Preserving Legal Memory – The Irish Legal History Society

Irish legal history went up in smoke on 30 June 1922. The explosion of munitions and resulting fire at the Irish Public Records Office at Dublin’s Four Courts marked a tragic end to the first act of the Irish civil war. One eyewitness to the explosion, the author Ernie O’Malley, described legal documents that dated as far back as the thirteenth century “gyrating in the upper air like seagulls”. Partly burnt documents were blown all over the city of Dublin.

This erasure of recorded memory can be compared to the destruction of records by the Nazis in occupied Europe, the bombing of the Bosnian national library in 1992 and the looting of Iraq’s museums and archives in 2003. Yet, the destruction of the Public Records Office was not the end of the field of Irish legal history. Documents were discovered intact in safes and strongrooms. Members of the public responded to appeals to pick up documents found on the street and return them to the authorities. A new state was born out of the ashes of the civil war that established its own legal system and, in so doing, began a new phase in Irish legal history.

The Irish Legal History Society was founded in 1988 with the intention of preserving and promoting the surviving fragments of Irish legal history. The society was the fruit of the labours of Professor W.N. Osborough of the Faculty of Law at University College Dublin. Under his guidance the society began holding public lectures in Dublin and Belfast to raise the profile of this growing field of scholarship.

The society has come close to publishing a book for every year since its foundation in 1988. The current twenty-four publications have covered such diverse topics as murder trials, Poynings’ Law and the Dáil courts. The society also publishes collections of the finest papers delivered to the society. Its next volume is Law and the Theatre and will be published by Four Courts Press in early 2015. The author of this work is Professor W.N. Osborough, the main architect in laying the foundations for the society, whose latest offering closes a happy circle for a society that recently celebrated its 25th anniversary. The anniversary itself was marked by a visit to Áras an Uachtaráin in which President Michael D. Higgins was presented with a complete set of the Society’s publications for inclusion in the Presidential Library.

Why should anyone interested in law and history join the Irish Legal History Society? One of the main attractions of joining the society is receiving future publications free of charge. The society also offers older publications on joining as a gift to new members. Members are also welcome to attend our “Law and Revolution in Ireland” conference which will be held in the chamber of the former House of Lords (now the Bank of Ireland) at College Green from 27 to 28 November. The keynote lecture of this conference will be preceded by a tour of this historic location at 5pm on Friday, 28 November. Members are also eligible to apply for the awards and prizes offered by the society. So what are you waiting for?
Anyone interested in joining the Irish Legal History Society should visit www.ilhs.eu and download an application form. The membership fee is €60.

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