

Irish Church Records

Church of Ireland—Presbyterian—Catholic

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INTRODUCTION

The Church of Ireland was decreed the *State Church* in Ireland in 1536 by an Act of the Irish Parliament. While members of the Church of Ireland were very much a minority, this granted broad powers to primarily the English settlers to be the ruling class. Among this ruling class, numerous records were created to document the laws enacted and to legitimize the displacement of the Catholic citizens.

The parishes of the Church of Ireland served as governmental centers for the administration of matters of probate and matrimonial jurisdiction. Its prelates and clergy became important officers of the state and exercised a disproportionate amount of power relative to their small numbers. Membership in the Church of Ireland was fundamental to persons serving in any government position or to owning land.

The impact of key events in Irish history determined such critical records as the starting date of Irish Catholic church records. The "relief acts" of the late 1700's began to restore some of the privileges that had been taken from the Catholics. The laws imposed on those who chose not to be affiliated with the Church of Ireland (State Church) affected the members of the Presbyterian Church and restricted their freedom to exercise their religion as they would have chosen. They were oppressed in much the same way as members of the Catholic Church. The result was that many continued their search for religious freedom by moving on to North America.

CHURCH OF IRELAND

PRE-1870 REGISTERS – for baptisms and burials and pre-1845 marriages are classed as public records (or property of the state) and are therefore deposited in the Public Record Office of Northern Ireland, Belfast and the National Archives, Dublin.

POST- APRIL 1845 – marriage records that were created as a result of the Marriage Act of 1844 and consequently provided for the civil registration of protestant marriages.

POST-1871 – registers detailing baptisms and burials after this date are the property and responsibility of the Church of Ireland.

Sources for research for members of the Church of Ireland are many. Researchers will often promote the myth that all of the records for this group have been destroyed. While there certainly were losses (two thirds of the parish registers), there are still many records left for examination and some substitutes.

Church records in the Church of Ireland were called into the Public Record Office, Dublin by an 1875 Act of Parliament. Unfortunately, there were many parish registers deposited when the record office was destroyed in 1922. There are numerous records that overlapped the parish registers and created a record of events which were recorded in these records. All of the following sources should be used for substitutes for parish registers: Marriage Licenses; Newspapers; Civil Registration of Marriages 1845+; extracts; Registry of Deeds; estate records; tombstone inscriptions; and transcripts of the 1600+ parish registers of the Church of Ireland, 1,006 were destroyed in 1922 in the PRO, Dublin. The records that survive are mainly for the North of Ireland (a point that should also be remembered for Presbyterian research since many burials were made in Church of Ireland cemeteries).

Many of the surviving records are deposited at the Representative Church Body Library, Dublin (RCBL). These are available for searches in person or through an agent. For a complete list of what is deposited as of 1 June 1992, see Appendix 3.1 in *Irish Church Records*, edited by James Ryan pp. 60-68. This list was created by Dr. Raymond Refaüssé and is also available as a separate list from the RCBL. It is updated as they obtain additional registers and other parish chest material. Many of the registers for the North of Ireland are on microfilm at the Public Record Office of Northern Ireland (PRONI). Recently the RCBL has initiated a project to begin publishing all of the existing Church of Ireland parish registers, but the work is progressing at a very slow rate.

After the destruction of the PRO, Dublin, the Deputy Keeper queried the various ministers about transcripts and copies of the registers made prior to the originals being deposited. For a list of the many copies which had been made, see the 56th *Report of the Deputy Keeper*, Appendix VIII pp. 416-420. There is always some question as to whether the copies of the registers sent to the diocesan offices were destroyed. The answer is yes, see the 41st *Report of the Deputy Keeper*, 1909 Appendix II, pp. 26-33.

CATHOLIC CHURCH RECORDS

The Catholic Church records were not destroyed in 1922. The Parochial Records Acts of 1875 and 1876 declared the *Church of Ireland* parish registers as "public records." The Catholic parish registers were not called in and were not deposited in the Public Record Office.

The Catholic Church records generally begin in the 1830's although some of the larger cities have records dating to the mid - 1700's. Many are in Latin and at first glance appear difficult to read. However, spending some time learning some very basic principles of the Latin used in genealogical records should provide you with enough information to begin transcribing the surnames of interest to you. The key terms are "filia" = daughter of, "filius" = son of, "conjuncti" = married, "Ws. = Witness and "Ss." or "Sps." = Sponsors. See for examples of Latin handwriting. The sponsors or godparents were usually very closely related. They were named to honor the child and the family and the intent was to strengthen the family. In the event of the death of both parents, they were often called upon to raise the child.

The most useful information on understanding the Catholic Church records was published in a work entitled *Irish Church Records, Their history, availability and use in family and local history research*, compiled by James G. Ryan. The Catholic records section was written by Mr. Ryan and gives a basic understanding.

PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH RECORDS

Many researchers consider the Presbyterian Church records a total loss even though none were destroyed in the Public Record Office, Dublin in 1922. Researchers tracing Presbyterian families from North America are usually trying to use the church records as an emigration tool. Since the Presbyterian Church records generally begin about 1830 and the peak emigration for Presbyterian emigration to North America was in two waves, one in 1740 and another in 1770-1780, these records do not make the critical link being sought.

Much of the published information about these records only highlights the starting dates for baptisms and marriages. The Kirk Session books may pre-date the church registers and sometimes the emigration link being sought is contained in a reference to a family moving out of the congregation. Other references to births, illegitimacy or deaths may also be contained. Sometimes relief to a widow is recorded, thus providing a reference point for the approximate death date for her husband. There is an excellent work on Presbyterianism in Ireland published in *Irish Church Records*, compiled by James Ryan, written by Dr. Christine Kinealy. Two key listings are found in Appendix 4.2 (pp. 88-101) listing all of the Presbyterian Church records microfilmed by the Public Record Office of Northern Ireland (PRONI). Appendix 4.3 (pp. 101-105) lists the Presbyterian Church records that are still held in local custody. PRONI continues to add to its collection so use the lists accordingly.

METHODOLOGY

The richest record of the recorded events is the baptismal register. Not all of the registers in the Church of Ireland, Presbyterian and Catholic Church records contain the same data elements, but when they are present, record the following elements. These should be approached with at least three scans of the data and transcribe the following:

- ✓ The name of the child with the *surname* being researched
- ✓ All of the entries where the *surname of the mother* is the relevant surname
- ✓ The names of the *witnesses* and record those entries

Using an Excel spreadsheet, create at least four different pages with the data. Sheet 1 should remain intact with the data as you have transcribed it. This will preserve a true copy of the data in case you make any errors when sorting the data – you always have the original copy.

Sheet 2 and all subsequent sheets should begin with a clean and exact copy of the data from Sheet 1. Now sort the data depending on the objective of your study. Label the sheet with the sort type. For example:

- Sort by the given name of the individuals baptized – this will give you the candidate entries of the same name and time period that may be in conflict and that need further research.
- Sort by the names of one or both parents to pull together potential family groups. This will group all of the children born to say a father named James, but easily identify multiple mothers' names (or spellings). It may also illuminate more than one father of that name or more than one marriage for that father. While the sort by the principle name of the person being baptized may also illuminate these patterns, you must have all of the data organized together to get the proper overview.
- Sort by the name of the father and the townland of residence. This will allow you to see all of the heads of household in a given townland. In the sort order, these should be followed by any illegitimate births where the mother's name and townland are listed.
- Sort by the names of the mother. This will give you a list of all of the persons of that surname and who they married. It is a great way to determine the marriages of female lines within a family even if the marriage did not occur in that parish or if the marriage pre-dated the recording of marriages in that parish.
- Sort by the names of the witnesses. It is advisable to record the names of each witness in a separate column so that you can sort by then names of the males (usually listed first) and the names of the females. Be careful not to lose the context of the witnesses tied to each event – you need to preserve both names associated with the entry.
- After sorting the witnesses by surname, sort them by residence. While this is the residence of the father of the person being baptized, it may reveal patterns in the potential residences of the witnesses.

You may want to preserve a separate copy of each of these views into the data for further analysis. The capability of Excel allows you to have multiple spreadsheets and use that copy multiple times.

ANALYZE THE DATA

As you analyze the data, look for patterns, anomalies, and incongruities within the data. This takes time; you will need to do as much of this as it takes to complete a thorough analysis of the data. As new information is uncovered, it will be necessary to go back and perhaps resort the data or mine it for additional clues.

At a minimum, you will need to:

- Evaluate naming patterns
- Correlate the dates
- Determine outside age ranges for each individual; note dates when the age is stated if available
- Identify the outliers – entries that may not make sense to the picture
- Account for each family member – list the members that are missing
- Correlate the areas where they live – map them
- Analyze their occupations and education

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6. Roulston, William. *Researching Scots-Irish Ancestors - The essential genealogical guide to early modern Ulster*. Belfast: Ulster Historical Foundation, 2005.

USEFUL WEBSITES

1. Church of Ireland – Representative Church Body Library (<http://ireland.anglican.org/about/42>).
2. Church of Ireland – Department of Tourism, Culture and Sport (www.irishgenealogy.ie).
3. Catholic Church – FindmyPast (<http://www.findmypast.com/>).
4. Presbyterian Church – Presbyterian Historical Society (<http://www.presbyterianhistoryireland.com/>).
5. Presbyterian Church – Public Record Office of Northern Ireland (<https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/proni>)