

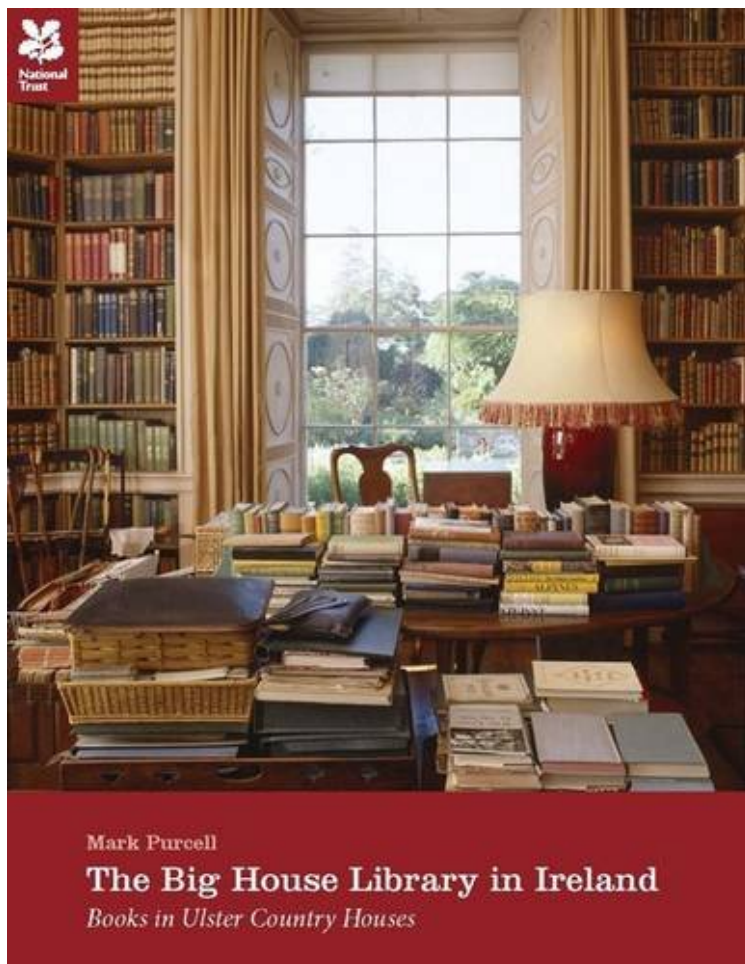
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Mark Purcell

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(Online library) The Big House Library in Ireland: Books in Ulster Country Houses

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Mark Purcell : The Big House Library in Ireland: Books in Ulster Country Houses before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised The Big House Library in Ireland: Books in Ulster Country Houses:

6 of 6 people found the following review helpful. An Irish Library TourBy OpinionCaptain Ralph Shelton, owner of the Irish house, the Argory, in County Armagh, claimed that, when shipwrecked, he had survived being eaten by sharks by the simple expedient of keeping his trousers on. Those who had not were not so lucky. Frederick Hervey, the hugely wealthy owner of estates and houses in Ireland and England, was both the 4th Earl of Bristol and the Bishop of Derry, the first Earl-Bishop, it was said, since Odo of Bayeux in the 12th century ("Who?" the reader may ask). The 18th century Clotworthy Lenox, a relative of the Lenox-Conynghams of Springhill, County Londonderry, was know as "Uncle Tatty." The life and career of the 19th century William Willoughby Cole, 3rd Earl of Enniskillen, was guided by two obsessions: collecting fossils and defending the Protestant Orange Order. Such are some of the miscellaneous facts-quirky, amusing, eccentric-that enliven Mark Purcell's book The Big House Library in Ireland: Books in Ulster

Country Houses, whose characters are drawn from the land-owning, Protestant Ascendancy class in (what became) Northern Ireland, or Ulster. Snippets like these lighten a book that is densely written, heavily freighted and, though not long, slow moving. Purcell has chosen six libraries owned by the National Trust in Northern Ireland, five with books (Castle Ward and Mount Stewart in County Down; Springhill, Londonderry; Florence Court, Fermanagh; The Argory, Armagh), and a sixth, an empty building, without any books (Downhill, Londonderry), and sets out to describe and contextualize them within a complicated weave of family, social, political and national history. Purcell writes as Libraries Curator for the UK National Trust. The post entails watching over more than 150 NT libraries in the UK, a monumental challenge to which, as in this book, he brings wide knowledge, meticulous scholarship and driving energy. It is only recently-long after the architecture, the paintings, the furniture, the porcelain, the silver, and like material objects in the NT's possession-that the 250,000 books under the NT's ownership have begun to be studied in detail, and to be eased into the light of public knowledge, their presence, extent and significance fully disclosed. The task is ongoing, and this book is a learned contribution to that effort. Of the quarter million volumes in the NT's care, about 7000 are in Ulster libraries. Given the collapse of landed and aristocratic power in Ireland over the past century and a half-in 1850 there were about 2000 country houses in Ireland; there are now only a few hundred-and with it the dispersal, sale or destruction of libraries, it is lucky we have even that number. In the collections he examines, Purcell goes about his study as a biblio-archaeologist, digging down to identifying and separate the successive sedimentary layers of inheritance and acquisition built up over time and lying beneath the present-day surface of any given library. With deft agility, he reads, sorts and interprets all the relevant clues-ownership inscriptions, bookplates, bindings, library lists and catalogues, correspondence, bills, wills, archives and so on-and constructs (to change the metaphor) a genealogy for each library. Though the narrative always returns to the bibliographical, given its method it makes long excursions into other arenas of enquiry, sometimes to the detriment of the work's focus and momentum. One of these arenas is family history. Family trees, whether diagrammatic or descriptive, play a recurrent role in the book, and Purcell likes sorting them out, however bewildering the exegesis. Take, for example, the following passage about the Lenox-Conynghams: "The Conynghams and the Lenoxes had been closely connected since the late seventeenth century, when James Lenox and Goodwill had both fought in the siege of Derry, and relations were cemented with the marriage in 1707 of Lenox's son John to Rebecca Upton, the younger sister of Good-Will's wife Anne, both women also (confusingly) being aunts by marriage to George Butle Conyngham, whose wife Anne Peacocke was the daughter of their sister Mary. Possessing only six great-grandparents instead of the usual eight, George Lenox-Conyngham was therefore simultaneously nephew and stepson-by-marriage to his predecessor at Springhill, great-nephew of his predecessor's father George Butle Conyngham both in blood and by marriage, and a great-great-nephew of Good-Will Conyngham by blood through his mother and his great-nephew by marriage through his father Clotworthy Lenox (1707-85) ["Uncle Tatty"] and grandfather John Lenox" (42). This gets positively Appalachian, but does it really enhance our appreciation of the books at Springhill? Many of the figures Purcell studies had little historical eminence apart from that associated with being a local squire or the beneficiary of inherited wealth and status. Though there are certainly exceptions, few exhibited intellectual distinction, and Purcell spends much time, often anxiously, wondering whether his protagonists actually read what was on their shelves. This is an unsettling, at some level a comically unsettling, question at the heart of a study like this one. In the almost complete absence in the books he surveys of the kind of visible testimony that demonstrate serious critical engagement with a text-annotations, marginal comments, or other written responses-Purcell, while admitting the problem, does his best to give his owners the benefit of the doubt, but his generous efforts too often come down to wishful speculation or conjecture. It is difficult to close the gap between unmarked, silent books and such truisms as libraries were a center of social and family life. It is easy to note that farmers had farming books, or zealous Protestants had zealous Protestant-or anti-Catholic-books, but such knowledge is unexceptional. Certainly there are plenty of volumes with owners' name in them, but are owners necessarily readers? There were surely just as many aspirational libraries in Ireland, or anywhere else for that matter, than working ones. For every library whose contents was actually read, absorbed, and acted upon by its owner, there must have been many more of which their owner might have said: "If I was to read, then these are the kind of books I would read. But I do not read. I have this library because it is the thing to." In this case a library is no more a medium of cognitive communication and human affect than a set of dining chairs or a lacquered cabinet. It is simply a material status symbol. There is another much more disturbing, and culturally specific, undercurrent running through the libraries and people Purcell studies: colonialism. The record of British imperialism in Ireland is hard to match anywhere else for its longevity, intentional exploitation, and racial, religious and class bigotry. This is the ground on which the houses were built, the libraries designed and the books acquired. Purcell does not avoid this unfortunate truth. He notes the often vast disparities of wealth, the chronic asymmetries of power, the condescensions of the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy, the residual "stigma," as he puts it, "of association with the old ruling class." And he keeps a prudent distance in the tone of his writing. One can admire the amused manner with which he writes about the grandest of his cast of characters, Charles Stewart, 7th Marquess of Londonderry, owner of Mount Stewart, whose lineage, wealth, connections, and vanity could not in the end prevent his dangerous mediocrity. This was the grandee who notoriously flirted with the Nazis in the 1930s, and whose friend, Ribbentrop, became know as

the "Londonderry Herr." Purcell jovially refers to the Marquess by his familiar name "Charlie." After reading Purcell's work, one is left concluding that it was the books that lent credit to their owners, not the other way around. In his turn, Purcell rewards those books with the expert attention and the appreciation of a leading scholar in the field. Not least, to convey the excitement of his discoveries, he has chosen and deployed an admirable range of illustrations and had them superbly printed. In particular, the photographs of pages from open books are vividly illusionistic: the cockling, and the shallow, shadowy creasing of the rag paper in the images of full pages, and the tactile, fibrous textures in the close-up views, have one reaching out to pick them up. This is an alluring and absorbing book.

In 1850 there were perhaps 2000 country houses in Ireland. Each Big House dominated its locality, but by the end of the 20th century, only a few hundred survived intact. No more than a handful were still in the possession of their original owners, or contained many of their original contents, including a substantial library. In some cases, this might well have been the only library in the district, though whether it was a carefully assembled collection or a haphazard accumulation of ancestral books would have varied from place to place. The National Trust in what is now Northern Ireland is responsible for most of the survivors. These collections have survived almost like time capsules, never subject to atmospheric pollution or the attentions of reforming librarians, and not heavily used in modern times. Many of their books contain the bookplates and ownership inscriptions of their long-dead owners, as well as instructions to binders, handwritten marginal notes and prices, and even the odd pressed flower; most are also in their original bindings. Together these features tell us a good deal about the tastes and interests of the people who owned them, and about the use, abuse, and circulation of print across the whole of Ireland over a period of more than 400 years. Drawing on a wide range of previously untapped sources and evidence from the collections themselves, this lavishly-illustrated book is a must for anyone interested in the history of reading, collecting, or country houses in Ireland.

About the Author Mark Purcell is a fellow of the Society of Antiquaries, a former member of the Councils of both the Bibliographical Society and the Library Association, and the libraries curator of the National Trust, responsible for more than 150 historic libraries in England, Wales, and Northern Ireland. He has published extensively on the history of the books, libraries, and reading.