



The arts past and present

My name's Anne Lawrence and I'm Professor of History at the Open University. The programme about Ireland sits in the Block that's called Tradition and Dissent and the part of that Block that it relates to concerns the ways in which Irish nationalism has drawn upon conceptions of the past to fortify the idea of a separate Irish nation, one which is separate from and independent from England.

What I was trying to show in the programme was the ways in which the visible remains of the past themselves have a history. That sounds rather a banal way of putting it, but it's actually about how nations may preserve some parts of their past and neglect, or even destroy, other parts of their past in the interests of presenting a particular take on that past, and it's very conspicuous in Ireland where the history of Ireland in the 20th century has been about the formation of a new independent nation state after 1922, in which the relics of the country's past as a colonial country have been played down in order to give a greater significance to a much earlier Irish past, which drew upon the history of ancient Irish civilisations, ancient kings, ancient Christianity. Ireland is very proud of its history as an early Christian centre in Europe, and the remains of the English rule of Ireland, which really effectively took place from the 16th century on, were very much neglected.

Two examples of buildings that were quite self-consciously preserved or, in one case very radically restored, which represented the ancient Irish nation, were Cashel which had a very ancient monastery and which St. Patrick was supposed to have visited, and which has a Romanesque chapel, which emphasises Ireland's connections with mainland Europe rather than its connections with England. A more secular site are the prehistoric remains at New Grange. New Grange was a very important pre-historic site, and it was comprehensively reconstructed in the sixties and seventies on the basis of archaeological evidence which is now quite contentious, but a lot of money was put into this restoration at a time when the Irish Government was not very rich. Sites such as Tara, New Grange, Cashel, represented a flowering of Irish civilisation which owed nothing to England and they therefore provided a sense of an Irish past without the oppressors. Buildings such as Dublin Castle, the Royal Hospital Kilmainham, and the houses that were put up by Anglo-Irish landlords, magnificent though they might be, represented the rule of alien people.

When the Irish land campaigns began in the late 19th century, and Irish tenants began claiming land that was owned by Anglo-Irish landlords, a number of Acts of Parliament were passed which actually gave tenants the right to buy land, so Anglo-Irish estates were already in decline in the late 19th century because the income that had provided the sustenance for these enormous 18th century houses and 19th century houses was diminishing. So many Anglo-Irish landlords, even before the creation of the new Irish state, were beginning to get a bit disenchanted with Ireland because they were becoming impoverished.

During the War of Independence and the Civil War, a number of houses were fired and destroyed, not perhaps as many as legend would have so more houses, as it were, vanished then and a lot of landlords moved to England during the twenties and thirties, they couldn't afford to keep up big houses, there was no State money for it, the Irish State in its early, for the first forty years of its existence, was very poor, and there was no equivalent of the National Trust or English Heritage, or anything like that, and also the value of these houses was not as aesthetic objects, it was as symbols of landlordism.

Several things changed the value that was given to these houses. One of them was simply the passage of time. By the 1970's most of the heroes of the Irish Liberation struggle were very old or dead, most of the Anglo-Irish landlords had vanished, and so the houses were increasingly dissociated from the class of people against whom all the objections had been made. But also a new spin was put on what these houses represented. They're monuments

to Irish craftsmanship, Irish architects, Irish carpenters, Irish plasterers, Irish glaziers, and this has I think proved to be quite a significant avenue for justifying the preservation of many of these houses, and several quite important restorations have taken place relatively recently.

I think people are more accepting of the idea that the period of English and then British rule was an episode in the past. I think two particular examples of how Ireland is more at ease with its Anglo-Irish past can be seen in the Royal Hospital Kilmainham and in St. Mary's Church. The Royal Hospital Kilmainham was the headquarters of the British army in Ireland, that's where the Commander in Chief lived, and it was also a home for disabled and wounded soldiers; it's now the Irish Museum of Modern Art. It's been converted very effectively into a magnificent gallery. St. Mary's Church was built in the late 17th century by a significant architect, who also built fortifications in other parts of Ireland and other churches, and it's been turned into an extremely fashionable and lively bar. And I think both of these examples show that new uses are being found for buildings, and this is a problem for all developed nations with a large stock of old buildings, but the buildings are being used in a way where people can accept what they originally stood for, alongside what they now stand for in their modern use.