



Editors' Introduction

What is social history? In this introduction we refrain from offering an analytical and systematic concept of the discipline for two main reasons. The first is that this book is a collective endeavour and the authors whom we have gathered here reflect a variety of approaches and methods. We affirm and celebrate such plurality of voices, believing that there is much to learn from listening to one another, for the age of the 'grand theories' is happily over. The second reason is that, for us, social history – and particularly this book – is not a point of arrival, but a point of departure. It is open-ended, it is a programme, a springboard for the rewriting of the history of the Irish. It is methodologically eclectic, open to cognate disciplines (geography, sociology, demographics, economics), and, if not *histoire totale*, it is at least interested in grasping the totality of human experience in society. Its totalising quest of meaning is a project, rather than a narrative.

Why do we start with the central decades of the eighteenth century? Though any chronological starting point would be more or less arbitrary, 1740 is significant for Ireland's social and economic history because it marked the beginning of a devastating famine. It was a catastrophe. It is not as well remembered as the one which started in 1845, partly because it did not have any immediate or long-term political consequences and was never incorporated into the grand narrative of national struggle. However, it deeply affected large numbers of people in a more direct and drastic way than political events such as the 1800 Act of Union.

Irish historiography, whether 'nationalist', 'revisionist' or 'post-revisionist', has traditionally been dominated by a concern for political history, with a focus on the national question. To an extent, the latter has affected also the way historians have explored social and economic topics, for example by stimulating excellent research on the Great

Famine, emigration and the Land Wars.¹ While there has long been a parallel scholarly interest in less obviously ‘political’ issues – a tradition spearheaded by historians such as Connell, Cullen and Akenson² – it is only in recent decades that there has been a substantial development in the study of a wider range of social and economic formations and phenomena. These include works on issues which used to be almost ‘taboo’ – such as class and sex – but also the social and cultural analysis of religious minorities and the questioning of the failure of the Irish state to sustain economic and social growth during the first generation since independence.³

This development has been vigorous and many-folded, yielding a rich crop of historical monographs on various problems long neglected by Irish historians – from urbanisation to elite formation, industrial development and the history of minorities. However, we do not have, as yet, any synthesis bringing together the results of this new way of looking at the Irish past. Partly as a consequence, these studies have not created the momentum which in other countries – already in the 1960s – resulted in ‘social history’ challenging received narratives.⁴ In the *Cambridge Social History of Modern Ireland* some of the scholars who have been, and are, reshaping the landscape of history reflect on the result of recent monographic research and offer a comprehensive new interpretation of the country’s history since 1740. Our emphasis is on economic and social change, our focus on people and cultures, instead of institutions and political ideologies, but this is not ‘history without politics’. On the contrary, politics is always present in our analysis, with reference, for example, to the impact of political and administrative factors on social practices, attitudes to welfare, family planning, women’s employment, child benefits and civil rights. While Irish migration was primarily driven by socio-economic and demographic forces, the timing of migratory flows and the destinations of emigrant Irish were influenced by wars and political decisions in the countries of destination. The Union with Britain shaped the evolution of education, health

1 For example, D. Fitzpatrick, *Politics and Irish life, 1913–21: provincial experience of war and revolution* (Dublin, 1977) and P. Bew, *Land and the national question in Ireland, 1858–1882* (London, 1978).

2 K. Connell, *The population of Ireland 1750–1845* (Oxford, 1950); K. Connell, *Irish peasant society* (Oxford, 1968); L. Cullen, *Six generations: life and work in Ireland from 1790* (Cork, 1970); L. Cullen, *The emergence of modern Ireland, 1600–1900* (London, 1981); D. Akenson, *The Irish education experiment: the national system of education in the nineteenth century* (London, 1970).

3 M. Silverman, *An Irish working class: explorations in political economy and hegemony, 1800–1950* (London and Toronto, 2001); M. Luddy, *Prostitution and Irish society, 1800–1940* (Cambridge, 2007) and D. Ferriter, *Occasions of sin: sex in twentieth-century Ireland* (London, 2009); F. Campbell, *The Irish Establishment 1879–1914* (Oxford, 2009); I. D’Alton, *Protestant society and politics in Cork 1812–1844* (Cork, 1980); C. Ó Gráda, *Jewish Ireland in the age of Joyce: a socioeconomic history* (Princeton, 2006); D. Keogh, F. O’Shea and C. Quinlan (eds.), *Ireland in the 1950s: the lost decade* (Dublin, 2004).

4 With a few exceptions, such as M. E. Daly, *Social and economic history of Ireland since 1800* (Dublin, 1981); T. Brown, *Ireland: a social and cultural history, 1922–2002* (London, 2003); C. Clear, *Social change and everyday life in Ireland 1850–1922* (Manchester, 2007); M. E. Daly, *Sixties Ireland: reshaping the economy, state and society, 1957–1973* (Cambridge, 2016).

and welfare, and any account of the social history of twentieth-century Ireland must take account of the impact of the formation of two separate governments after 1922.

Though contributors to the present volume adopt different methodological and historiographical strategies, they all share a sense that Irish history is best understood in a wider European and indeed global context. They challenge the insular, introspective paradigm of an Irish *Sonderweg*, and adopt an inclusive, eclectic and comparative approach, which borrows widely from a wide range of disciplines, including historical demography, literary criticism, social anthropology, archaeology, economics, sociology, social geography and the history of science.

Moreover, because the *Cambridge Social History of Ireland* focuses primarily on people, rather than institutions, its remit goes beyond the shores of the island: the diaspora, mass emigration and, generally speaking, movements of people in and out of the country are part of our subject. As is well known, there are many more people of Irish descent living overseas than in Ireland itself. They belong in the present history, because they have always played an important role in the economic, social and political development of the 'Ould Sod'. They helped to shape a worldwide Irish 'imagined community', encompassing both the diaspora and the Irish who stayed behind, especially those who contemplated emigration as a manageable option for either themselves or some family members. Thus, though often unwilling pioneers of globalisation, the Irish contributed powerfully to the creation of that quintessentially global entity, the 'English-speaking' world – one in which the language was a *lingua franca* rather than a symbol of nationality and identity.

This book is designed to be a tool to unpack Ireland's social and cultural history in its global as well as national significance. We hope that it will inspire our readers, in the words of W. B. Yeats, to 'go forth ... and seize whatever prey the heart long for, and have no fear. Everything exists, everything is true, and the earth is only a little dust under our feet.'

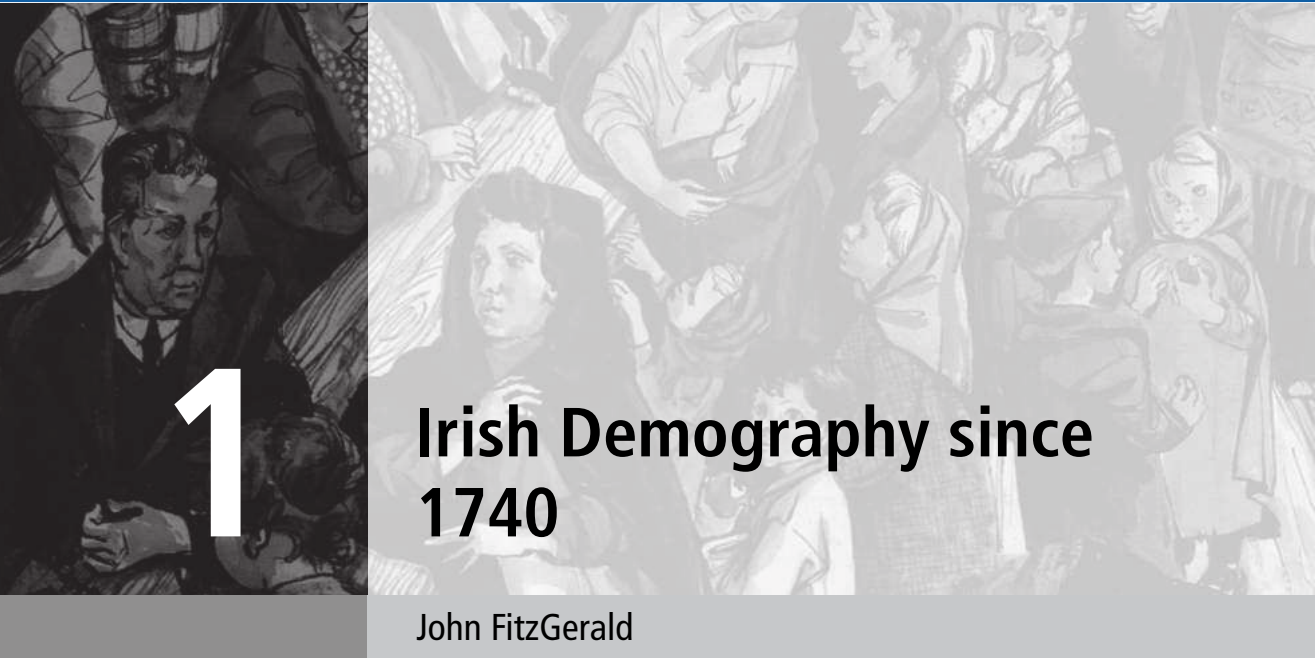
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PART I

Geography, Occupations and Social Classes



Irish Demography since 1740

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1.1. Introduction

The demography of Ireland presents an unusual picture when compared, not only with our nearest neighbour, but also with other European countries. The dramatic fall in the population in the nineteenth century caused by the Great Famine, followed by near stagnation for much of the twentieth century, makes Ireland exceptional. However, probably the most striking feature of Irish demographic change over the past two and a half centuries has been the role played by very large migratory flows.

One of Ireland's leading statisticians, writing in 1935, bravely provided estimates of the future population to 2016.¹ His 'high' forecast for 1996 was very close to the actual outturn of 3.6 million. However, he went on to conclude that 'it would appear that the population of An Saorstát is unlikely to exceed 3,700,000 during the next 80 years'. Already at 4.6 million, it exceeds this forecast by a quarter, highlighting the dramatic shift in demographic fortunes that Ireland has experienced in recent years.

Section 2 of this chapter describes the data sources that are available. Section 3 considers the demographic changes that occurred over the period 1740 to 1850, while Section 4 describes the changes in the subsequent 160 years to 2010. As well as considering demographic change on the island of Ireland, taken as a unit, where possible this chapter also analyses demographic developments in both Northern Ireland (the north) and the Republic of Ireland (the Republic).

¹ R. C. Geary, 'The future population of Saorstát éireann and some observations on population statistics', *Journal of the Statistical and Social Inquiry Society of Ireland*, 15 (1935/6), 15–35.

1.2. The Data

The 1926 census for Ireland collected estimates of the population from the late seventeenth century until the first full census for the island in 1821. Most of these estimates were based on hearth tax returns. However, as even contemporary analysts indicated, the estimates from these different sources were defective. Their reliability was affected by changes in the definition of exempt dwellings and also changes in the process of revenue collection. Connell analysed these data and provided a set of population estimates for the eighteenth century. However, his estimates also suffer from some problems. More recently, Dickson *et al.*,² using additional information, considered the reliability of individual tax returns, producing revised estimates of population in the eighteenth century.

The collection of consistent data on an annual basis for births, deaths and marriages only began in 1864. The paucity of reliable data on these vital statistics in the period up to 1864 makes the analysis of demographic change more difficult for the period to 1860.

Since 1821, there has been a census at least every decade. The first three censuses (1821, 1831 and 1841) may have involved some under-recording. In these early censuses an attempt was made to fill gaps in demographic data by asking questions about marital status and also about births and deaths over the previous decade. However, it was clear to contemporaries that these data, which were based on recall at the time of the census, were increasingly unreliable the further back in the decade they refer to.³

From 1864 to the present day, the annual *Report of the Commissioner for Births, Deaths, and Marriages*, now referred to as the *Vital Statistics* (for simplicity it is referred to in this chapter as the *Commissioners' Reports*), published data on births, deaths and marriages. This publication has changed little in content over the century and a half since 1864. As with all such nineteenth-century data sources, there are questions about their reliability. However, the internal consistency of the data suggests that they are reasonably reliable from the first publication for 1864.

One area where continuing problems were reported was in the recording of their ages by spouses at the time of their marriage. While in the 1860s up to 45 per cent of spouses recorded their actual age at marriage, this had fallen to about 12 per cent by the early years of the twentieth century.

When combined with the censuses, the *Commissioners' Reports* provide a pretty comprehensive set of data. While estimates are published of the numbers emigrating, the statistics omit emigration from Ireland to Great Britain. For the century

2 D. Dickson, C. Ó Gráda and S. Daultrey, 'Hearth tax, household size and Irish population change 1672–1821', *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy. Section C*, 82c, 6 (1982), 125–60, 162–81.

3 Census of Ireland (1851), part 6, XLIX.

Table 1.1. Estimate of population in the eighteenth century (millions)

	Ireland	
	Low	High
1706	1.75	2.06
1712	1.98	2.32
1725	2.18	2.56
1732	2.16	2.53
1744	1.91	2.23
1749	1.95	2.28
1753	2.20	2.57
1791	4.42	
1821	6.8	7.2 ¹
1831	7.7	
1841	8.2	8.4
1851	6.5	6.5

SOURCE: Dickson et al., ‘Hearth tax, household size and Irish population change’
NOTE: ¹ Including an adjustment in 1821–41, as suggested by Lee 1981.

after the Great Famine, Geary suggests that emigration to Britain was approximately 50 per cent of the emigration to the USA. However, as discussed later, on the basis of the census and of data for births and deaths, the numbers emigrating can be derived residually for the inter-censal periods. In turn, these estimates can be compared with the published estimates of the numbers emigrating to give an indication of emigration to Britain.

For Northern Ireland similar data are generally available from the *Annual Report of the Commissioners for Births, Deaths and Marriages*. However, there are fewer censuses for the north and they provide more limited information than the censuses for the Republic. In addition, there is not a continuous series for emigration from the north covering the period since 1922.

To make up for the limitations in the pre-1864 data an alternative approach, using a simple demographic model, was employed. The life tables for 1926⁴ were modified to reproduce the published life expectancy figures back to 1871. Using the resulting model, the population for 1841 to 1881 was predicted and compared with the actual population. This facilitates the testing of different assumptions on life expectancy and births.

4 Census of Ireland (1926), vol. V, part 1, tables 22 and 23.

1.3. Demographic Change, 1740–1850

The best source of information on the population in the eighteenth century is the hearth tax returns. To the extent that they provide a reliable indicator of the number of dwellings, they are the basis for estimating the population. Dickson *et al.* concluded that the tax returns for the first half of the eighteenth century and for 1791 are more reliable than the returns for the intervening years. On this basis they prepared revised population estimates for a range of years from the beginning of the eighteenth century through to the 1821 census (Table 1.1). Because of the uncertainty associated with these data, where appropriate, the authors provide a high and a low estimate of the population.

As shown in Table 1.1, between 1732 and 1744 there was a dramatic drop in population due to a major famine in the intervening years. Most of the fall in population was probably due to excess deaths, because emigration in the early eighteenth century was still quite limited. As shown in the table, in the second half of the eighteenth century and continuing to 1821, the Irish population grew very rapidly, maybe at a rate of 1.6 per cent a year. Thereafter, the population growth rate slowed to 0.9 per cent a year between 1821 and 1831 and to 0.6 per cent a year between 1831 and 1841. The Great Famine of the 1840s resulted in a truly dramatic fall by an average of between 2.3 and 2.5 per cent a year.

By the end of the eighteenth century there was already very extensive emigration from Ireland, mostly from the north. Connell estimated that emigration between 1780 and 1845 amounted to 1.75 million. Mokyr and Ó Gráda suggested that between 1815 and 1845 alone, 1.5 million people left Ireland, a much higher emigration rate than was suggested by the annual estimates published in the censuses. Mokyr and Ó Gráda, in their 1984 work, confirm Connell's hypothesis that marital fertility was high in the eighteenth century. They also suggest that the age at marriage was quite low in 1800: between twenty and twenty-two, rising to twenty-four to twenty-five by the 1840s.

The traumatic effects of the famine years of the late 1840s produced a dramatic change in the population. The upheaval was so great that, even with better data, it would be very difficult to estimate the composition of the demographic changes between 1840 and 1850; with the limited data available to supplement the censuses, a number of researchers have done extensive work to elucidate the key details of what happened.⁵

Table 1.2 shows the census population figures for 1841 and 1851. To the population estimated in the census is added an estimate for under-recording derived from Lee. If marital fertility had been the same as it was in the 1860s, then there would have been more than 2 million births between 1841 and 1851. Mokyr estimated that the

⁵ Summarised in J. Crowley, W. Smyth and M. Murphy, *Atlas of the Great Irish Famine* (Cork, 2012).

Table 1.2. Derivation of excess deaths due to the Great Famine

		Thousands
Population 1841 – census	+	8,175
Population adjustment (Lee 1981)	+	300
Births at 1860s marital fertility	+	2,034
Births – effects of famine (Mokyr 1983)	–	350
Emigration – official statistics	–	1,235
Emigration to Great Britain (Miller 2012)	–	300
Deaths – at 1871 life expectancy	–	1,167
Deaths – famine related	–	905
Population 1851 – census		6,552

SOURCE: Author’s estimates.
NOTE: The estimated life tables for 1871 are applied to the detailed age data from the 1841 census, deriving an estimate of the number of ‘normal’ deaths. This estimate is based on the assumption that life expectancy in 1841 would have been similar to that in 1871, were it not for the Great Famine.

effect of the famine was to reduce the number of births by between 0.3 and 0.4 million. The numbers reported to have emigrated to countries other than Britain over the decade amounted to 1.25 million, to which must be added an estimate for emigration to Britain of between 0.2 and 0.3 million.

If life expectancy in the 1840s had been identical to that in 1871, then there would have been about 1.17 million deaths. When these estimates are combined with the census population for 1851 they would suggest ‘excess’ deaths due to the famine of around 0.9 million. This is similar to the estimate of ‘excess’ deaths of 1 million.

1.4. Demographic Change, 1850–2010

Figure 1.1 shows an estimate of the population over three centuries. It is based on the Dickson *et al.* estimates for the eighteenth century, linked to the annual series published in the *Commissioners’ Reports* and its successor publications. It illustrates the dramatic changes that have taken place over three centuries, the most notable being the shock arising from the famine of the 1840s.

The Irish population fell nearly every year between the Great Famine and the end of the nineteenth century. In the case of what is now the Republic, there was only one year in the second half of the nineteenth century when the population did not fall. In the case of Northern Ireland, while the population also fell between 1851 and 1901, there were seventeen years when the population actually increased.

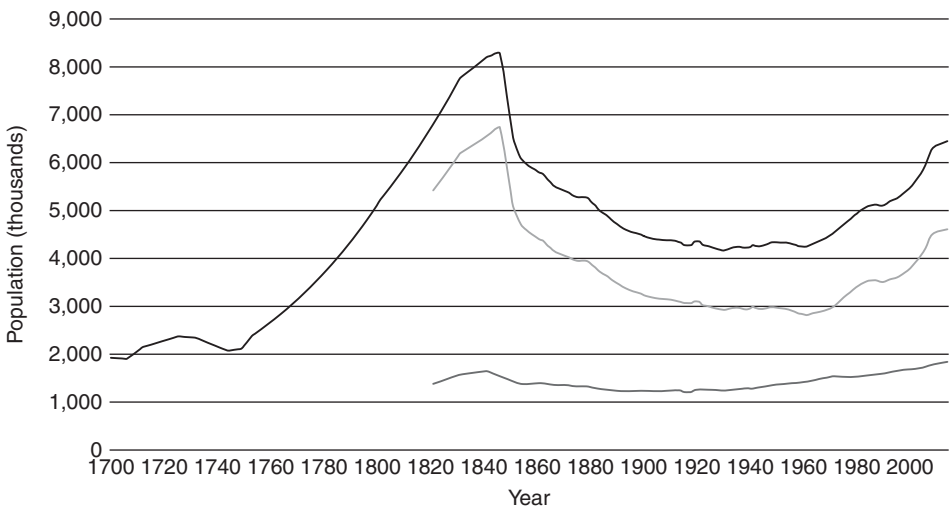


Figure 1.1 Irish population, 1700–2014 : Ireland (top), Republic of Ireland (middle) and Northern Ireland (bottom).

The population in the Republic fell in forty-five of the years between 1901 and 1961, whereas in Northern Ireland the population rose pretty continuously. This difference in experience reflected different rates of economic development in the two jurisdictions after 1922. It was only in the years immediately after the First World War, and again in the Depression years of the 1930s and during the Second World War that emigration from the Republic was halted or reversed. The very poor economic performance of the Republic in the first forty years of independence meant that the standard of living on offer in Britain was much superior to what was available in Ireland.

As a result, between 1850 and 1960 the population in the Republic fell by an average of 0.4 per cent a year, whereas in the north the population in 1960 was almost identical to what it had been just over a century earlier. From 1960 to 2014 the position has altered, with the population in the Republic growing by 0.9 per cent a year and that in Northern Ireland by 0.4 per cent a year.

1.4.1. Survival Rates in Ireland

For what are now the Republic and Northern Ireland, Figures 1.2 and 1.3 show the proportion of each cohort born between 1830 and 1890 that survived to a given age, taking account of the combined effects of emigration and deaths. The exceptional emigration and the dramatic increase in the death rate during the famine years had a devastating effect on the cohort born in the Republic between 1831 and 1840: by the age of thirty, less than 30 per cent were still alive and living there. However, as the century progressed, the death rate decreased rapidly from its famine peak, and emigration also fell, reflecting improved economic conditions. Thus, for the cohorts born in the 1870s