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Setting the Irish State Table

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Setting the Irish state table

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Abstract

This year Ireland celebrates the centenary of the Easter rebellion of 1916, the event which is generally regarded as having led to Ireland's independence six years later. Drawing on Irish government archives, this essay presents the beginnings of Irish state hospitality in the 1920s the emergence of diplomatic dining in the 1930s hosted by the Irish head of state and the first attempts to establish inventories of state owned furniture abroad. The essay then discusses how the Department of External Affairs set out to acquire a dinner service for official entertainment by the Minister of External Affairs as a showcase of Irish manufacture, ultimately establishing the material culture of the Irish state table which remains to this day.

Introduction

Hosting a formal banquet for a visiting head of state is a key feature in the statecraft of international relations. Food is the societal common denominator that links all human beings, regardless of culture.¹ When world leaders publicly share a meal, that meal is laden with symbolism, illuminating each diner's position in social networks and social systems.² The public nature of the meal signifies status and symbolic kinship and that guest and host are on par in terms of their personal or official attributes.³

Much of the theory and empirical research on the historiography of food and power at medieval courts through to the eighteenth century has focused on absolutist courts with powerful monarchs and a wealthy court life.⁴ Some of the most sumptuous banquets recorded during the Italian

Renaissance took place in the smaller states that, conscious of their vulnerability due to their small size set out to establish relationships as a means of survival.⁵ Elite dining preferences denoted a conscious way of behaving with the intended consequence of setting an individual or group apart from others.⁶ This is particularly evident in the ceremony, etiquette and table manners imposed on his court by King Louis XIV which was better known for its gargantuan quantities of food and culinary excess⁷ and where the monarch's eating habits were characterised by gluttony rather than refinement.⁸

After the late eighteenth century, the role of the absolute courts was transformed by the industrial, agricultural and political revolutions across Europe and European kings and emperors either disappeared or remained on as constitutional monarchs. With the disintegration of absolute courts the historian's interest in stately banquets has diminished despite the emergence of new loci of power such as the presidential houses of France and the United States or international organisations such as the European Union which remain relatively unexplored in terms of the role of food and powerplays in their operation.⁹ That is not to say that no academic commentary exists. There is a growing body of academic research on the role of food within modern power structures. This is evident in work such as the research on European courts after 1789,¹⁰ the analysis of the foodways of the Belgian court,¹¹ the Nobel banquets in Sweden,¹² state dining in Britain,¹³ in France since the time of the 3rd Republic¹⁴ and at the White House.¹⁵ Political figures such as Charles Maurice de Talleyrand-Périgord¹⁶ and Winston Churchill,¹⁷ considered to have used the soft power of dining for exercising their political and diplomatic skills around the table, have also been the subject of further study in the nexus between food and power. More recently, the link between food and international relations has emerged in the fields of culinary diplomacy,¹⁸ gastrodiploamacy,¹⁹ political food culture²⁰ and the role of the meal in political life.²¹

It is within this context that the present research project on Irish state dining is positioned. It is a contribution to research into the role of food and dining in modern power structures. Furthermore, while the political, economic and social history of 20th century Ireland is well documented, the culinary history of the period remains, for the most part, unwritten. When the topic of food is explored in Irish historiography, the focus tends to be on the consequences of the Great Irish Famine (1845–49) which left the country ‘socially and emotionally scarred for well over a century’.²² One of the aims of this research project therefore is to contribute to the research on Irish culinary heritage and to add to the contemporary body of work on Ireland’s culinary past which is unearthing a story of a more nuanced culinary heritage than has previously been understood. This is clearly demonstrated in the research on gastronomy in Irish literature and culture,²³ gastro-topography,²⁴ Irish culinary manuscripts²⁵ and French culinary influence in eighteenth and nineteenth century Ireland.²⁶

The research project begins in 1922 when, after nearly eight centuries of British rule, the Irish Free State emerged as a new constitutional entity and entered the international political landscape of the 1920s seeking recognition of its status and charged with the task of developing international relations with other nations.

Sources and Methodology

The presented research is interdisciplinary but based primarily on archival research. The primary resources are the archives of the Irish government, in particular the Department of External Affairs, located at the National Archives of Ireland in Dublin. The secondary resources consulted range from books, peer reviewed articles, journals and print media within disparate disciplines such as material culture, food history, art history, sociology and gastronomy

The quality of the documents consulted has been assessed for validity and reliability using Scott's four criteria for documentary evidence: authenticity, credibility, representativeness and meaning.²⁷ Authenticity refers to whether the document is an original or reliable copy, by or on behalf of a particular person. Credibility measures the standpoint of the producer or author for sincerity and accuracy. Representativeness considers whether the documents are typical of those from which they are drawn. Meaning concerns the extent to which it is possible to read the content and how it will be interpreted.²⁸ The government files cited in the course of this piece have been authenticated as being those of the relevant government departments to which they pertain, the content has been examined for credibility and found to be free from distortion, they are representative of the larger pool of Irish government archives from which they are drawn. The content is in English, and for the most part been generated in typeset format making it easy to read.

The findings are interpreted and presented within the framework explored by Webb and Brien.²⁹ The methodological framework is not set in advance but rather determined by the needs of the project. According to the authors, the researcher is likely to function like Brady's bowerbird:³⁰

“... a little like a bowerbird that picks out the blue things and leaves all the other colours. ... This bowerbird researching requires its own skill. The skill to locate quickly, sort through, and accurately select all the blue pieces. It is also the skill of knowing where to look, where to find the blue pieces in the first place. ... the writer needs to be able to work quickly, to know the questions to ask and to be able to isolate the essence.”

In other words, a bowerbird researcher is capable of drawing data and ideas together from different sources and combining them in a manner which provides ‘a fresh way of understanding those points of connections and their wider implications and applications’.³¹ Webb and Brien expound on this stating that another way to describe this approach comes from anthropologist Levi-Strauss’ use of

the term *bricoleur*³² (handyman) as a research method. The *bricoleur's* skill lies in drawing from a toolkit of research practice, in other words drawing on multiple methodologies from within a range of disciplines in combination or at different times. While this may appear haphazard, the approach is grounded in the careful investigation of research methodologies and their functions. They point to the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu as a model of the successful researcher who never simply obeyed a paradigm's logic and who insisted 'you get what you can where you can'.³³ The methodology does not direct the research or practice, rather the 'practice directs the bricoleur-as-bowerbird's selection of method' thus contributing to improved practice and innovation as well as 'generating new knowledge about discourses on creativity as well as areas such as social formation and historical narrative.'³⁴

Material Culture

Material culture is the common term given to the inanimate items which people encounter, interact with and use throughout their lives.³⁵ The study of material culture is a means by which to acknowledge the visual or tactile dimensions of history³⁶ through the examination of these items. Although they may range vastly in size from small items such as a cup, key or a pen through to large complex objects such as a car, shopping centre or computer, the term material culture traditionally refers to small portable objects which are perceptible by touch.³⁷ The study of material culture is concerned with the uses made of these items and enables scholars to consider how culture is transmitted, received and produced.³⁸

The Irish Free State 1922-1939

From the Anglo-Irish Treaty of December 1921 the twenty-six counties of southern Ireland were recreated as the Irish Free State in December 1922. The Irish Free State was a self-governing dominion of the British Commonwealth. Despite membership of the Commonwealth and the

League of Nations, the newly formed state had little standing in the eyes of the international community. With no precursor department left over from the British administration, the Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA) was created. Its primary focus was the official recognition of the Irish Free State, the development of Irish foreign policy and the establishment of its diplomatic service.

The Irish state table, in the context outlined above, was yet to be established. Court cooking in Dublin prior to 1922 was by the Vice-Regent court,³⁹ the Vice Regent being the representative of the British monarch in Ireland.⁴⁰ Moreover, the Department of Foreign Affairs, renamed the Department of External Affairs (DEA) in 1922, was yet to form reciprocal diplomatic representation with other states, a standard feature of diplomatic relations and which comprises a series of well established protocols, chief amongst them the traditional state banquets in honour of visiting heads of states and/or their representatives. Considering that during the first years of its inception, Irish leaders were dealing with the aftermath of civil war coupled with the fact that a sizeable portion of the population contested its legitimacy, entertaining foreign dignitaries was, perhaps understandably, not always at the forefront of state matters.⁴¹

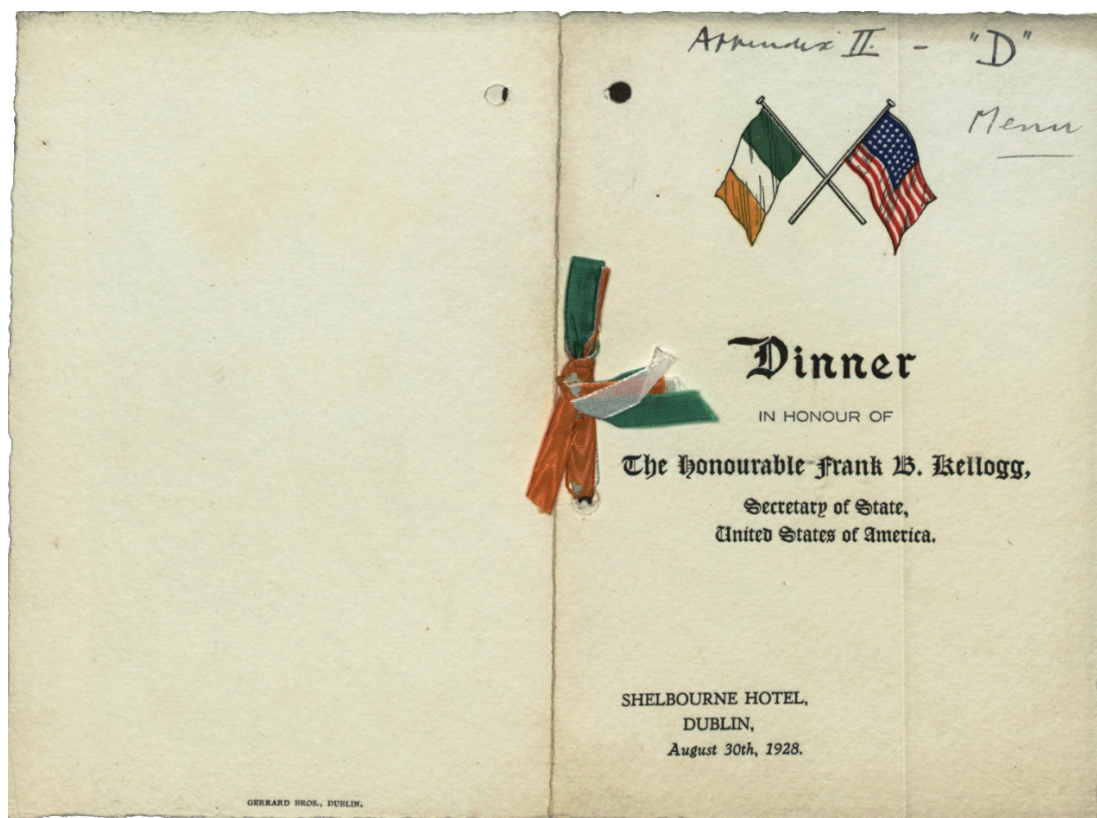
The first official visit to the Irish Free State took place in 1928. The American Secretary of State, Frank B. Kellogg visited Ireland in August 1928 and a state dinner was held in his honour at the Shelbourne Hotel.⁴² Located on Stephen's Green on the south side of Dublin city, the Shelbourne was a fashionable and high-end hotel. Conveniently placed in the centre of the city and close to government buildings, it was by far the most popular hotel for distinguished international visitors during the 1920s and 30s.⁴³

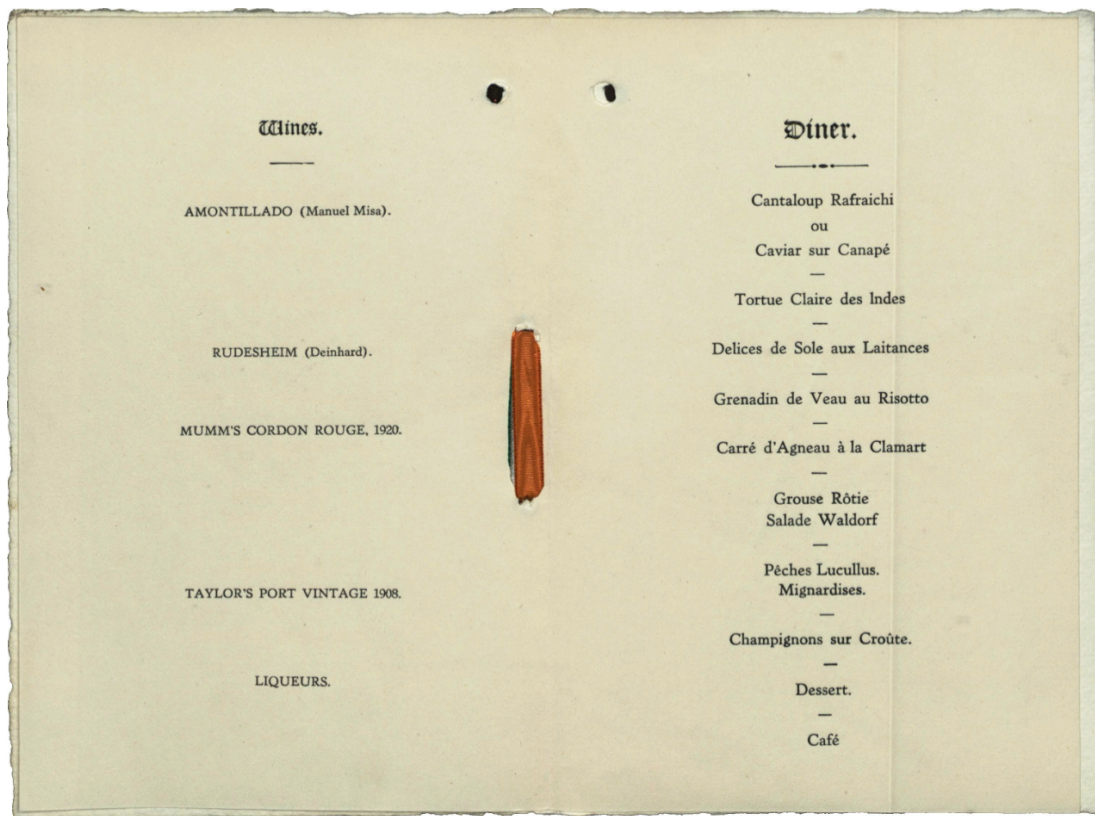
Dining in public in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century was an important ritual in London and Paris. It enabled people be seen together in public yet exclusive settings.⁴⁴ The mere

ability to pay, writes Rich,⁴⁵ was not sufficient: attendance depended on being invited or on political or professional affiliation. Dublin mirrored London in terms of the development of restaurants and luxury hotels, both slightly later than Paris due to the popularity of gentlemen's clubs in both cities.⁴⁶ Irish leaders, coming from the same upper social classes as those in London and Paris were familiar with fine-dining establishments and it stands to reason that they would imitate the social behaviours of their peers.

An extract from a DEA memo of 1929 sets out the state's position in relation to receiving distinguished guests:⁴⁷

“Generally, policy is to keep State hospitality as exclusive as possible, and up to this only persons and bodies of a certain type have been looked after. These would include Ministers of foreign Governments, distinguished publicists of international repute and, to a certain extent, industrial magnates. An unpretentious dinner or a luncheon given by the President or a Minister is all that has been done hereto...”





1928 State banquet menu for US Secretary of State Frank B. Kellogg
National Archives of Ireland (NAI), TSCH/3/S5731

In the absence of state reception rooms during this time, the unpretentious dinners or luncheons referred to above took place at hotels in Dublin city centre including the Shelbourne. An examination of the menu served to Kellogg shows the distinctly French influence observed in London and Paris at that time.⁴⁸ The influence of French haute cuisine on fine-dining establishments in Dublin during this period was already firmly established through the presence of foreign-born chefs trained in the classic French tradition.⁴⁹ The Head Chef at the Shelbourne Hotel was a Swiss national Otto Wuest. His ten course menu for Kellogg, written in French, began with *Cantaloup Rafraichi* and *Caviar sur Canapé* as the amuse bouche. This was followed by *Tortue Claire des Indes*, *Délices de Sole aux Laitances*, *Grenadin de Veau au Risotto*, *Carré d'Agneau à la Clamart* and *Grouse Rôtie, Salade Waldorf*. The meal ended with *Pêches Lucullus* and *Mignardises* followed by *Champignons sur Croûte*, dessert and coffee. According to Flandrin⁵⁰ the higher the

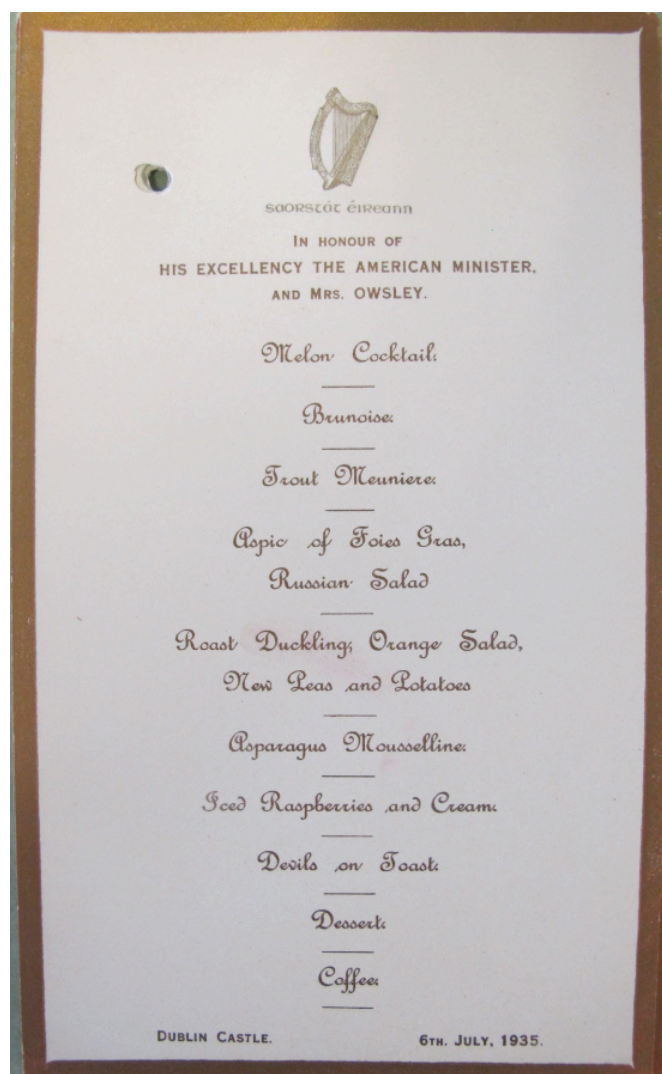
number of courses and dishes, the more significant the meal. He notes that this changed in the twentieth century and the number of dishes no longer had the same implication.⁵¹ In light of Flandrin's findings with regard to the early twentieth century, Kellogg's ten course menu can be considered a reflection of the significance attributed to the meal and by consequence to his visit by the Irish government.

In 1932 a change of government brought about in a new era in Irish diplomatic relations. Under the new President of the Executive Council and Minister for External Affairs, Eamon de Valera, it was decided that Dublin Castle would be used as state reception rooms. Considering that Dublin Castle had been the seat of British rule up until 1921, the choice could not have been more symbolic. The Castle was given the 'greatest spring clean in its history'⁵² and began to be used for state events starting with the state reception during the international Eucharistic Congress of 1932 which was a defining event in staunchly Catholic mid-twentieth century Ireland.⁵³

During the same period, new procedures were put in place by the government for the accreditation of Ambassadors to Ireland while at the same time the DEA established the first Irish diplomatic missions abroad. With the arrival of new ambassadors to Ireland came the ceremonial presentation of credentials and the traditional banquet given by the new host government in their honour. With the requisite state reception rooms now available at Dublin Castle, from 1934 onwards new ambassadors to Ireland presented their credentials at Dublin Castle to de Valera who then held the customary state banquet in their honour.

When examining the menus from this period, the influence of the French culinary tradition on fine-dining is evident. For example, dishes such as '*Clear Turtle*' or '*Dariole of Foies Gras*' and '*Asparagus Mousseline*' appear on the menu at the very first banquet, held in honour of American

Ambassador McDowell on 4 April 1934. Several months later, for German Ambassador von Kuhlmann, diners enjoyed '*Bisque*', '*Braized Sole, Cardinal Sauce*' and '*Vol-au-vent Financière*'. For the new Spanish Ambassador in 1935 the menu included '*Oysters*', '*Sole, White Wine Sauce*', '*Braised Sweetbreads, Mushroom Sauce*', and '*Biscuit Glace*'. Although their names are in English or Franglaise (as was the custom of the time) these dishes, along with those served to Kellogg in 1928 can be found in *Le Répertoire de la Cuisine*⁵⁴ and *Larousse Gastronomique*⁵⁵ by name and/or preparation clearly indicating their place in the French culinary repertoire and the influence of French classical tradition on fine-dining as established by Trubek⁵⁶, Rich⁵⁷ and Mac Con Iomaire.⁵⁸



1935 Dublin Castle State banquet menu for Minister Owlsey
National Archives of Ireland (NAI), PRES/1/P414

The Irish National Emblem

Each of the menus has a gold edge and a gold harp appears at the top of each one. Sometimes, the word ‘Saorstát’ (Free State) is printed beneath the harp. Ireland has the distinction of being the only nation to have a musical instrument as its national emblem.⁵⁹ Depicted in a range of contexts since medieval times, the harp’s status as a national symbol was established by its introduction on Anglo-Irish coinage by King Henry VIII in 1534.⁶⁰ Originally facing right on Tudor coins, the harp was later positioned to face left when Ireland was included in the British royal coat-of-arms in 1603, an orientation which it has maintained to this day. Its depictions in the iconography have varied since then, appearing with a griffin’s head or with a small crown on top of the harp or with a winged maiden whose torso replaced the forepillar of the harp and which remained the symbol of Ireland up until the eighteenth century.⁶¹ The rise of Irish nationalism in the nineteenth century saw more items identified as symbols of Ireland’s cultural heritage and which included the wolfhound, round towers and shamrock along with the harp, which was subsequently selected as the national emblem of the Irish Free State. The design was modelled on the Trinity College or Brian Boru harp thus replacing the winged-maiden of the previous century. The new design was chosen as the Great Seal of the new state and minted on its coinage from 1923.⁶²

The state dinners were hosted by the President of the Executive Council and the menus were representative of the President’s position as head of government. A gold edge and gold crest can likewise be seen on the menus and invitations used by the Swedish royal family as hosts of the Nobel banquets.⁶³ The status of the host is therefore indicated by the use of a symbol, in the case of Ireland the harp, and serves as a marker of the host’s leading rank within society. The place and position of the harp was therefore a critical factor and part of the intrinsic graphic symbol of individual and state identity on the table.

Early Material Culture in Irish Embassies Abroad

During the same period Irish diplomatic representations were being set up abroad. The High Commissioner's Office in London was opened in 1923 and over the next fifteen years, legations were opened in Geneva (1923), Washington (1924), Paris (1929), Holy See (1929), Berlin (1929) and Madrid (1935).⁶⁴ Consular offices were also opened in Boston (1929), New York (1930), San Francisco (1933) and Chicago (1934) but as they were established to deal with trade matters and issues relating to Irish nationals and did not have a Minister's residence attached to them, they are only mentioned briefly here.

The legations were furnished by the Office of Public Works (OPW) and in the 1930s an attempt was made to establish an inventory of state-owned furniture abroad. Each embassy was requested to compile a complete account of the furnishings on their premises, room-by-room and asked to list 'articles such as cutlery, glass, china, linen etc' separately.⁶⁵

What is apparent when examining the lists of cutlery, glass, china and linen returned to Dublin is that nothing was standardised. There is no obvious order or clear use of specific brands. When compared to the corresponding OPW lists it is not clear whether the items supplied had anything more than a domestic function as opposed to an official one. Some legations listed 'bone china' dinner services (Holy See), others simply listed 'china' (Berlin) with neither premises making any reference to quality. The OPW lists mention 'dinner plates' but do not indicate the quality, type or brand. Descriptions of cutlery differ also, described as 'silver' (Washington) and 'plated ware' (Madrid). Glassware was sometimes purchased locally (Holy See, Geneva) for reasons which are unclear and subsequently described as 'glass' while others were supplied with 'cut glass' by the OPW (Berlin, London). Other inventories contain unfamiliar items of glassware such as 'sherberts' (Washington) but which the Irish ambassador to Washington subsequently explained

were in fact wine glasses and that the description was nothing more than ‘a relic from prohibition days’.⁶⁶

That the first Irish missions abroad were furnished rental properties might explain the irregular quantities and the variety of items in the inventories. There were no procedures in place at that time to equip Irish representations with standardised items for formal entertaining and it would be nearly a decade before such a project would take shape.

By the time the inventories were completed in 1938 the Irish Free State had been transformed out of existence by the 1937 Constitution and the state renamed Ireland or, in the Irish language Éire. Ireland’s first President, Douglas Hyde, took up official residence in *Áras an Uachtaráin*, formerly the British Vice-Regal Lodge, in Dublin’s Phoenix Park. The State Apartments at Dublin Castle were to be renovated once more, and by May 1941 the DEA had taken up permanent residence at Iveagh House, a former Georgian townhouse of the Guinness dynasty on Dublin’s St Stephen’s Green, where it remains located to this day. From its new location, the DEA had a venue which would become a window to the world of Irish foreign policy and diplomatic relations. In the post-war years it would become the heart of Irish diplomatic dining.

The Irish State Table

The task of establishing the material culture of the Irish state table began in October 1946 when the *Taoiseach* (Prime Minister) and Minister for External Affairs, Eamon de Valera, requested a dinner service for use at official dinners and lunches in Iveagh House. In a letter to the OPW, the DEA stated that de Valera considered the service which was currently in use (‘a strong white stone ware supplied by the caterers’) to be inappropriate and asked for the ‘special manufacture’ of a high quality dinner service for 120 persons for official entertainment on his behalf.⁶⁷ It was to be of

simple dignified design and should bear the harp, the official emblem of the state. The service was to be kept at Iveagh House where one of the Department's officers would be responsible for ensuring that all the pieces supplied to the catering contractors in the building would be duly accounted for. The Minister also required a suitable service of glassware, of similar quality and with the same identifiers which would be retained by the Department under the same control arrangements as the dinner service.

De Valera's preference was that the items be of Irish manufacture. His instructions added that if the quality he had in mind was not currently being manufactured in Ireland the order could be placed in Britain, France or Sweden, all known for the excellence of products of this kind. The DEA's representatives abroad could, if necessary, assist in obtaining quotations or samples but no orders were to be placed until the Minister had seen the examples of the designs on offer.

A meeting was subsequently held between Mr O'Sullivan, Furniture Clerk at the OPW and DEA officials where a list of the required items was drawn up. During the meeting O'Sullivan mentioned that he was considering standardising the patterns for use on items for state entertaining in government buildings, *Áras an Uachtaráin* and Irish legations abroad.⁶⁸

The DEA officials then met with Dr Edward MacLysaght, Chief Herald of Ireland⁶⁹ and the issue of the harp as the national emblem was raised. There remained two points to be settled: the number of strings to be shown and the position of the harp. The fourteenth century Brian Boru harp on which the emblem was to be based had thirty strings but from a heraldic view point, eleven strings were considered preferable. The other issue was whether to show the harp standing upright or positioned so that the strings would appear straight. Dr MacLysaght favoured the former as the latter would involve the harp being shown leaning and informed the DEA officials that these points were to be

discussed at an upcoming meeting with the Department of the *Taoiseach*.⁷⁰ As soon as the matter was settled, specimens could be obtained swiftly and the project could begin. The eleven string leaning harp was adopted as the emblem of the Irish state later that year and remains the national emblem of Ireland.⁷¹

The project for a dinner service for Iveagh House was momentarily postponed following the promise of the gift of a service from the Czechoslovakian government several months later. The Czechoslovak *Chargé d’Affaires* in Dublin at the time met with Leo McCauley, Assistant Secretary at DEA and informed him that his government wished to present the Irish government with:⁷²

“(a) a service of china for 100 people, (b) glass for the same number, (c) a crystal chandelier of ‘representation’ quality, (d) perhaps, but not certainly, and in any case not immediately, a hand-made carpet.”

The gift was in return for the 2,000 head of cattle which the Irish government had sent to Czechoslovakia the previous year as part of its overseas aid policy of the alleviation of distress in Europe after the Second World War.⁷³ The Czech *coup d’état* of early 1948 appears to have significantly delayed the arrival of the dinner service and glassware, not to mention the associated gift of chandeliers and carpet. The glassware eventually arrived on 6 December 1948⁷⁴ but no trace or record of any of the other items has been uncovered to date.

Meanwhile the DEA decided to press on with its proposal to furnish each of its missions abroad with formal tableware.⁷⁵ Each representation was asked to submit a list of dinnerware and glassware requirements as well as an inventory of those items currently on their premises. The project progressed slowly. With a network of sixteen embassies and representations now ranging from

Australia to South America, and from North America and Canada back to and across Europe, it took considerable time to gather the information.

The designs to be used and the function of the items to be supplied was finally signed off in 1950.⁷⁶ Two dinner services would be supplied to each embassy: a dinner service of 'hotel ware quality' for use by the family and a special service of bone china which would be reserved for official functions. The items would be standardised. They would all have a gold edge. The everyday-ware would have the national emblem in gold on a blue background on the rim and the bone china would have the harp in gold on the rim.

The lists from missions abroad were finally collated by the DEA in July 1951 and Iveagh House staff used them to draw up the complete list of items required. These were then sent to the OPW where they were costed and sanction for the corresponding expenditure was requested from the Minister for Finance. The OPW then placed calls for tenders and received samples and drawings from potential suppliers which they duly transmitted back to the DEA.⁷⁷

The issue of Irish manufacture was reinforced by certain officials. In a letter to the DEA, Ambassador Fred Boland in London suggested that the bone china for formal entertainment be supplied by Minton's in the UK and that Arklow Potteries in Ireland supply the items for everyday use. Although less elegant, Boland felt that Arklow Pottery ware was stronger and more resistant than that available from Minton's and would be considerably cheaper. The Ambassador also suggested that the embassy be supplied with a set of Waterford cut-glass for official dinners and lunches along with a set of less expensive glass for everyday use.⁷⁸

Ambassador William P. Fay in Paris wrote in support of Boland's suggestions and had quite firm views in terms of the glassware to be used in Irish embassies.⁷⁹ He wrote:

"I have always regarded the present official glass as inadequate. I do not like the design, which is very ordinary and the harp badge which should never have been put on good quality glass by the chemical transfer process but should have been engraved and gives a most unfortunate impression that the glass has been presented to the Embassy as an advertisement..."

continuing

"There might be something to be said for having local glass in each Embassy e.g. French glass in Paris, Swedish glass in Stockholm and Italian glass in Rome but there is little to be said for having English glass in Irish Embassies and Missions throughout the world, particularly when this glass has nothing in particular to recommend it."

He suggested:

"Waterford Glass are now producing table glass of an absolutely first-class quality; and one of their suites of glass (the number of which is known to the OPW) resembles the classical cutting of 18th century Waterford glass. This is the model I recommend for our Embassies, it goes without saying that the employment of a distinctively Irish glass on the tables of our missions abroad is one of the best methods of advertising this excellent industry."

The companies ultimately selected by the Irish government were all prestigious names in Irish tableware and glassware. They had or were developing national and international reputations by the 1950s when the project was being finalised, some of them with significant histories behind them.

Waterford Crystal

The original Waterford manufacture opened in 1783 and ran until 1851. Despite a new excise tax levied at all glassmakers in 1826 Waterford managed to continue for another twenty five years.⁸⁰ The reference made by Ambassador Fay above refers specifically to the high reputation held by Waterford during this period.

In 1950, Waterford Crystal was revived by a Czech national, Charles Bacik. Nothing has been found in the research at the moment of writing which would indicate any link between Bacik and the gift of Czech glassware to the Irish government of 1947. There were few skilled glassmakers in Ireland at the time so craftsmen were recruited abroad to produce crystal and to pass on their knowledge. One of those was Miroslav Havel, also a Czech national and whose name would become synonymous with Waterford Crystal. He was put in charge of developing the factory's new designs and training apprentices. The designs were to be based on early Waterford glass so Havel spent time in the National Museum painstakingly drawing, in detail, piece after piece of the national glass collection.⁸¹ His hard work paid off. The hours spent drawing inspired him to create pieces such as the Lismore suite⁸² and which would become the glassware of choice for the Irish state. He also designed the famous Waterford chandeliers which would go on to become one of the factory's most coveted items.

The 1950s and 60s were marked by prodigious growth and more craftsmen were recruited from abroad. The chemical content of Waterford glass made up of thirty three per cent red lead ingredients as opposed to twenty four per cent in Czechoslovakia made the glass more difficult to cut but gave it the superb sparkle that was the envy of European glass factories. Havel's cutting patterns were designed specifically to enhance that quality.⁸³

Waterford glass proved very popular in the United States. A Romanov ‘chandelier’ for a Washington hotel in 1953-54 is considered to be a major achievement given that the factory had rather primitive equipment at the time making the production of such an item particularly arduous.⁸⁴ In July 1965, a special reception was held in Westminster Abbey to unveil sixteen chandeliers of Waterford crystal donated to the Abbey by the Guinness family to mark the 900th anniversary of its foundation.⁸⁵ The Parliament of Westminster also ordered a suite of drinking glasses with cut stems and bowls engraved with the coat of arms.⁸⁶

Throughout the 1970s and early 80s demand for Waterford crystal remained steady and in 1986 the company acquired Wedgwood, the North Staffordshire pottery and was renamed the Waterford Wedgwood Group. Some short-term financial difficulties in the 1990s were overcome but resurfaced in 2008. In 2010 WWRD Group Holdings Limited which by then owned the Waterford Crystal, Wedgwood and Royal Doulton brands signed an agreement with Waterford City Council to open the Waterford Crystal manufacturing facility, retail outlet and visitor’s centre. The manufacturing facility currently produces up to 45,000 pieces each year.⁸⁷

Newbridge Cutlery

The town of Newbridge in County Kildare was a thriving garrison community at the turn of the twentieth century and was left vacant when the army troops left in 1921. It was decided that the metal forging and finishing equipment left behind by the army coupled with local know-how could be used for different purposes and the Newbridge Cutlery Company was born. As at Waterford Crystal, experts were recruited from abroad, in this case from Sheffield, to train local employees and by 1948 the workforce stood at 240.⁸⁸



Examples of early Newbridge cutlery designs on a damask linen background
Office of Public Works (OPW), 2015

In the 1950s the factory expanded the range to produce tea and coffee sets, condiment holders and kettles. The economic vulnerability of the 1960s and 70s were also felt in Newbridge and a group of local businessmen stepped in to save the business. William Doyle, the son of one of those men, took over in the 1980s. Faced with a falling demand for tableware in the 1990s, William and the team realised they had the technical capability on site to manufacture jewellery and Newbridge Silverware was born. Well-known celebrities were recruited to help transform the brand into a household name and a chance acquisition of a dress belonging to Audrey Hepburn sparked off the launch of the Museum of Style Icons. The museum is one of the top visitor attractions in Ireland while the manufacture of tableware and jewellery remains an integral element of the business in Newbridge, Co. Kildare.⁸⁹



Examples of Newbridge spoon designs on a damask linen background
Office of Public Works (OPW), 2015

Arklow Pottery

Arklow Pottery in County Wicklow was formally opened in July 1935. Just as in Waterford and Newbridge, staff were recruited from abroad, from the Staffordshire potteries to teach ceramic production to their Irish colleagues. One of the most significant introductions at the pottery was the arrival of a Dressler oven which increased production to 20,000-25,000 pieces per week.⁹⁰ Items were decorated by a mixture of print transfer and in particular hand-painting, where the items were passed down a long table from one painter to the next.⁹¹



1940s Arklow soup dish design with hand painted golden harp
Office of Public Works (OPW), 2015



Detail of hand painted 1940s Arklow soup dish
Office of Public Works (OPW), 2015

The pottery was dogged by importation restrictions on coal during the Emergency of 1939-45 resulting in the halting of production and often a decrease in quality. The pottery had been

supplying ordinary tableware to the Irish state via the OPW and this issue of coal supply is evident in the correspondence between the OPW and Arklow Pottery during that time.⁹²

After World War II output increased to 15,000 dozen pieces per week consisting mostly of cups and saucers, plates and teapots for hotels, hospitals and the Irish Defence Forces. Its 'Badge Catalogue' of the 1950s and 60s shows that the Pottery supplied the Royal St George Yacht Club, Dublin Airport, University College Dublin, the Shelbourne Hotel and government organisations such as *Bord na Móna* (The Irish Peat Board).⁹³

In 1952 the Pottery announced that it had succeeded in developing an Irish mineral which was capable of producing goods almost as fine as chinaware.⁹⁴ As outlined earlier, Arklow Pottery was suggested in 1955 by Ambassador Fred Boland as the potential supplier of informal dinnerware as the Pottery did not have the capacity to produce bone china for formal use. Documents found in the course of this research project would suggest that this position changed. Invoices from Arklow Pottery addressed to the Irish Embassy in London at its new premises in Grosvenor Place in 1959 for a fifty piece dinner service of 'Burnished Gold Band & Line with Gold Harp Badge' suggest that the new chinaware process announced by the Pottery in 1952 may have enabled it to tender and be selected to supply the items of dinnerware for formal entertaining.⁹⁵

The Pottery appeared to be on a prosperous trajectory in the early 1970s⁹⁶ but was also facing financial difficulties similar to Waterford Crystal and Newbridge Silver. The Pottery was purchased in February 1976 by the Noritake Co. Limited of Japan but closed in 1998 after sustaining considerable losses despite attempts at restructuring and rebranding.⁹⁷



State dinner and soup dish design by Noritake
Office of Public Works (OPW), 2015

Irish Linen

The region of Northern Ireland has long been associated with the production of Irish linen. Flax, the plant from which linen derives needs a moist temperate climate and this is especially prevalent in Northern Ireland. Flax was being cultivated by the eleventh century and its yarns were used for ecclesiastical garment in Winchester Cathedral by the twelfth century.⁹⁸ Archival documents from the Vaucluse also attest to the purchase of Irish cloth, most likely linen, in Avignon in 1432⁹⁹ although it was only in the seventeenth century that the industry truly began to develop.¹⁰⁰ The industry benefitted significantly from the industrial revolution with the advent of the power loom increasing the number of producers and consequently boosting employment.¹⁰¹

Up until the nineteenth century damask was only affordable for those who were wealthy. Its production tested the best weavers and the result was expensive. The arrival of the power loom and its adaptation onto the heads of existing handlooms in 1879 speeded up the weaving process thus decreasing production costs and extending its availability to a wider client base.¹⁰²

Damask napkins and tablecloths have traditionally been favoured by the Irish government and were supplied by the OPW to Irish legations abroad in the 1920s and 30s, as is evident from the inventories discussed in the earlier part of this essay. Despite the lower cost, damask was still considered a luxury item and care was taken to maintain the tablecloths and napkins for a suitably long time. Correspondence in the inventory files demonstrates that when the items became tatty or a little worn, they were sent to the OPW in Dublin for repair.¹⁰³ They would then be returned to the embassy where they would be used until they were once again in need of repair. At this point the Ambassador would have the choice to return the item for a second time or to pass it to staff for their own use or as cleaning cloths if the item was considered too damaged.

The firm Thomas Ferguson Irish Linen was established in 1854 in Banbridge, County Down and is considered one of the world's finest weavers of damask tablecloths and napkins.¹⁰⁴ The company has been the principle supplier of damask items to the Irish government and continues to supply damask tablecloths, napkins and centre pieces to the Irish government to this day.¹⁰⁵

The State Tableware

The supply of tableware to Irish representations finally began towards the end of the 1950s, almost a decade after it was first proposed.¹⁰⁶ Irish embassies and missions abroad were supplied with the following items for official functions on behalf of the Irish government, finally establishing the material culture of the Irish state table as follows:

1. Waterford Crystal Cut Glass: Cashel and Lismore Suites;
2. Newbridge Cutlery: Kings Pattern (later Jesmond Pattern);
3. Arklow Pottery: Bone china with gold rim and harp badge on rim;
4. Irish Linen: damask napkins, tablecloths and centrepieces.

The Irish State Table Today

Crystal, cutlery, linen and glass from these companies or from their successors or peers continue to appear on the Irish state table to this day. The Furniture Branch of the OPW remains responsible for their procurement and delivery to government buildings at home and abroad. The DEA's network of embassies has grown considerably in the decades since the 1950s project to create an Irish state table was first rolled out and consequently the OPW now stores a large accumulated range of ware which is located in a large premises in a suburb of Dublin city.

The evolution of the Irish state table has become well established since the 1950s. The successful consolidation of the table décor and its signification of Irish identity can be seen in an assessment of the state banquet held in honour of Britain's Queen Elizabeth II's visit to Ireland in 2011.¹⁰⁷

As the first visit of a reigning British monarch to Ireland since Ireland gained independence from Britain, it generated a level of preparation previously unseen among Dublin Castle staff who described it as 'the most stage managed state event they had ever witnessed.' In preparation for the banquet, an entire new set of state tableware was ordered for the President's table. The items used to set the state table were the successors of those which been in use since the material culture of the Irish state table was first established over half a century earlier: Waterford Crystal glasses, Newbridge Silver cutlery, Arklow Pottery bone china with gold edge and harp on rim (now

purchased from Noritake in Japan) and damask tablecloths and napkins from Thomas Ferguson Irish Linen.¹⁰⁸

The staff of Dublin Castle later remarked how proud they were to be part of such a significant event and spoke in particular of their pride in the distinctly Irish nature of the occasion. The Queen, they said, had particularly liked the champagne glasses.

Summary and Conclusion

This paper has sought to demonstrate the challenges faced by the newly formed Irish state to establish an identity which had hitherto been both in-existent and unrecognised. Drawing on government archives, the article outlines the shaky beginnings of Irish state hospitality in the 1920s, the emerging of more formalised diplomatic dining of the 1930s and the contemporaneous first attempts at establishing inventories of state owned furniture abroad. Examination of these inventories showed the need for a systemised and uniform supply of items for Irish legations. The paper then discusses how in the immediate postwar years the Department of External Affairs set out to acquire a dinner service for official entertainment by the Minister of External Affairs as a showcase of Irish manufacture, ultimately establishing the material culture of the Irish state table which remains to this day. The Irish manufacturers chosen for the project in the 1950s, the subsequent development of their brands at home and abroad, along with their continued use for state occasions today indicates the state's on-going commitment towards the use of Irish brands as requested in the Minister's letter of 1946. The presence of these items and their role in state life reinforces the research into a nation's state table described at the outset as a means to convey identity and the importance of its role within the statecraft of international relations. From uncertain beginnings in the 1920s came a solid and now, using the state symbol of the harp, internationally recognisable and exclusively Irish look to the state's table.

As De Vooght and Scholliers have noted, the historian's interest is said to have waned with regard to the study of food and power in court society after 1800.¹⁰⁹ This research is intended to fill some of the gaps identified in that body of knowledge while at the same time contributing to research on material culture and the growing contemporary body of work on Irish culinary heritage.

Key words: material culture, diplomatic dining, Dublin Castle, Iveagh House, Waterford crystal, Newbridge cutlery, Arklow pottery, Irish linen

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Menus from the 1928 state banquet for US Secretary of State F. Kellogg and the 1935 state banquet for Minister Owsley have been reproduced with the kind permission of the National Archives of Ireland and the Director of the National Archives of Ireland.

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