

If this essay were a film documentary, it might begin like this:

**Daybreak.
Small cottage, exterior.**

A rattling sound as the door latch is lifted, and a woman hurries out. Close up on her face: she is not young, but not yet old. One hand closes the door, the other clutches the corners of her apron, and she looks down, anxiously, at the rounded shape it contains.

A long shot as she makes her way over the fields, towards the church spire in the nearby village.

Close up on another face, as an old man opens a more substantial door, fixing his collar as he does so. He is a priest. No words are spoken, but everything is understood; these two know each other well. Together, they enter the church next door. The woman unwraps the bundle, a newborn baby wrapped in old rags. She holds the baby over the font, and the priest baptises him. There is no sense of ceremony. As the water touches his head, the baby lets out a loud cry, and the two exchange a glance, a half-smile; this one will live. But the woman's half-smile fades quickly.

"There was another one, Father," she whispers. "It was twins."

He looks at her, a question, and she shakes her head, so small a movement it is almost imperceptible.

"And the mother?"

"She'll be alright, please God."

She settles the small shape into her apron again, and leaves.

The priest wearily passes a hand over his face. His eyes remain shut afterwards.

The woman was Mary Malone, and I heard from my aunt the story of how she used to carry the little bundles in her apron over the fields. My aunt, when she was young, heard the story from Mary herself, then an old woman but still called upon occasionally, into the 1930s, for her midwifery skills. It's a very striking and real illustration of how important baptism was. Civil registration began in 1864, but, for the mostly Catholic rural population, church baptism remained a more immediate concern, and was carried out as soon as possible after birth. Those twins, the one who lived and the one who died, would have been buried apart; one in the killeen and one, many years later, with his family, in what was always called 'consecrated ground'.¹

¹ Killeens were burial grounds for unbaptised children, of which every parish had at least one. They were simple, small enclosures, with stones marking the burials, which often took place at night in a semi-clandestine manner.

Catholic baptismal records are therefore considered more reliable as to dates of birth than civil records, and often record babies who died within days or weeks and were never recorded in the civil register.² In the case of first-born sons or daughters who did not survive, the names were very often the names of the paternal grandparents, and so baptismal records can connect a family to the previous generations in a way that the civil records can not. Civil registration required no sponsors (godparents) whereas these names are mostly recorded in baptismal registers, and are important to genealogists in that godparents were very frequently siblings of the parents. For parishes with surviving registers from the early nineteenth century, and in the lamentable absence of census records before 1901, it is possible sometimes to trace back three or even four generations using church records alone.³

The mother's maiden name is entered, and consanguinity is also recorded, a little worrying in its frequency but sometimes important in establishing relationships to earlier generations.⁴ Street and townland addresses are very often included too, though spelling variations can be puzzling; I will deal with this in more detail in discussing marriage registration.

Church of Ireland records go back further; in theory, they go back to the 1634, when the church (the state church, it should be remembered) was required to record christenings and burials. In practice, however, the majority of records start properly between 1770 and 1820, which is still many years earlier than their Catholic counterparts, and they are, in general, easier to read, as the registers were pre-formatted much earlier than the Catholic books. However, their baptismal records are less informative, lacking mothers' maiden names, sponsors, and, frequently, addresses. Given that the Church of Ireland population was considerably smaller, linking generations of families is, nonetheless, relatively easy, where there are no date gaps in the registers.

The loss of an estimated one thousand of the registers in the Customs House fire in 1922 is somewhat mitigated by the fact that many parishes made copies before sending the registers, as required by law, to the Public Record Office for, ironically, safe-keeping.

Presbyterian registers record the same information as the Church of Ireland books, but a complication is that they often do not cover a definite geographical area, such was the nature of their congregations, with dissension leading to splits at various times, sometimes leading to two Presbyterian churches in the same town.

Methodist registers also record the same information, but it is significant that the church had its own internal arguments, with the most important one, in 1816, leading to Wesleyan Methodists establishing themselves as a separate entity. Until then, Methodist baptisms (and marriages and burials) were recorded in the Church of Ireland books.

Of the few other congregations in Ireland, the most numerous were the Quakers, who kept records from the seventeenth century, not as parish registers but as recordings at monthly meetings in about twenty towns, with a fairly even geographical spread.

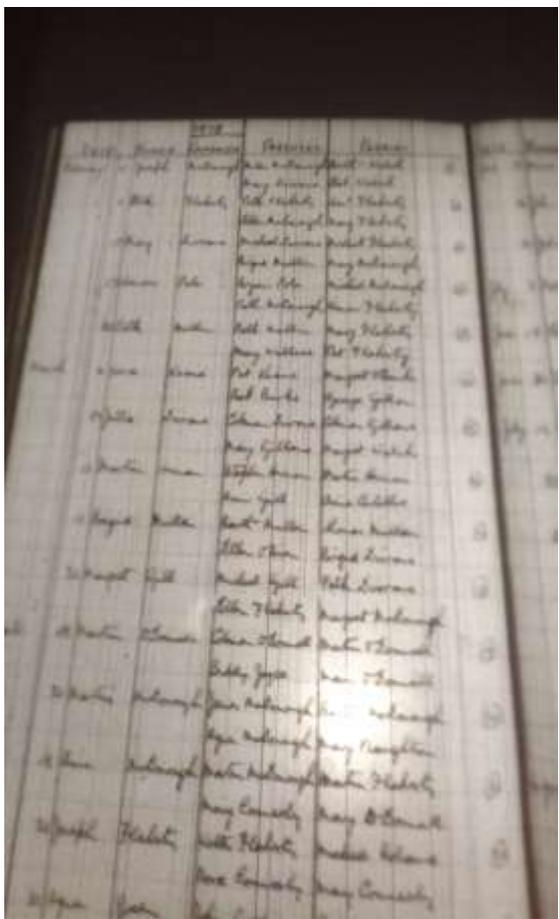
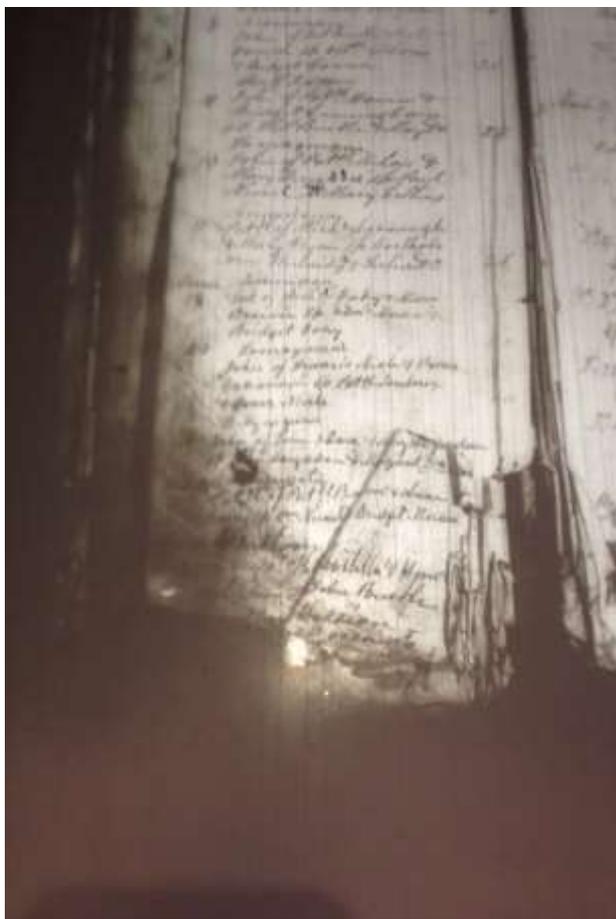
2 The infant mortality rate actually increased between 1860 and 1890, from 95.7 to 99.4, per 1,000 live births. Brendan Hensey, *The Health Services of Ireland* (Dublin 1972), p. 10.

3 Many Catholic registers date from the first decades of the nineteenth century, though poorer parishes in the north and west tend to start later. John Grenham, *Tracing your Irish Ancestors* (Dublin 2012: 4th Edition), p. 36.

4 The marriages of cousins appear not infrequently, unsurprising in rural situations for people who walked everywhere and whose worlds were limited to a few square miles. Keeping land within the broader family was also a factor.

It is crucial to view the records in the context of their time, to remember that there was frequent unrest which was not conducive to orderly record-keeping, and that the record keepers were subject to human frailties, such as forgetfulness and bad handwriting. It is estimated that about ten per cent of life events went unrecorded; some people lived long lives without being recorded anywhere in the church registers.

Registers were never kept in ideal archival conditions, and there are, sadly, many entries obliterated by damp and dogeared pages. Location is no guide to condition, as the photographs below show: both from around 1880, both from the Catholic Diocese of Tuam and side-by-side on the National Library microfiche, the register in bad condition is from Annaghdown in East Galway, and the one which looks like it was written yesterday is from the Aran Islands.



This mismatched pair of registers leads neatly to the subject of marriage, and if this essay were a documentary, it might continue like this:

Evening,

Priest's house, interior.

This priest is a young man.

He is seated at a table in front of a large ledger, quill in hand, inkwell uncovered. He is muttering to himself. Between the inkwell and the flickering oil lamp is a half-empty glass of whiskey.

His housekeeper enters.

"Ellen," he says, "could I ask you..." His speech is quite gentrified. But just a little slurred.

"Yes, Father?", she says with a slight, but audible, sigh.

"That townland name again, the wedding this morning, Curra...? Conna...?"

"Curracloon, Father?"

"That's the place. How would you spell that?"

"Sure I wouldn't know, Father, I never saw it written down."

"Oh, I see, well, all right, we'll just..." He writes somethings, strikes it out, tries again.

"And the boy, was he from...from...I wrote it down, but I can't find it now..."

"Wasn't he one of the McNamaras, Father?"

"Yes, McNamara, Patrick McNamara, where is he from again?"

"Was he Pat Johnsy, or Pat Mike?"

"What do you mean?"

"Was his father John, or Michael?" She speaks to him slowly, as if he's a bit simple.

"John. I think."

"Well are you *sure* Father?"

"Almost sure, yes."

"Because you see if he's one of the Johnsys then it's Gortaclareenbeg but if he's a Michael it's Gortaclareenmore...unless of course he's one of the *other* Michaels then it's a different story entirely, then it would be Gortaclareenagowna, do you see, Father?"

The priest takes another sip of whiskey, picks up the quill and scribbles something hastily in the register.

"Thank you, Ellen, that will be all."

Ellen leaves, rolling her eyes.

The priest wearily passes a hand over his face. His eyes remain shut afterwards.

I would like to claim that I was related to that somewhat impatient housekeeper, but this second scene is pure conjecture on my part⁵. It is well known, however, that townland names, almost invariably deriving from the Irish language, have presented many problems for surveyors, cartographers, clergymen and officialdom in general.

Curracloon exists: it is where my maternal grandparents lived, and I have seen it spelt variously as Curracloon, Corracloon, Connacloon, Curraghcloon, Corrachlune, Curracklune, Curclune, Curraglune and (on a list of Clare hedgeschools) Curragh Clewin.

Gortaclareen also exists, insofar as older people in the area can point in its direction and tell you it's

5 Her impatience may also have been her way of covering illiteracy. In 1901, nearly a million people out of four and a half million were still illiterate.

“behind the brow of that small hill”, but it appears on no official list of place names, on no old

maps, and in no land surveys⁶. It is, however, given on my great-grandfather's civil marriage certificate as his native townland, while in the church register he and his wife are both from Curracloon.

(I admit that Gortaclareenagowna is my own invention.)⁷

Names were also subject to variation, with McNamara sometimes becoming simply Mack, and a positively cavalier attitude taken towards the 'O' prefix; Sullivan is one of the names in the West Cork half of my own ancestry, and it's interesting to observe the ratio of Sullivans to O'Sullivans between 1901 and 1911.⁸ People seemed to use them interchangeably, and it would be a major error indeed to ignore Sullivans while looking for O'Sullivans in a parish register.

Priests were moved from parish to parish at a bishop's discretion, and rarely had time to familiarise themselves fully with local names and placenames. Further inaccuracies were incurred when recording marriages because many weddings took place in the home of the bride, and so the register was not filled in on the spot. As Catholic weddings traditionally did not take place during Advent or Lent, there would sometimes be a concentration of ceremonies just before these periods, and therefore a priest might have several weddings to write into the register together. In fact, some experienced genealogists would say that if there is a particularly neat page of weddings all within a short time period this can be a sign that they were all written up together and that therefore the possibility of errors is greater, neatness notwithstanding.

Catholic marriage entries, as for baptism, include witnesses but the other denominations do not, and, in general, Catholic entries are more informative; ages are occasionally given, as are addresses for all four parties and the groom's occupation.

One wonders if the participants themselves realised just how much information they would leave to posterity as they said *til death do us part*.

6 One Gortaclareen is recorded by the Placenames Commission, near Oola in Tipperary, but none in Clare.

7 Gort an Chláirín: the field of the flat place. Gort an Chláirín na Gamhna: the field of the flat place of the goats.

8 The names Sullivan and O'Sullivan:

Census 1901:

Sullivans, whole of Ireland.....31,012
Sullivans, Cork county.....13,640
Sullivans, Mealagh D.E.D.....165

O'Sullivans, whole of Ireland.....7,405
O'Sullivans, Cork county.....3,429
O'Sullivans, Mealagh D.E.D.....0

Census 1911

Sullivans, whole of Ireland.....28,873
Sullivans, Cork county.....12,835
Sullivans, Mealagh D.E.D.....139

O'Sullivans, whole of Ireland.....9,167
O'Sullivans, Cork county.....4,122
O'Sullivans, Mealagh D.E.D.....0

There is a clear drop in Sullivans and a very much corresponding rise in O'Sullivans between 1901 and 1911. So, it has to be that some of the same people who were Sullivans in 1901 were calling themselves, or being called, O'Sullivans in 1911.

The Mealagh Valley families, in 1901 and 1911, were always Sullivans, although on later memoriam cards the same people were O'Sullivans.



Death did, indeed, part many couples when they were still very young by today's standards. In a documentary, the camera might slowly zoom in on the memorial in the photograph, in Kilfarboy Cemetery near Miltown Malbay, in West Clare.

What is most remarkable is the date: he died in 1908, so, almost within living memory, country people had little access to medical care and were reliant on people like Michael Sexton for the repair of broken bones.⁹ Such was life, and people died of simple infections which a course of antibiotics, or even cleaner living conditions, would take care of today.

⁹ What is also remarkable is how little information can be found about him. This is a large memorial, measuring about twelve feet to the top of the cross, and must have cost a considerable sum. I have tried asking local people, to no avail, and there is nothing online except a mention, by local historian Eddie Lenihan, of the fact that he was not the only member of his family with bone-setting skills. On the 1901 census (presumably it is the same Michael Sexton) he makes no claim to any skill other than farming.

Death and burial records are where Catholics fall behind and the other churches come into their own. It is not clear why the Catholic church recorded deaths and burials less than the other life events, and where records exist they are far from comprehensive.

The Church of Ireland, again in its capacity as the state church, also sometimes recorded burials of other denominations, and one other source of records of all types is the vestry minute book; perhaps it is indicative of the hierarchical nature of the Catholic church, and the slightly more democratic nature of the Church of Ireland, that these records of parish meetings exist, and can sometimes hold information outside of the actual registers.

For all denominations, in a parish where the records go back two hundred years or more, have withstood the ravages of time, and where a succession of priests or ministers were meticulous record-keepers, the church registers are a very rewarding study.

As society worldwide becomes increasingly secular, it's easy to disregard how important religion was, and, therefore, what a comprehensive record of society is provided by the church registers.¹⁰ To conclude, the following story shows how far removed we have become from church and sacraments: A Dublin teacher related how one of her holy communion class had not turned up to the church for the ceremony. The teacher presumed she had been ill, so was surprised to see the child in school looking perfectly fine the following Monday. When asked if everything was alright, and why she had missed the ceremony, the child replied, 'We got delayed at the hairdresser, so we just skipped the churchy bit and went straight to the hotel!'

If christenings and weddings were to follow this logic, the genealogists of 2115 will not be studying church registers but rather the appointments books of hairdressers, manicurists and tanning salons. Mary Malone, hurrying through the fields holding her precious bundle in her apron, could never have imagined such change.

10 Going back a hundred years to the 1911 census, the vast majority identify themselves as belonging to a church. Of the 88,232 (just two per cent of the total population) who are recorded as 'other', I looked closely at the first thousand as a representative sample and found that the overwhelming majority are either Catholics or Church of Ireland, abbreviated or misspelt in various ways that the transcription does not recognise. Just two of the thousand are atheists, and there are eleven agnostics. The remainder associate themselves with smaller sects such as Huguenot, Moravian and Apostolic Church.