

FAMINE OR HOLOCAUST-HOW MANY DIED ?

This is the text of a talk given for Féile Duthalla 27th August, 2010, in Kanturk.

Introduction

It may seem perverse and provocative, or even blasphemous to use the term holocaust in relation to the Famine but I think it is appropriate. A holocaust was traditionally a sacrifice by destruction of an animal, person, or a large number of people for a purpose, usually divine. In this case to denude Ireland of sufficient people to make it suitable for the untrammelled operation of free trade and market forces. It was deliberate because there was no shortage of food and it occurred at the centre of the most powerful state in the world which had the resources to prevent mass starvation if it so willed it. The country was full of food – corn and barley, meat and poultry, dairy produce of all sorts and every vegetable except potatoes so mass starvation was not inevitable. There was no Famine because there was no shortage of food and that is why the mass starvation is rightly called a Holocaust. People were sacrificed. An American commentator has said that claiming the Irish starved because of lack of food would be like saying the Jews died of lack of oxygen in WWII.

For example, the amount of butter exported from the Cork Butter market increased during those years. In fact all food was exported as normal and the extensive army network used to enforce it. (See Annex 1, © Chris Fogarty). The blight affected other countries where famine was prevented.

Describing it as a Holocaust is nothing new. It was first described as such at the time by the Cork Examiner:

“DEATHS IN BANTRY.

BANTRY is now as badly off as Skibbereen. Could we give a more fearful description? Impossible. We have only time, this post, to call attention to our report of *ten* inquests more in Bantry, and allow the following extract, hastily selected from a private letter, to speak the rest:--

"Each day brings with it its own horrors. The mind recoils from the contemplation of the scenes we are compelled to witness every hour. Ten inquests in Bantry-- there should have been at least *two hundred* inquests. Each day-- each hour produces its own victims-- Holocausts offered at the shrine of political economy. Famine and pestilence are sweeping away hundreds-- but they have *now* no terrors for the poor people. Their only regret seems to be that they are not relieved from their suffering and misery, by some process more speedy and less painful. *Since the inquests were held here on Monday, there have been not less than 24 DEATHS from starvation* and, if we can judge from appearances, before the termination of another week the number will be incredible.

As to holding any more inquests, it is mere nonsense. *The number of deaths is beyond counting.* Nineteen out of every twenty deaths that have occurred in this parish for the last two months were caused by starvation. I have known children in the remote districts of the parish, and in the neighbourhood of the town too-- live some of them for two - some for three - and some of them even for *four days on water.* On the sea shore, or convenient to it, the people are more fortunate, as they can get *sea weed*, which, when boiled and mixed with a little Indian or Wheaten meal, they eat, and thank Providence for providing them with even that to allay the cravings of hunger." (The Cork Examiner, 22/1/1847)

(See <http://adminstaff.vassar.edu/sttaylor/FAMINE/Examiner/Archives/Jan1847.html>)

This is a perfectly accurate description of what was happening. Michael Davitt in 'The Fall of Feudalism' said that "responsibility . . . for the holocaust of humanity . . . must be

shared between the political and spiritual governors of the Irish people in those years of measureless national shame.”

And even the doyen of our revisionists, Roy Foster, in the first edition of his ‘Modern Ireland’ repeatedly described it as a holocaust. However, this description disappeared in later editions and was replaced by catastrophe - but then what is revisionism if not the revising of history.

Malthusian views were dominant at the time. Economic progress depended on getting rid of surplus populations. If left unchecked food supply could not keep up with population growth so famines, diseases, etc were a necessity and therefore a blessing – but not exactly in disguise.

The man in charge of Ireland during the Famine, George Trevelyan, regarded it as a divinely inspired sacrifice or holocaust of those who died that was justified by the eventual benefits that would ensue! He explained that up till then: “The deep and inveterate root of social evil remained, and this has been laid bare by a direct stroke of an all-wise and all-merciful Providence, as if this part of the case were beyond the unassisted power of man. Innumerable had been the specifics which the wit of man had devised; but even the idea of the sharp but effectual remedy by which the cure is likely to be effected had never occurred to anyone. God grant that the generation to which this great opportunity has been offered may rightly perform its part, and that we may not relax our efforts until Ireland fully participates in the social health and physical prosperity of Great Britain, which will be the true consummation of their union!”(The Irish Crisis, 1848).

He was so certain that God was on his side, that it was a true and worthy holocaust, that he sent a copy of his book to the Pope! His response is not recorded.

How many died, officially?

The issue I want to concentrate on here is that of Ireland’s population before the holocaust and how many died. This means first of all trying to estimate the population figure for Ireland in 1846 which has never been established conclusively. It does not even appear as an issue in the literature on the subject though it is a crucial fact to establish if one is interested in making any real assessment of the numbers who died. For some odd reason most seem satisfied with the official Census figures for 1841.

The figures for those who died are treated in the most arbitrary and flippant way. Varying estimates that sometimes differ by millions can appear in the same publication.

Those who died were not counted at the time. There was no civil registration of births and deaths and Church registers are no way adequate for this task and Catholic registers were particularly inadequate. The usual practice is to deduct the 1841 figure from the 1851 figures and accept that as sufficient. And when this is represented in graphs based on the cycle of 10 year census figures we can get the population beginning to decline in 1841! This graphical representation is inevitably misleading. See Annex 2 as an example.

We now have annual official Famine Commemorations and a report on this year’s event says:

“The loss of two million Irish people through starvation and emigration is to be remembered in Mayo this week when the second National Famine Commemoration’s programme opens today.....Almost 90 per cent of Mayo’s population depended on the potato when blight hit crops from August 1845. An estimated one million people died and another million emigrated as a result of the 1845-50 famine, and Mayo’s population dropped dramatically from almost 389,000 to just over 274,000 in the decade from 1841 to 1851.” (Irish Times, 10 May 2010).

This view presents the 2 million figure as a given and appears to be the figure accepted by the official Government commemoration. I submit that nothing could be further

from the truth and that these figures are wrong by several million. And the job any government that commemorates the event should be to get the basic facts right. Anything else is an insult to those who died. I will always use figures rounded to the nearest million in the usual way.

Previous Census figures

The following is a table of some of the accepted figures for Ireland's population up to 1841:

1603 Fynes Morrison	700,000
1652 Sir William Petty	850,000
1672 Sir William Petty	1,100,000
- The same corrected	1,320,000
1695 Captain South	1,034,102
1712 Thomas Dobbs	2,099,094
1718 “	2,169,048
1725 “	2,317,374
1726 “	2,309,106
1731 Established Clergy	2,010,221
1754 De Burgho	2,372,634
1767 Hearth-money Rolls	2,544,276
1777 “	2,690,556
1778 Arthur Young	3,000,000
1785 “	2,845,932
1788 Gervais Parker Bushe	4,040,000
1791 Hearth-money Rolls	4,206,612
1792 Rev. Dr. Beaufort	4,086,226
1805 Tomas Newenham	5,395,456
1814 Incomplete census	5,937,856
1821 Census	6,801,827
1831 Census	7,767,401
1841 Census	8,175,124

Some of these have been revised but there is at least one clear conclusion from these figures that nobody queries which is that the rate of population growth was very high over the centuries and during the first decades of the 19th century (see diagram at Annex 2). This increase was one constant. In fact there is almost a tenfold increase over the period which is amazing.

Gaelic society and civilisation had been systematically and deliberately shattered by the English State during this period, in fact since Tudor times, and the natural cultural and social constraints of what was a viable civilisation on a stable population growth were constantly weakened. There was no functioning and accepted moral authority, clerical or secular. One of the resulting ‘freedoms’ resulted in a rapid population growth that gave rise to an excessive reliance on the potato. An irresponsible land system resulting from the same source facilitated subletting to complement the reliance on the potato.

The potato had been available for over three centuries and by itself did not, and never would, suddenly give rise to such dependence. It was an effect not a cause - the potato is innocent!

Why an apparent decline in the rate of population growth?

What is clearly questionable from these figures is why the population growth rate apparently declines so dramatically in the 1830s and this needs explaining. There is every reason to believe that the rate should have remained essentially the same - if not actually increase – as there were no great changes in the society during those decades.

Cormac Ó Gráda of UCD estimates that in the early decades of the 19th century the annual rate of growth was between 1.5 and 2% and this is accepted by L. A. Clarkson of QUB. Joe Lee of UCC implies a rate of 1.6%. (Goldstrom & Clarkson: *Irish Population, Economy and Society* 1981: Oxford). Joel Mokyr gives an annual population growth of 1.69% between 1821 and '41 (*Why Ireland Starved*, p.53, Joel Mokyr).

These estimates are perfectly credible and I think it safe to accept Lee's conservative estimate. But what is not credible is that this rate should have declined in the decades up to the Holocaust.

The rate of population growth does not alter dramatically in any society without some very clear and obvious reason – war, sudden climatic changes, massive economic change, plagues, pandemics, invasions, nuclear attacks or whatever. Nothing like this happened in the period we are looking at. I submit therefore that the population in 1846, continuing to grow at a constant, accepted, rate, was in the region of up 12 million.

Some basic points about demographics and counting populations

There are a few obvious and banal, but regularly ignored, facts to bear in mind when dealing with this issue of Irish population and census counting.

* It is not always easy to count populations accurately. By comparison demographic trends are easy to identify, i.e., whether a population is going up or down. And inaccurate census figures are nothing new. In fact all censuses are notorious for their inaccuracy and are very prone to all sorts of errors for all sorts of reasons. For example, demographers reckon that the 1971 Irish census and the 1980 US census were both an undercount. I was an enumerator in the UK census of 1991 and it was quietly written off, for all practical purposes, as soon as it was completed. I know of whole streets in London that had a few dozen people recorded. Why? For reasons not very dissimilar to those that contributed to make census taking in Ireland inaccurate – taxes and fear of the state. Specifically, Margaret Thatcher and the Poll Tax in this case. A report on the 2001 UK Census notes that “In the last count, some 1.5 million households failed to fill in their forms. Also, figures produced for Manchester and Westminster, among other areas, were regarded as being grossly inaccurate from the off.” (Irish Times 13 July 2010). This represents 1.5 million families which means several million people were not counted for! One consequence is that the census is going to be abandoned in the UK after the next one in 2011.

* Ireland was a country conducive to a high population. Its soil is very productive and its produce of a high quality with a wide variety of good food, no great price fluctuations at the time, it has a benign climate with a cheap, extensive and accessible supply of fuel in turf. Culturally it was a child and family friendly society as testified regularly by visitors. For example, “The ties of family love are nowhere else in the world more strong than in an Irish cabin” (*Ireland*, by Leitch Ritchie, 1834). And it was very easy to get married and raise families as there was no need to consult church or state to do so.

* It is also a fact that poverty and oppression are also conducive to high population growth. One of the most oppressed areas of the world is the Occupied West Bank and Gaza but the following is the position there as regards population growth: “The Palestinian population's annual growth rate exceeds 3 percent in the West Bank and approaches 4 percent in the Gaza Strip. While the growth rate of Palestinians in Israel is 2.6 percent, it outstrips the Israeli Jewish growth rate of 1.5 percent, according to official statistics.” (Palestinians on the

Verge of a Majority: Population and Politics in Palestine-Israel in the *Palestine Centre Information Brief No. 162 (12 May 2008)*

* In 1834 a very competent agriculturalist, William Blacker, wrote one of many essays to the Agricultural Committee of the Royal Dublin Society outlining how Irish agriculture could be better managed. He accepted landlordism but thought the problem was simply one of mismanagement. He could not understand why there was rack-renting and applying horse sense, literally, he said “that as the horse which is overburdened will not draw so the tenant that is *so* overcharged.... will pay nothing.” On the basis of the country’s agriculture managed properly across the whole country as it was managed in the part of Armagh he knew he reckoned that the country would eventually support a population of well over 17,000,000 people! (*Prize Essay, addressed to the Agricultural Committee of the Royal Dublin Society. On the Management of landed Property in Ireland, etc 1834*).

His argument is accepted by a modern demographic expert, Joel Mokyr. Such population figures are fact not fantasy. Look at the situation in the Netherlands whose population is over 16 million with an area of less than half that of Ireland.

* While all common sense would accept that any miscounting is normally an underestimating of the figures we have the extraordinary instance of the Commissioners of the 1841 Irish census claiming that the census of 1831 was an overestimate as one of their arguments to try to prove that their figures for 1841 were accurate. This was an amazing claim and may be unique in the history of census taking. The tradition has been to find reasons for a declining rate of population in the 1820s and 1830s on the basis of accepting the official census figures as automatically and incontrovertibly correct and then assuming things like emigration, disease etc as the reasons for the rate of decline but this has a self fulfilling connotation in the absence of any verifiable and convincing reasons for such a change.

* But probably the most crucial factor regarding census taking in 19th century Ireland is that it was not conducted by an Irish government and there was automatically a question of trust that must militate against full disclosure by the whole population because it was - to put as mildly as possible - ‘outsiders’ counting the ‘insiders.’ Census taking is a personal and intrusive matter where trust is vital for accuracy. And in a situation of general mistrust all official statistics are inevitably and deeply flawed. This is a fact of life that is usually ignored in 19th century Ireland. In fact, census taking in any country at any time where there is widespread alienation between the state authority and large sections of the population is fraught with problems and the accuracy is suspect.

For example, I doubt that census returns in Franco’s Spain or in Poland during the Soviet era that census figures were accurate for this same reason. And of course census taking is sometimes abandoned if the alienation of the population gets too much. There was not census here in 1921.

Joe Lee is the only Irish academic who seems to recognise some of this but does not follow up its full implications. He did a serious critical assessment of the 1821 census figures and the methodology used. He was probably provoked into doing his critical research after discovering that his native Chorca Duibhne and other well known places like Castlegregory in Co. Kerry were not included in the 1821 census. They might as well not have existed.

1821 Census

This was, officially, the first proper census. But it cannot be accepted as a reliable census by any standard. The enumerators were drawn from the Ascendancy and the lumpen Ascendancy in particular. They were also predominantly tax-collectors. It does not take much imagination to realise that these types were not likely to be very successful in eliciting information from the mass of a population who rejected the moral basis of the Ascendancy itself and were literally at war with its members over land, political and social rights, taxes,

and the most infamous tax of all - the tithes for the Established Church. In any society at any time tax collectors should not do this type of work – human nature being what it is.

Its accuracy, or rather its inaccuracy might be gauged from one pertinent fact - the returns of the enumerators accounted for 6.8 million acres which would mean that nobody lived in two-thirds of the country! Yet the population of this area was 6.8 million people! The 1831 census used essentially the same methodology and there is no reason to accept that it produced any more reliable figures.

Fortunately, we have a firsthand contemporary account of the problems in counting the population and arriving at a more accurate figure from a very competent and inquisitive visitor in the year after the 1821 census.

Thomas Reid (1791-1825)

Thomas Reid was an Irish born navalsurgeon. In 1822 he visited Ireland. He was a most serious and competent individual, a member of the Royal College of Surgeons and much travelled. He was perplexed as to why Ireland was not benefiting from the virtues of the Union, after 20 years, and not becoming more like the rest of the UK. It was self-evident to him that this should be happening. He was a most inquisitive individual. He would go into cabins and hovels to find out what was going on. Often at some risk to himself.

One of the first things that struck him was how difficult it was to establish how many people actually lived in these places and the attitudes he came across would have existed until during the 1821, 1831 and 1841 censuses

“It would scarcely be imagined by anyone who has not tried the experiment, how difficult it is to ascertain the population of Ireland. There exists among the peasantry an unconquerable aversion to tell the exact number of which their families consist, and in nine cases out of ten they represent it under the truth. On what grounds this prejudice exists I am not able to explain; but I had ample experience of the fact.” (*Travels in Ireland*, 1823)

He described his experience on entering eleven households in Cork city’s lanes which was typical of the reception he got:

“Walked through some of the lanes, between six and seven o’clock, and visited several cabins after the families had risen. I was desirous of knowing how many persons had taken refuge in those places for the night, but I found the people very unwilling to gratify my curiosity, and in suffering their fears to be overcome, they intimated their expectation of ‘a treat’ for their civility. ...those cabins average a population of eighteen and a half to each; and even if they’d deceived me as to the persons belonging to them who were then absent, still those whom I myself numbered give an average of sixteen to each house; it should be remarked also, that all these persons were Catholics.

I inquired in each cabin how many had slept there the previous night, but could only obtain answers from two of them, namely, the second and the fifth; the question appeared to alarm and displease all the others; one man observed ‘I suppose you are a Millstreet Peeler (the term applied to police-officers) come here to look after some of the *innocent blades*, but take my honest word for it, I have nothing to do with it, nor never *giv’d* one of them a *mail’s mait*, nor a bit of my blanket.’”

....I am well aware of how very difficult it is to arrive at anything near the truth in such an undertaking (an estimate of the whole population, J.L.), that, in fact, correctness is in most cases absolutely impracticable. When in the north of Ireland, some of my relations gave me the number and names of certain families, to whose house I afterwards went, and put the question ‘How many of you are in family?’ but in no instance was the answer correct, - it was always *under* the actual number. Whatever be the cause of this disposition to represent their families as being smaller than they really are, it is quite certain that it pervades all the lower,

and even middle classes of the Catholics in every part of the country; and that the poorer order of Protestants are influenced by the same spirit, but in a much less degree.

I had visited Cork in January 1817, since which time, it appears greatly altered, and altered for the worse; several houses have been added, the population has wonderfully increased, and the distress has more than kept pace with them both.” (ibid.)

We will ignore his naivety for the moment and respect his honest efforts. He was not to know that to the majority of the population at that time any person visiting them in a suit most likely meant danger, trouble and/or a threat of some sort. Reid could not be expected to appreciate this. Being oblivious to this situation and the type of man not to be defeated by such a task he embarked on a project to count the population in 1822. He set up an extensive project with relations and friends to do it and published it with a breakdown by county, number of houses and number of Catholics and Protestants. It came to 7, 855,606. About a million more than the official census of 1821. Mr Reid published this but he did not believe it. Being a gentleman he would not contradict his friends and be seen to rubbish their hard work. But he was quite certain they were wrong. He said:

“..it is feared the statement is far from correct. Had I trusted entirely to my own observations, the result would have been considerably greater.. I am quite certain that the view here given is much below what it should be; indeed I had many opportunities of proving it; but deference for those who kindly interested themselves in the inquiry... has induced me to adopt their calculation.” (ibid.)

He went on to give a concrete example of the levels of underestimation that could exist and the efficiency of the census enumerators in those days. He quotes from:

“A Mr Hardiman in his History of Galway, page 192, says, ‘The return of the inhabitants of the town and liberties, after the census act of 1812 amounted to 24,284; but those to whom the enumeration was entrusted were, according to their own subsequent accusations of each other, guilty of gross neglect and omission in the execution of that duty. The general and most probable opinion is, that the population amounts at, present (1820) to 40,000, which comprehends a vast number of daily increasing poor, without trade, manufacture, or adequate employment.’ In 1814 before a Committee of the House of Commons, the population of Galway was stated to be 50,000. I regret to say that the charge of ‘gross neglect and commission’ set forth in the preceding note, is fully borne out by my own observations in a great many parts of the country. Desirous of having some conversation with the ‘enumerators’ I made my inquiries about them, but did not happen to pass through any district where anyone appeared to know or even to have heard anything at all of such a person.” (ibid.).

What possible credence could be given to census figures from such a background. It confirms the total inadequacy of the 1821 census which was a crude and corrupt affair and cannot be taken seriously. It is a great pity Mr. Reid did not give us his own estimate but we can definitely, and conservatively, say he would reckon it was well over 8 million. This would give rise to a population of just under 12 million by 1846 at an annual increase of 1.6%

César Moreau, 1827

A few years later another attempt was made by a rather amazing statistician, César Moreau, a Frenchman resident in London who specialised in trade statistics. (Moreau, 1791-1860, was Director of the French Statistical Society, French Vice Consul in London, Member of Royal Institution and of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain & Ireland and of the London Western Scientific & Literary Institute, a Foreign Member of the Board of Agriculture & the Society for the Encouragement of the Arts, Manufactures & Commerce in

the British Empire, Corresponding Member of the Royal Academy of Sciences, Arts & Belles Lettres of Marseilles, Rouen, Dijon etc. etc.)

In 1827 he produced "*The Past and Present Statistical State of Irelande established in a series of tables constructed on a New Plan and principally derived from official documents and the best sources.*" It provided thousands of statistics on every conceivable subject relating to Ireland including its history, geography, industries, trade, products, politics, administration and of course population and it sold for 30/-. It was a stunning piece of work and all done in the neatest of handwriting.

He calculated the population in 1827 and also provided detailed breakdowns of the main towns by sex, occupations and houses, inhabited and uninhabited. My sample test for his figures was the town of Millstreet and they ring true and accurate as they correspond with other contemporary accounts and if anything his figures are low but they are quite credible. Based on the information he put together with the help of others he came to a number of estimates for the overall population with the highest being 9,050,000 (he emphasised quite rightly that these were not official figures). But of course there were no credible official figures available at the time. This figure would complement the assumption that Thomas Reid had about the figure of over 8 million five years earlier.

Moreau's as with Reid's figures would also give rise to just under 12 million by 1846 at an annual growth rate of 1.6%.

There is no evidence that these two, Reid and Moreau, ever knew of each other's existence and they would have arrived at their estimates independent of each other and this adds to the credibility of their figures. They are a test of each other's calculations. Yet, I have yet to see a reference to them by *anyone* who has done work on this issue.

1841 Census and the Commissioners' Report

This is the most important census of the period. It is always quoted as gospel and the people who did it were very proud of their work. Everyone knows of the official figure for the 1841 census of 8,173,124. What is not often noted is that this figure was not even credible to the Census Commissioners themselves (led by Thomas Larcom) and it was revised upwards by them in the official report to the Lord Lieutenant in 1843. They added on 572,464 and gave a new figure of 8,747,588 which is rarely quoted. What is even less often noted is the reasons they gave for making the revision.

When they had put their figures together for the 1841 Census returns they noted something very, very odd. These figures meant that the population increase during the ten years of the 1830s was 5.25 % but the increase during the previous decade of the 1820s was 14.5%. Why did the rate decrease so dramatically during the 1830s?

In Britain the overall increase in the two decades was 15% and 14% respectively confirming that population growth does not alter dramatically all - other things being equal. Anyone who knew anything about Ireland would not have appreciated why such a drastic decline should have occurred. Quite the contrary, in fact. Disraeli said that Ireland was the most densely populated country in the world – more so than China, for example.

So the Commissioners set about giving explanations. They pointed out that the army and navy recruits were excluded from the 1831 census but this amounted to very little, relatively speaking, about 39,000. They mentioned cholera outbreaks but then said that this amounted to little if any change. Then they claimed that in 1831 there was some payment in some situations to the enumerators according to the size of population counted. (This has been refuted by Joe Lee). So they claim the census of 1821 were also inadequate, being too low, which up until then would have been vehemently denied as 1821 was purportedly the first proper census. So 1821 was too low and that of 1831 too high. They could not be wrong themselves! Perish the thought!

The great issue to fall back was emigration. This was used to explain the fall. But then they find it very difficult to quantify this. Migration and immigration are barely acknowledged and not really allowed for. Movements of people were not accounted for properly at the time and they arrive at an emigration figure by counting whatever official records exist of emigration from Irish ports during the 1830s and then add on the Irish emigration from Liverpool.

Then they allow for “estimated additions” and “probable increases” and they can only account for 104,814 actual emigrants in England during this period and 214, 047 going to the colonies from Irish ports. It is interesting to see how they arrive at the emigrants in England. The Census in Britain showed a total of 419,256 Irish born living there and as this included people who were born in Ireland across three generations at least they simply divided it by four to calculate the number settling there during the 1830s.

The fact is that emigration as opposed to migratory seasonal labour was not a prominent feature of Irish life at this time. It was the relatively well off who emigrated, and particularly from Ulster, not the poor who were later most affected by the holocaust. There had to be ‘assisted emigration’, people had to be paid to encourage them to emigrate, in many cases during this period. People were not starving and they had no problem with their own culture and society. Cecil Woodham-Smith came to the same conclusion about the low rate of emigration at that time relative to later trends.

The Report is full of reservations about their calculations, particularly on emigration such as “we trust that these calculations though in a degree hypothetical will not be thought wholly irrelevant” and “we cannot take upon ourselves to pronounce with certainty the extent to which any of these may vary from the truth.” It is a very defensive document of special pleading with quite arbitrary assumptions and huge blind spots. There is absolutely no way all the factors and figures they utilise could convincingly explain the apparent dramatic rate of population decrease because they are impossible to quantify and verify and are unconvincing.

Their view of the 1821 census is also worth noting for the typical magisterial understatement that the 1841 Report is prone to: “that it (1821 census) was probably effected with less perfect machinery. We may perhaps therefore assume that it was rather below than above the truth.” A census with returns that omitted two thirds of the country is indeed very likely to be rather far below the truth.

The Commissioners Report concludes by saying that: “In justice to ourselves we venture to add, that a Census is, in the light we have considered it, of such a nature, that a department framed suddenly for its execution, must be subject to considerable disadvantages, both as to the time consumed and the labour employed to ensure correctness.” (14/8/1843). Which is a whinge rather than a ringing endorsement of their work and which has the air of pre-empting any criticism of it.

Why is the 1841 census wrong?

So why was the 1841 census unreliable? In their report on 1841 the Commissioners unwittingly do give a very good reason why the rate and the figures looked so odd and so wrong. They are at great pains to explain that their Census was carried out for the first time by “a highly disciplined body of men” i.e., the Royal Irish Constabulary. They were no doubt accepted as the ‘perfect machinery’ for the task by the Commissioners. As well as the “very efficient exertions of the constabulary” they also claimed to have the “general goodwill of the people” and that was next major factor in its favour! This was wishful thinking.

The Commissioners believed the involvement of the RIC was a plus, in fact the key to its accuracy. Anyone who knew anything of the real attitude of the vast majority of the

population towards the RIC would appreciate that their involvement meant a distinct disadvantage to any such accuracy.

So what the Commissioners considered was the Census's great strength was in fact its greatest weaknesses. The RIC and their predecessors were historically and currently associated with implementing evictions, enforcing the tithes and other taxes, arresting, imprisoning and if necessary executing political opponents of the government, etc etc. There had been an actual long war over the tithes up to a few years previously with the military and RIC to the fore in that war. They were engaged in the spate of evictions in the 1830s as a consequence of the 'consolidation' of tenancies by the landlords.

The RIC were consequently alienated from the population and regarded quite rightly as the para military police and intelligence arm of a foreign government that had no accepted moral authority as a police force for the population as a whole. They were the last people in the world that the population would have been willing to give personal information. The RIC subsequently ran the census right down to 1911 and always treated it quite blatantly as an intelligence gathering exercise. The 1861 and 1871 census were destroyed by order of the British government, once statistics had been extracted, on grounds of "confidentiality". The 1881 and 1891 census records were further destroyed by order of the British government during the First World War on grounds of wartime "paper shortages".

Other problems with the census of 1841

There were of course many other factors that made the figures questionable - apart from the RIC involvement.

* Levels of literacy and language differences were crucial as the return had to be completed by household heads for the first time. The language difference is a glass ceiling and not mentioned at all as an issue though the majority of heads of households would not be literate in English. No provision was made for translations.

* There was also the fact that it was held on a Sunday which was the day for visiting (rambling or scoraiochtig), travelling and being anywhere but in your own home. This betrayed the severe Protestant view of the Sabbath held by the Commissioners as opposed to the weekly diversion of a festival for sport and entertainment as it was regarded by Catholics. Form-filling for the RIC would have been a very low priority for them on that day of all days.

* There were other assumptions that mitigated against accuracy. The census was based on the family but what was a family in the Irish circumstances of the time? Irish family life was very robust and was so because it was flexible and ambiguous as regards definitions. For example, fosterage was normal and informal and people moved around families quite easily. There was typically at least three generations in every family. The nuclear family was not the norm, nor was it a collection of nuclear families. It was a community that merged with other family communities and defied any modern definition. Typically it was more like a clan than a family.

But the head of the household and others would have had to get their heads round the following to complete the census:

"the family was to be understood either one which being independently in a house or part of a house on his or her own means of support, or several individuals related to each other, with the addition of servants or visitors living together in the same house or part of a house upon one common means of support."

This would certainly need translating into English for the majority of people to help them get their heads round it.

* Even the very concept of defining a house was problematic. When the 'house' in question for at least 40% of the population was a one roomed cabin of an extended and ever

changing family how could one cope with the above definition. How could such communal living be reshaped to fit into a strict modern bourgeois, nuclear family definition?

* And how could one satisfactorily define a servant or visitor in the Ireland of the time? The country had plenty people who rambled around permanently, staying where the fancy took them. And how could the tinkers, beggars, evicted tenants, peddlers, gypsies, spailpíns, itinerant entertainers (poets, musicians, story tellers) and odd job men be counted? There were quite a few always 'on the run.' None of these were on intimate terms with the RIC, except in a very negative sense!

* The Freeman's Journal reported about the large number of people 'taking to the hills' while the census was being held for fear of it being used to question or even arrest them. This included any Whiteboys, Ribbonmen, Rockites, Starlighters, Shanavestsetc. as well as members of the Repeal Association. Were any of these groups or their friends likely to 'report to the police' to be accounted for? Not in a million years.

* Ordinary people were frightened by the very idea of a census. A Dublin middle class lady, Elizabeth Smith recorded in her diary:

"June 7

Busy filing in the Census papers which are very complete as to information, the use I don't exactly know, the poor people here are all terrified that they were to have been kidnapped or pressed or murdered on the night of the 6th. Half of them were not to go to bed & had barricaded their doors." (*The Irish Journals of Elizabeth Smith 1840-1850*, 1980)

This gives some idea of the feeling surrounding the census and how unlikely it was that the mass of the people co-operated sufficiently to make it a fair representation of the population. Elizabeth Smith recorded in her journal:

* The Commissioners pointed to some results that they admitted they could not explain. The population of Clare grew by 10.9% and Carlow by only 5.2% though there was no obvious social differences. The population of Cork city actually fell but they did seem to even notice that peculiar fact.

* Anyway, the Commissioners decided to add an arbitrary figure of just over half a million. This was clearly not a satisfactory census and even if credible it was still 6 years before the holocaust really struck. So the official figures for 1841 are inadequate for several reasons in assessing the number of victims.

* Another problem is that there are only snippets of the actual census returns extant - just for a few townlands in Killashandra in Cavan. This lack of original documentation applies to all the previous (and some later) census documents as well with the result that there is no real basis for cross checking even samples of the population with other sources in any of these censuses.

A middle class view of the census

It is worthwhile to look at the Census from a completely different angle – that of the middle classes who had no problem with the RIC. But many of them were provoked to protest at how Dublin Castle had manipulated the census for their own ends, extending the questions and doubling the penalties. If they were upset by the Castle's behaviour, intrusions and threats, imagine how the 'peasantry' so-called, were likely to be.

The following are samples of indignant letters published in the Freeman's Journal:

"6 Fitzwilliam Square East, Dublin.

May 28, 1841

To the Editor of the Freeman's Journal

Sir -the method adopted by the Irish Government is one hundred times more inquisitorial and is not only without any authority from, but in direct contravention of the (Census) Act. Enumerators are sent round to our houses *before* the 7th of June. These enumerators, not content with asking questions about our persons, ask questions about our property also, without any authority derived from the act, either directly or indirectly. Further, they leave schedules to be filled up by us, although the act neither mentions or alludes to schedules, except with reference to England, Wales and Scotland. Still further, these schedules contain questions relating to our private affairs, totally unauthorised by the act, and unconnected with its purposes.... I beg to ask by what authority these steps are taken, in violation of the act of Parliament under which the census is held. And I further ask if these steps are taken, as I believe they are, without the authority of Parliament, will the people of Ireland submit to them?

I am, Sir, your obedient servant

James Henry.

*

“Glenageary Cottage

Kingstown

1 June 1841

Sir – A police-constable this day intruded himself into the most private parts of my house, and asked many question respecting my property, such as how many cattle, sheep, goats, goats, pigs, poultry, &c. I possess, how many windows, stories, &c. in my house, whether the walls are really built of brick and stone, as they appear to be, or only of mud, covered with plaster, &c.? He also left several schedules to be filled up and verified before a magistrate, which schedules containing very many inquiries as to the private affairs of myself and family, and state that these queries must be fully answered, under penalty of ten pounds.

I have carefully examined the acts if parliament..... and find no authority given by them to inquire into any other matters than the age, sex, occupation, and place of birth of each individual, and the number of houses inhabited, uninhabited, and building; there is no mention of schedules except for England, Scotland and Wales... that the penalty.. is only five pounds.

I have, in consequence, declined answering any question relative to the census until the time specified by the act...

I have to be, Sir, your obedient servant,

Thomas Elder Henry

*

To the Most Noble the Marquis of Normandy

Dublin, Thursday, 2 June 1841

Most Noble Marquis – I have the honour to enclose a paper left at my house yesterday by a policeman, The manner in which I have filled the paper will best show the feelings I have on the subject.

By being obliged to fill in and sign this paper under a penalty, the modest privacy of my family is broken into. An unconstitutional act, only fit for the meridian of Algiers, or the city of Paris in the days of Robespierre, or the city of Dublin in the year 1798, when the ever to be abhorred and detestable act of union was carried through a corrupt and profligate parliament. There can be no correct census taken under the impertinent machinery of this act,

I am, my Lord Marquis, your lordship's most obedient and very humble servant.

James D. Shanly

What was the population reality in 1846?

When the blight first appeared and relief efforts were made it soon became apparent to those on the ground that the accepted population figures were totally misleading and were therefore a positive hindrance to providing real help. Cecil Woodham-Smith noted:

“How many people died in the famine will never precisely be known. It is almost certain that, owing to geographical difficulties and the unwillingness of the people to be registered, the census of 1841 gave a total smaller than the population in fact was. Officers engaged in relief work put the population as much as 25 per cent higher; landlords distributing relief were horrified when providing, as they imagined, for 60 persons, to find more than 400 ‘start from the ground.’”

This latter phrase rings very true. In the 1840s in West Clare there was a very conscientious Inspecting Officer called Captain. E. Wynne who sent regular and detailed reports to Dublin castle. On the 5th September, 1846 he reported as follows to Thomas Lorcam:

“The census of 1841 being pronounced universally to be no fair criterion of the present population and consequent destitution, I tested the matter in the parish of Clondagad, Barony of Islands, where I found the present population more than a third greater than that of 1841. This I believe to be the case in all the districts along the coast.” (Irish National Archives, CSORP/1846/1391).

Wynne's estimate would therefore, again, give a figure of up to 12 million in 1846 and that's assuming the 1841 Census figures are correct, as Wynne does, which is a very big assumption given what I have described above.

What this means is that three independent, unrelated, unconnected sources from three different countries - Captain Wynne, Thomas Reid and Cesar Moreau, would confirm a figure of up to a possible 12 million people in 1846.

I submit that these unofficial figures and assumption are more consistent and more reliable than the official figures as they were not operating under the inevitable handicaps associated with official counting of the population in the period.

A typical town

Another way to give a realistic assessment of the rate of population growth in this period is to take the growth of a typical rural market town. This is more manageable than taking the country as a whole and far easier than assessing the countryside.

I looked at the local town of Millstreet. As the RIC were based right in the middle of the town we can assume they got the figures in the town around them pretty well correct – as did the tax inspectors in 1821. After all, they did not necessarily have to rely on what people actually told them as they would have had to do in places such as the distant mountainy historic centre of culture and learning from time immemorial – the townland of Aubane – which did not even officially exist for them, as it does not down to the present day..

Fortunately we have figures for the town during the previous decades:

1,564 in 1821 census

1,680 in 1825 (Samuel Leigh)

1,935 in 1837 (Samuel Lewis and Rev. G. Hansbrow).

2,162 in 1841 census

This is an increase of over 38% and no doubt by 1846 it would have increased by at least 40% in the 25 year period. The question is - could there have been a freakish increase in a typical town if, by comparison, the overall population hardly changed at all? It simply does not make sense.

It could be argued that its growth was caused by migration from the countryside to the town but I don't think this was the case as the town was not industrialising which is the normal reason for such migration. It had one industry, the mill, after which the town is named. It consisted essentially of services by artisans, pubs and shopkeepers passed down through the same families in the town to service its hinterland and the travellers and traders passing through. In fact there was a strong tradition for those who had 'made their pile' in the town to acquire land outside the town as it was seen as the only real wealth.

Ruán O'Donnell

Another interesting figure was provided in the "*O'Brien Pocket History of the Irish Famine*" by Ruán O'Donnell (The O'Brien Press, 2008, ISBN 9781847170194). The book is a welcome addition to the studies of the period. He says that "The precise number of Famine dead in Ireland will never be known owing to the inability of Government to derive an accurate census from their enquiries in 1841" (p.129).

Ruán gives a figure in the context of discussing elections and the electorate before and after the holocaust that is very revealing and refers to the only counting of people that was actually done during the holocaust. That group which were counted as accurately as any group is likely to be was the actual electorate of the time. This had to be done as there was an election in the middle of the holocaust which was the single most important political event of the period. These people (males, of course) were a relatively privileged group, the £10 freeholders, and can be assumed to be substantial property owning people who were well able to 'look after themselves' and more so than most of the population..

Yet their numbers declined from 122,000 before to 45,000 afterwards - a decline of over 60%. There may be many factors involved in this specific case but even so they are true figures and indicate the actual magnitude of the disaster when this category of people were so devastated. O'Donnell shows how the Government and its apologists who claimed inability to be able to organise adequate food supplies suddenly became extremely efficient when it came to countering the minuscule Young Ireland rebellion in 1848 and no manpower or expense was spared to deal with it. Indeed, he also shows that none was spared during the holocaust in ensuring the safe and unhindered export of food.

Though Ruán's book gives a good account of the holocaust and he uses the sources available well, what strikes one when reading it are the inherent limitations that any historian has to cope with when dealing with the subject. What are available are some sporadic, written glimpses of what went on, tips of proverbial icebergs. There were no civil servants, reporters or anyone else monitoring the millions of cabins, fields and ditches throughout the countryside where the vast majority of the victims were to be found. And those who lived through this and survived were too traumatised and ashamed to talk to anyone about it. A full assessment must rely on other than the standard methodologies.

1851 Census

The other issue that needs to be examined (outside the scope of this essay) is the accuracy of the 1851 census because they are likely to have been inaccurate in the very opposite direction to the earlier censuses in being too high. The trauma and shock of the holocaust had encouraged people to 'overcount' themselves in the hope of attracting any assistance that might be available. The overcounting may have balanced out an undercounting and the final figure of just over 6 million may therefore be fairly accurate

One of its undoubtedly accurate observations was:

“But no pen has ever recorded the numbers of the forlorn and starving who perished by the wayside or in the ditches, or in the mournful groups, sometimes of whole families who lay down and died, one after another, upon the floor of their miserable cabins and so remained uncoffined and unburied till chance unveiled the appalling scene.”

However, the Commissioners’ Report is infamous for its conclusion on how the country had ‘advanced’ and benefited because of the Holocaust:

"In conclusion, we feel it will be gratifying to your Excellency to find that although the population has been diminished in so remarkable a manner by famine, disease and emigration between 1841 and 1851, and has been since decreasing, the results of the Irish census of 1851 are, on the whole, satisfactory, demonstrating as they do the general advancement of the country."

How many million victims?

So with the possibility of there being up to 12 million in 1846 and perhaps less than 6 million after 1847 we are left with the uncanny figure of a possible 6 million victims of the Holocaust between those who died and those who emigrated. Can this be possibly true in view of the about 1 million dead and 1 million emigrants that are regularly bandied about? Surely there cannot be such a discrepancy? Emigrants are of course a totally wrong description – these people were refugees.

The Times newspaper took a close interest in the country and being totally confident in their prejudices could deal with the situation quite bluntly and could never be accused of exaggerating the tragedy of the situation. It said editorially:

“The workhouses are full and only hold 100,000 while 4,000,000 are starving. The workhouses are mere charnel-houses. In one there is an average mortality of a death an hour, day and night.” (15 March 1847, p. 4. col.3)

They also put it more euphemistically in its editorial of 3rd Jan 1848 when it said that 4 million people had been ‘battling with death’ in 1847.

The figure of 4 million starving remains a constant figure for the paper during the whole period. It was not contradicted and was used regularly to embarrass the Irish Parliamentary Party into being grateful for the assistance being given and challenging them to deny it and come up with an alternative. They could not as they were also committed to free-trade and Liberalism. This figure of 4 million was logical as about 5 million people were directly dependent on the potato and this is not disputed. Obviously some more millions were indirectly dependent on the potato as it was used as animal feed as well as for human consumption.

What happened to those four million who were starving in March 1847?

Is it not most likely that the majority and probably all of these 4 million died as in the middle of 1847 the main official “Famine” relief was ended and the new Liberal free trade government were quite prepared for the consequences. Even workhouses were allowed go bankrupt when local rates could not support them. And the blight returned for at least two more years in various degrees. With the clear ideological conviction of the new Liberal government this was now a golden opportunity to solve the Irish ‘problem,’ once and for all. The starving and dying consequently increased.

Also, the starving did not necessarily emigrate. This is usually overlooked. The well known sculpture in Dublin docks is misleading. Only relatively healthy people, who had the strength and money to get to a port and purchase ship passage, were likely to survive by emigration. That would have been a small percentage. Steerage fare to Liverpool for one

person was ten shillings, two week's or a month's wages; equivalent to, say, one month's subsistence for one person. Survival by this means was not to be expected of starving people who hadn't the resources for a day's subsistence. Fares to the US were ten times that amount. In other words - starving people did not emigrate because they could not, financially or physically.

So what happened to those of The Times' starving four million in March 1847, and those added after March '47 who could not emigrate as conditions deteriorated further? I think the answer is obvious.

1 million approximately went to Liverpool and another 1 million to North America and elsewhere in the next three years, 1848-50. Can we more precise?

Jack Lane