



Tracing Irish Roman Catholic Ancestry

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Introduction

For years, access to Irish Roman Catholic records was difficult. The Family History Library had copies of perhaps 30% of the parish registers on microfilm. The National Library of Ireland is the primary repository for the parish registers and transcript copies are available in heritage centres across Ireland, however gaining access was expensive. Now, however, the records have been digitized and released on July 9th, 2015 to the general public and are searchable for free, online from the comfort of your own easy chair!

Objectives

By the end of this class, you will be able to:

- 1) Understand the Irish Roman Catholic Church's history and records
- 2) Find reliable online resources about the locations of Roman Catholic parishes and the existence of records
- 3) Locate and search indexes to the parish registers
- 4) Locate, search and understand the parish registers

Irish Roman Catholic Church History and Records

In 1536, the Irish Parliament declared Henry VIII head of the Church of Ireland. While it took decades and, in some cases, centuries, the impact of this was significant. Politically, it was best to follow the tenets of the Church of Ireland. However, most of the population was Roman Catholic which caused problems for adherents because of their show of dissent against the government-backed church.¹

There also appears to have been poor internal organization within the Catholic Church. Since the 1600's, bishops in Ireland urged parish clergy to keep records, particularly of baptisms and marriages. Unfortunately, persecution and poor internal organization within the church meant these instructions were rarely carried out.² James G. Ryan explained, "It can be imagined that the keeping of records was a low priority in a church which was internally disorganized, and externally under legal, if not practical, threat of extinction."³

Historically, the Roman Catholic Church in Ireland has been divided into 26 dioceses within four provinces or Archdiocese (Armagh, Cashel, Dublin and Tuam). Each of the provinces was headed by an archbishop. Armagh is the "primatial seat" considered the head of and most prestigious of the four archdioceses. As of the year 1999, there were about 2,000 parishes in

¹ Ryan, James G. *Irish Church Records*. (Dublin: Flyleaf Press, 2001). FHL Book# 941.5 K27rj, pp. 108-9.

² Corish, Patrick J. and Sheehy, David. *Records of the Irish Catholic Church*. (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2001). FHL Book# 941.5 D27mg vol. 3, p. 37.

³ Ryan, p. 109.

Ireland.⁴ This can be contrasted to 1,153 sets of parish registers dating to 1880. The registers include baptism and marriage records. Burial registers were often not kept and are found in just over 200 of the parishes however.

While many records were lost in the famous Four Courts Public Record Office fire of 1922, Catholic records were not among them. Unfortunately, most parishes did not keep registers until the 1800's with exceptions for urban areas and certain regions. For example, 30% of the parishes in the Province of Leinster and 11% in Munster have baptismal registers prior to 1800 compared to 3% in Connaught and the more protestant Ulster.⁵ Most original registers are still at the parish church. In the 1950's and 60's, the Roman Catholic Church in Ireland participated with the National Library of Ireland to microfilm all of the earliest registers up to 1880.

Finding Roman Catholic Parishes and the Availability of Records

Ireland has two types of parishes: civil and ecclesiastical. The civil (i.e. government) parish boundaries are the same as the Church of Ireland ecclesiastical parish boundaries. The civil (i.e. government) parish boundaries are the same as the Church of Ireland ecclesiastical parish boundaries.

As noted above, as of 1888 Ireland had 1,153 Roman Catholic parishes with 1,066 of these microfilmed by the original National Library of Ireland project in the 1950's and 1960's.⁶ The National Library of Ireland website now indicates microfilmed copies from 1,086 parishes.

If you know the parish your ancestor was from and would like to see that parish on a map of parishes as well as know what records exist, the place to start is: John Grenham's - https://www.johngrenham.com/places/rcmap_index.php#maps/. Click on the county your ancestor's parish is in, then click on "Catholic records" and a map of Roman Catholic parishes for that county will appear. Click on the parish of interest and a table showing existing records with their locations and online resources will be presented and an excellent starting point for your research.

Another resource for a listing of available records are:

Grenham, John. *Tracing your Irish ancestors: The complete guide*. (Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing Co., 2006). FHL Book# 941.5 D27gj 2006. – There is a guide in the back to all known existing Catholic Church records similar to what is at the IrishTimes link above.

Another resource for a map of Roman Catholic parishes by county is:

Mitchell, Brian. *A new genealogical atlas of Ireland*. (Baltimore, Maryland: Genealogical Pub. Co, 1986). FHL Book# 941.5 E7m 2002.

Gazetteers are essentially dictionaries for places. *A topographical dictionary of Ireland* by Samuel Lewis, published in 1847 alphabetically describes all of the civil parishes in Ireland with their relevant Roman Catholic parishes. Here are two online versions, found at: 1) www.thecore.com/seanruad (find any townland's parish, and 2) <http://www.libraryireland.com/topog/>.

Locate and Search Indexes to Parish Registers

There is now a complete index to the registers of baptisms, marriages and burials at Ancestry.com and also FindMyPast.co.uk. Partial indexes can be found at FamilySearch.org,

⁴ Corish and Sheehy, p. 1.

⁵ Ryan, p. 114.

⁶ Grenham, John. *Tracing your Irish Ancestors: The complete guide*. (Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing Co., 2006). FHL Book# 941.5 D27gj 2006, p. 35).

though it would be less than 30% complete. RootsIreland (www.rootsireland.ie) is also a subscription website and has an almost complete index along with transcripts of entries (but no accompanying images) from the parish registers. **Just remember that the index is not complete and there are pitfalls especially related to the sometimes poor condition of the registers, Latin terms, and gaps in the record, etc.**

Locate, Search and Understand the Parish Registers

The obvious first place to look for digital images of original parish registers is on the National Library of Ireland website: www.nli.ie. Under the small heading “Family history research” click the hyperlinked text (“family history”). Then click the link, “**Visit Catholic Parish Registers at the NLI**”. You will be presented with a box to type in your parish name and view the images.

Each National Library of Ireland digitized microfilm appears with its number, the events (baptisms, marriages, burials) and time period, and the number of images. By clicking on the thumbnail of the image, a viewer will appear with controls for zooming in and out and adjusting the image to make it easier to read if necessary. The images themselves are in a “film strip” format. Scroll down to get to the next image. You can scroll for the length of the film.

You can also search more directly for a specific event and time period by using the “Filter Events/Dates” feature.

If you know only the county your ancestor was from, it may be necessary to search parish by parish until you find what you are looking for.

Searching the original records is absolutely necessary to accurately researching your Irish Catholic ancestors. The original register may have information not contained in an index such as Ancestry or RootsIreland. The indexed entry could be wrong, depending on the condition of the register, the handwriting of the clerk or priest, or the ability of the indexer to read the writing or type it into a database. The possible pitfalls were described by John Grenham this way: “The mass of spidery, abbreviated Latin, complete with blots and alterations and crosshatched with the scratches of a well-worn microfilm, can strike terror into the heart of even the most seasoned researcher.”⁷

Be aware the many Irish Catholic parishes bearing more than one name. You may wish to use https://www.johngrenham.com/places/rcmap_index.php#maps/ to help you determine the various names of parishes.

Or, another option for learning the different Catholic parish names is, again, using the NLI website, but at the following webpage: <http://registers.nli.ie/>. Skip the “Enter a parish name ...” box and scroll down to the bottom of the page and click the map of Ireland, for the map of your county of interest; find your parish and click on it. The excellent advantage to this map is that it shows the different names by which the Catholic parishes were called or named, as well as the neighboring parishes and neighboring counties!

When you click on the map showing your parish, there will be a “pop-up” box with some brief information and you will need to click on the name of the parish again to get to the parish page with the images. Note that this screen displays alternate parish names, a smaller, clickable map of your parish and the surrounding parishes. There are also links to Irish Times and Roots Ireland (described above).

⁷ Grenham, p. 37.

Information in Baptism, Marriage and Burial Entries

For a baptismal entry, the minimum information recorded will be the baptismal date, the name of the child and the name of the father. In most cases, the name of the mother, including mother's maiden name and the names of sponsors aka godparents will also be given. The townland in which the family resides and the father's occupation may also be included. This information may not be found in an index so it's always important to look at the original record.

Marriage entries should at least include the date of marriage, the name of the groom, the name and maiden name of the bride, and the names of the witnesses. Occasionally, places of residence are listed. If the bride and groom are related, the degree of relationship is often given as well.

Again, burial registers exist for only about 20% of parishes. When they do, burial information includes: the name of the deceased, date of burial and sometimes an occupation or residence (townland). Later years often include the age at death and for children at least one of the names of the parents, usually the father.

Latin

Many Irish Catholic records are in Latin. Here are some key terms and names that will help you understand the register better:

filia: daughter of

filius: son of

et: and

de: of

coram: in the presence of (witnesses)

patrini, Sp. or Ss.: sponsors (godparents)

conj./conjuncti: joined together in marriage

consanguinati en tertio grado: second cousins

affinus: related thru previous marriage of two families

sepultus: buried

This list isn't comprehensive so it may be necessary to consult a good Latin dictionary. Many can be found online.

Some given names in Latin are different enough from their English counterparts to be confusing. A couple of these are: Jacobus = James and Guilielmus = William. Often a name ending in '-am' indicates a female and a name ending in '-um' or '-em' is male.

More Things to Remember

- Surnames variations – use www.irishtimes.com/ancestor/surname for various spellings, etc. The 'O' in O'Reilly may have been left off in the parish register. Sometimes Gaelic surnames were anglicized. For example, many in the McGowan sept of County Cavan anglicized their names to Smith because *Mac an Ghabhann* means "son of the smith."
- First names and nicknames – (i.e. Delia or Biddy for Bridget). More information - *A Rose by Any Other Name: A Guide to Irish Christian Names* by Judith Eccles Wight (FHL Book# 941.5 D4w or film #1162446, item 2).
- Often, baptism entries will list the townland of the parents of the child being baptized. This will often be critical in helping to sort families, especially when the surname is common in the area.