

Belfast in 1911: An Experiment in Research-Led Teaching, Using Census Manuscripts

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On Sunday, April 2, 1911, Neal Gallagher filled in a census form for himself, his wife Mary Ellen, and their three children, Columba, Daniel and Kathleen. Neal was from Donegal, his wife from Armagh; the oldest child was born in Cavan and the younger two were Belfast-born. The census manuscript clearly reveals the family's migratory pathway, one shared by many other migrants to the boom town of Belfast. On a more poignant note, Mary Ellen, though only 30 years old at the time of the census, had already lost two children. She had been a young bride, married at the age of 19.

Neal, a Roman Catholic employed by the Royal Irish Constabulary, rented a red-bricked terraced house on a mainly Protestant street off Shankill Road. Even more challenging perhaps to some of our perceptions of the past, Constable Gallagher was an Irish or Gaelic speaker.

This family vignette gives a sample of the kind of evidence available from one of the richest sources on the Irish past: the original census forms filled in by some one million Irish households in 1911. The material is ideal for student historians in that it offers a window on social, economic and cultural life on the eve of the Great War, the Easter Rising and Partition. The problem, though, is that these manuscripts are held in the National Archives in Dublin and are not easily accessible to students or indeed anyone else.

Fortunately, the School of History & Anthropology is in the process of digitizing the census returns for Belfast for research purposes, and it struck me that as a spin-off venture we could adapt this work for teaching and learning. So, last year in the School of History we introduced a module called "Belfast in 1911," based primarily on original source materials rather than the more conventional textbooks and journal articles. Designed for a group of first-year students, the course was a somewhat risky experiment in research-led teaching.

We were inviting students to engage actively and imaginatively with source materials and to come up with their own findings. In view of the rich information in the 1911 census, the focus of their enquiries could range from family and household structure to marriage patterns, gender, residential segregation, child mortality, fertility within marriage, religious affiliation, occupation, literacy, housing conditions, migration and immigration to Belfast. More ambitious explorations could use these building blocks to interweave knowledge of two or more sets of variables.

Thus, students were assigned the role of *working historians*, rather than being relegated to the position of passive consumers of other people's knowledge. After all, history really is *made* by historians working with evidence. This was quite challenging, not least because students were being asked to define their own historical problem and come up with original findings.

The mechanics of the approach can be summarized as follows:

- The digitized versions of the original census documents (virtually identical to the originals but in a form that was more legible and more convenient for analysis) were posted on a dedicated website, <http://www.belfastfamilyhistory.com>.
- Students downloaded from this site a sample of 20 households, containing information about roughly 100 individuals. (10 of these households were from the Falls ward and 10 from the Shankill ward, so as to facilitate comparisons and contrasts across two working-class areas of the city.)
- Students were encouraged to read widely in the secondary literature on Edwardian Belfast, both to provide context and to identify key issues.
- Students then devised their own research questions or problems.
- Making history: Students analyzed the evidence available to them and came up with *original* findings.
- These findings were then related to the wider literature in the form of a research paper or essay.

Naturally, some students were apprehensive in the beginning; indeed, so was the tutor. The approach was supported by a series of weekly lectures and workshops, where discoveries, problems and imaginative possibilities were explored in group discussion. For example: What was the story behind the appearance of an Italian immigrant trader or a Scottish-born engineer in the Belfast of 1911, never mind the boarding house with mainly young unmarried females?

Our expectation is that the basic approach, with variations, could be rolled out across other courses in history, historical geography, historical sociology and Irish studies. Overall, students seemed to get a sense of achievement, as well as fun, from practising the historian's craft. This was independent learning (albeit supported by workshops and lectures) resulting in findings original to each student. Perhaps in the end the approach, and the type of source material being used, tuned in (like reality TV?) to one of the most basic human qualities: curiosity about other people and how they live.