

TRINITY WEEK ACADEMIC SYMPOSIUM

ORIGINS, MISSION AND SIGNIFICANCE

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This symposium celebrates the launch of a dedicated website of the proceedings of the Statistical and Social Inquiry Society of Ireland, and its direct ancestor the Dublin Statistical Society. The Dublin Statistical Society was founded on 23 November 1847 with the mission to bring professional expertise to bear on pressing contemporary social and economic issues. The timing is not coincidental: 1847 was probably the worst year in the history of modern Ireland. This was the beginning of the third year of the great famine; death and emigration were at record levels, as was the incidence of disease. The British government was suffering from ‘compassion fatigue’; they had ended all special measures for famine relief and abandoned Ireland to its own resources, placing the entire burden of relief on the inadequate and inexperienced Irish Poor Law, which was breaking down under the strain. Landlords, faced with record rates bills and unpaid rents were evicting tenants and clearing their estates, and the emigrant ships contained not just the destitute and desperate, but many substantial farmers with their families. An international financial crisis only added to the gloom. Irish politics was also in disarray, following the death of Daniel O’Connell and the collapse of the Irish Convention which had attempted to achieve some political consensus on critical issues such as land reform.¹

The Dublin Statistical Society can be seen as an attempt by some of the city’s elite to agree on possible solutions to Ireland’s crisis, offering what they believed to be a scientific and objective alternative to partisan, and discredited political solutions. The Society aimed at ‘promoting the study of Statistics and Economical Science’, and like the Royal Irish Academy, it determined to reject all papers that would provoke discussions relating to party politics or religion. Its mission is summed up in its motto: ‘Our pole star is truth’; the fact that this was written in English, and not in Latin – a language familiar to most of the founding members – highlights the message that the society was addressing contemporary issues, using contemporary intellectual tools.

By the mid-nineteenth century statistics – the study of socio-economic and political conditions both quantitative and qualitative – was seen as offering scientific answers to pressing socio-

* This paper draws extensively on my book, *The Spirit of Earnest Inquiry: The Statistical and Social Inquiry Society of Ireland* (Dublin: Statistical and Social Inquiry Society of Ireland, 1997), which was published to mark the sesquicentenary of the Society.

¹ For the political background to these years, see Peter Gray, *Famine land and politics: British government and Irish society, 1843-1850* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 1998); Donal Kerr, *A ‘nation of beggars’? Priests, people and politics in famine Ireland, 1846-1852*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994).

economic questions. The society was part of a European-wide drive for better government that would be based on rational, scientific policies. By 1847, statistical societies were in existence in many European states, and in a number of rapidly-growing English cities had statistical societies. These societies addressed practical problems such as crime, disease and poverty. Membership tended to be drawn from the business and professional elite: doctors, lawyers, leading businessmen and academics; they were not professional statisticians as we would understand the term today, and while some of the papers that were presented cited quantitative data – what we could describe as statistics – others relied entirely on qualitative information. The vogue for statistical societies was driven by the belief that if you assembled comprehensive information on a particular topic it would be possible identify the solution; a solution determined by science and rational analysis. This belief was not confined to statistical societies: it permeated governments, and it was a driving principle behind the Victorian civil service. The outputs of this mindset remain available today in the decennial Census of Population; civil registration data, crime and other quantitative series, and in the voluminous Blue Books (royal commissions, select committees etc.) that documented many aspects of life in Britain and Ireland during the nineteenth century. The Dublin Statistical Society, like its peers, used these data series and the various committees and commissions as raw material for papers and symposia – a practice that continues in today’s Statistical and Social Inquiry Society of Ireland.

The immediate impetus for founding the Dublin Statistical Society appears to have come from William Neilson Hancock’s series of lectures on the condition of Ireland. These were published in 1847 under the title, *Three Lectures on the Question: Should the Principles of Political Economy be Disregarded at the Present Crisis?* Hancock held the Whately chair of political economy at Trinity College Dublin, and the four previous holders of the Whately chair became office holders of the society. Richard Whately, the Church of Ireland archbishop of Dublin, was the founding president; he held that office until 1863. Prior to his appointment as archbishop of Dublin, Whately had been Drummond professor of political economy at Oxford. A member of the Board of National Education, and chair of the marathon Irish report on the Poor Law, Whately believed that ‘next to sound religion, sound political economy was most essential to the well-being of society . . . [and] . . . to the prosperity of the nation’.

The sixty or so founding members of the society were drawn from Ireland’s professional, administrative, academic and business elite. They included Thomas Larcom, commissioner of public works, later under-secretary at Dublin Castle – the driving force behind the 1841 Census and the father of Irish official statistics; Sir Robert Kane, first president of Queen’s College Cork, president of the Museum of Irish Industry and professor at the Royal Dublin Society; the Earl of Rosse, who is best remembered today for his magnificent telescope; three future Lords Chancellor of Ireland; past and future holders of the Whately chair; the Italian immigrant Charles Bianconi, who gave pre-famine Ireland a cheap and extensive network of horse-drawn transport – perhaps the forerunner to today’s Ryanair; Sir William Wilde – polymath and one of seven founding members drawn from the medical profession; Isaac Butt – economist and later founder of the Home Rule movement; William Mulvany – then of the Board of Works, but soon to become a significant mining entrepreneur in the Ruhr (owner of the Hibernia and Kathleen mines). There was also a good sprinkling of Dublin’s Quaker families – specifically the Pims and Haughtons – with members drawn from both business and academia. The Society was a cross-section of Ireland’s elite at that time; member founding members were also members of the Royal Irish Academy and the Royal Dublin Society. Politicians were conspicuous by their absence.

The Society offered a forum for men (and the occasional woman), who were concerned about the condition of Ireland, and about specific social issues, to become involved in seeking a solution, while supposedly avoiding divisive political debates. In 1863, John Kells Ingram – a founding member and a distinguished president of the Society noted that it was ‘*the pressure of social problems...demanding attention that led its youthful founders to attempt the establishment of such an institution*’ he went on to note that the Society did not occupy itself with dilettante statistics, collected with no special purpose’, but with the most important questions affecting the condition

of the country'. In 1847, the problem of immediate concern was the condition of Ireland: the famine, Ireland's over-reliance on the potato, and whether it was possible to build a prosperous society in a country that lived off potatoes – Charles Trevelyan, permanent under-secretary to the Treasury had suggested that a potato diet and its accompanying lifestyle doomed Ireland to poverty.² Neilson Hancock countered with the view that the Irish people relied on potatoes because they were poor; they were not poor because of their reliance on potatoes. Other topics discussed in the early years included the respective merits of free trade versus protection – another burning issue given the belief that the repeal of the Corn Laws in 1846 and the export of food from Ireland during the famine years had contributed to the disaster. Land reform – a topic already attracting widespread interest before the famine, with the publication of the Report of the Devon Commission in 1844 – occupied many meetings of the Society throughout the nineteenth century.

Successive volumes of the Journal of the Statistical and Social Inquiry Society of Ireland can be seen as a running commentary on the condition of Ireland and some of the key socio-economic issues of the time, presented by a small, but important elite – drawn from senior civil servants, academics, senior legal and business people. Charting the topics on a time sheet gives an indication of the issues that were causing concern at a particular time. Such an exercise – which is now very easy to undertake thanks to the digitisation of the journal – provides a complementary text on Ireland and its history over the past 150 years.

Tom Boylan and Anthony Foley have suggested that the Society was founded not so much as a humanitarian response to an Irish crisis, but to defend the laws of political economy: they see the Society as a colonial/establishment enterprise.³ True, the members were drawn from the elite, but that does not preclude a range of opinions, and the views expressed within the Society on matters such as land reform were by no means uniform, or necessarily in tune with economic liberalism or supportive of the status quo. What is open to question is the assumption made by the Society's founders that it is possible to arrive at a scientific politically-neutral solution to social problems. The mere accumulation of information – whether quantitative or qualitative – does not automatically produce an unambiguous solution; the manner in which researchers collect and interpret information is inevitably influenced by political and other factors no matter how much they aspire to be neutral. Answers to any social problem, must take account of political and social circumstances. For contemporary researchers, the past issues of the Journal of the Statistical and Social Inquiry Society are valuable, not simply for the information that they contain, but as a reflection of the social and political context in which policy was formed. The record of the discussion which followed a paper is often more revealing than the original paper. Membership lists offer another insight into the network of men (and some women), who were influential in the formation of economic and social opinion in Ireland. For this reason it would be important to add digitises membership lists to the website in the future.

If the Society was seen as an institution that was broadly supportive of the Dublin Castle administration, it appears to have made a remarkably smooth transition to post-independence Ireland. The composition of the membership remained broadly similar, though the number of legal and medical participants fell gradually, and by the 1940s SSISI had begun to attract a number of trade union members. One feature that was common to Ireland under the Union, and after independence, is the almost complete absence of politicians among members, speakers and participants. The notable exceptions to this include James Dillon, Minister for Agriculture in the first and second inter-party governments, and leader of Fine Gael (for most of the 1940s he was an independent) is a notable exception, and Garret FitzGerald, whose involvement in the society predated his political career.

² Charles Trevelyan, *The Irish Crisis*, (London 1850).

³ Thomas A. Boylan and Timothy P. Foley, *Political Economy and Colonial Ireland. The propagation and Ideological Function of Economic Discourse in the Nineteenth Century*, (London, 1992).

The Statistical Society may well have become more important after independence than it had been under the Union, because it became one of the major fora (outside Dáil Éireann) where pressing issues facing the new state could be discussed: matters such as the provision of a social welfare system; the state of the economy; economic planning and economic growth, and, the perennial topic of Ireland's population. When I asked the late Professor Patrick Lynch to identify the most significant contribution made by SSISI he answered without hesitation, that it provided a forum where senior civil servants could express their opinions and debate issues of practical concern with businessmen, trade unionists, academics and others, a debate that is captured in the Journal.

Until the 1960s when the current affairs division of Teilfis Éireann took the first tentative steps in investigative journalism and began to hold studio debates, the opportunities for frank discussion of the contemporary social and economic issues were extremely limited, and many of the outlets had a religious, or quasi-religious focus, such as the Jesuit periodical *Studies* or Muintir na Tíre Rural Week. Coverage in the newspapers was also limited; indeed meetings of the SSISI provided a significant proportion of the informed copy on contemporary socio-economic questions. (Garret FitzGerald's columns in *The Irish Times* were another important source.) The SSISI paper that was most significant in helping to engage with contemporary economic issues was probably T. K. Whitaker's paper on 'Capital formation, Saving and Economic Progress', presented to the 1955/6 session, around the time that Whitaker became Secretary to the Department of Finance. In that paper we can detect, in embryonic form, many of the ideas that later emerged in Whitaker's 1958 report, Economic Development, and the debate that took place during that meeting should be regarded as a first step in the process that resulted in the transformation of Irish economic policy. In more recent times, there are many instances when the Journal provided an early airing of later policies – for example, a 1987 Symposium on the privatization of state assets. Anybody wishing to revisit the grim economic circumstances of the 1970s and 1980s will also find plenty of material that reflects the difficult economic issues of those times.

To conclude, I would like to identify some other factors that make the Society so significant to the history of modern Ireland:

- Longevity and continuity. Most of the statistical societies founded in the early or mid-nineteenth century had disappeared by the end of that century. They were succeeded by much narrower, professional societies, composed of academics; professional social scientists and/or statisticians. This increasing specialisation and professionalisation of social inquiry resulted in the loss of the broad-spectrum, interdisciplinary mix that exists today in SSISI. The survival of the SSISI is of itself a matter of historical significance. SSISI survived, whereas its counterparts in Britain and the USA did not, because of the small scale and underdeveloped nature of academic disciplines in Ireland, and the absence of a critical mass of professional statisticians or economists that could support a more specialized learned society. The survival of this broad-spectrum society is arguably of greater relevance in the twenty-first century than it may have been one hundred years ago, given the realisation that contemporary scholarship and contemporary policy solutions often require input from a variety of disciplines, and the growing awareness of the need to promote debate and dialogue between academics, policy-makers and the public. SSISI offers a platform for 'public intellectuals'.
- The Journal is probably the best documentary source on the emergence of the social sciences in Ireland. The pages of the Journal provide an effective starting point for charting writing and thinking on economics, sociology, social policy, statistics and criminology.
- SSISI was one of few places where women could present papers, and debate social questions on equal terms with men in nineteenth century Ireland. The Journal contains papers by some of the leading Irish women: Isabella Todd, a pioneer of women's education; Rosa Barrett, an authority on child-care issues – founder of the Cottage Home

for Little Children and a driving force behind the establishment of the National Association for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children.

- Finally, and perhaps most importantly, a journey through past issues of the SSISI Journal provides an invaluable lesson to today's policy-makers, that many of today's problems – such as crime, alcoholism, caring for children in need, etc. are not new: that they were debated extensively in the past, with a passion and commitment at least equal to today, and that many of the issues debated and solutions proposed are not dissimilar to those being advanced today. History often provides a sobering lesson that we do not have all (perhaps any) of the solutions, and this Journal is testimony to that.