



Decade of Centenaries grant report

Recipient name:	Darach MacDonald
Amount and year awarded:	€8,976 in 2022
Title of project:	On Edge: Chaos, Confusion and Change in Four Cross-border Parishes 1921-1925

Summary of project:

This project examines the immediate impacts of partition on the district formerly covered by the Clones Poor Law Union. Almost equally divided between the counties of Fermanagh and Monaghan, the Clones Union encompassed four neighbourhood parishes, all straddling the new frontier to greater or lesser degrees. The Clones Union was split up by partition in 1921 and subsequently abolished in the realignment of local government on both sides of the border in 1923-24, yet the constituent parish communities provided a multi-layered spectrum of the new reality on both sides of a new frontier. Through local newspaper accounts and other secondary and primary sources, the project uncovers evidence of the human and community impact of the new border on a formerly prosperous and tightly knit community. It follows, almost at a microscopic level, the evolution of a border where none had existed previously. It reveals the bitter division and bloodshed that threatened to erupt into an island-wide civil war, the deep sense of betrayal among huge local minority populations in both of the new states, the growing dichotomy of Ulster Protestant loyalists on both sides of the new border, the total disruption of communications infrastructure, the imposition by Dublin of a Customs frontier even before the Border was formally settled under the Treaty provisions, and the physical challenges of building an international boundary with newly created and divergent local institutions. Nowhere was this more apparent than in the Clones district, which was closely scrutinised on the arrival of the Boundary Commission in 1925. The shelving of its recommendations for transfer of territory on both sides of the border meant that some of the most glaring anomalies of partition it sought to rectify or ameliorate, have remained to this day.



Objectives of the project:

To provide an on-the-spot narrative of the creation of the Irish border and a social history of partition using contemporary accounts from all sides. The project addressed some glaring omissions and



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misconceptions in the history of partition by disclosing contemporaneous accounts of tremendous change in a pivotal district during the tumultuous period of conflict and division. The ultimate objective is to publish a book on the outcomes of my research, and provide source material for articles, talks and lectures about partition as we conclude its long, drawn-out centenary in 2025.

Methodology used in conducting the research:

The research project was mostly based on historical research of contemporaneous records contained in the local press. My perusal of the files of local newspapers provided a variety of windows into the sequence of events, the shifts of opinions and changing attitudes on both sides of the border, and within each side's majority and minority populations. The newspapers studied were the unionist-leaning Northern Standard (Monaghan) and Impartial (Enniskillen), as well as the nationalist Fermanagh Herald (Enniskillen) and the Anglo-Celt (Cavan). The transformation of a relatively homogenous community into divergent camps and states is gauged through news of current events, courts and council reports, as well as the observations of local correspondents on the ground, their editors and readers and all the anecdotal stories and rumours circulating in the district. The accounts provided by these newspaper records are supplemented by retrospective accounts published in biographical and historical accounts; archive material including archive testimonies in the Bureau of Military History; and personal papers filed in PRONI and other institutions.

Findings of research and milestones achieved:

While I underestimated the scale of my project and the time needed to bring it to a satisfactory conclusion, my research has provided historical material to fill a glaring gap in the historical narrative of state formation on both sides of the border during the years 1921 to 1925. It does so by addressing the fate of minority communities and the sequential disruption of local economies, administrative life and social interaction in one specific location. This will focus attention on the human and social impact of partition during those early years, rather than merely political. Most pertinently, perhaps, it gauges the level of trauma in the conflicts of identity, caused by forces beyond the control of local people or their institutions, by charting changes through the ebb and flow of hope and despair during chaotic times of upheaval and political estrangement. The outcomes of my research will now form the basis of a book to be completed for publication in 2025 marking the centenary of the tripartite Anglo-Irish agreement enacted in the Ireland (Confirmation of Agreement) Act of December 1925.

Dissemination of the project outcomes:

A promotion and marketing campaign for the book will commence at the appropriate time giving all due recognition to the Royal Irish Academy for its support of the research project.

Published work/plans:

Colmcille Press, Derry, has already expressed strong interest in publishing the book, and the Clogher Historical Society is currently considering coming on board as a joint publisher.



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Lectures given/outreach activities:

I have been actively engaged in delivering lectures and workshops based on my research over the past year. Most recently, I have completed a series of four workshops commissioned by the County Armagh Community Development (CACD) organisation, a cross-community body under the aegis of the County Armagh Grand Orange Lodge. This series of workshops on 'Partition and the Border' also involved members of the Clones Family Resources Centre (FRC) and involved sessions in Clones and Portadown.

Media coverage:

All avenues of publicity will be used to promote the planned book.

Plans for continued communication of the project's results:

A book on the subject, plus publicity coverage and lectures/workshops.

Plans for furthering the project:

I am working on a final deadline for September 1924 for the writing and editing of the project when I am due to take up a position under the Royal Literary Fellowship scheme –

<https://www.rlf.org.uk/education/rlffellowshipscheme/>

How the bursary enhanced professional development:

The bursary allowed me the time and resources to undertake a huge and laborious project of research into local newspaper archives and other resources in many locations (Clones, Enniskillen, Dublin, Belfast, London). It honed my abilities in being able to cross-reference pivotal developments to achieve a more varied and balanced perspective of events and developments that had tremendous impact on disparate communities and individuals.