

The 1901 and 1911 Irish Censuses: A Unique Source for the Historian

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As a source for historical research, the manuscript records of the Irish census were neglected for a considerable time. The data were available for use in the National Archives; no hundred year rule applied. Symes (1972) seems to have been the first to put the 1901-1911 data to academic use. My focus in this talk is on the different ways in which social and economic historians of Ireland have exploited the manuscript census returns in their research since the 1970s.

Timothy Leary and Joanna Herlihy were married on May 15, 1862 in the parish of Kilnamartyra (Cill na Martra) in northwest Cork. Their first son John was baptized on June 22, 1864. All three appear on Form A of the 1901 Irish census, living on a farm in the townland of Leac Beag (a place I happen to have known since early childhood). By then John was recently married and had two young daughters, Annie and Mary. A decade later, Joanna had passed away, but the 1911 census lists Timothy, along with John, his wife Nellie (named Ellen in 1901), and seven children. Another child, noted but not named, had died in the meantime.

Note first of all the discrepancies between John's recorded age in 1901 (30 years) and 1911 (43 years), and his true age in 1911 (49 years), as evidenced by the parish baptism register. Ellen has aged 14 years in the decade between the two censuses. More striking is the "aging" of her father-in-law Tim, from 60 years in 1901 to 83 years in 1911.

How old was Tim really in 1901? For one thing, Tim and Joanna's ages are suspiciously rounded, both at 60 years. For another, it seems highly unlikely that Tim would have handed the farm over to John when John was still in his mid-20s, and Tim still in the prime of life, in his mid-50s. On the other hand, the introduction of the Old Age Pension on New Year's Day 1909 gave many a farmer like Tim an apparent incentive to exaggerate their true age in 1911. The qualifying age for the pension was 70, and thousands made false statements about their age in 1908, so Tim would have been in good company. However, in Tim's case, the 23 years added to his age seems to have been a combination of pension-induced exaggeration and correction of age understatement in the 1901 census.

Several studies have drawn attention to or analyzed the problem with age-exaggeration in 1911. For those chasing their ancestors in the 1911 census it is something to watch out for (Ó Gráda 2002; Budd and Guinnane 1992). Analysis shows the likelihood of exaggerating one's age was a function of the likelihood of being eligible for the pension. Thus it was much more common in rural Ireland, where means testing was harder to enforce.

All the adults could read and write except Johanna. All spoke Irish and English, which meant that some Irish at least was spoken in the house, since the children were then still too young to attend Réidh na nDoirí (Renanirree) school, about a mile and a half away.

Johanna had died sometime between 1901 and 1911. Now John put himself down as aged 46 years and Nellie as aged 43 years (instead of the 40 and 39 one might have expected on the basis of 1901), while Timothy's age is given as 83 (instead of the 70 one might have expected). The

children are all described as scholars, except John, the youngest, aged 18 months. The 1911 census reveals that the Learys had built up a big family by 1911 (and did not end there).

1. Household Structure

Much of the early use of the census involved research in the tradition of English social historian Peter Laslett, focusing on issues of household size and structure. The issue, which is in hibernation now, generated a lot of heat at the time. Laslett's claim that the nuclear family had dominated in England for centuries prompted research into household structures elsewhere. On the basis of research into 18th-century Austria, a famous paper by Lutz Berkner (1972) criticized Laslett's approach based on cross-section, snapshot sources, for being too static. Berkner claimed that the typical household passed through a family life cycle, beginning with a couple plus the husband's parents, then three generations, then two as the old folk pass on. A snapshot would find that only a minority of households consisted of more than two generations.

The Leary household in Réidh na nDoirí was a stem rather than a nuclear family, and would remain so until John died. When Timothy and Joanna died, their three youngest children were still living at home. The farm passed to John, the second son, but all three siblings lived their whole lives on the farm in the townland of Leac Beag.

The 1970s produced its share of "SPSS history" in Ireland, i.e., social history papers involving SPSS-generated cross-tabulations. An early example is the paper given at a conference in 1975 by Frank Carney, then based in Trinity College Dublin, which used surviving manuscript data from the 1821 census by way of "extending our knowledge of 19th-century households and families in the British Isles beyond England" (1977: 44). The paper was a contribution to the literature on family structure sparked off by Cambridge social historian Peter Laslett. Carney found that household size was related to socioeconomic status, and that households headed by someone in the 45-54 year age group were biggest. Mean household size (MHS) in Carney's 1821 sample (5.45) was less than English MHS in 1811 (5.48), while Carney's comparison with other countries showed Irish MHS about the middle. A few years later Carney published another paper comparing 1821 and 1911.

Gibbon and Curtain (1978, 1983), Fitzpatrick (1981), and Varley (1983) continued the study of family size. The topic raised a lot of heat at the time: the discussion seems rather dated now.

2. Servants

Note that although the Learys were relatively prosperous by local standards, they had no live-in servant. Richard Breen (1983) showed that in 1911 farm servants in Beaufort, County Kerry, were concentrated on large farms with relatively good land (as reflected in valuation per acre). He also pointed out that there was a life-cycle quality to service: servants were disproportionately teenagers and young adults.

Joanna Bourke's focus on female domestic servants also highlights their rapid turnover. Again, matching households in 1901 and 1911, she finds that two-thirds of the servants in her sample had moved out of their jobs by 1911 (Bourke 1993).

Mary Daly (1985: 306-07) uses the 1911 enumerators' forms to analyze household structure by dwelling category -- tenements, corporation housing, artisans' dwellings -- in Dublin in 1911. The elite status of households living in artisans' dwellings is highlighted -- virtually no illiteracy, a preponderance of secure, skilled employment, whereas tenement households were most likely to be headed by a woman, or an illiterate, or an unskilled labourer.

Obviously, each census provides only a snapshot in time. One can generate some dynamics by treating different age cohorts as a pseudo-time series. Alternatively, several scholars have compared 1901 and 1911 to get some sense of dynamics. Comparing 1901 and 1911 permits some generalization about the life cycle aspect of service, leaving home, and so on. However, in an urban setting, you are talking about needles in haystacks. Digitization will facilitate searching in this respect.

The Leary's owned a decent-sized farm by local standards; in my own youth they owned a bull, which seemed as much a status symbol as anything else, and they owned two horses against the one on all neighbouring farms.

Guinnane (1997) exploited the census to examine a range of related issues, such as how the marriage rate varied by farm size, and the age at which young people left home for good.

3. Marital Fertility

It is evident from the published 1911 census that there was already an urban-rural gap in marital fertility a century ago, and considerable variation across counties. The manuscript census data offer added insights. It emerges that in rural areas there was little difference between Catholics and members of other denominations, relative to a few decades later at least. In Dublin, the fertility of Jewish couples was higher than that of either Catholic or Protestant couples (Ó Gráda 2006). This was not because Jewish couples were poorer, or because their children were less likely to survive infancy and childhood. A project currently underway by Tim Guinnane (Yale), Carolyn Moehling (Rutgers), and myself, looks at the fertility transition in urban Ireland, and attempts to account for the impact of both cultural and economic factors. Both mattered. One of the curious findings, which may not withstand further analysis, is that the religious ethos of a street had an impact on fertility.

4. Culture and Language Shift

Note that in 1911 John has changed his surname from Leary to O'Leary. Was this a political gesture? Certainly the O'Learys were known as "Lareys" in my youth; now, with the attenuation of local accents and dialects, they may be known as O'Learys. The census is also a great source on "naming."

The census forms also contain useful information on language. In 1901 and 1911, the language had not been politicized, and the revival had yet to bite in. Well, not entirely. Some -- very few -- in 1911 insisted on filling the form in Irish, and the enumerators tolerated this.

On the whole, though, for the student of linguistic history the data are pretty “clean.” You either knew Irish or you did not; there was less likelihood of those with little Irish claiming fluency, or of people with no/plenty Irish boasting/denying fluency. The microdata can shed light on interesting issues such as: What groups in a community led the shift? Were younger kids more likely to be brought up English-speaking? Did the presence of a monoglot relative in the household increase the likelihood that preschool children knew Irish? Comparing 1901 and 1911, what are the patterns of gain and loss? Some of these issues are addressed for Cléire/Cape Clear in Ní Chiosáin (2006). Ó Canainn (2006) infers the timing of the death of Irish in Ballinascreen in south Derry from the ages of the eldest English-only speakers in local households in 1901.

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