

1901 and 1911 Census digitisation project

1. Introduction

The household returns and ancillary records for the censuses of Ireland of 1901 and 1911, which are in the custody of the National Archives of Ireland, represent an extremely valuable part of the Irish national heritage, and a resource for genealogists, local historians and other scholars which has not as yet been developed to its fullest potential. The Irish diaspora is estimated to number 70 million people in all parts of the globe, and many of these have an interest in their family and local history. The digitisation of the equivalent records for England, Wales and Scotland has proved hugely popular with users, as has the digitisation of Canadian and United States census records.

The National Archives of Ireland has established a research partnership with Library and Archives Canada to facilitate digitisation, indexing and contextualisation of our 1901 and 1911 census records. Library and Archives Canada have a world-wide reputation in the field of document digitisation, and have already successfully digitised and partially indexed the Canadian census returns 1901, 1906 and 1911. As a fellow national archival institution, Library and Archives Canada (LAC) share our values in relation to preservation of, and access to, our documented heritage.

2. The records

The returns for 1901 and 1911 are arranged by townland (the smallest division of land) or, in urban areas, by street. The 1901 census lists, for every member of each household; name, age, sex, relationship to head of the household, religion, occupation, marital status and county or country of birth. The census also records an individual's ability to read or write and ability to speak the Irish language. All of this information is given on Form A of the census, which was filled in and signed by the head of each household. Where the head of the household could not write, his or her mark, usually an X, was recorded and witnessed by the enumerator.

The same information was recorded in the 1911 census, with one significant addition: married women were required to state the number of years they had been married, the number of their children born alive and the number still living.

In addition to returns for every household in the country, both censuses contain returns for police and military barracks, public and private asylums, prisons, hospitals, workhouses, colleges, boarding schools and industrial schools among other institutions.

The returns for both censuses give details of houses, recording the number of windows, type of roof and number of rooms occupied by each family. Each house is classified according to its overall condition. The number of out-offices and farm buildings attached to each household is also given. This information is recorded by

the enumerator, who provided summaries of the returns for each townland and street, including the religious denomination of occupants. These summaries include a list of heads of household, thus providing a nominal index for each townland or street.

The 1901 and 1911 censuses are an excellent source both for the history student and the genealogical researcher. They are obviously a principal source for Irish social and economic history in the early twentieth century. They also provide enormous scope for local study, and can be used with trade and street directories to provide detailed information on the composition and development of urban areas in particular.

3. The project

LAC will digitize the 1901 and 1911 census records to preservation standards, and two indexes will be created, linked to the digital images: a topographical index based on townland/street within District Electoral Division, and a nominal index to every individual listed in both censuses. A website will be created of which these images and indexes will form the core, surrounded by contextual and illustrative material.

3.1 Digitisation of the microfilms

Luckily, the census records have been microfilmed, and digitisation can take place automatically from the microfilms. There are 1209 microfilm reels for 1901, and 3281 for 1911. The backs of the household return forms were filmed for 1911, but not for 1901.

3.2 Preparation of an online topographical finding aid from existing sources

This has been prepared and transmitted to LAC. The fields in the database are: microfilm reel number; unique ID; county; district electoral division; townland/street; number of households; DED number; townland/street number; notes (details of interesting buildings in some townlands/streets).

Number of townlands, 1901: 60,462

Number of streets, 1901: ca.14,000

Total: ca. 74,462

Number of townlands, 1911: 60,679

Number of streets, 1911: ca.14,000

Total: ca. 74,679

3.3 Preparation of nominal database

The nominal database will reference surname, first name(s), age and sex for every individual in both censuses. LAC has commenced indexing each name in the census records for Dublin 1911, and e-linking this database and the topographical database to the digitised images of the records. It is expected that this process will be complete for Dublin 1911 by the end of March 2007.

The total number of nominal entries will be ca. 9 million.

Digitisation, indexing and e-linking for both censuses is expected to be complete by mid-2009.

3.4 The website

We expect to launch the website in Autumn 2007. The first phase will consist of Dublin City and County 1911, images, databases and contextual material (see 4 below). 1911 will be prepared first because the film is better quality than 1901, and we will be initially focussing on urban areas because of the present difficulty of finding one's ancestors in cities without a precise address. The website will be freely accessible, with no charge for viewing any of the material.

4. The context

The images and databases will be enhanced by contextual material consisting of historical commentary, photographs, digitised documents from the period from Ireland and Canada and links to relevant scholarly and genealogical sites:

4.1 The Lawrence collection of photographs from the turn of the last century is Ireland's most important collection of photographs, covering the whole country, including every city and town. They are in the custody of the National Library of Ireland, the Director of which has given us permission to use a selection of them;

4.2. We intend to commission pieces from historians, curators, literary critics and others on economic, political, social and cultural life at the time, and to link these pieces to the images. There will be particular emphasis on emigration, women's history, occupational issues, health issues, housing, contemporary dress, urban and rural environments, and first hand testimonies, where available. We already have extensive contextual material on Dublin in 1911 to accompany the first phase of the launch;

4.3. We are hoping to arrange to link directly to the printed census reports from 1901 and 1911, which are being digitised by the UK Data Archive. This will greatly enhance the scholarly value of the site;

4.4. It would probably be feasible to do a follow-through exercise on Irish individuals and families who emigrated to Canada, finding them in the Irish census and later in the Canadian census. This could be embedded in the contextual pieces outlined above;

4.5. We may digitize relevant small collections or documents, for example crime statistics for the period, emigrant letters from Canada where available and perhaps some literary sources;

4.6 LAC has already mounted an online exhibition of documents in their custody relating to the Irish in Canada, accompanied by text from scholars in the field. The Shamrock and the Maple Leaf can be found at <http://www.collectionscanada.ca/ireland/>

4.7 We have reached agreement with the Public Record Office of Northern Ireland to become involved in the project, and to contribute some of their extensive Canadian-related holdings to the website.

Catriona Crowe
Senior Archivist, Special Projects
National Archives of Ireland

Tel: +353 (0)1 407 2366

Email: ccrowe@nationalarchives.ie