

Charting the Future of the Past

**D.A. Chart, the first Deputy Keeper of Records,
Public Record Office of Northern Ireland (PRONI)¹**

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'It is possible for [a Record Office] to be merely a store, passively receiving such documents as come to it, or to become a means of gathering information and collating knowledge, of making access easy by lucid arrangement and the provision of well-planned indexes.'

— D.A. Chart, 1925



¹ **Image:** Portrait of D.A. Chart, from National Archives (Dublin), Mills Album (1914), courtesy of the Director of the National Archives of Ireland.

Creating any archive from scratch is an enormous feat of organization and imagination. Setting one up for the newly established Northern Ireland administration was an even greater challenge than usual. And doing so in the wake of the greatest catastrophe in Irish archival history required a very particular set of skills. Luckily, David Alfred Chart — the first Deputy Keeper of the Public Record Office of Northern Ireland, and a long-time employee of the Public Record Office of Ireland (Dublin) — was an extraordinarily able and determined public servant.

Early life and career at the PROI Dublin

A child of empire, D.A. Chart was born on 13 October 1878 when his father, also David, was serving as a Colour Sergeant with the 85th Regiment, King's (Shropshire) Light Infantry in Lucknow, India.² His mother, Mary Josephine (*née* Quigley), married her Colour Sergeant in Lucknow in 1876. Young David was the couple's second child; a daughter Clara died in infancy in 1877. He was baptized at All Saints (Anglican) church in Lucknow.

Chart's educational career at Kilkenny College, Queen's College Cork, Oxford and Trinity College Dublin,³ suggests that the family retired to, or were stationed in, Ireland. In the 1901 census Chart was living in a boarding house at Military Road in Cork, where he described his occupation as 'Classical Tutor, B.A.'. His first wife Lily Mc Cotter, fourteen years his senior, was the daughter of his landlady. Chart joined the civil service in 1902 as a Class I clerk, the couple were married at St Joseph's catholic chapel, Cork, in 1903.⁴

A transfer to the State Paper Office in 1906 brought Chart to Dublin Castle where he worked until 1912 when he crossed the river to join the staff of the PROI

² British India Office, Ecclesiastical Returns – births and baptisms. 1878, Vol: N-1-165, f. 29

³ Particulars concerning Mr D.A. Chart, Public Record Office of Ireland, 26 Nov. 1921 (D. A. Chart Personnel file, PRONI, FIN 72/7/26).

⁴ C.J. Woods, 'Chart, David Alfred' in the *Cambridge Dictionary of Irish Biography*.

at the Four Courts as Inspector of Historical Manuscripts.⁵ On arrival in Dublin the couple lived in Clontarf, later moving to the Rathmines,⁶ while both were appropriately respectable suburban addresses for a profession civil servant their unionist political and cultural identity separated them from Dublin's nationalist city centre.

His six years in the S.P.O. and ten years at the PROI in Dublin gave Chart a thorough grounding in the operations of a state archive. His capacity as an archivist and administrator was evident in 1909, with the introduction of the Old Age Pension. 'Much trouble was caused in making numerous searches' as the PROI was inundated with requests for access to the 1851 census to verify applicants' ages. The index to the households in the city of Dublin, which Chart compiled, was singled out for special praise in the Deputy Keeper's annual report of 1915 because it 'will save the Dublin Census Returns from much unnecessary wear, and will be extremely useful to genealogists, claimants for Old Age Pensions. Etc.'⁷

Chart was also familiar with the archive as a researcher, publishing three books on Irish history, often drawing on the same records he handled in his daily work. His university training as an economist came to the fore in articles which he published on organised labour, social conditions and agricultural production in Ireland. His publications during his time in Dublin include *The Story of Dublin* (1907), *Ireland from the Union to Catholic Emancipation* (1910) and *An Economic History of Ireland* (1920).

When war broke out in 1914 Chart was thirty-six year of age. He did not enlist in the military but, initially, volunteered as a munitions worker at the College of Science in Dublin. In May 1915 he joined the St. John's Ambulance Brigade as a

⁵ *Thom's Irish Who's Who: 1923*, (Dublin, 1923), p. 35.

⁶ Dublin Electoral Rolls, 1908, 1913.

⁷ *Forty-Seventh Report of the Deputy Keeper of the Public Records and Keeper of the State Papers in Ireland*, (Dublin, 1915), pp 7–8.

volunteer stretcher-bearer, returning to his former place of employment at Dublin Castle which had, by then, been converted into a Red Cross Hospital.⁸ Chart continued as a St John's Ambulance volunteer until January 1919, so along with the regular flow of wounded and recuperating troops arriving from the European front he would also have been involved in the fraught difficult and often dangerous missions conducted by the volunteer ambulance brigade amid the fighting in Dublin during the Easter Rising of 1916. The Rising had a further direct impact on Chart when the republicans took over the Four Courts and the premises of the PROI, closing down all business for the week of the rebellion. Presumably he shared his colleagues' relief when, after clearing up and re-shelving the records, it emerged that a single will was all that had been lost during the occupation. The ensuing revolutionary years made life in Dublin particularly difficult. Following the establishment of Northern Ireland in May 1921, Chart began seeking a transfer across the new border.

Career at PRONI

In November 1921, just at the formal transfer of power to the government in Belfast, he was called for an interview at the new Northern Ireland Ministry of Commerce. However the telegram arrived too late and he missed his chance. The delay may have been fortunate, writing to a Belfast colleague on 1 December 1921 he hoped that 'the bombs and bullets, which appear to be still prevalent' were not causing too much harassment.⁹

Within a few months Chart was 'on loan' from Dublin to the Northern Ireland Ministry of Finance, his transfer becoming permanent on 21 April 1922.¹⁰ The letter

⁸ British Army, British Red Cross Volunteers 1914–18.

⁹ Letter from Chart in Dublin to Duggan in Belfast, 1 Dec. 1921 (PRONI, FIN 72/7/26).

¹⁰ Letter from H. Wood, Deputy Keeper of the PROI Dublin, to Sir E. Clark, Head of the Civil Service, Northern Ireland, 13 Mar. 1922 (PRONI, FIN 72/7/26).

confirming the transfer was sent from the Public Record Office of Ireland at Upper Merrion Street, Dublin, *not* the archive's Record Treasury premises which, along with the Four Courts, had just been occupied by anti-Treaty forces.¹¹

The timing of Chart's departure from Dublin meant that he missed the outbreak of the Civil War, while his arrival in Belfast coincided with a gradual reduction in violence in the northern capital. However, he could not avoid the effects of the destruction of the PROI on 30 June 1922, an event that would dictate much of his future career.

From his first day in the Ministry of Finance, Chart managed to devote an hour or two to the work of the new Public Record Office of Northern Ireland. Perhaps his superiors saw this as a minor responsibility, but Chart had other ideas. In January 1925 he sent a carefully argued memo arguing that 'a salary of £200 be attached to the Deputy Keepership'. Ever the thorough administrator, he was clear that this should be backdated and be paid in addition to his current salary. Making the case for a modern, functioning archive, Chart wrote that:

A Record Office more than any other department is what it is made by its chief. It is possible for it to be merely a store, passively receiving such documents as come to it, or to become a means of gathering information and collating knowledge, of making access easy by lucid arrangement and the provision of well-planned indexes.¹²

Chart was persuasive: what had been an additional activity within the Ministry of Finance became a clearly defined role in the new administration. Reading the familiar tone of Chart's private letter to Duggan in December 1921, and more

¹¹ Letter from J.F. Morrissey, Assistant Deputy Keeper of the PROI Dublin, to Ministry of Finance, Northern Ireland, Donegall Square West, Belfast, 21 April 1922. Chart's transfer was effective from 1 April 1922 (PRONI, FIN 72/7/26).

¹² Memo, D.A. Chart to Mr Duggan, 21 Jan. 1925 (PRONI, FIN 72/7/26).

formal language of his official memo in January 1925, it is possible that he and Duggan were on friendly terms and had privately discussed the need to put PRONI on a more secure footing. There may have been an unofficial agreement as to which arguments would be most effective in securing the desired outcome.

At £200 per annum, Chart was very good value. His experience in the Record Office in Dublin taught him how to unify disparate records from the Medieval, Early Modern and more recent periods into a coherent archive; how to take account of changing administrative practices over time; and how to manage the annual deposits of records from current government departments and agencies. Northern Ireland's brand new archive was effectively a blank slate where Chart could initiate the best archival practices and begin to repair the loss of Ulster records in the destruction of the Four Courts and PROI in Dublin.

Under his direction PRONI actively sought out historical records from municipal and county councils, large institutions and small legal firms. Getting out into the countryside, Chart made personal contact with landowners and members of the nobility, encouraging them to deposit copies of their family and land records with his growing archive.¹³ The networking policy which he initiated remained a major asset to PRONI, bearing fruit beyond his own retirement in 1950.¹⁴

He was appointed to oversee the Department for the Preservation of Ancient Monuments in Northern Ireland, publishing a survey of antiquities in 1940.

¹³ C.J. Woods, 'Chart, David Alfred', *Cambridge Dictionary of Irish Biography*.

¹⁴ Gerry Slater, 'Networking for co-operation: the experience of the Public Record Office of Northern Ireland', *Journal of the Society of Archivists*, 1 (2001), 5–16; Woods, 'Chart, David Alfred', *Cambridge Dictionary of Irish Biography*.

Extracurricular Activities

Chart always made time for extracurricular activities. In addition to his academic writing, while in Dublin he regularly attended talks at the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland.¹⁵ His lectures to the Social and Statistical Inquiry Society of Ireland on the conditions of the urban poor were published as *The General Strike as a Labour Weapon* (1912) and *Unskilled Labour in Dublin: its housing and living conditions* (1913). He was active on the council of the Housing and Town Planning Association, was an examiner in Economics and Industrial History for the Intermediate Education Board, became a member of the Royal Irish Academy in 1913 and joined the Medical Research Committee in 1919, serving as its treasurer in 1920.¹⁶

On moving north, he joined the Belfast Literary Society where he was remembered as a cultured, witty but modest contributor. In November 1929 he gave the Presidential Address on 'geographical poetry', a term he apparently coined to describe poetic responses to landscape.¹⁷ Notes for another paper reveal Chart's musical side. His topic, 'Songs of occupation', dealt with traditional farming songs and ballads associated with domestic work, or hunting etc. It was amply illustrated with (presumably extracts from) twenty-seven such songs, each listed with the performer's name. A fine singer himself, and described as 'a massive figure',¹⁸ we can picture D.A. Chart's vigorous renditions of 'Rio Grande', 'The Volga Boat Song' and 'Marching through Georgia'.¹⁹ His performance of 'Tramp, Tramp, Tramp' may have raised some eye-brows in genteel post-partition Belfast— this American music

¹⁵ Minutes of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland, 1922.

¹⁶ *Thom's Irish Who's Who: 1923*, p. 35; Particulars concerning Mr D.A. Chart, Public Record Office of Ireland, 26 Nov. 1921 (PRONI, FIN 72/7/26).

¹⁷ Chart papers, PRONI, D 1246/2B.

¹⁸ *Irish Times*, 21 Dec 1960, p. 5.

¹⁹ Chart papers, PRONI, D 1246 / 2B.

hall number was more widely known as the tune to the nationalist rallying song 'God Save Ireland'.²⁰

He served as chairman of the Ulster Society for Irish Historical Studies and was a governor of the Linen Hall Library in Belfast.²¹ Chart's papers in PRONI also record his membership of the Belfast Centre of Irish P.E.N., an international group of writers promoting free speech.²² It is perhaps fitting then that his talks reached a wider audience. In the later 1940s he gave radio talks on BBC Northern Ireland on Ulster's economic history and the monastic ruins on Devenish Island.²³

Chart had married Lily McCotter in Cork in 1903. When she died in 1935 he remarried in 1941 in Belfast to Florence Blair. Neither marriage produced children. Chart died at his home in Cambourne Park, Belfast, on 9 December 1960. In the disparate archival matter which he left behind, David Chart comes across as an active and enthusiastic man, committed to the preservation and dissemination of knowledge, and passionate about the success of the new Public Record Office of Northern Ireland. His research into living conditions among Dublin's tenement families showed his concern for those less fortunate than himself. His public talks, radio broadcasts and his involvement in promoting freedom of speech portray a strong sense of civic responsibility. PRONI was indeed fortunate to have such a character at the helm in those crucial early years.

²⁰ Georges D. Zimmermann, *Songs of Irish Rebellion: Irish political street ballads and rebel songs, 1780–1900* (Dublin, 1967), p. 266.

²¹ *Irish Times* obituary, 13 Dec. 1960, p. 7.

²² Irish P.E.N., Belfast Centre, List of Members 1955–6 (PRONI, D1246/1A). Chart's occupation is listed as 'Historian'.

²³ D.A. Chart, *A Short History of Northern Ireland* (Belfast, 1927), p. 1; Chart Papers, PRONI, D1246/2A.