

Evidence and Enquiry: Using the 1901 and 1911 census forms in the History classroom, 2016 edition

Introduction

A census is taken in the Republic of Ireland every five years and it counts all the people in the country. However, the census does more than just count people. By researching the information contained in past censuses, history students can get an idea of the social and economic conditions of the country.

During a census, each household has to fill in the census form for each person staying in the residence on the night of the census. In 1901 and 1911, the form had to be signed by the head of the household, and by a government official. All information given on the form had to be correct. The only item of information that people could refuse to give was their religion. Each household filled in a census form, and census reports were compiled from these forms.

Census reports contain information on population, housing, religion, education, work, literacy, emigration and other areas. These reports never identify individuals or families. When Irish people filled in their census forms in 1901 and 1911, they gifted to us an incredibly powerful, personal testimony about their lives, one that is treasured by their descendants a century later. Historians can learn about families and neighbourhoods in a way that was not possible before. The original forms filled in for each family are now available online for the census of 1901 and of 1911 (www.census.nationalarchives.ie).

The National Archives, based at Bishop Street in Dublin, promoted the democratic notion of making all the materials from the 1901 and 1911 census available free to all researchers. As a result, teachers and students can now access for free original census records to show the importance of evidence in the study of history.

The census forms for 1901 and 1911 provide tremendous source material that can be used for Junior Certificate, Transition Year, and Leaving Certificate classes. They provide a very accessible range of primary documents, and have the capacity to engage students in interpreting the raw data of history. A large number of hooks and approaches are possible.

Junior Certificate students can benefit in two areas from the use of census materials.

In first year, the work of the historian is introduced, and students should find that the 1901 and 1911 census material easy to engage with. In third year, the census material can be used to illustrate changing life-styles in Ireland from 1900. The unit on the Brogan family in 1911 or the unit on Grace Gifford using the material from the 1911 census material are recommended for use in first or third year.

Transition Year students can undertake a more detailed examination of census materials, prior to undertaking a personal project based in part or in whole on the 1901 and 1911 census. The full section on *Evidence and Enquiry: Using the 1901 and 1911 census in the History classroom*, incorporating material from John O’Connell’s family in 1901 and 1911, the four other individuals from 1911, as well as the unit on the Brogan family are suitable for use in whole or in part in the transition year classroom.

Leaving Certificate students have the opportunity to use the 1901 and 1911 census materials for the research study report. Students can base their study on the 1901 and 1911 materials.

Note on the historical material

The first educational unit is based upon the 1901 and 1911 census returns of the family of John O’Connell (from Glasnevin, County Dublin). Teachers are encouraged to familiarise all students with the headings of the 1901 census form. The first section of the O’Connell material is used to illuminate the intent of the headings.

The census returns for four other individuals for 1911 are examined. The unifying focus here is that the people had to fulfil three criteria – they had to be listed on the census form of 1911, they had to have a connection with the events of the 1916 Rising, and the individual must have given a statement to the Bureau of Military History, an organisation set up to collect the stories of those who wished to record their memoirs of the 1916 period. For each of the four, the 1911 census form is examined, and then students are asked to consider some aspects of their witness statement.

The purpose of extending the historical exercises beyond the census forms is to encourage students to evaluate the invaluable information that is available on the census forms in the light of other available material that can give a broader picture of an individual's contribution. In the case of two of the individuals, further biographical material is available for the student to consult, thus allowing a broader range of materials to be used to assess a person's significance.

The four individuals selected for inclusion are –

- Edward Bailey, County Louth
- Grace Gifford, County Dublin
- Rosanna Hackett, City of Dublin
- Bernard McAllister, County Dublin

The unit consists of the following files:

- CSO 2015 A- History Introduction
- CSO 2015 B - History John O'Connell 1901 1911
- CSO 2015 C - History Edward Bailey in 1911 census and 1916
- CSO 2015 D - History Grace Gifford in 1911 census and 1916
- CSO 2015 E - History Rosie Hackett in 1911 and 1916
- CSO 2015 F - History Bernard McAllister in 1911 census and 1916
- CSO 2015 G - History Brogan family in 1911
- CSO 2015 H - History 1901 1911 census images
- CSO 2015 J - History 1901 Forms Bailey Gifford Hackett McAllister