

**‘The Minister requests a dinner service of dignified design and bearing the official crest of the State’:
The material culture of the Irish diplomatic table**

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Research into the semiotics of dining clearly demonstrates the social and cultural importance of food as a means to convey status, identity and power (De Vooght and Scholliers, 2011). As early as Ancient Greece, commensality among a city’s ambassadors and among ambassadors of different cities was responsible for establishing a diplomatic community and a primordial *corps diplomatique*. If an Athenian ambassador sat, ate and drank with the other Athenian ambassadors, then by that very act he also joined them in thought, policy and diplomatic conduct (Constantinou (1996, p. 128).

Throughout history, from medieval times to the warring factions of Renaissance Italy, the gargantuan feasts of Louis XIV and Catherine de Medici, the coronation of Charles I and the French banqueting campaign of 1847, food has defined the social, cultural and political position of a nation’s leaders (Baughman, 1959; Mennell, 1985; Albala, 2007).

The study of specific meals and political gatherings has substantiated the role of commensality in diplomatic relations, whether through the analysis of the dinner guests and the food served at court (De Vooght, 2012) or by examining how politicians use meals as an opportunity to discuss topics which have been left off the official agenda at negotiations (Tellström, 2004). Research of specific meals further shows how minutiae such as the tableware, seating plans, guest lists, menu creation, protocol and location convey identity and social belonging (Young, 2002) or how a state banquet for a visiting monarch might be curated to demonstrate a nation’s diplomatic, cultural and culinary identity (Mahon, 2015). Study of the diplomatic dining of nations such as France, the United States and Britain further demonstrate that the state table has a clear role in the statecraft of international and diplomatic relations right up to the present day (Lavendier et al, 2005; Morgan, 2012; Groom, 2013).

When Ireland gained independence in 1922, it emerged as a new constitutional being. Newly partitioned and with Southern Ireland having been conferred dominion status by the 1921 Treaty, the Irish Free State entered a political landscape which had yet to recognise its sovereignty. Despite membership of the Commonwealth and the League of Nations, the newly formed government had little standing in the eyes of the international community. With no precursor department left over from the previous administration, the Department of Foreign Affairs was created and put into an organised and systematic format by its first Secretary General, Robert Brennan. Its primary focus was the official recognition of the Irish Free State, the development of Irish foreign policy and the establishment

of its diplomatic service. Entertaining foreign dignitaries was, perhaps understandably, not at the forefront of state matters (Mahon, 2013).

The Irish state table, in the context described above, had yet to be established when Ireland gained independence. Court cooking in Dublin prior to 1922 was that of the Vice-Regent, the representative of the British court of St James to Ireland (Robins, 2001; Mac Con Iomaire and Kellaghan, 2012). Drawing on Irish government archives, this paper will trace the material culture of the Irish state table during the first fifty years of independence. Starting in 1922 and ending in the 1960s when the project to establish the material culture of the Irish state, first mentioned in 1946¹ and which continues to this day, finally took shape.

The Irish Free State 1922-1939

Contrary to the isolation inferred by Blanchard’s *‘une île derrière une île’* (an island behind an island) as mentioned by Keatinge (1973, p. 1), Dublin was a bustling hub of activity during the 1920s and 30s with a wide range of international visitors from the four corners of the globe. The Department of Foreign Affairs was renamed the Department of External Affairs (DEA) by 1922 and had no specific policy with regard to entertaining state guests, particularly in the first years of independence. It nonetheless kept track of ‘distinguished visitors’ to Ireland from 1924 onwards and noted their name, title, provenance and the reason for their visit (Mahon, 2014).

An extract from a DEA memo of 1929 sets out the state’s position in relation to receiving distinguished guests:

Generally, policy is to keep State hospitality as exclusive as possible, and up to this only persons and bodies of a certain type have been looked after. These would include Ministers of foreign Governments, distinguished publicists of international repute and, to a certain extent, industrial magnates. An unpretentious dinner or a luncheon given by the President or a Minister is all that has been done hereto...²

In the absence of state reception rooms during this period, the unpretentious dinners or luncheons referred to above generally took place at hotels in Dublin city centre, in particular at The Shelbourne Hotel and The Gresham Hotel where the influence of French haute cuisine has been firmly established through the presence of foreign-born

chefs trained in the classic French tradition and who, in this case, were both Swiss (Mac Con Iomaire, 2009).

It would not be until 1932 when Dublin Castle, which had been the seat of Imperial rule until 1922, would receive the ‘greatest spring clean’ in its history and start to serve as ‘State reception rooms for the newer *régime*’ (The Irish Times, 1932, p. 5). The first signs of diplomatic dining and ceremony emerge at Dublin Castle between 1934 and 1939 where a number of banquets - with food and services supplied by outside catering firms - were hosted by the Irish Free State

Early Material Culture in Irish Missions Abroad

The first Irish missions abroad were set up during the period 1922-1939. The High Commissioner’s Office in London was established in London in 1923 and over the course of the next 15 years, legations were opened in Geneva (1923), Washington (1924), Paris (1929), Holy See (1929), Berlin (1929) and Madrid (1935) (Crowe et al, 1998, p. 560).

Consular offices were also opened in Boston (1929), New York (1930), Chicago (1934) and San Francisco (1933) but as they were established to deal with trade matters and issues relating to Irish nationals and did not have a Minister’s residence attached to them, they are only mentioned briefly in this paper.

In line with its functions, the Office of Public Works (OPW) supplied the legations abroad with furniture: Berlin, Paris, Rome, London and Madrid. Geneva and Washington were furnished by the DEA, and supplemented by the OPW. Lists of furnishings were kept on file by the DEA while the OPW used the Roneo card system to keep inventories of the furnishings supplied to all the buildings under its remit.³

When the OPW⁴ requested sanction from the Department of Finance in 1935 to enable one of its Furniture Clerks to complete an inventory at the legation in Paris, the Department of Finance queried the system for keeping records of state furniture abroad.⁵ What eventually became clear was that only two inventories were up to date and held on the Roneo card system (Berlin and Paris) and that no formal inventories had been drawn up for Rome, London, Madrid, Geneva or Washington. There was no established means for keeping inventories up to date and the only way in which the OPW was kept informed of amendments was if the Minister at a legation made a specific record of additions, scrappages, breakages or alterations and then duly informed the Furniture Clerk in Dublin so that all the records could tally.⁶ It was decided to approach the DEA and ask that each legation supply complete inventories of the items held abroad, whereupon the OPW would then check these lists against their own records and establish a complete set of inventories on the Roneo card system for each representation.⁷

In a letter dated 25 August 1936 the Commissioner of Public Works formally requested the cooperation of the

DEA and the legations abroad to help establish accurate lists of state owned furniture on their premises and in this way, help avoid the expense which would be incurred by the OPW having to send its own staff abroad to carry out the task. The legations in Berlin and Paris were asked to check the inventories already established and to list any amendments. Geneva, Rome, London, Madrid and Washington were asked to carry out an inventory room-by-room and ‘to list articles such as cutlery, glass, china, linen etc’ separately.⁸ The DEA agreed to the Commissioner’s request, duly corresponded with its legations abroad and kept the OPW updated on progress.

The first completed inventory arrived from Paris,⁹ followed by the Holy See,¹⁰ Berlin,¹¹ Washington¹² and lastly, Geneva.¹³ The Madrid legation was unable to complete its inventory due to ‘present circumstances’¹⁴ (presumably the Spanish Civil War of 1936-39) and at the request of the High Commissioner in London, a Furniture Clerk from the OPW was despatched to carry out the inventory.¹⁵

What is apparent from the lists of cutlery, glass, china and linen sent to Dublin is that nothing was standardised. There is no obvious order or clear use of particular brands. When compared to the OPW lists it is not apparent whether the items supplied had anything more than a domestic function as opposed to an official one.

Some legations listed ‘bone china’ dinner services (Holy See), others simply listed ‘china’ (Berlin) with neither premises making any reference to quality. The OPW lists mention ‘dinner plates’ but do not indicate the quality, type or brand. Descriptions of cutlery differ also, described as ‘silver’ (Washington) and ‘plated ware’ (Madrid). Glassware was sometimes purchased locally (Holy See, Geneva) for no clear reason and subsequently described as glass while others were supplied with ‘cut glass’ by the OPW (Berlin, London). Other inventories contain unfamiliar items of glassware such as ‘sherbets’ (Washington) but which the Irish Ambassador to Washington in 1944 explained were in fact wine glasses and that the description was nothing more than ‘a relic from prohibition days’.¹⁶

The fact that the first Irish missions abroad were furnished rental properties might go some way in explaining the irregular quantities and the variety of items in their inventories. With no standardised procedures in place for furnishing Irish representations at that time, no apparent attention to the quality of the tableware but rather its function, the absence of a list of standard items available from the OPW (and which would not be available for quite some time)¹⁷ and no established specifications with regard to standardised ware of representation quality, it could be assumed that the next logical step might be to take on this task.

By the time the first set of inventories was completed in 1938, the Irish Free State had been transformed out of existence by the 1937 Constitution and its first President, Douglas Hyde, had taken up official residence at *Áras an*

Uachtaráin. The State Apartments at Dublin Castle were about to be renovated once more and by May 1941, the DEA had taken up permanent residence in Iveagh House where it remains to this day. From its new location, the DEA had a venue which would be a window to the world of Irish foreign policy and diplomatic relations, and in the post-war period would become the heart of the Irish diplomatic dining which was to take place in the decades which followed.

The Irish State Table

The task of establishing the Irish state table began in October 1946 when the Minister for External Affairs, Eamon De Valera, requested a dinner service for use at official dinners and lunches in Iveagh House.

In a letter to the OPW, the DEA stated that the Minister for External Affairs considered the service which was currently in use ('a strong white stone ware supplied by the caterers') to be inappropriate and asked for the 'special manufacture' of a high quality dinner service for 120 persons for official entertainment on his behalf.¹⁸ It was to be of simple dignified design and should bear the official emblem of the state. The service was to be kept at Iveagh House where one of the Department's officers would be responsible for ensuring that all the pieces supplied to the catering contractors in the building would be duly accounted for. At the same time, the Minister also required a suitable service of glassware, of similar quality and with the same identifiers, and which would be retained by the Department under the same control arrangements as the dinner service.

The letter continued, saying that the Minister would prefer that the items be of Irish manufacture adding that if the quality he had in mind was not currently being manufactured in Ireland then he would suggest that the order be placed in Britain, France or Sweden as they were all known for the excellence of their products of this character. The DEA's representatives abroad could, if necessary, assist in obtaining quotations or samples but no orders were to be placed until the Minister had seen the examples of the designs on offer.

A meeting was subsequently held between Mr O'Sullivan, Furniture Clerk at the OPW and officials of the DEA where a detailed list of the items required was drawn up. The corresponding DEA file reporting on the meeting indicates that Mr O'Sullivan mentioned that he was thinking of standardising the patterns adopted for use at government functions in all the legations abroad, in government buildings at home and at *Áras an Uachtaráin*.¹⁹

The project was momentarily postponed following the promise of a gift from the Czechoslovakian government several months later. Dr Korstal, the Czechoslovak *Chargé d'Affaires* in Dublin at that time met with Leo McCauley, Assistant Secretary of the DEA and informed him that the Czech government wished to present the Irish government

with '(a) a service of china for 100 people, (b) glass for the same number, (c) a crystal chandelier of "representation" quality, (d) perhaps, but not certainly, and in any case not immediately, a hand-made carpet.'²⁰ The gift was in return for the 2,000 heads of cattle which the Irish government had sent to Czechoslovakia the previous year as part of its Alleviation of Distress in Europe due to War commitments (House of the *Oireachtas*, 1947). If the offer of the gift was accepted, Dr Korstal requested that specimens of the harp emblem be made available for reproduction on the china and glass as well as the carpet. The reproductions were to be sent in colour so that the harp could be reproduced on the carpet in the correct colours.

Reporting on the meeting which took place on 30 May 1947 with Dr Edward MacLysaght, Chief Herald of Ireland at that time (National Library of Ireland, 2015) the DEA were informed that there remained two points to be settled regarding the harp: the number of strings to be shown and the position of the harp. The fourteenth century 'Brian Boru harp' on which the emblem was to be based had thirty strings but from a heraldic view point, eleven strings were considered preferable. The other point was whether to show the harp standing upright or so placed that the strings were perpendicular. Dr MacLysaght favoured the former as the latter would involve the harp being shown leaning. These points were to be discussed at a meeting with the Department of the Taoiseach the following week and as soon as the matter was settled, specimens could be obtained in a relatively short time.²¹ Later that year, the eleven string leaning harp was adopted as an exclusive emblem of the Irish state and is used by government departments and offices at home and abroad to this day (Department of the Taoiseach, 2013).

As a result of the forthcoming gift from the Czech government, the DEA postponed its request to the OPW for the dinner service and glassware and forwarded reproductions of the harp to the Czech Legation in Dublin in autumn 1947.²² The Czech *coup d'état* of early 1948 appeared to put paid to the prospects of the DEA obtaining the dinner service and glassware, not to mention the chandeliers and carpet so the DEA decided to take no further action unless the Czech government showed that it still intended to make the gift.²³ Several months later, the new Czech Minister to Dublin, Mr Ruzicka informed McCauley of the DEA that the glasses and china were about to be dispatched from Prague. The set of glassware arrived on 6 December 1948.²⁴

In the interim, the DEA had decided to press on with its proposal to the OPW and to expand its original request so that all missions abroad be provided with official dinnerware and glass of standard design bearing the state emblem.²⁵ A stock would be kept in Dublin from which the dinner and glass services could be replaced and breakages made good. It appeared that this was the practice in other countries and resulted in considerable savings. A small service of the intended dinner service and glassware would

be kept in Iveagh House for use on informal occasions. Iveagh House would also have the service from the Czech government but it would be reserved strictly for special occasions.²⁶ There remained the issue of the imminent dispatch of the dinner service from Prague recently indicated by the *Chargé d’Affaires* so the DEA decided to wait and see if it arrived. In the meantime, each of the missions abroad was asked to submit a list of requirements in terms of dinnerware and glassware as well as an inventory of those items currently available on their premises.

The project progressed slowly. With a network of 16 embassies and representations now ranging from Australia to South America, and from North America and Canada back to and across Europe, it took considerable time to gather the lists and inventories necessary.

In early 1950, the project started to take shape in terms of design and function.²⁷ Two services would be supplied to each mission abroad: a dinner service of ‘hotel ware quality’ for use by the family or on ordinary occasions and a special service of bone china which would be reserved for official functions. The items would be standardised. All items would have a gold edge. The ordinary ware would have the national emblem in gold on a blue background on the rim; the bone china would have the harp in gold on the rim.

The lists from missions abroad were finally collated by the DEA in July 1951 and Iveagh House staff used them to draw up the complete list of items required. These were then sent to the OPW where they were costed and sanction for the corresponding expenditure was requested from the Minister for Finance. The OPW then placed calls for tenders and received samples and drawings from potential suppliers which they duly transmitted back to the DEA.²⁸

The original request that the items be manufactured in Ireland was reinforced by suggestions from certain officials. In a letter to the DEA, Ambassador Fred Boland in London suggested that the bone china for official entertainment be supplied by Minton’s in the UK and that Arklow Potteries (Ireland) supply the items for everyday use. Although less elegant, wrote the Minister, Arklow Pottery ware was stronger and more resistant than that available from Minton’s and would be considerably cheaper. The Ambassador also suggested that the embassy be supplied with a set of Waterford cut-glass for official dinners and lunches along with a set of less expensive glass for everyday use.²⁹

Ambassador William P. Fay in Paris wrote to the DEA in support of Boland’s suggestions and appears to have had quite firm views in terms of the glassware to be used in Irish embassies.³⁰

He wrote:

I have always regarded the present official glass as inadequate. I do not like the design, which is very ordinary and the harp badge which should never have been put on good quality glass by the chemical transfer process but should have been engraved and

gives a most unfortunate impression that the glass has been presented to the Embassy as an advertisement...

He continued:

There might be something to be said for having local glass in each Embassy e.g. French glass in Paris, Swedish glass in Stockholm and Italian glass in Rome but there is little to be said for having English glass in Irish Embassies and Missions throughout the world, particularly when this glass has nothing in particular to recommend it.

He suggested:

Waterford Glass are now producing table glass of an absolutely first-class quality; and one of their suites of glass (the number of which is known to the OPW) resembles the classical cutting of 18th century Waterford glass. This is the model I recommend for our Embassies, it goes without saying that the employment of a distinctively Irish glass on the tables of our missions abroad is one of the best methods of advertising this excellent industry.

The State Tableware

A decade after establishing the material culture of the Irish state table was first suggested, the project was finally rolled out towards the end of the 1950s and continued in the early 1960s.³¹ The number of each item required was calculated by the DEA based on the capacity of the embassy in question. This information was sent to the OPW who then dispatched the items to the embassies.

Irish embassies and missions abroad were supplied with the following items for official functions on behalf of the Irish government, ultimately establishing the material culture of the Irish state table as follows:

- Waterford Crystal Cut Glass: Cashel and Lismore Suites;
- Newbridge Cutlery: Kings Pattern (later Jesmond Pattern);
- Arklow Pottery: Bone china with gold rim and harp badge on rim;
- Irish Linen: damask napkins, tablecloths and centrepieces.

Waterford Crystal

The original Waterford manufacture opened in 1783 and ran for nearly seventy years until its demise in 1851. A new excise tax introduced by King George IV and levied at all glassmakers within the realm marked the end of most glassmakers in Ireland, although Waterford managed to continue for another twenty five years (Grehan, 1981). The reference made by Ambassador Fay above refers specifically to the reputation held by Waterford during this period.

In 1950, Waterford Crystal was revived by a Czech national, Charles Bacik, who had arrived in Ireland with the intention of setting up a crystal factory in 1947. Nothing has been found in the research at the moment of writing which would indicate any link between Bacik and the gift of Czech glassware to the Irish government of 1947. There were few skilled glassmakers in Ireland at the time so Bacik travelled to Europe to recruit craftsmen who would not only produce crystal but who would also pass on their knowledge. One of those was Miroslav Havel, a Czech national whom he had known prior to his arrival in Ireland. Bacik persuaded Havel to come to Waterford where he was put in charge of developing the new factory's capacity for producing top-quality crystal. He was also responsible for the design of every product and training the new apprentices. He was instrumental in the commercial success of Waterford crystal from the 1960s to the 1980s and was particularly noted for the chandeliers he produced and which would become one of the company's most coveted products (Havel and Kelly, 2005).

Newbridge Cutlery

The town of Newbridge in County Kildare was a thriving garrison community at the turn of the 20th century and was left vacant when the army troops left in 1921. In a bid to encourage new manufacturing enterprises, the Irish Free State government encouraged the establishment of new businesses in non-traditional areas outside the major cities. It was decided that the metal forging and finishing equipment left behind by the army could be used for different purposes and the Newbridge Cutlery Company was born. From the time it opened in 1934 it quickly became renowned for the quality of its craftsmanship and at one point, employed over 600 people (Newbridge, 2015).

Arklow Pottery

Arklow Pottery in County Wicklow was formally opened in July 1935. As in the case of Waterford Crystal, staff were recruited from abroad to teach ceramic production to their Irish colleagues. Whitty (2003) explains that the introduction of the Dressler oven to the works allowed an output of between 20,000 and 25,000 items on a weekly basis and that each article was painted by hand, passed down a long table from one person to the next. Dogged by importation restrictions on coal during the Emergency of 1939-45, production and quality decreased. This can be clearly seen in correspondence between the OPW and Arklow Pottery during this period.³²

After World War II output increased once more and Arklow Pottery's 'Badged Catalogue' of the 1950 and 1960s supplied government organisations such as *Bord na Móna* (The Irish Peat Board) and establishments such as the Shelbourne Hotel, University College Dublin and the Royal St George Yacht Club.

In 1952 the Pottery announced that it had succeeded in developing an Irish mineral which was capable of producing

goods almost as fine as chinaware (Whitty, 2003). Arklow Pottery had originally been touted in the government project as the potential source for the hotel-ware quality which was to be supplied for less formal occasions. The presence of invoices from the Pottery addressed to the Irish Embassy in London at its new premises in Grosvenor Place in 1959 for a 50 piece dinner service of 'Burnished Gold Band & Line with Gold Harp Badge' appears to suggest that the new chinaware process announced by the Pottery in 1952 may have enabled it to tender, and be selected to supply the formal items of state tableware.³³

Irish Linen

The region of Northern Ireland has been associated with the production of Irish linen for centuries. Archival documents from the Vaucluse attest to the purchase of Irish cloth, most likely linen, in Avignon in 1432 (Kane, 1972). Damask napkins and tablecloths have traditionally been favoured by the Irish government and were produced by the firm Thomas Ferguson Irish Linen established in 1854 in Banbridge, County Down.³⁴

The Irish State Table Today

Each of these items appear on the Irish state table to this day. The Furniture Branch of the OPW remains responsible for their procurement and delivery to government buildings at home and abroad. Considering the size of the DEA's current network, these supplies are considerably larger and housed in large premises in a suburb of Dublin city (Plunkett, 2015).

That the material culture of the Irish state table is well established in the terms described above can be seen in research into the state banquet which was held in honour of Queen Elizabeth II's visit to Ireland in 2011 (Mahon, 2015).

As the first visit of a reigning British monarch since Ireland had gained independence from Britain, it generated a level of preparation previously unseen among Dublin Castle staff who described it as 'the most stage managed state event they had ever witnessed.' In preparation for the banquet, an entire new set of state tableware was ordered for the President's table. The items were those which have been in use since the material culture of the Irish state table was established over half a century earlier: Waterford Crystal glasses, Newbridge Silver cutlery, Arklow Pottery (now Noritake) bone china with gold edge and harp on rim, Irish Linen from Thomas Ferguson Irish Linen (Mahon, 2015).

Summary and Conclusion

This paper discusses how the Irish government set out to convey Irish identity by establishing the material culture of its state table. Drawing on government archives, the article outlines the beginnings of Irish state hospitality in the 1920s, the emerging diplomatic dining of the 1930s and the first attempts to establish inventories of state owned

furniture abroad. Examination of these inventories showed the need for a systemised and uniform supply of items for Irish legations abroad.

The paper then discusses how the DEA, firmly established in its new home at Iveagh House, set out to acquire a dinner service for official entertainment by the Minister of External Affairs and as a showcase of Irish manufacture. Gift-giving and reciprocity and its effect on the department’s project was then followed by the lengthy process via which the DEA came to finalise the details of its material culture in the early 1950s and its expansion to include all the missions abroad. Despite long delays and varying expectations from different officials, the project finally came to fruition in the 1950s.

The material culture was defined as Waterford Crystal, Newbridge Silverware cutlery, Arklow Pottery bone china and Irish linen napkins and tablecloths. Research into a state banquet in 2011 shows their continued presence on the contemporary Irish state table.

The Irish manufacturers chosen for the project in the 1950s, the subsequent development of their brands at home and abroad, along with their continued use for state occasions today indicates the state’s continued commitment towards the use of Irish brands as requested in the Minister’s letter of 1946. The presence of these items further reinforces the research of a nation’s state table described in the above introduction as a means to convey identity and its role within the statecraft of international relations.

This paper is part of a research project into Irish diplomatic dining, and the author is part of a research cluster into Ireland’s culinary heritage within the Dublin Institute of Technology. The aim of the research is to add to the growing body of scholarship on Irish gastronomic history and, ultimately, to contribute to the discourse on the existence of a national cuisine. If, as Zubaida (2014) says, ‘a nation’s cuisine is its court’s cuisine’ then it is time for Ireland to ‘research the feasts as well as the famines’ (Mac Con Iomaire and Cashman, 2011).

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