

**LAUNCH OF THE ON-LINE ARCHIVE OF THE JOURNAL OF THE STATISTICAL
AND SOCIAL INQUIRY SOCIETY OF IRELAND 1847-2007**

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The journals of the Statistical and Social Inquiry Society of Ireland provide a remarkable record of both the events and the ideas of the past 160 years. They relate mainly to Ireland but they reflect the views and enthusiasms that swept through Britain, Europe and the rest of the world.

Founded in 1847 as the Dublin Statistical Society “for the promotion of statistics and Political Economy” it was widened in 1862 to include jurisprudence. The address of the Archbishop of Dublin, then President of the Society, at the conclusion of the first session in 1848 emphasised that “This was an institution for instructing not a few recluse students, but the people at large, in the knowledge of that science which all must practice, whether they practice it well or ill; and upon the good or bad practice of which the welfare of the nation, at all times, and at such times as these specially – nay, the very existence of the nation as a civilised community – must mainly depend”. Lest this be considered hyperbole, you can read in the first volume that “The people in Ireland died from want of money and not from want of food....” (p.29). An analysis of the disastrous impact of steps taken to intervene in the famine follows. “But the interference with the trade in food undertaken by the commissariat arrangements, instead of benefiting.... since the lowering of the price, ... is of no benefit to a man who has no money, increased their danger, by turning away the attention of the public from the only mode of saving their lives by supplying them with the means of buying food”. The challenges remain. The SSISI symposium in 2006 was devoted to Ireland’s aid policy to developing countries.

Records of the Society show a fairly constant core membership, with swings in membership and attendances which seem to coincide with movements in the economy – increasing in economic downturns and declining somewhat when things improve. The years from 1860-1890 were marked by large attendances (a special train was commissioned for the Inaugural Meeting of 1864) and by reports of papers and addresses in the media of the day. The history of the Society reflects debates that preoccupied not only the professional “enquirers” but those involved in the social and political development of society.

We are celebrating here the launch of most recent innovation in the Society’s history in form of the archive on-line. This has become a reality as a result of the contribution of Trinity College and the outstanding work of Professor Paul Walsh, Honorary Secretary and editor of the Journal. The online archive makes available the riches of one hundred and sixty years of intellectual activity and the pursuit of answers to a wider public both in Ireland and throughout the world.

In some way my presence here is an illustration of the catholicity of the extraordinary body that is the SSISI. Dr. Garrett FitzGerald, who unfortunately is unable to be with us today, is a combined statistician, economist, policy-maker and statesman on the national and international stages. I am none of these but I have had to grapple with the vagaries of policies, some fashionable and inadequately tested, in many areas of economic and social life. As a humble, last-stage consumer I am therefore grateful for the new and accessible form of the archive and excited by its potential. Those who have brought this about deserve our enthusiastic congratulations.

My first contact with the Society was in the early eighties when I became involved with the Commission on Taxation. Faced with apparent discrepancies in the strength of different forms of economic activity in Ireland and unusual fluctuations in everything from livestock to retail sales in Northern Ireland and the jurisdiction with which the Commission was concerned it was difficult to assess the reality of the economy. SISSI was recommended to me as a source of reliable information. I was not disappointed. The vigour and rigour of the discussions after the main papers

were particularly helpful for someone trying to make sense of the shifting sands of Irish tax policy in those years. The post-paper discussions provide some of the best insights into the subjects under review and are a valuable contribution to the art of “Inquiry”.

May the Society flourish for another 160 years.

Aidan Punch, President of the Statistical and Social Inquiry Society of Ireland

Mr Provost, Ladies and Gentlemen.

Today represents a watershed in the illustrious 160-year history of the Statistical and Social Inquiry Society of Ireland – a day in which the papers and proceedings of the Society become available free of charge on the World Wide Web. These papers, which represent the contributions of some of the best minds of their respective generations, provide an invaluable insight into the development of Irish society over the last century and a half. In the context of the times that we live in, where there is a welcome new beginning in North/South relations on this Island, it is worth mentioning that the Society is, and has been from its inception, an all-Ireland body.

At the outset I would like to express the gratitude of the Council and Members of the Statistical and Social Inquiry Society of Ireland to you, Dr. Hegarty, and to your colleagues in Trinity College for facilitating today’s launch of the online archive of the Journal of the Society. Given the close links between the Society and Trinity College it is fitting that the launch should be taking place here in the Old Library Long Room.

At its September 2004 meeting, the Council of the Society agreed to explore the feasibility of making past journals available to a wider audience. The appointment of the young and energetic Professor Paul Walsh of Trinity College as one of the Honorary Secretaries of the Society with specific responsibility for the journal ensured that the project was bound to succeed. It is fair to say that he has been the driving force behind the archive project from the very start. He has been ably assisted throughout by his fellow Honorary Secretary Dr. Shane Whelan. To both we owe a great debt of gratitude.

Paul used his network of contacts to good effect and from the very start we used the services of Eneclan Limited who came to us with an affordable proposal. Eneclan is a Trinity College campus based company and I would like to pay tribute to its CEO Brian Donovan and to Cathy McCarthy whom we also dealt with for their professionalism and dedication. Eneclan guillotined and scanned the 35 hard copy volumes containing the journals. These covered the proceedings of 160 sessions and contained some 1,300 papers in total. Using recognition software they captured the contents of the various papers, thereby enabling keyword searches to be performed.

At an early stage we also had the enthusiastic support of Trinity College Librarian Niamh Brennan. Niamh made a presentation to the Council in which she informed us of what was happening in the world of e-publishing, particularly the advent of open source data base technology developed by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. She recognised from early on how the project could also benefit the academic community.

The undertaking was a big one even for a University of the size and standing of Trinity College. The time consuming and very necessary cataloguing work was in the capable hands of Geraldine Ryan. Masters in Education student Michelle Garvey, in addition to organising today’s symposium and this launch, also did sterling work on organising metadata and historical coding. We would expect nothing less from the niece of the Director General of CSO! Barry Rafferty, Denis Tkachenko and Laura Weymes also helped in a major way with the editorial work while Patrick Doyle of Trinity library updated the SSISI website.

The culmination of all their efforts is the valuable resource that will be open to all from today onwards by simply logging on to www.ssis.ie.

I now call on one of our distinguished Vice-Presidents Dr. Miriam Hederman O'Brien to formally launch the online archive. I am grateful to Miriam for stepping in at short notice in place of former Taoiseach Dr Garrett FitzGerald who is unfortunately indisposed.

Miriam is a stalwart member of our Council and a great supporter of the Society. She is former Chancellor of the University of Limerick and former Chairperson of the Commission on Taxation.

Thank you ladies and gentlemen.