“OS200:Digitally re-mapping Ireland’s OS heritage”

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The Charles Close Society was founded in 1980 to bring together all those with an interest in the maps and history of the Ordnance Survey of Great Britain and its counterparts in the island of Ireland. The Society takes its name from Colonel Sir Charles Arden-Close, OS Director General from 1911 to 1922, and initiator of many of the maps now sought after by collectors.

The Society publishes a wide range of books and booklets on historic OS map series and its journal, Sheetlines, is recognised internationally for its specialist articles on Ordnance Survey-related topics.
OS200: digitally re-mapping Ireland’s Ordnance Survey heritage
Keith D Lilley and Catherine Porter

“Accompanied by Lieutenant Drummond, Colonel Colby traversed Ireland from north to south in 1824, selecting the most suitable mountains for principal stations, and collecting data for determining probable limits of altitude to be represented in the map.”

2024 is a significant anniversary year for the Ordnance Survey’s connections with Ireland. The bicentenary of Colby’s ‘traverse’ across the island will be marked in many ways and one significant contribution to this occasion is already underway, a research project called OS200.

Thanks to funding, awarded in 2021 by the Irish Research Council (IRC) and the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC), OS200 will enable a collaboration between researchers across the island of Ireland to reconnect - digitally - the historical records of the Ordnance Survey in Ireland. The three-year project is part of a €6.5m programme of research funded by the IRC-AHRC, bringing together world-leading expertise in the digital humanities across the UK and Ireland. The bicentenary year will be marked by OS200 with a conference and exhibition at the Royal Irish Academy, drawing upon the findings of the project, which involves a multidisciplinary team of researchers led by Queen’s University Belfast, University of Limerick, Royal Irish Academy, and the Digital Repository of Ireland.

From the outset, in Ireland the Ordnance Survey not only surveyed and mapped the land at the large scale of six inches to one-mile, but gathered geographical, archaeological, and toponymical information including local customs, antiquities, place-names and topographical features. These records capture localities across the island as they were in the 1820s and 1830s, including farming practices, language, folklore, trades and religion, as well as details of the lives and activities of those employed by the OS in Ireland. One of the key outcomes of OS200 will be a digital platform that reconnects many of these important records. Focusing especially on the OS Memoirs, Letters, Name books and First Edition Six-Inch Maps, the aim is to use digital methods and tools to develop new insights into the practices and processes of the OS operations ‘in the field’. While the history of the OS in Ireland has received much scholarly attention, through the work of John Andrews, among others, how the activities of the OS operated on the ground, across the island, has yet to be studied geographically.

As a focus for OS surveyors, busy recording local place-names, antiquities, folklore, as well as undertaking trigonometrical and topographic surveys, ‘the field’, rather than the archive, is principally what interests the project’s

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1 J E Portlock, Memoir of the Life of Major-General Colby (1869), 122-23.
researchers. Accessing the field as a locale of OS operations requires careful study and linking of the many disparate surviving records of the OS in Ireland. Some of these sources, such as the OS 6-inch maps and OS Letters, already exist in a publicly-accessible digital form, while others, such as the OS Memoirs and OS Name books, exist in part as digital records but are not public. Moreover, these records have yet to be brought together as a single corpus for analysis. Reconnecting them digitally offers significant potential for exploring how the OS operated in the local landscape, especially through tracking particular individuals named in these accounts, as they traversed the island.

With the creation of a digital corpus for OS200 and linking Ireland’s OS records, it will be possible for the first time to visualise who was doing what, where and when. This is important, as the connections between people and places are difficult to comprehend currently from surviving, disparate historical accounts of OS personnel. Using new techniques of geovisualisation and spatial analysis, the geographical and biographical information extracted digitally from OS Letters, Memoirs, Name books and 6-inch maps, will reveal the otherwise ‘hidden’ networks within which and through which Ireland was surveyed and mapped two hundred years ago, in effect following the footsteps of those involved on the ground.

In particular, the project seeks to reconstruct an ‘ethnography’ of the OS in Ireland, looking in detail at the movements of individuals, as well as their links with others, with informants and other OS personnel, studying the timing and geography of these movements and the unfolding of OS operations across Ireland during the late-1820s through into the 1830s. The accounts available for this are in certain areas more detailed than for others. With the Memoirs availability for the northern counties, the research team will be able to draw these together with other contemporary accounts, especially the Letters and Name-Books and to this end work has begun on a pilot focused on County Armagh. The common reference point found in OS records is the ‘townland’, that unique ancient administrative unit of Ireland. With the townland, the textual records of the OS can be fixed geographically, located and related to the townlands marked on the OS 6-inch maps. Using Geographical Information Systems (GIS), the digitised boundaries of townlands shown on the First Edition 6-inch maps provide a geographical ‘container’ to place those other, textual records of the OS. This geographical approach, then, reinserts the surveyors back into ‘the field’ and the myriad localities where they had worked.

The challenge facing OS200 researchers lies in sourcing and integrating digitally these disparate records of the OS. The gains however will outweigh the difficulties, for not only will the project offer new insights into the early work of the OS in Ireland, it will result in a more accessible digital resource for users. The records of the OS in Ireland are of international importance and interest, not only for historians of cartography and historical geographers, but for linguists, folklorists, archaeologists, genealogists and archivists the world-over.

Nineteenth-century Ireland is well recognised as having been the first entire country to be mapped systematically at the scale of six inches to one mile, and it
was Colby’s measurement of the Lough Foyle Baseline, in 1827-8, that attracted the attention of George Everest who then adopted Colby’s ‘beautiful system’ for the Great Trigonometrical Survey of India. To this end, the digital outcomes of the OS200 project will not only advance our understanding of how Ireland was mapped two centuries ago, but also open up to wider and new audiences the legacies and impacts of the OS, recognising the lasting significance of what was accomplished and marking the bicentenary of its instigation.

‘Sketch showing the mode of proceeding in measuring the Lough Foyle Base’ W Yolland, *An account of the measurement of the Lough Foyle Base in Ireland* (1847).

Professor Lilley (a CCS member) and Dr Porter are joint leaders of the OS200 project. To contact OS200 please email *k.lilley@qub.ac.uk* and to keep track of the project on Twitter, please follow @IrelandMapped.