Tarquin Blake: Abandoned Mansions of Ireland
Cork: The Collins Press
Éibhear Walshe

In many ways, the front cover of Abandoned Mansions of Ireland provides the most arresting image of the book, not simply because of the beauty of the stark black and white photograph of the Grange in County Limerick, but also because of the glowing red seething in the background. This serves as a visual reminder that so many of these Big Houses had been burnt out during the War of Independence and the Civil War, when the anger and resentment of the surrounding landscape seemed to be vented on the houses themselves and thus houses were, as W.B. Yeats put it, executed by the revolutionaries. This book of photographs provides a fascinating history of the ruined homes of the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy: in the accompanying notes the author details the various twists and turns by which each of these houses became abandoned, either by financial ruin, political upheaval or the ending of the family line. In his preface, Tarquin Blake tells us that he had been exploring the ‘lost and fallen architecture’ of other countries, ‘blissfully unaware that some of the most amazing things I have ever seen were almost on my own doorstep’. He began his task of photographing these houses in 2008 and this beautifully produced book, full of high quality photos, is the fruit of his exploration.

Structurally, the book divides county by county, and the photos are accompanied by a useful history of each house, including a list of residents as recorded by the 1901 census. It seems to me that the prevailing atmosphere around the Irish Big House always had that sense of alienation and abandonment, even when the houses were still standing and the households supported by income from the surrounding farms. In terms of Irish writing, this sense of alienation was responsible for nurturing some of our best novelists. ‘The loneliness of my house, as of many others, is more an effect than a reality. But it is the effect that is interesting. When I visit other big houses I am struck by some quality that they all have – not so much isolation as mystery. Each house seems to live under its own spell, and that is the spell that falls on the visitor from the moment he passes in at the gates’. Thus wrote Elizabeth Bowen of her own home Bowen’s Court in 1940. By 1960, her house was a ruin, lost because of her inability to keep it going, despite years of struggle and precarious survival.

As I looked at these photographs of collapsed floors, rotting timbers, foliage run riot, I kept thinking about the recent National Library exhibition Power and Privilege: photographs of the Big House in Ireland 1858-1922. The photographs of the National Library allow us access to a
radically contrasting view of the interior worlds, the pastimes, and the amusements of this very same world. We see large numbers of staff, the latest in expensive clothes, domestic luxury and the toys and gadgets of the rich. Those earlier photographs show us the wealthy Anglo-Irish in the period of greatest prosperity, right before the ravages of the Land Wars and the First World War. Here in Blake’s world, we have a post-apocalyptic view of the same houses and his connection and reverence for this world is seen in his introduction - ‘I will end this note with a plea for lost heritage; the abandoned mansions of Ireland are slowly disintegrating and memory of them fading’. His photographs will do much to preserve and hold this world.

Eibhear Walshe is a senior lecturer in the Department of Modern English at University College Cork and his publications include Kate O’Brien A Writing Life (2006), Elizabeth Bowen:Visions and Revisions (2009) and the memoir, Cissie’s Abattoir (2009).