

Metadata as cultural stewardship

rediscovering Irish diocesan libraries through cataloguing

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ABSTRACT

Irish diocesan libraries represent an important yet overlooked element of the nation's ecclesiastical and cultural heritage. Although many of these collections survive physically, inadequate cataloguing has limited their visibility within contemporary research environments. This article argues that metadata should be understood not simply as a technical mechanism for organising information but as an essential form of cultural stewardship. Through a comparative study of four historic diocesan libraries formerly associated with the Diocese of Cashel, Ferns and Ossory: Christ Church Cathedral Library, Waterford; St Canice's Cathedral Library, Kilkenny; the Bolton Library, Cashel, Co. Tipperary; and the Cotton Library, Lismore, Co. Waterford, it explores how differing approaches to cataloguing have shaped discoverability, preservation, institutional identity and public engagement. The article suggests that comprehensive metadata can reconcile scholarly accessibility with local stewardship, allowing historic collections to remain embedded within their original communities while participating fully in wider networks of research and cultural interpretation.

KEYWORDS metadata; cultural stewardship; diocesan libraries; heritage collections; discoverability

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Introduction

In the preface to *Fasti Ecclesiae Hibernicae*, Rev. Henry Cotton wrote that his purpose was "to preserve ... the memory of those who have held high office in the Church, and to supply materials for the future historian" ([Cotton, 1848–1878](#)). His words capture the original purpose of many Irish diocesan libraries. Established during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, these collections supported theological scholarship, preserved institutional memory, and sustained the intellectual life of the clergy. They also served as repositories of local knowledge, reflecting the religious, educational, and cultural life of the dioceses in which they were created. Today, however, many remain physically intact but are only partially visible within contemporary discovery systems, limiting their contribution to historical scholarship and public understanding.

While historic libraries are often discussed in terms of conservation, preservation alone does not ensure scholarly accessibility. A collection may survive physically yet remain effectively invisible if it cannot be identified, searched, or interpreted. Metadata enables the identification, discovery, and interpretation of collections, recording provenance and preserving the institutional context in which they were created ([Baca, 2016](#); [Gilliland, 2016](#)). It establishes intellectual connections between collections, institutions, and researchers, allowing historic libraries to participate in wider systems of knowledge. Without effective cataloguing, even significant collections risk becoming inaccessible to all but a small number of specialists.

This article argues that metadata is more than a technical mechanism for organising information; rather, it is a form of cultural stewardship. Drawing on four historic diocesan libraries associated with the Diocese of Cashel, Ferns and Ossory, it demonstrates how cataloguing has influenced discoverability, preservation, and institutional identity. In doing so, it suggests that comprehensive metadata can enable heritage collections to remain both locally rooted and intellectually accessible, ensuring that they continue to serve not only scholars but also the communities from which they emerged.

Metadata Beyond Description

Metadata is commonly defined as the structured information that enables information resources to be identified, managed, discovered, and used ([Baca, 2016](#); [Gilliland, 2016](#)). Within heritage collections, however, its significance extends beyond technical description. Metadata records provenance, preserves institutional context, and creates the intellectual connections through which collections become visible to researchers. It is therefore not simply a tool of organisation but an essential component of cultural stewardship.

Historically, Irish diocesan libraries operated as working collections rather than heritage repositories. Their holdings of biblical commentaries, patristic writings, sermons, and ecclesiastical law supported the daily pastoral and scholarly work of the clergy ([Brown, 2001](#); [Burns, 1999](#)). Access depended less upon formal catalogues than upon institutional memory: successive generations of clergy knew the collections intimately and transmitted this knowledge through continued use. As patterns of theological education changed during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, these informal systems gradually disappeared. Metadata succeeded institutional memory at precisely the point when institutional memory itself began to fade.

The subsequent histories of four diocesan libraries formerly associated with the Diocese of Cashel, Ferns and Ossory illustrate how differing approaches to cataloguing have shaped their survival and accessibility. Christ Church Cathedral Library, Waterford, was transferred to South East Technological University, where professional cataloguing restored its scholarly visibility while simultaneously removing it from the cathedral community that had created it ([Walton, 1989](#); [South East Technological](#)

[University Library, 2026](#)). At St Canice's Cathedral, Kilkenny, the transfer of the Ossory Diocesan Library to Maynooth University likewise transformed a largely local clerical collection into one accessible through modern discovery systems and national research networks ([Campbell and McCormack, 2017](#)).

The Bolton Library at St John the Baptist's Cathedral, Cashel, followed a similar trajectory. Professional cataloguing and conservation secured the collection's future only after its relocation to the University of Limerick, demonstrating how metadata can restore scholarly accessibility while fundamentally altering a collection's institutional context ([Coey, Turner and McGuinn, 2007](#); [University of Limerick Library, 2025](#)). By contrast, the Cotton Library at St Carthage's Cathedral, Lismore, remains within its original cathedral setting but continues to rely largely upon Henry Cotton's nineteenth-century catalogue ([Cotton, 1889](#); [St Carthage's Cathedral, no date](#)). Although physically preserved, it remains only partially represented within contemporary discovery systems and consequently underutilised by researchers.

Taken together, these four libraries reveal that metadata does far more than describe collections. It influences where they are housed, who can discover them, and how they continue to participate in scholarly and public life. Cataloguing is therefore not merely an administrative activity undertaken after preservation; it is one of the principal means through which heritage collections remain intellectually present.

Metadata as Cultural Stewardship

The four libraries demonstrate that metadata should be understood as more than descriptive information. It is an active form of cultural stewardship, shaping not only whether collections are discoverable but also how they are valued, interpreted, and sustained. Professional cataloguing creates intellectual access, allowing collections to participate in catalogues, authority files, digital discovery services, and wider scholarly discourse ([Gilliland, 2016](#); [Baca, 2016](#)). In doing so, metadata extends the life of collections beyond their physical preservation.

The case studies also reveal a more complex relationship between discoverability and place. In Waterford, Kilkenny, and Cashel, professional cataloguing followed relocation to university libraries, where specialist expertise secured both preservation and scholarly accessibility. These interventions have undoubtedly benefited the collections, yet they have also altered their relationship with the cathedral communities in which they were created. Metadata has enabled these libraries to enter national and international research networks, but only after they had ceased to function within their original ecclesiastical settings.

The Cotton Library presents a different possibility. As the only surviving diocesan library within the Diocese of Cashel, Ferns and Ossory still housed in its original cathedral, it offers an opportunity to establish comprehensive metadata before relocation becomes necessary. A programme of professional cataloguing, authority

control, and integration with shared discovery systems would make the collection visible to researchers while allowing it to remain within the architectural, liturgical, and historical environment that gives it much of its significance. Rather than preserving access through relocation, metadata offers the possibility of preserving both access and place.

This suggests that discoverability and locality need not be regarded as competing objectives. Advances in cataloguing standards, digital metadata, and collaborative discovery systems increasingly allow intellectual access to be separated from physical location. Collections can remain embedded within the communities that created them while participating fully in wider networks of scholarship.

Towards Collaborative Stewardship

Such an approach requires collaboration that extends beyond the cathedral itself. The experience of Irish public libraries demonstrates that stewardship is no longer confined to preservation alone but encompasses interpretation, partnership, education, and community engagement ([Department of Rural and Community Development, 2023](#)). Discoverability is the essential first stage in that process. Once collections become visible, opportunities emerge for exhibitions, educational programmes, collaborative research, genealogy, digital interpretation, and wider public engagement. Metadata therefore provides the foundation upon which these activities can develop, transforming collections from largely inaccessible repositories into active cultural resources.

For diocesan libraries, this points towards a model of shared stewardship involving cathedral custodians, university libraries, public library services, heritage organisations, metadata specialists, and local historians. Each contributes complementary expertise, while comprehensive cataloguing provides the intellectual infrastructure that connects their work. My own experience within the Irish public library service has demonstrated that successful stewardship depends upon collaboration as much as conservation. When collections become discoverable, they attract new audiences, encourage partnerships, and stimulate fresh research. Metadata therefore becomes more than an exercise in information management; it is the means through which historic collections remain rooted within their local communities while participating confidently in national and international scholarship. Through collaboration, discoverability becomes not an end in itself but the beginning of a collection's continuing intellectual, cultural, and educational life.

Conclusion

The four diocesan libraries considered here demonstrate that metadata shapes far more than bibliographic description. It influences discoverability, institutional identity, scholarly engagement, and ultimately the long-term stewardship of heritage collections. While the histories of Waterford, Kilkenny, Cashel, and Lismore differ

significantly, each illustrates the central role that cataloguing plays in determining whether a collection remains intellectually accessible or gradually recedes from scholarly awareness. Together, they show that the future of heritage collections depends not only upon their physical preservation but also upon their ability to participate in contemporary systems of knowledge.

The Cotton Library offers a particularly significant opportunity. Unlike the other collections, it remains within its original cathedral setting and therefore provides the possibility of establishing comprehensive metadata before relocation becomes necessary. Its future suggests that discoverability and locality need not be regarded as competing priorities. Instead, professional cataloguing can enable historic collections to remain embedded within their original communities while participating fully in contemporary research, education, and public engagement. In doing so, it offers a model that may be applicable to many other locally significant heritage collections.

Metadata should therefore be understood not simply as a technical process but as an act of cultural stewardship. By recording provenance, preserving institutional context, and enabling discovery, it reconnects collections with the researchers, communities, and institutions they continue to serve. Henry Cotton hoped to "supply materials for the future historian" ([Cotton, 1848–1878](#)). More than a century and a half later, that aspiration remains remarkably relevant. In this sense, cataloguing is not the final stage of preservation but the beginning of a collection's continuing intellectual, cultural, and community life.

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