

Desperation genealogy or What the Rest of Us Can Learn from Irish Family History Researchers

Introduction

One way or another, we all get our easy research done and have to face the problems which are not so easy to solve. Sometimes we hit brick walls because we just cannot find our ancestral families in the census or because they did not trouble themselves to register the births of their children. Those of us of Irish descent almost always face the big brick wall as soon as we try to extend our families into Ireland. There are a number of reasons for why research in Ireland is so difficult. One of those reasons is that so many records were destroyed during a battle in Dublin in 1922. Rebels barricaded themselves inside the national archives and used the old probate files to block the windows. When that building went up in flames, census returns, most of the pre 1858 wills and probate records, pre 1900 court records and ½ the Church of Ireland parish registers burned. Therefore, the usual approaches to family history research are of limited use in Ireland. We have to try something else. It is the methods that have been developed by Irish researchers over the decades to get around the dearth of the usual records which we are here to share with you tonight. Our expectation is that you will come away with some new ideas on how to break down your own brick walls in other countries based on the methods and types of records we use to make progress with our Irish research.

1. Census Substitutes: What to do when the census returns have been destroyed or the census taker missed your family.
2. Looking for Records in Other Jurisdictions
3. Some Ways of Finding Places of Origin in the Old Country
- 4 The Importance of Identifying Very Specific Locations in the Old Country
5. Why You Should Not Limit Your Search to the Internet
6. Applying Advanced Techniques: If the elementary and intermediate methods of research are not working for you, there are the fancier and usually more time consuming ways of solving research problems.
7. Searching Out Obscure Sources. We have our basic family history sources such as the census and birth, marriage and death registrations. We have our second set of go-to records such as land and church records or wills and estate records or nicely indexed military records. Ireland does not have a lot of the usual records. Therefore we have to look for types of records which are pretty obscure by the standards of Canadian, American and British researchers. We have some ideas for you on what else to look for.

Census Substitutes

The earliest census available for Ireland is 1901. There are some small fragments of the 1821 and 1831 census which were rescued from the fire. However, for most researchers, there are effectively no census returns before 1901. Census substitutes are, therefore, one of the first sources used by researchers working on Irish ancestors.

A census substitute is a pretty comprehensive list of names of people living in a particular area at a particular time. The 2 big ones for Ireland are, of course, tax assessments:

Griffiths' Primary Valuation created between 1847 and 1864
The Tithe Applotment Books created between 1823 and 1838

These are as close to including the entire population of Ireland as it gets in Ireland. It took 15 years to complete each of these tax lists precisely because they were so comprehensive and carefully done. The tax list for each area in Ireland within Ireland was done in a specific month and year. Therefore, we do not know until we look into the details what precise years are covered for our place of interest. But they work fairly well for locating families in a time and place. Because they are both national in scope, we can use the indexes to Griffiths Primary Valuation and the Tithe Applotment Books to try to narrow down the place our families came from in Ireland based on the surnames.

There are more local tax and religious census. Religion was more of a hot political issue in Ireland than in many other countries. The country you are interested in may not have religious censuses. But every government has been interested in collecting taxes. There may be lists of all the men of military age or lists of every man eligible to vote.

To qualify as a census substitute, a list needs to include:

- The year the list was made
 - The name of each man (more rarely women)
 - The place where those listed lived
- Depending on the purpose of the list, further information about each person or household such as age, occupation, precise place of residence, value of their property or their religion.

A collection of records made from the since destroyed census returns which may be peculiar to Ireland is the files of the pre 1922 applications for Old Age Pensions. To prove their age, applicants were able to have the 1841 and 1851 census returns searched. Therefore, a fair number of official abstracts from the 1841 and 1851 census were created before they were burned. These abstracts still exist and can be searched.

The information from these census substitutes is not as much as we can obtain from the Canadian census. However, they do place an adult, usually the father, in a place and time. This tells us some important things:

1. He is still alive.
2. He has not yet moved away, or conversely, he has arrived at that locale.
3. His family is probably with him or will join him soon.
4. Neighbours are likely to include relatives, in-laws, or future in-laws and close associates.
5. If we can find other records for the time and place, we may be able to get more information about him and his family.

Looking For Records in Other Jurisdictions

Some of you may recall that the speakers we had last fall from the Military Museum told us that more information about a battle might be available in an allied country than in the country directly involved. They were talking about twentieth century conflicts and government censorship. Another reason another country might have a lot of records about the country you are interested in could be that it used to be a colony or occupied territory. For Ireland, the “other country” is England. In particular, a lot of Irish men served in the British Army. Those records are in London. Large parts of Ireland were owned by English landlords. The records of those large landed estates frequently list tenants and sub-tenants and can give quite detailed accounts of the doings of the tenant farmers, including the ubiquitous lease for 3 lives. The landed estate records may be in private hands but are quite possibly in an English county or university archives.

Work is involved in:

- a) determining what plot of land your ancestor worked
- b) who the landlord was, and
- c) where the landlord's records are

but, we are talking about desperate measures for desperate situations.

Foreign governments, foreign landlords ...

Church records: my own Irish ancestors include a lot of Irish Methodists. Many Irish Methodist records are in the archives of English Methodist denominational headquarters and The John Rylands University in Manchester. Did your family attend a church with headquarters elsewhere? Did their minister go back to the old country, or on to a different assignment, taking the church records with him? The same considerations could apply to missionaries and or possibly Roman Catholic orders of monks and nuns who served or were associated with a community.

Obituaries and news items may have been published in the local newspaper where relatives lived, such as places where children or siblings settled, or the home town where parents or siblings may have stayed.

For example, I recently came across an obituary published in the Christian Guardian in Ontario. The obituary gave an immense amount of information about the life of a parent, including the date and place of his birth, the date and place of his marriage, and the maiden name of his wife. This man lived and died in Ireland but had 12 children

living around the world in Ontario, New Zealand, Australia and the United States, as well as 1 or 2 still in Ireland. What a gold mine this obituary would be for a descendant living in Australia if he or she thought to look in a Methodist weekly newspaper in Ontario!

Applying Advanced Techniques

When the going gets tough, the tough get going. Irish research is all advanced methodology. Therefore, ready or not, we have to look at how other people have solved these difficult research problems.

For example, What to do when you do not have enough information about your ancestor's place of origin?

Answer: Do more research on the family or person and close associates in the place he or she moved to.

The Other Answer: a one name study

The Irish Answer: a two name study

When we have the maiden name of the wife, Irish researchers can use the Householders Index to try to narrow the place of origin of a couple to a parish or Townland where both the husband's surname and the wife's maiden name are found. The Householders Index is a combined surname index of the 2 big nineteenth century census substitutes, i.e., The Tithe Applotment Books and Griffiths Primary Valuation. The theory is that many surnames were limited to specific areas even as late as the nineteenth century. This does not work for surnames such as Miller and Myers which can be either English or German. It works better with Sparling since this is usually, but not always, an Irish Palatine surname found in very specific places in the counties of Limerick and Tipperary, and we really are all related to each other.

Digging Up Obscure Sources

We have already told you about tax records, local religious censuses and the estate records of foreign landlords; the luck of the Irish in finding obituaries in foreign religious newspapers, Just when you thought we couldn't get any more obscure:

Hayes Guide to Manuscript Sources for Irish Civilization – an academic list in 11 volumes plus supplements of unpublished documents such as diaries, land records and collections of letters. A complete set is held in the University of Calgary library

1796 Flax Growers List

This was a government program to bolster the Irish linen industry. Free spinning wheels were given out to every farmer growing flax. This is such an important source for Irish research that it has been available online at Ancestry for years.

The Royal Irish Constabulary

Service records from 1816 to 1921 for this national police force; also online at Ancestry

Sir William Betham's genealogical abstracts

These are notes made by a professional genealogist of a lot of Irish wills which he studied before those wills were destroyed in 1922. His notes have been microfilmed and are available through the Family History Library.

Desperation Genealogy: Notes for Irish Researchers

Census Substitutes

1. Griffith's Primary Valuation (1847 to 1864)
The Tithe Applotment Books (1823 to 1838)
The Householders Index – surnames from both the Tithe Applotment Books and Griffiths Valuation

online www.ulsterancestry.com, www.irishorigins.com, National Library of Australia and elsewhere, available on a Broderbund CD, available through Calgary Family History Center
2. Pre- 1922 applications for old age pensions – the census search forms available on microfilm from the Family History Library

Records in England

National Archives of England www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/

John Rylands University Library, Manchester: methodist collection

Obscure Sources

Hayes Guide to Manuscript Sources for the History of Irish Civilization at U of Calgary library

1796 Flax Growers List on Ancestry.co.ok and on a Broderbund CD

Royal Irish Constabulary service records 1816 to 1921 on Ancestry.co.uk

Betham's Prerogative Will and Administration Abstracts on microfilm at Family History Library

Sir Bernard Burke's will abstracts on microfilm at Family History Library

Recommended Books and Web Sites for Irish Genealogy

A Genealogist's Guide to Discovering Your Irish Ancestors by Radford and Betit
ISBN 1-55870-577-5

Tracing Your Ancestors in Northern Ireland by Ian Maxwell
ISBN 0 11 495823 8

Researching Down Ancestors: A practical guide for the family and local historian by Ian Maxwell
ISBN 1-903688-01-9

Researching Armagh Ancestors: A practical guide for the family and local historian by Ian Maxwell
ISBN 0-901905-89-5

Researching Scots-Irish Ancestors: The Essential Genealogical Guide to Early Modern Ulster, 1600 – 1800 by William J Roulston
ISBN 1 903688 53 1

IrelandGenWeb: www.irelandgenweb.com/

GENUKI: www.genuki.org.uk/big/irl/

Cyndi's List of Genealogical Sites on the Internet: www.cyndislist.com

Fianna Hideaway & Guide to Irish Genealogy: www.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~fianna/

Irish Ancestors: www.irishtimes.com/ancestor/

Family History Library Catalogue: www.familysearch.org/eng/library/fhlc

National Archives of Ireland: www.nationalarchives.ie/

The National Archives (UK): www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/

Public Records Office of Northern Ireland: www.proni.gov.uk