

On 'Archive Fever'

by

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*The opening address at 'The Archive of the Future'—a public forum to mark the launch of **Beyond 2022: Ireland's Virtual Record Treasury**, presented in association with Trinity's **Making Ireland Research Theme**.¹*

As anyone will tell you, the one thing that you should never do when preparing welcoming comments for an event is to prepare by reading Jacques Derrida—so, in thinking about the *Beyond 2022* launch today, I did precisely that. Perhaps it was the title of today's event—'The Archive of the Future'—but over the past few days, I found myself drawn back to an essay that Derrida published in the journal *Diacritics* in 1995: 'Archive Fever'.²

As so often with Derrida, in the beginning was the Word. Archive. 'So familiar a word', he writes. He then reminds us that its root is Greek: *Arkhe*, which, as Derrida puts it, 'names at once the *commencement* and *commandment*.' The word itself means a place from which we begin, but, by extension, the idea of a first principle: the point from which authority, or power derives. It is the same root that we find in words such as 'archetype', or 'archangel'. 'There where authority, social order is exercised, *in this place* from which *order* is given.'

This point of commencement is a good place at which to start.

¹ The Beyond 2022 team is very grateful to Professor Morash for sharing his public address on the Beyond 2022 website.

² Jacques Derrida and Eric Prenowitz, 'Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression', *Diacritics*, 25:2 (1995), 9–63.

It reminds of a number of things; that an archive is a *place*—I'll come back to that in a moment. It is also a starting place; not least for research. All of us in this room have had the experience, I am sure, at one point or another in our careers, of finding that something we were trying to understand only really came into focus once we got into the archive. In those moments, the archive really is our *starting point*, the point at which an idea originates.

The relationship between the archive and power, however, is an equally compelling one; the *arche* as first principle, the point from which authority proceeds. Derrida is writing in the context of the Freud archive in Vienna, and puzzling through the idea that *here* is where the authority through which we shape our understanding of consciousness—our understanding of understanding, as it were—begins.

In the case of the Irish archives, however, this idea that the archive is a site of the origins of authority has a different significance. The well-known image of flames pouring out of the Four Courts while the archive goes up in flames is, I would suggest, the *archetypal* image of the origins of the Irish state. It is the image that tells us that the Irish State is one that has, at its moment of commencement, a flaming absence; where the site of authority should lie, there are only ashes and tangled girders. This helps to explain a great deal about Irish public life since, and now; the fluidity around issues such as the name of the state, and what constitutes the national territory; our fixation on the 1916 Proclamation as a kind of surrogate founding document; our endless fascination with questions of constitutional law; our unease with national moments of civic commemoration. The burning archive is, it could be argued, the Irish state's absent origin.

And that is what make the initiative that we are celebrating here today with the Beyond 2022 project so exciting. It's particularly exciting for me because, before I was a member of the Making Ireland research theme, and so I was around the table when Peter Crooks, Séamus Lawless, and a few others first floated the idea of a virtual reconstruction of the lost archive. The short period between that first glimmer

of an idea—that moment of commencement, as it were—and today, much hard work has gone into imagining how we might bring Ireland's Public Record Office back to life by creating a 3D virtual reality model of the destroyed building and refilling its shelves with fully-searchable surviving documents and copies of the lost records, identified by the team in archives and libraries around the world. What is more, the idea the completed project should aim for the centenary of the Four Courts blaze in 2022, as a kind of capstone to the decade of centenaries, shows an intuitive grasp of the symbolic force of the archive in the life of a state. Indeed, this aspect of the project is given an added resonance in the context of Brexit, given the necessary involvement in *Beyond 2022* of the National Archives of the UK and the Public Record Officer of Northern Ireland, alongside our own National Archives, and the Irish Manuscript Commission.

I want to end where I began; when Derrida excavates the etymology of 'archive', he also reminds us that the 'arche' is 'the *place* from which we begin'. When the Public Records Office went up in flames in 1922, it was a *place* that burned. The idea of place, however, has been transformed profoundly in the ensuing century. Derrida's 'Archive Fever', written in 1995, is, as I mentioned a few minutes ago, occasioned by a reflection on the Freud archive in Vienna; by a *place*. However, at one point he also notes—in 1995, remember—that 'psychoanalysis would not have been what it was if E-mail [*sic*] had existed.' Looking back from the perspective of 23 years later, this was a moment of prescience. I don't know when you first started using email for work, but the first time I really remember using it was when organising a conference in 1992; Derrida is writing only three years later. And in the twenty-three years since, the idea that information has a *place* has been transformed more profoundly and utterly than in the preceding five centuries combined. A place is not necessarily any longer a physical location. And, of course, that is why Francis Blouin, for instance, writing in *PMLA* in 2004, would insist that we now live in a time when 'the archive itself is an intellectual problem, and a cultural artefact worthy of study.'³ The *Beyond 2022* project grasps that challenge; it is not simply about compiling a resource for

³ Francis X. Blouin Jr. 'History and Memory: The Problem of the Archive', *PMLA* 119:2 (2004).

future scholars, although it is that; it is also a way of asking what it means to have 'archive fever' in the twenty-first century.

So, for all of those reasons, it is my very great pleasure to welcome each and every one of you to Trinity, and to this launch event. It would be remiss of me not to acknowledge the support of the Irish Research Council, the ADAPT Centre, and the Making Ireland research theme. And I would especially like to welcome here today Jeff James, Keeper of the National Archives (UK); Michael Willis, Director of PRONI; John McDonough, Director of the National Archives; John McCafferty, Chair of the Irish Manuscripts Commission; Natalie Harrower, of the Digital Repository of Ireland; and Professor Lorna Hughes of the University of Glasgow, who is Chair of the Beyond 2022 Advisory Board; and, of course to Peter Crooks, Séamus Lawless, and all of the colleagues in History and the Library who have been guiding lights in bringing us to this point of commencement.