No Good Deed Goes Unpunished
The Preservation and Destruction of the Christ Church Cathedral Deeds
Stuart Kinsella

‘Many charters were left scarcely legible, and particularly a foundation charter of King Henry II ... could not by any means be read; the prior applied to the Barons of the Exchequer to enroll such of their deeds as were not wholly destroyed, and leave was accordingly given’

The Christ Church deeds were the oldest collection of material in the Public Record Office of Ireland. During the restoration of Christ Church in the 1870s, the cathedral authorities felt it wise to deposit the cathedral’s vast collection of medieval and early modern materials for safe keeping in the newly minted Public Record Office of Ireland, established in 1867, unaware, of course, that the materials would survive unscathed for only four decades.¹ To the immense relief of posterity, a then junior civil servant in the office of the deputy keeper, was assigned to produce a calendar of the cathedral records, summarising them into English mostly from Latin and a few from French. Michael J. McEnery was his name, who began work in 1883, and was almost complete by 1884. He published them as appendices to the reports of the deputy keeper in 1888, 1891, 1892, with an index in 1895 up to the year 1602. Fortunately, a calendar of material from 1605-1699, not considered important enough to publish at the time, survived the 1922 fire, and in 2000, Raymond Refaussé, then Church of Ireland librarian and archivist, as part of a series of records being published as part of a larger cathedral history project, edited these five gathering them together into the single *Christ Church deeds* volume which is so useful today.²

The preservation of archival records went hand-in-glove with an intellectual curiosity as to the origins of these collections and how they worked, as well as a knack for preserving the material themselves. While the initial concern was for preserving documents determining legal title to property,³ and indeed manuscripts of liturgical relevance,⁴ by the seventeenth and eighteenth-centuries, this had spilt over into a collection of a library of books of a theological or historical nature,⁵ as well as the preservation and maintenance of a working music library for the choir.⁶ While, McEnery & Refaussé were not the first archivists to tend to the cathedral deeds, and hopefully will not be the last to consider them, it is worth noting some of those responsible for the recurring task of transcribing these records from oblivion, of whom three feature particularly, namely: Thomas Fich (d.1518), an Augustinian sub-prior; Thomas Howell, a lay chapter clerk (1633-d.1666) and Canon John Lyon (1710-90), a prebendary of St Patrick’s cathedral. Each of these figures went to extraordinary lengths to preserve cathedral records – in Fich and Lyon’s cases, involved coordinating groups of transcribers – and in each century produced new
volumes: the Liber Albus, the Great Parchment book and the Registrum Novum respectively.⁷

Christ Church has a sustained record of administrative activity which is matched by few institutions in Ireland, particularly when one considers that the earliest records are Anglo-Norman versions of earlier Viking and Irish records. The earliest and most important deed in the collection is no. 364c dated to 6 March, 3 John (around 1200, but the date is uncertain⁸), in which King John confirmed to Holy Trinity all its lands granted before and after the arrival of the English, as confirmed by Archbishop Laurence O’Toole. The early donors such as ‘Cithuric, son of Absolea’, ‘Macdeardan Macduba’; ‘Donagh, son of Donald Grossus’, ‘Enad, son of Donald, King of Leinster’ are just recognisable, but thankfully have benefited greatly not only from the survival of a clearer list,⁹ but also of more than a century of scholarly ministrations.¹⁰

Although hardly peaceful, the arrival of the Anglo-Normans in Ireland took effect rather more like a management-takeover than a full scale invasion.¹¹ Senior clergy were gradually replaced with Anglo-Norman appointees, and at Christ Church there are identifiably Irish or Viking names that survived on the ecclesiastical staff into the late 12th-century,¹² all of which must have helped the new administration consolidate and document the lands already controlled by the church. While it is known that the original religious and liturgical volumes (probably following the Roman-Germanic pontifical, brought from Cologne)¹³ would have to have been replaced over time due to use,¹⁴ little is known of how these legal property deeds were preserved.

Despite fire burning the cathedral and its tower in 1283,¹⁵ ruin collapsing the tower in 1316,¹⁶ and pestilence wracked the land with plague in the mid-fourteenth-century,¹⁷ it was tempest in 1461 that provided historians with the first clue of how the archives were stored. ‘Several coffers’ were broken by stones when a storm blew in the east window, which amongst other valuables contained ‘also the writings and muniments of the church … many charters were left scarcely legible, and particularly a foundation charter of King Henry II … could not by any means be read; the prior
applied to the Barons of the Exchequer to enroll such of their deeds as were not wholly destroyed, and leave was accordingly given.'

It is into this aftermath, that the Oxford-educated Thomas Fich first appears as an Augustinian in 1467, where he was to remain until his death in 1518. While Fich appears to have been responsible for the preservation of the book of obits, he is perhaps better known for rescuing the cathedral’s legal documents. Following his appointment as sub-prior in 1505, a group of between 17-20 scribes from around the city began work transcribing the cathedral deeds into a new white vellum bound register, the Liber Albus, some even copying old notarial marks of mid-fifteenth-century predecessors. In the end a total of 43 scribes can be detected in the completed volume, many of them identifiable by name, a process of detection which will require building on previous work of palaeographic comparison.

The conversion of the Augustinian cathedral priory to a secular cathedral with a dean and chapter combined with the collapse of the cathedral nave in 1562, which rendered the tower unstable until the early seventeenth-century, can have done little to promote a sense of archival stability. It was under Jonas Wheeler, dean (1595-1618) and bishop of Ossory (1613-40) that the cathedral was restored physically and administratively. He saw the reconstruction of the tower by Humphrey Farnham, and his son-in-law, and successor as dean, Randolph Barlow (later archbishop of Tuam), landed the coup of renting out the old monastic buildings on a 1000-year lease to the crown to house the four judicial courts. Around 1600, Wheeler undertook a survey of cathedral leases which survives as the little register or ‘Parvum Registrum’. In annotating this volume the Welsh arrival, Thomas Howell, first began taking stock of cathedral property, but proving unsatisfactory, he began his own abstract of leases drawn from material held in the chapter room, then still occupying the vaulted space south of the transept. His thoroughness included not only cathedral but episcopal lands too, focussing particularly on lease expiry dates. The result was the ‘Great Parchment Book’, completed in 1644. More importantly, the fact that he retained his role as chapter clerk through the turbulent years of the 1640s and 1650s when the cathedral was used by independent congregations, meant that he was invaluable in re-establishing the cathedral’s administrative structures following the Restoration of Charles II, enhanced by his role as a notary public.
Following the death of this ‘old servant’ of the church in 1666, he was succeeded by Lieutenant Gilbart Nicholson, who managed the remarkable achievement of acquiring the positions of chapter clerk, registrar, verger and sexton of the cathedral all four of which he held until his resignation in May 1697.\textsuperscript{26} His timing may well have been to coincide with the move of the chapter house from its medieval home of over 600 years, to the south aisle of the nave, formerly used as the Trinity chapel of the guild of merchants which, blocked by a solid wall since 1570 from the rest of the nave, made a suitably enclosed chapter room. It was into this wooden-panelled eighteenth-century interior, complete with a modern reference library and a clock, that Canon John Lyon, a colleague of Swift’s would begin his interest in the cathedral archives.\textsuperscript{27} While the cathedrals’ archival material was still relevant to the cathedral’s economic well-being, in the 18th century, it was acquiring the additional romantic allure of antiquity.

The 1730s appears to have been somewhat of an intellectual renaissance at Christ Church with the appointment in quick succession of a new precentor in 1727, chancellor in 1728 and dean in 1731.\textsuperscript{28} Respectively, these were Louis Saurin, an Oxford-educated French Huguenot; Patrick Delaney, a prolific writer and professor of oratory and history at Trinity College; and Charles Cobbe of Newbridge House, an aristocratic Oxford-educated former chaplain to the lord lieutenant, who had already held bishoprics of Killalla and Dromore before taking that of Kildare, traditionally held with the deanery of Christ Church. In such circles, John Lyon needed little encouragement to immerse himself in Christ Church’s historical documents, and by 1738 he was paid £20 ‘for his Transcribing in a fair Book the Records of this Church’.\textsuperscript{29} In 1750, he was paid 20 Guineas for his transcriptions,\textsuperscript{30} and in 1767, 17 years later he was paid £150 for ‘Transcribing and Digesting the Records.’\textsuperscript{31}

During these thirty years and more, his great achievement was the production of a new register, the ‘Registrum Novum’, three volumes of transcripts of the most important of the cathedral documents. He did not work alone, but garnered the assistance of three talented cathedral canons: John Owen was the son of a saddler but excelled at Trinity where he was a scholar, and earned a BA, BD and DD. After clerical forays to Derry, he held the prebendary of St Michael’s (1736-46) and St John’s (1746-60) at Christ Church, as well as positions at St Patrick’s while also being
precentor of Kildare (1737-60) and dean of Clonmacnoise (1742-60). William Fletcher’s career was similarly pluralistic; a graduate of New College, Oxford, he became prebendary of St Michael’s at Christ Church (1747-9), and later prebendary of Tymothan at St Patrick’s cathedral (1750-71), while holding a collection of titles in Kildare including the deanery (1765-71).  

Orchard-born Isaac Mann, was also a scholar of TCD where he acquired a BA, MA, BD and DD. He was chaplain at Dublin castle (1741-51), then precentor of Christ Church (1749-72), and eventually consecrated bishop of Cork and Ross (1772-88). It is clear that despite a plethora of clerical roles, each (although Mann less so) took great care in their responsibilities to transcribe these documents, thus preserving the archives for generations to come. 

The tradition must have made an impression on the chapter, because in 1793, three years after Lyon’s, death they ‘appointed a committee to inspect the state of the records of the church’.

Image: South view of Christ Church, Dublin
by George Gratton c. 1810, watercolour Victoria & Albert Museum, London
By the 1810s, the busy world of the old cathedral must have felt very far away. The Four Courts had moved to the quays in 1796, leaving the old buildings derelict and unused, while the Wide Streets Commissioners had begun tearing down much of the fabric of the medieval city, which coincided with the visit of George IV in 1821, involved remodelling Skinners’ Row, later renamed Christchurch Place. Artists and archivists could sense the passing of an era. William Monck Mason attempted the publication of a history of Christ Church, and one view by George Grattan, which captured the dilapidation, was very likely intended as an illustration. It was timely that the Irish Record Commission was established about this time to enquire as to the state of archives in the country, and we are left with a very full report of the contents of the cathedral library. The contents were reported as: ‘Some thousands of original Records, mostly in Latin and the Norman Court Hand, and chiefly relating to the Possessions and Privileges of the Deans and Chapter, of their predecessors the Prior and Convent of the Holy Trinity. Various Statutes and Ordinances, Royal and Private Grants, Charters, Kings Letters, inquisitions, Wills, Rolls of ancient Popal [sic] Bulls and Indulgencies. The oldest are, a Charter of Henry II. In 1172, and two Bulls of Pope Urban in 1187.’ The commissioners gave further detail as to the contents and also noted the records as ‘In good Preservation, in general; numbers, and in Bundles, or on Files, and kept in Oak Presses.’ Although they observed: ‘There is no general Index or Catalogue’, they concluded that ‘There is a great fund of Antiquarian information in this Repository’.37

Some work was carried out on the ‘Novum Registrum’ in 1851-2 by the barrister, William Annesley Mayne, whose views on the architecture of Christ Church in its mid-nineteenth-century state, were decidedly unsympathetic, but this was more or less the condition of the archives by the time dismantling work began in preparation for the restoration of the cathedral by George Edmund Street in the 1870s. Finding the archives a new home was a priority, and so it was that they were moved in 1872 to the newly opened, and conveniently neighbourly, Public Record Office of Ireland.
In the smouldering aftermath of 1922, McEnery’s calendar of the Christ Church deeds must have seemed heaven-sent in comparison to the amnesia forced on many other institutions and indeed the nation. Together with the 17th-century material that has survived, the single volume of the deeds edited by McEnery and Refaussé provides an invaluable framework from which not only to look back through history at the cathedral’s archival tradition, but to explore new ways in which that collection can be researched, utilised and reconstructed and restored.


*Footnotes*

7 Dublin, Representative Church Body Library, C6 1.2 (Liber Albus, early 16th century containing copies of documents 1186-1585); Dublin, National Archives of Ireland, M 2534 [original] & RCBL C.6.1.17.2-4, category 10 [copy] (Great Parchment Book, notes of leases by the dean and chapter and archbishop, 1577-1644) and RCBL C6.1.6.1 (1172-1325); 2 (1328-1499) & 3 1501-1709 & index.


11 For example, F.X. Martin, ‘Ireland in the time of St Bernard, St Malachy, St Laurence O’Toole’, *Seanchas Ard Mhacha: Journal of the Armagh Diocesan Historical Society*, xv, 1 (1992), 1-35 and F.X. Martin, ‘Chapter II. Diarmait Mac Murchada and the coming of the

12 *The book of obits and martyrology of the cathedral church of the Holy Trinity, commonly called Christ Church, Dublin*, ed. J.C. Crosthwaite (Dublin: Irish Archaeological Society: 1844), the obits of which were reprinted in *The registers of Christ Church cathedral, Dublin*, ed. Raymond Refaussé & Colm Lennon (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1998), 37-86, such as 71 (Gelalius and Edanus), 73 (Patricus), 74 (Audoenus), 77 (Kellagh and Cristinus (also on p. 79), Aubrey Gwynn, ‘Archbishop John Cumin’, *Reportorium Novum*, i, 2 (1956), 285-310:, 307 suggests the name represents Gille Críost), 80 (Gigred, Odmell and Moroc).


15 For example, *Annals of St Mary’s*, ii, 290 & 318-319.

16 For example, *The annals of Ireland by Friar John Clyn ... and Thady Dowling ...* ed. Richard Butler (Dublin: Irish Archaeological Society, 1849), p. 20. (Dowling)


Courts Press for the National Archives of Ireland, 2002), pp 333-4 from memoranda roll 2-3
Richard III m. 7d. (RC 8/42 pp 137-43).
24 Dublin, Representative Church Body Library, C6/1/3 (A register of 15th & 16th century leases made by the prior and later dean and chapter and the vicars choral).
25 Raymond Gillespie, Thomas Howell and his friends: serving Christ Church cathedral, Dublin, 1570-1700 (Dublin: Friends of Christ Church Cathedral, 1997).
26 Dublin, RCBL, C6.1.7.3 (Christ Church Chapter Acts), 90 (Monday 3 May 1697); 92 (Wednesday 26 May 1697).
28 http://tiac.eu/cccdb-no1/heritage/architecture/architects/clergy.html depicts a timeline of members of the cathedral clergy.
29 Dublin, RCB C6/1/8/5 (Christ Church Chapter Acts, copy), 151. (Monday 4 December 1738).
30 RCB C6/1/7/6, 64). (If not 7, then 8, which is the copy). (Thursday 29 March 1750)
31 RCB C6/1/7/6 (Christ Church Chapter Acts), 224-5 (Monday 7 December 1767).
32 J.B. Leslie & W.J.R. Wallace (ed.), Clergy of Dublin and Glendalough (Dundalk: Ulster Historical Foundation & Diocesan Councils of Dublin and Glendalough, 2001), 633 (William Fletcher); 949-50 (John Owen); 871-2 (Isaac Mann).
34 RCB C6/1/7/8 (Christ Church Chapter Acts), 11 (Monday 9 December 1793).
35 Dublin, Trinity College, MS 10529-30 (Manuscript draft of William Monck Mason’s unpublished ‘History of the cathedral of the Holy Trinity, commonly called Christ Church Dublin, from its foundation to the year 1809’, intended as a companion to Monck Mason’s History of St. Patrick’s Cathedral (1819), c.1820-1830 in two portfolios: I: draft of the unpublished history of Christchurch; II: collection of notes and extracts relating to Christ Church. Both formerly Phillipps 24204, purchased as part of lot 347 at Christie’s London, 26 June 1991.
37 Irish Record Commission, Reports from the Commissioners appointed by His Majesty to execute the measures recommended in an address of the House of Commons respecting the public records of Ireland: with supplements and appendixes: 1810-1815 (London: House of Commons, Irish Record Commission, 1819), 442 at https://archive.org/stream/pp1312056-2001#page/n500/