

Order from Chaos

Herbert Wood's *Guide of 1919* as the Key to the Virtual Record Treasury

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'When the history of Ireland in the past is taken into account, it is more to be wondered at that so much has survived from the chaotic conditions which prevailed in this country.'

—Herbert Wood, 1919

At the time of the 1922 fire, Ireland's chief archivist was Mr Herbert Wood (d. 1955), whose title was Deputy Keeper of the Public Records of Ireland. Wood retired from his post as Deputy Keeper after the destruction of the Record Treasury, but he continued his work on the records for Irish history for three more decades.

No one understood more fully the significance of the loss of the Record Treasury and the collections it held. In 1919, when still Assistant Deputy Keeper of the Public Records, Wood published a descriptive catalogue of Ireland's public records: *A Guide to the Records Deposited in the Public Record Office of Ireland*.

Wood's *Guide* is a precious resource, but it makes sobering reading. It lists over five thousand series of records, most of which were completely destroyed in 1922. As Wood himself noted in 1930, *'The tragedy of 1922 lies in the fact that the method of assembling the public records under one roof was the very means of making such a destruction possible'*.

Thanks to Wood's painstaking work, we are able to create a searchable and hierarchically-organised listing of the contents of the destroyed Record Treasury, which provides the spine of the reconstruction process. Wood's *Guide* reveals the internal archival organisation of the Public Record Office of Ireland, which arranged

¹ **Image:** Portrait of Herbert Wood from National Archives (Dublin), Mills Album (1914), courtesy of the Director of the National Archives.

its collections according to the various Departments of State (or other non-state institutions) that produced them. This provides a framework for the database that underlies Ireland's Virtual Record Treasury.

Beyond 2022 has assigned a unique identifying number to every series of records in the destroyed Record Treasury. For example, Wood's lists all records that were created by the Exchequer from the Middle Ages to the twentieth century under the section heading 'Court of Exchequer'. In the new database, 'E' stands for 'Exchequer'. Every series listed by Wood's in the section 'Court of Exchequer' now has a unique number beginning with the prefix 'E'. Similarly, the first element in the unique number for all the series of records produced by the Chief Secretary's Office is the prefix 'CSO'. The numbering system reflects the hierarchical organisation of the Public Record Office of Ireland. An example of an individual item within a very large collection is the entry for 'Documents in connection with title of lands of See of Killala, 1625-86'. Its unique number (ETC - 2 - 1 - 13 - 1 - 6). The number tells us precisely where the series fits within the vast 'Ecclesiastical and Testamentary Collection' (ETC) of records relating to the Church of Ireland.

The power of this is that it enables the project to connect information about a destroyed series to any substitute source, whether printed or manuscript, held in archives and libraries around the world today. The result is a little like an empty archive building, with every shelf numbered and labelled, just waiting for the records to be accessioned. The challenge of Beyond 2022 is to fill the empty shelves of Ireland's Virtual Record Treasury with information about the substitute sources.

Herbert Wood believed strongly in the importance of records, both for fledgling nations and states with long experience of record-keeping. In 1930, lecturing the Royal Historical Society on the public records of Ireland 'before and after 1922', he noted how new nations created after the first World War were drawing on the archives of older countries in order to provide themselves with a national memory:

'The feverish haste which urges on younger countries without records to gather together what they can about their country from the archives of other nations shows the importance [of public records]. Accordingly, the destruction of a great accumulation of records, by whatever means it has been caused, comes as a tremendous shock ... and the loss of the Irish public records will deprive the Irish historian of a field which has only partially been worked over.'

There is something prophetic about Herbert Wood's idea of overcoming the tremendous shock of archival destruction by gathering together material from other archives.

Beyond 2022 gathers together into a single database all the information it can from the archives and libraries in Ireland and internationally. Herbert Wood could not have envisaged this twenty-first century digital solution to the destruction of the public records of Ireland. But it is Wood's *Guide* that makes it possible to create an inventory of loss and survival from the disastrous fire of 1922.