



## **The arts past and present**

*Ireland: The fate of country houses*

### **Narrator**

While the monuments of Irish prehistory and early Christianity were being preserved by the new Irish state, those of the Anglo Irish landed elite were left to decay, condemned by a deep antagonism towards the regime that built them.

### **Terry Dooley**

By the early 1880s, big houses had become oppositional symbols for Irish nationalists and landlords began to be blamed, if you like, on public platforms for all the social and agrarian ills that were at that time perceived to be endemic in Irish society.

### **Narrator**

From this time on the 'big house' went into decline. Agrarian agitation, declining rents and the forced sale of estates all took their toll. Then there was the Irish revolution of 1916.

### **Terry Dooley**

The most obvious impact of the Irish revolution 1916 to '23 was the destruction of Irish country houses. Approximately 300 were burned during the war of independence and the Civil War. Now, they were burned for a variety of reasons. Reasons that can be loosely termed, for example, military reasons, i.e. vacated Irish country houses. They were afraid or rumours spread in the locality that they were going to be occupied by crown forces, in which case, the IRA burned them to prevent their occupation by Black and Tans or auxiliaries or whatever. Secondly, possibly, the main reason for the burning of houses during this period, was that local agrarian agitators, who may very well have been members of the local IRA as well, used the social chaos of the time to burn country houses in a bid to drive resident landlords out of an area so that their lands could be taken over and redistributed amongst the local farming population.

### **Actuality archive 'Glimpses of Erin' American Tourist Film 1934**

*The types of people that usually assemble here are representative of agricultural life in Ireland and although they may be plain in manner, they represent the backbone of a country that could not exist without their co-operation.*

### **Narrator**

This American tourist footage may present an unrealistically romanticised view of Irish rural life, but it does highlight the significance of the Irish farmer to the new state.

### **Vincent Comerford**

I think it's a very important to realise how important the notion of the farmer was in the Irish Free State. And therefore, if you were promoting this cult of the farmer, by implication you had to be then opposed to the regime from which these independent farmers had won their independence, namely, the old system of territorial landlordism and the big house was seen as the symbol of that.

### **Terry Dooley**

The big house wouldn't have been considered a part of Ireland's sacred heritage, certainly, in the 1920s and the 1930s. In fact, Dáil rhetoric is very much characterised by statements such as reversing Cromwell's policy and this was almost given some form of moral justification to the compulsory acquisition of estates and their redistribution then amongst Irish tenant farmers. And between 1923 and the 1960s, there's more than a dozen land acts introduced that by the 1960s have effectively stripped all of these houses of their surrounding estates.