisk, has written: ‘I can think of no comparable institution in a place of such social and political division that has been able to amass such a record’.

Origins of the collection

The origins of the collection certainly lay in individual initiative. As anecdote has it, the then Librarian, Jimmy Vitty, was handed a civil rights leaflet some time in 1968; he collected it, and then set about collecting other ephemeral material appearing as our political crisis gathered pace.

What is also true is that the Linen Hall provided a context in which such a project could take root. As the last surviving subscribing library in Ireland, and the oldest in Belfast (dating from 1788), its local history collections were rich in the small printing of the city and neighbourhood. Interest in local bibliography was a major motivating factor for Vitty and others who worked with him. The independent and self-governing status of the library, and the laissez-faire nature of its governance at the time, put few constraints on the initiative. As the Northern Ireland crisis deepened, public institutions were more cautious, and were in turn often suspected by key participants in the conflict. The Linen Hall’s own complex history also offered something for everyone; on the one hand a radical foundation that managed to get its second Librarian, the United Irishman Thomas Russell, executed as a rebel; on the other, an institution patronized and supported by pillars of the establishment.

Collecting methods and hazards

The different faces of the Linen Hall, and its links, even at the end of the 1960s, with all sections of the community were to prove invaluable as the ‘Troubles’ escalated from 1969 onwards. The legal status of material being collected was indeed questionable, and the principal Republican newspaper of the time, the United Irishman, was banned under the Special Powers Act. One member donated copies, and others were significant publishers of material and contributors to the collection. In 1971, an imminent threat by the police to seize the collection arose. A phone call to the Attorney General from a Governor who was also a member of the Ulster Unionist Council resolved the crisis, and the library received written authority to continue collecting.

From the outset, the assembly of a collection of this kind involved a wholly new approach to acquisition. Most obviously, letters sent from afar requesting copyright deposit cut little ice with organizations that did not recognize the state! Even the Linen Hall could not collect from behind a library desk, and visits in the field, and the making of personal contacts right across the political spectrum, have remained key to collecting. By August 1969 this involved trips behind the barricades in West Belfast, and even at the height of subsequent murder campaigns, Linen Hall staff found themselves visiting Sinn Fein headquarters and those of the various Loyalist paramilitaries on the same day.

Organizing the collection: progress and problems

In the early ‘heroic’ stages of collection the emphasis was on ephemeral printed material, and on acquisition rather than listing or cataloguing. Our priority always has been to collect, and then to worry about organization afterwards, but in the 1970s the Linen Hall’s wider problems – it came within an ace of closure in 1981 – seriously limited what was possible. At most, the part-time work of one member of staff was devoted to the collection. Material was simply very roughly categorized as Loyalist or Republican, Unionist or Nationalist. Even by 1981, when there were only 10,000 items in the collection, the fracturing of organizations into often warring factions rendered this over-simplification increasingly unhelpful. By the very nature of such material, publication information was often obscure, and we still...
struggle to secure information that would have been much better recorded at the time.

In the revived post-1981 Linen Hall we have given a high priority to the collection. In part, this was no more than a proper recognition that publications of this kind, which can all too easily be viewed as marginal, in fact constitute a high proportion of Northern Ireland’s entire published output. The collection, which had previously been accessible principally to academic researchers only, was given a higher profile and made accessible to the community at large – they, after all, were the people producing the material. Bit by bit staffing was secured, and today the collection has three permanent staff.

The new focus and additional resources led to a dramatic increase in the rate of acquisition; from the 10,000 items held in 1981 the collection grew to 35,000 items in 1988, 135,000 items in 1998, and today’s figure of 250,000 items. Part of the growth has arisen from a widening of the collection’s focus from ephemeral printed political material, both in form and content. The acquisition of one collection of 55,000 photographs obviously made a major contribution to growth between 1998 and the present. Today’s breakdown by form is as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Form</th>
<th>Quantity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Archives</td>
<td>c.50,000 items</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Books and pamphlets</td>
<td>11,500 volumes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ephemeral items</td>
<td>75,000 items</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Newspaper cuttings</td>
<td>1,500 volumes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Periodicals</td>
<td>c.100,000 issues of 2,000 titles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Posters</td>
<td>5,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Photographs</td>
<td>55,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Videos</td>
<td>3,650</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miscellaneous items</td>
<td>1,000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This bare breakdown hardly does justice to the variety of forms – badges, calendars, Christmas cards and defaced coins, not to mention baby’s bibs, bullets, political lollipops and jam (marmalade!). The collection has also expanded beyond the narrowly political. It covers all the various social, economic and legal issues that may have some bearing on the conflict.

Needless to say, the collection has run far ahead of our capacity to list, catalogue, or otherwise index it. An early initiative was the publication in 1992 of Robert Bell’s Northern Ireland Political Periodicals 1966–1992 allied to our microfiche edition of these. Charting the fortunes of 1404 titles published by 659 publishers, this was a veritable tour de force, produced as it was on an early word processor. Apart from the inadequacy of the technology, the exercise revealed that even in the relatively self-organizing field of periodicals, Northern Ireland politics was special – changes of title, of publisher, mergers and splinters were the norm.

In that most basic area of books and pamphlets, progress became possible following the Linen Hall’s overall computerization in 1988 and the adoption of the BLCMP (now TALIS) system backed up by Queens University. It was only in 2001 that cataloguing of this material was completed. The obscurity of key publishing information on many pamphlets is an obvious problem. So also is subject access. Beyond the automatic search capacity of TALIS, we have developed our own specialized subject index with relevant terms incorporated into the MARC record, enabling greater flexibility and precision when searching by keyword. In proceeding thus, we do our best to step over the minefields of terminology that beset the Northern Ireland situation. By way of example – do you use ‘murders’ with its judgemental and often disputed connotations, or do you use ‘deaths’? Fortunately, computers, and in particular TALIS, offer the option of multiple choice and cross-referencing.

The collection’s 5000 posters have now been catalogued on TALIS as part of our major ‘Troubled Images’ Project, which will see the publication of a CD-ROM, the launch of a travelling exhibition, and a substantial book in October 2001. Work on this project has identified a number of issues. First, there is the major problem of confirming who did what, when, and why, and often up to 30 years after the event. Secondly, there are the major and labour-intensive problems of securing copyright permissions for reproduction in digital form, and in this case to be available on the CD-ROM only. Thirdly, we have to consider the possibilities, if the resources are available, of adding significantly to the basic record.

On the CD-ROM, in addition to the basic cataloguing record, we provide a commentary note of up to 50 words for the 3500 posters included, and for the 75 posters to be included in the exhibition and book this has been expanded to 250 words. Building up the resource has involved tracking
down and interviewing a significant number of the key poster designers from all sides, and otherwise drawing to the full on the knowledge of the library’s contact network.

If there is a sense that we are just in time to fill in missing detail on the posters, that is every bit as true of the 75,000 ephemeral items. These are now organized by producing body or occasion, and in a more detailed and systematic way than in 1981, but much remains to be done.

Other major and outstanding areas to be tackled include the 55,000 photographs of the Pacemaker Press archive, the principal Northern Ireland news photographic archive up to the mid-1970s. Here there is conservation work to be done in safeguarding the negatives, but also the challenge of making at least a significant selection of the images digitally accessible. Untackled too, as yet, are significant archives, including, for example, that of the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association.

Our records to date are now available on-line via our web OPAC, which is accessible through what is now the library’s extensive general website,1 and the same will be true of all further progress. In some areas, notably that of periodicals, where we now need to update and convert records, progress will be via TALIS. The increasing flexibility of TALIS also offers the prospect that this, rather than the creation of databases in other forms, will be the vehicle for mounting the records of the other untouched parts of the collection, but final decisions still have to be made. Advice welcome!

Then, as always, there are the resource questions to be solved. We can at least reflect how far we have progressed since 1981, when the library did not even have an electric typewriter. One element of that progress was the opening in September 2000 of the library’s major extension as part of a £3.4 million Millennium Development. Appropriately, the Northern Ireland Political Collection secured a new reading room as part of this – extraordinarily for an historic library with historic collections, this is our most heavily used collection by the international research community.

It is used by our own people too. In that respect, I reflect that while librarians have no magic lodestone with which to solve the problems of the world, let alone Northern Ireland, we at least have a duty to avoid being part of the problem, a duty to maximize access to our own literature, however difficult and painful it may often be. I also reflect that our cataloguers, indexers and listers are, rather like political poster designers, the unsung heroes and heroines of the cause. The Linen Hall certainly owes a particular debt of gratitude to its own.

Note

1. See the library’s website at http://www.linenhall.com

References and further reading


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