



Researching Irish Ancestors: an introduction to the sources and the archives

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Interest in researching Irish ancestors has never been greater. Given Ireland's history of emigration, it is hardly surprising to find that around the world tens of millions of people have a family connection with the island. Much of this interest comes from Britain, the USA, Canada, Australia and New Zealand. What follows is a very basic introduction to researching Irish ancestors. It highlights what the major sources are and where they can be found. Prior to 1922 Ireland was under one jurisdiction and so where we refer to *Ireland* we mean the entire island. Where we are referring specifically to Northern Ireland or the Republic of Ireland we will try to make this clear.

Some background information

Exploding a myth

A popular misconception about researching Irish ancestors is that it is a fruitless exercise because so many records were destroyed. There is no denying that the loss of so many records in the destruction of the Public Record Office, Dublin, in 1922 was a catastrophe as far as historical and genealogical research is concerned. Three main categories of record were destroyed in 1922:

- Virtually all census returns, 1821–51
- The registers from over 1,000 Church of Ireland parishes
- Virtually all original wills probated before 1900

Many other records, including records relating to government and the courts, were also lost. However, *not* destroyed in 1922 were the registers from some 600 Church of Ireland parishes as well as church records for all the other denominations in Ireland. Neither were official records of births, deaths and marriages destroyed. Since 1922 the work of archivists to gather records of historical importance has resulted in a vast amount of material being available for the genealogical researcher to peruse.

Getting started

As is the case anywhere, the best way for someone to begin researching their Irish ancestry is within their own family. In nearly every family there is at least one member with an encyclopaedic knowledge of who married who and how many children they had and where they lived etc., etc. Collect as much information as possible on names, dates and places relating to your family; write it down and begin to plot out the skeleton of a family tree. Occasionally wrong information may be given, yet it is surprising just how often an elderly person's reminiscences prove to be an accurate recollection of the facts. A family Bible is another possible source of information on your ancestors. Gathering this information before you visit the archives can save a great deal of time. Once you find out what you do know you will then be aware of the gaps and will have a clearer idea of what you should be looking for.

The internet

The internet has transformed genealogy around the world and Ireland is no exception. To list all the websites that deal with Irish genealogy would be impossible as they seem to be increasing almost by the day. A website providing a fairly comprehensive listing of internet sites relating to Irish genealogy is www.cyndislist.com/ireland.htm

Some websites focus on a particular county or district and contain extensive lists of digitised sources, while others concentrate on a particular

family. Many of the genealogical centres affiliated to the Irish Family History Foundation have made their records available on a subscription basis at www.rootsireland.ie.

Administrative divisions

The following are the main units of administration in Ireland:

Barony

A unit used in Ireland between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries for administrative (census, taxation, and legal) purposes. Often drawn on pre-existing Gaelic divisions, baronies consisted of large groupings of townlands within a county. The 1891 census is the last to use the barony as an administrative unit.

County

There are 32 counties in Ireland, six of which are now in Northern Ireland. The county system as a form of territorial division was introduced into Ireland shortly after the Norman Conquest in the late twelfth century. The creation of counties or shires was gradual, however, and the present arrangement of county boundaries was not finalised in Ulster until the early seventeenth century.

Parish

This territorial division refers to both civil and ecclesiastical units. Civil parishes largely follow the pattern that was established in medieval times. Ecclesiastical parishes do not always coincide with civil parish boundaries, however. Following the Reformation in the sixteenth century, the Church of Ireland more or less maintained the pre-Reformation arrangement. Church of Ireland parishes are, therefore, largely coterminous with civil parishes. When the Catholic Church began its institutional re-emergence in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, it constructed a new network of parishes which did not necessarily follow the civil parish network.

Poor Law Union

Under the Irish Poor Law Act of 1838 commissioners were empowered to “unite so many townlands as they think fit to be a union for the relief of the destitute poor”. A Union was a group of parishes usually centred on a market town, where a workhouse might be built, with

parishes and townlands as subdivisions. Rates, land based taxes, were collected within these areas for maintenance to the poor. They were named after a large town. The same districts later became used as General Register Districts.

Province

Provinces are composed of groups of counties. There are four provinces in Ireland: Ulster in the north, Leinster in the east, Munster in the south, and Connacht (Connaught) in the west.

Townland

This is the smallest administrative territorial unit in Ireland, varying in size from a single acre to over 7,000 acres. Originating in the older Gaelic dispensation, townlands were used as the basis of leases in the estate system, and subsequently to assess valuations and tithes in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. They survive as important markers of local identity.

The archives

A listing of the principal archives in the island of Ireland will be found at the end. The most important in the Republic of Ireland are the National Archives of Ireland, the National Library of Ireland and the General Register Office. An indispensable book is *Guide to Irish Libraries, Archives and Genealogical Centres* by Robert K. O’Neill (3rd edition, 2013) which provides contact details, as well as summary information on collections held by the main archives in Ireland. The abbreviations used in this article for the main archives are:

GROI – General Register Office of Ireland

GRONI – General Register Office of Northern Ireland

NAI – National Archives of Ireland

NLI – National Library of Ireland

PRONI – Public Record Office of Northern Ireland

Civil registration

Civil registers of births, marriages and deaths provide basic family history information. However, their usefulness for the genealogist will depend on the period being researched. Civil or state registration of all births, deaths and marriages began in Ireland on 1 January 1864. Non-Catholic marriages, including those conducted in a