

‘Ferreting out Evil: the records of the Committee on Evil Literature’

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Now that Playboy magazine is available in Irish newsagents, albeit on the top shelf, readers might be interested to learn of the recent release to the public by the National Archives of records which document the background to the introduction of the Irish censorship laws under which this publication would ultimately be proscribed. The records of the Committee on Evil Literature, which were made available to the public under the National Archives Act in January 1995, reveal early attempts by the newly established Irish Free State to prevent the introduction into, and circulation within, Ireland of printed matter deemed to be morally corrupting. This paper attempts to draw attention to the small, but interesting records of a body whose recommendations contributed directly to the formulation of Irish censorship.

The Committee on Evil Literature was appointed by the Minister for Justice, Kevin O'Higgins, on 12 February 1926, to consider and report *whether it is necessary or advisable in the interest of the public morality to extend the existing powers of the State to prohibit or restrict the sale and circulation of printed matter* (1). In establishing this departmental committee, the Minister was yielding to mounting public pressure which disagreed with his statement to Dáil Éireann in October 1925, stating that existing laws were adequate to deal with the sale and distribution of obscene literature and that it was not possible for the state to interfere or to decide what the public could read with propriety (2).

The committee, consisting of three laymen and two clergymen (one Roman Catholic and one Church of Ireland), met at 24 Kildare Street, Dublin, between February and December 1926, to hear and consider submissions from a variety of individuals, organisations and institutions, including social and religious organisations. The report of the Committee, which was presented to the Minister for Justice on 28 December 1926, emphatically indicated its dissatisfaction with the inadequacies of existing laws, and concluded that it was the duty of the State to take any necessary action to prevent the circulation of literature that was considered to be obscene and morally corrupting. The Committee also recommended the establishment of a censorship board.

The papers in this series of Department of Justice records which were generated by the functioning of the Committee, are not very extensive, but their very existence speaks volumes. The papers have been arranged into three sub-series, each of which relate to the performance of specific functions by the secretary to the Committee, Mr. J.P. Clare, an official of the Department of Justice.

JUS 7/1 Secretary's Papers

The seven files in this sub-series relate to the administration of the Committee's routine business by J.P. Clare. It includes correspondence with members of the Committee on such matters as the scheduling of meetings and the preparation and submission of the Committee's report, in addition to correspondence with the Irish High Commission in London concerning the collection of information relating to efforts in other British Dominions to prohibit the circulation of publications considered obscene. Also included are files containing texts of international agreements on the suppression of obscene literature, documents circulated to the members of the Committee, cuttings from contemporary newspapers referring to the work of the Committee, and letters, submissions, petitions and resolutions received from members of the public.

JUS 7/2 Collection of Evidence

There are twenty three files in this sub-series, each one relating to the submission of evidence by a particular individual or organisation. Generally, each file originated with a letter from J.P. Clare soliciting a submission. In some cases, a file contains Clare's letter and a reply indicating an inability to make a contribution of relevance to the work of the Committee. However, most of the appeals received a positive response – some simply containing assurances of support, but most providing copious information for the consideration of the Committee, including examples of literature which were considered by such individuals or organisations to be obscene. In many instances, the files in this sub-series contain copy transcripts of the evidence given before the Committee by a particular individual or organisation; in other cases, only abstracts or summaries of such evidence are filed.

The files document the level of involvement of the following professional, vocational and philanthropic organisations: the Boys Brigade, the Boy Scouts Association, the Catholic Headmasters Association, the Catholic Truth Society of Ireland, the Catholic Writers Guild, Comhairle an Fhainne, the Irish National Teachers Organisation, the Irish Retail Newsagents Association, the Irish Vigilance Association, the Schoolmasters Association and the Young Men's Christian Association.

The Committee also sought advice from representatives of the principal religious bodies in Ireland and consequently there are files relating to the contributions of the Church of Ireland, the Roman Catholic hierarchy, the Methodist and Presbyterian churches, and the Jewish community. In addition, the Christian Brothers and the Marian Sodalities were invited to contribute their views for the consideration of the Committee. Reverend Richard Devane, SJ, author of *Indecent Literature – Some Legal Remedies*, published in *The Irish Ecclesiastical Record*, February 1925, seems to have advised the Committee in an expert capacity.

The observations and recommendations of officialdom were also necessary to the deliberations of the Committee. The Department of Posts and Telegraphs, the Revenue Commissioners and An Garda Síochána made presentations.

JUS 7/3 Preparation of Report

This sub-series consists of four files containing respectively the Committee's draft report, the signed original report of the Committee submitted to the Minister for Justice, an amended and annotated printer's proof and multiple copies of the published report.

Unfortunately, full transcripts of the evidence given before the Committee by the various witnesses do not seem to have survived, however, as explained above, many of the files in JUS 7/2 include typescript carbon copy transcripts, typescript abstracts or summaries of the evidence given before the Committee.

This small collection of archives does not completely document censorship in Ireland, but any student of the topic cannot ignore the existence of the archives of the Committee on Evil Literature.

Notes

(1) *Report of the Committee on Evil Literature* (Dublin, 1927), p 3.

(2) Quoted in *The Irish Independent*, 1 February 1927.

Irish Archives

This article is an online version of the article 'Ferreting out Evil: the records of the Committee on Evil Literature' by Tom Quinlan. The complete printed version with illustrative examples of the document types mentioned appears in *Irish Archives*, the [Journal of the Irish Society for Archives](#), Autumn 1995.