

Social Context of the 1901 and 1911 Census Records

AGI Irish Census Records

Ireland at the turn of the 20th century was a society undergoing profound change and the 1901 and 1911 censuses capture a country in transition. A series of Land Acts, culminating in the Wyndham Land Act (1903), transformed land ownership with a provision for tenants to purchase their farms, providing families with greater security and stability.

These changes coincided with a culmination of internal migration from poor rural areas to cities, such as Cork, Belfast and Derry, shaping new, urban, working-class communities.

However, overcrowding, disease and chronic poverty shaped daily life for tens of thousands of urban families, particularly in Dublin. Low wages, poor working conditions and overcrowded tenements, fanned the flames of social agitation. Figures, such as James Connolly and James Larkin became central to the emerging Irish Labour movement, advocating for workers' rights and improved working conditions.

When the Old Age Pensions Act (1908) introduced Ireland's first state welfare payment, 5 shillings per week to those aged 70 and over, many older people exaggerated their ages in the 1911 census to qualify for the pension, creating notable age discrepancies when compared to their 1901 returns.

Politically, the late 19th and early 20th centuries were shaped by the struggle for Irish self-government. Home Rule was the defining issue of the era, though it divided opinion and the country. Alongside this political nationalism, a cultural revival was also emerging.

The Irish language was central to this revival. Before the Great Famine, it is estimated that half the population were Irish speakers, but mass emigration and the English language national school system contributed to its decline. By 1911, only around one in six people reported speaking Irish.

The Gaelic League, established in 1893, promoted the Irish language and provided classes for adults and children. Some households completed their census forms in Irish as an act of cultural pride and subtle nationalism.

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CENSUS OF IRELAND, 1911.

Two Examples of the mode of filling up this Table are given on the other side.

FORM A.

No. on Form B. /

RETURN of the MEMBERS of this FAMILY and their VISITORS, BOARDERS, SERVANTS, &c., who slept or abode in this House on the night of SUNDAY, the 2nd of APRIL, 1911.

Number.	NAME AND SURNAME.		RELATION to Head of Family.	RELIGIOUS PROFESSION.	EDUCATION.	AGE (last Birthday) and SEX.	RANK, PROFESSION, OR OCCUPATION.	PARTICULARS AS TO MARRIAGE.			WHERE BORN.	IRISH LANGUAGE.	If Deaf and Dumb; Blind; Imbecile or Idiot; or Lunatic.	
	Christian Name.	Surname.	State whether "Head of Family," or "Wife," "Son," "Daughter," or other Relative; "Visitor," "Boarder," "Servant," &c.	State here the particular Religion, or Religious Denomination, to which each person belongs. [Members of Protestant Denominations are requested not to describe themselves by the vague term "Protestant," but to enter the name of the Particular Church, Denomination, or Body to which they belong.]	State here whether he or she was "Head and Wife," or "Census Head."	Insert Age opposite each name—the Age of Males in column 6, and the Age of Females in column 7. For Infants under one year state the age in months, as "under 1 month," "1 month," "2 months," &c.	State the particular Rank, Profession, Trade, or other Employment of each person. Children or young persons attending a School, or receiving regular instruction at home, should be returned as Scholars. [No entry should be made in the case of wives, daughters, or other female relatives solely engaged in domestic duties at home.] Before filling this column you are requested to read the instructions on the other side.	State for each Married Woman entered on this Schedule the number of—			If in Ireland, state in what County or City; if elsewhere, state the name of the Country.	Write the word "Gaelic" in this column opposite the name of each person who speaks Gaelic only, and the words "Gaelic & English" opposite the names of those who can speak both languages. In other cases no entry should be made in this column.	Write the respective infirmities opposite the name of the afflicted person.	
								Whether "Married," "Widowed," "Widow," or "Single."	Completed years the present Marriage has lasted. If less than one year, write "under one."	Children born alive to present Marriage. If no children born alive, write "None" in column 11.				Total Children born alive.
1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.	9.	10.	11.	12.	13.	14.	15.
1	Douglas (Hyde)	de h-íde (Hyde)	Head of Family	Roman Catholic	None	51	Retired	Married	18	2	2	Galway	Gaelic & English	
2	John	de h-íde (Hyde)	Son	Roman Catholic	None	42	Teacher	Married	18	2	2	Galway	Gaelic & English	
3	Maria	de h-íde (Hyde)	Wife	Roman Catholic	None	16	None	Single				Galway	Gaelic & English	
4	John	de h-íde (Hyde)	Son	Roman Catholic	None	14	None	Single				Galway	Gaelic & English	
5	Mary	de h-íde (Hyde)	Daughter	Roman Catholic	None	23	None	Single				Galway	Gaelic & English	
6	Margaret	de h-íde (Hyde)	Servant	Roman Catholic	None	44	None	Single				Galway	Gaelic & English	

Census return of Douglas Hyde / Dubhglass de hÍde (1st President of Ireland) 'as Gaeilge', in Irish using old Gaelic script - nationalarchives.ie/collections/search-the-census/view-pdf?doc=nai000186386
Courtesy of the National Archives of Ireland

Women played a far more central role in early 20th-century Ireland than the census alone suggests. Enumerators were instructed not to record women's occupations, despite rural households' reliance on women's labour and women being given the right to vote and stand in local council elections (with a property qualification) in 1898. Women played a critical role in the movements of cultural nationalism, while suffragism was also gaining momentum. Many of these women later played integral roles in the struggle for Irish independence.

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1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.	9.	10.	11.	12.	13.	14.	15.
1	Bridget	Nugent	Head of Family	Roman Catholic	None	21	Suffragette	Married	1	0	0	Galway	Gaelic & English	
2	Joseph	de h-íde (Hyde)	Son	Roman Catholic	None	23	None	Single				Galway	Gaelic & English	
3	James	Nugent	Boarder	Roman Catholic	None	24	Farmer	Married				Galway	Gaelic & English	

Bridget Nugent, Suffragette, Aghagogan, Carrickmore, Co. Tyrone — notably listed as head of household despite her husband's presence nationalarchives.ie/collections/search-the-census/view-pdf?doc=nai003385200
Courtesy of the National Archives of Ireland

Meanwhile, Unionism was strengthening, particularly in Ulster, where many feared Home Rule would threaten their political and economic interests.

The censuses capture this widening divide, revealing a society increasingly polarised yet culturally vibrant, on the edge of the revolutionary decade that would reshape Ireland.

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