

Collaborative Doctoral Awards Studentship Competition (Project-led)



Arts and
Humanities
Research Council

Project Title:	Voices of Ulster's Poor: Charitable Requests, 1850s-1920s
Project Summary:	The 'voices' of the nineteenth and early-twentieth-century poor are not often visible in historical documents, rather we hear from the officials and authority figures who penned surviving records. This original and exciting project draws on new and underused archival material housed at PRONI, letters and petitions requesting assistance submitted to charities and politicians and brings to light for the first time the voices of those experiencing hardship in nineteenth and early twentieth-century Ulster. The project will allow a unique understanding of living conditions, family relationships and issues facing many families across Ulster as they tried to access help.
Institution:	Ulster University
Partner Organisation:	Public Record Office of Northern Ireland
Primary AHRC Subject Area:	History
Creative Practice Component:	None

For further information and to submit an expression of interest, please contact:			
Lead Supervisor:	Dr Leanne McCormick	Email:	lv.mccormick@ulster.ac.uk
EXPRESSIONS OF INTEREST MUST BE RECEIVED NO LATER THAN:			DEADLINE 6/1/2020

Project Description:
<p>The 'voices' of the poor are often faint in historical sources, described or mediated through officials and captured on paper by clerks, politicians, philanthropists, women and men religious, institution staff, or others. Charity requests, where they survive, capture the temporarily poverty-stricken or everyday poor in their own words. Requests for assistance speak to kinship responsibilities, family survival strategies, destitution caused by local circumstances, ill-health or bereavements. They convey the patchwork of economic strategies required for a family's survival and in doing so provide a fascinating account of lived realities for 'ordinary' individuals. Recent scholarship on Dublin charity letters by historians Virginia Crossman and Lindsey Earner-Byrne demonstrates the value of such records in representing the historical past and the poor. But the voices of Ulster's poor have yet to emerge. A PhD based on rich records held in PRONI would ensure an important Ulster dimension to this emerging scholarship.</p> <p>Charitable requests that convey the voices of the poor are rare but housed at PRONI are a range of records which allow these voices to be heard. This will include, for example, identified volumes of charity applications and petitions for assistance to politicians and other figures of authority that reveal the immediate concerns and poverty of people in the newly-established state.</p>

These fascinating, sometimes heart-breaking, requests provide rich qualitative evidence that will be coupled with a quantitative assessment of the collections as a whole. Charitable requests also allow for a material dimension and represent a tangible connection to the past.

The proposed project aims to explore the realities of poverty through these letters. It will seek to answer questions about:

1. Poverty

How did petitioners narrate their poverty and explain their circumstances? What aspects of their lives did they highlight to negotiate assistance and convey immediacy? What can these records indicate about the patchwork of resources required for survival? Multiple requests from the same applicant facilitates an assessment of changes in circumstances across time.

2. Intersections between gender, age and class

What can the records reveal about gender or other roles within the family or community more generally? Letters were often written by widows, which renders them even more valuable considering this is the social group most silent in historical records. What can this rich evidence reveal about widowhood, motherhood, women’s social networks, or kinship roles? Other women and men were deserted by or separated from spouses, offering insights into diverse relationships and different needs of the province’s poor.

3. Relationships between the poor and the prosperous

Where records indicate whether applications for assistance were successful these allow us to determine the social groups who were most successful, and what this indicates about those who proffered assistance. What do descriptions of petitioners’ appearance and behaviour reveal about attitudes of those controlling purse strings? Since most of these requests were received by men, this adds another gender facet to the study. Cashbooks, annual reports, and records of donations facilitate a consideration of how the wider community responded to local poor.

In addition to the placement at PRONI, a 6-week internship has been organized and agreed in principle, with the Tenement Museum in New York, providing experience in representing the stories of the marginalized to a public audience. The student will bring these skills to the curation of an exhibition in PRONI on the rich records held there. This will be showcased at a conference on poverty and voices of the poor. The PhD, further publications, and the PRONI resource guide on the archives will allow for a greater understanding of life in nineteenth and twentieth-century Ulster and a new understanding of political and religious tensions. Most importantly it will allow the voices of Ulster’s marginalized to be heard, the lived experiences of those experiencing hardship made vivid.

SUPERVISION AND EXTERNAL ADVISORS

First Supervisor:	Dr Leanne McCormick	School/Department:	History, School of Arts and Humanities, Ulster University
Second Supervisor:	Ms Jayne Hutchinson	School/Department:	Public Record Office Northern Ireland
Additional Advisor:	Dr Elaine Farrell	Organisation/Institution:	History, School of History Anthropology, Philosophy and Politics, Queen’s University Belfast

The supervisory team is an ideal fit for this project. Dr Leanne McCormick, Senior Lecturer in Modern Irish Social History has researched and published widely on Irish social history especially in Ulster. In 2018-19, she was commissioned to co-lead an enquiry into Mother and Baby Homes/Magdalen Asylums in Northern Ireland. Her work has focused on marginalised women and their interactions with philanthropy and institutions, and how gender, class and regionality impacted on this.

Archivist Jayne Hutchinson has considerable knowledge and experience of the range of archives, both private and official, relating to this project. She has previously supervised university interns on placement at PRONI working on records relating to the project. She has presented at academic and archive conferences on a number of themes and projects, most recently on asylum records held by PRONI

Dr Elaine Farrell, Senior Lecturer in Irish Social History, has research and publication experience in the field of Irish nineteenth and twentieth-century social history. Her research to date has largely focused on 'ordinary' inhabitants and she has used letters as a historical source in her research on women's crime and punishment.

The academic supervisors are writing a monograph based on their AHRC-funded research project, 'Bad Bridget: Criminal and Deviant Irish Women in North America, 1838-1918'. It explores the many issues relating to poverty that Irish women experienced abroad.

RESEARCH ENVIRONMENT

The student will be in the fortunate position to benefit from three research environments. The student will be part of the Ulster University Doctoral College which provides a comprehensive Researcher Development Programme and will have a bespoke training plan created which for this project will provide specialist training in terms of writing for public audiences. The student would be integrated into the History unit where a number of staff work in relevant areas of Irish history, and the student will be encouraged to engage with their active cohort of PhD researchers as well as the wider History Unit. Students are encouraged to attend and present at the History Research Seminars and are supported to organize their own events and activities. As part of the School of Arts and Humanities the student will be able to attend specialist classes on exhibition design and curation with Professor Elizabeth Croke as part of the Cultural Heritage and Museum Studies MA and receive guidance on their exhibition design.

PRONI is actively involved in hosting and organising a range of research-based conference and events each year and hosts and supports researchers, both local and international, as they explore the archives held in Belfast. The student will be able to access these events and to engage with the researchers spending time in PRONI. This will enable the student to develop new networks and relationships. The student will be able to avail of the wide expertise of PRONI staff and will be able to gain an in depth understanding of the archival process as well as working on the archives as a researcher.

History at Queen's has an active cluster on British and Irish social history, gender history and public history. The student will be integrated into this research environment through History's weekly research seminars and regular conferences and events.

Both academic supervisors are members of the Committee of Ulster Historical Studies and Editorial Board Members of Ireland's major academic journal Irish Historical Studies. Dr Farrell is an Editorial Board Member of Ulster Historical Foundation and Dr McCormick a Stakeholder and member of the PRONI User Forum. Both are ideally placed to encourage the student to engage and become involved in a range of local organizations, networks and related activities

