

1926 Census Briefing Document

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BACKGROUND

The first full census of population compiled in Ireland took place in 1821 and was the first in the then United Kingdom to record names.¹ It was not until 1841 that the census in England & Wales and Scotland noted each person's name.

Census records up to 1851 were compiled by the government through Dublin Castle, under statute, while those from 1861 to 1911 were compiled under the authority of the Registrar General. After the foundation of the State all census was compiled by the Statistics Department (later the Central Statistics Office) under the *Statistics Act 1926*, which was later repealed by the *Statistics Act 1993*.

Until very recent times, census records noted only a few details about each person enumerated. Generally, this was each person's name, age, sex, religion, occupation, literacy, marital status, place of birth, infirmities and relationship to head of household. Not all of these categories were covered in all censuses and in some censuses other questions were asked, such as statistics about duration of marriage, numbers of children born, and ability to speak Irish. It was only in the 1970s that the very inquisitive form of census we recognise today began to evolve.

CENSUS 1813 TO 1851

These records were transferred to the Public Record Office of Ireland (established by statute in 1867) where they were destroyed in the conflagration which consumed the Irish Public Records in June 1922, at the height of the Civil War. Before their destruction these records were widely used by researchers and academics. After the passing of the *Old Age Pension Act* in 1908 these

¹ There had been an earlier attempt to compile a census for Ireland in 1813, but it was never completed and little of it survived by the time it was transferred to the Public Record Office.

records were consulted widely in order to provide proof of age for pension claimants (who were obliged to prove from official sources that they were aged at least 70 years of age). To facilitate this the Custom House placed a number of clerical officers in the Public Record Office (PRO) to assist with the great burden this obligation suddenly placed on the PRO.

CENSUS 1861 TO 1891

The census returns for 1861 to 1891 were compiled under the authority of the Registrar General and thus were not administratively transferred to the PRO. Existing files in the Chief Secretary's Office papers in the National Archives (the successor body to the Public Record Office of Ireland, established in 1988 under the *National Archives Act 1986*) indicates that the Registrar General was mistakenly led to believe by the census authorities in London that he should destroy the original census returns after all statistics had been noted. However, this advice was given on the misunderstanding that Ireland, like England & Wales and Scotland, had compiled enumerator's transcript books of the original returns for permanent preservation.

CENSUS 1901 TO 1911

Although compiled before the creation of the State and under the authority of the Registrar General, the 1901 and 1911 census returns were transferred in the 1940s by the Statistics Department (then under the Department of Trade and Industry) to the PRO because of a lack of space to house them. In due course the PRO requested the Minister for Justice to open the returns to the general public and in 1961 Charles Haughey TD (then the Minister's parliamentary secretary) obliged and signed a warrant under the *Public Records (Ireland) Act 1867*. These census records were made available to the public because the earlier nineteenth century census returns had been destroyed through bureaucratic muddle and civil war. In the case of the 1911 census returns, it is apposite to note that only fifty years had then passed since their compilation.

CENSUS 1921

There was to have been a census undertaken in Ireland in April 1921, but at a session of Dáil Éireann in the second week of March of that year a decree was passed "authorising the Minister of Home Affairs to forbid the census proposed to be taken by the British Government as an invasion by an alien authority of the rights of the Irish people" (*The Irish Times*, 22nd March

1921). However, this decree was not mentioned in a related announcement made on 1st April 1921 by Dublin Castle:

“Owing to the existence of a state of rebellion in the South and West of Ireland and the disturbed conditions in certain other parts of the country, the Government have come to the conclusion that, if a Census were held in the coming month, it would be impossible to obtain complete and accurate returns. No useful purpose would be achieved by holding a Census at heavy expense if the returns so obtained were either incomplete or misleading, as no statistics based upon these returns would be of any value. The Government have, therefore, decided to postpone the holding of a Census in Ireland on the present occasion. Under the Government of Ireland Act [1920], all responsibility in regard to the Census question passes to the Governments of Southern and Northern Ireland. It will be for these Governments, when they are constituted, to consider upon what conditions and at what time the Census shall be held in Southern and Northern Ireland respectively.”

CENSUS 1926 TO 2011

The first census after the foundation of the State was eventually compiled in 1926. Thus the longest gap between censuses in the history of censuses of Ireland was the 15 years from 1911 to 1926. Historians studying that momentous period in Irish history, and all those involved in marking the approaching centenaries of the major events of the period, would find the 1926 census returns an invaluable primary source as those centenaries are celebrated.

Subsequent censuses were compiled in 1936 and 1946. After this time the census year was moved to 1951 and each decade thereafter.² However, a ‘short’ census was compiled in 1956, 1966, 1979, 1986, 1996 and 2006. There will be a full census undertaken this year, 2011.

The *Statistics Act 1926* appears to have been based upon a similar piece of legislation from South Africa. It made no provision for the eventual release of historical census records, although it should be pointed out that the Westminster Acts under which the 1901 and 1911 census was

² The 2001 census was postponed to 2002 because of the outbreak of Foot & Mouth Disease.

compiled also contained no such provision but this did not prevent them being ‘officially’ transferred to the PRO and made available for public perusal in 1961.

Interestingly, in January 2010 in a letter to a professional genealogist (Paul Gorry, who requested data about his parents and grandparents from the 1926 census) the Central Statistics Office (CSO) indicated that “...release of census information in respect of named individuals to their next of kin is allowable by law...”. However, the letter (written by the CSO head of census, Mr. Aidan Punch) went on to place obstacles in their own way as to why data could not be provided. This took the form of the logistics required to locate the data requested by Mr. Gorry. However, sources at the National Archives indicate that the 1926 census is fully catalogued and easily accessible.

100 YEAR EMBARGO

The *Statistics Bill 1993* provided for a 100 year embargo on census data, after which it would be released to the National Archives. This was done without any consultation amongst interested parties and stakeholder groups. This incident is a clear example of the point made recently by former Fine Gael leader John Bruton when he said on RTE Radio’s ‘Pat Kenny Show’: “*we have a sort of Civil Service–led system of administration which uses the Dáil and the Senate as a delivery mechanism*”. Through very effective lobbying, genealogists, led by the Council of Irish Genealogical Organisations (CIGO), managed to secure an amendment to the 1993 Bill in the Seanad reducing the embargo to seventy years, but this was later reversed in the Dáil by the Fianna Fáil led government.

Quoting no clear or firm evidence, the CSO argues that if census returns are not closed for 100 years then it will be difficult to ensure that the public will comply with future census campaigns. The flaw in this argument is that while all censuses compiled since 1993 automatically carry a compulsory 100 year embargo (under the *Statistics Act 1993*), no such commitment was given under the earlier 1926 Act.

REDACTION

The CSO is convinced that the Irish public cannot easily differentiate between a 100 year closure and a similar policy that closes data until, say, 100 years after an individual's birth. The obvious compromise is to redact! Census records compiled under the 1926 Act (which includes all census to 1991) could be opened to public scrutiny after 85 years in a redacted form, with all so called 'sensitive' information removed. As an example, under such a scheme the 1926 census returns would have become eligible to be opened in a redacted form this year, in 2011.

OTHER JURISDICTIONS (THREE EXAMPLES)

Canada – In Canada, under the *Statistics Act 1985* (section 18.1) post 1910 census records are closed until ninety-two years after the census was first compiled. In this instance, the 1921 federal census of Canada will be released in 2013.

UK - The UK introduced an embargo of 100 years in 1961. However, despite this in 2006 the UK Information Commissioner found that as no clear promise had been made about everlasting privacy in the England & Wales 1911 census the public had a right of access. From that time the UK National Archives began to release (in redacted form) data from the 1911 census.

USA - The USA releases all federal census returns seventy-two years after they have been compiled. Currently, all US federal census records from 1790 to 1930 can be found, fully indexed and searchable in unredacted form on the Internet. The returns for the 1940 census are currently being prepared for release in 2012.

TOURISM POTENTIAL

The creation of the fully searchable online database to the 1901 and 1911 Irish census (managed by National Archives' Senior Archivist Catriona Crowe) has been an outstanding success. It is of use to both genealogists and historians. Quite obviously, its potential for genealogy related 'roots tourism' is incalculable and since it was placed online it has played a large part in encouraging such tourism. Many of the Irish diaspora will say that they want to visit Ireland and the place their ancestors came from – but won't come until they know where they will be visiting. Given this, enabling potential visitors to identify their ancestral home place before they leave their

home country will encourage many more to invest the funds in visiting Ireland. To date, the National Archives' census website had received over 400 million hits.

No Cost to State

The 1926 census could easily be opened within the next year or two, and with virtually no cost to the state given that Irish and overseas genealogy companies such as Eneclann or Ancestry.com or Brightsolid (findmypast.co.uk) would be queuing up to invest in such an opportunity. Under a recent initiative, the National Archives now enters contracts with outside agencies where the agency invests its own resources in digitising and indexing a chosen record series and in return the agency secures a fixed number of years during which it can have sole rights to market access to the created database. After the period expires, the database and all rights to it return to the National Archives.