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Studies in the Quality of Life in Victorian Britain and Ireland

 Springer

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Introduction

Application of the concept, *quality of life*, to an era before our own is fruitful, but it can be difficult. There arises the choice among several formulations of the term with the attendant problem of whether data sources are accessible. Much of the current literature on quality of life addresses contemporary matters and so avoids many difficulties. On the other hand, it is characterized by geographic breadth and a range of practical matters in the lives of ordinary people.

Quality of life in an earlier era can explain how the practical problems just alluded to came about, and suggest some strategies for alleviating them. For example, Latvia incorporated quality of life into its set of policy goals (Karaitis 2006), and pursuit of them requires a grasp of Latvia's situation over the last 70 years. In a broader sense, attempting to construct a reality of life in a former time is worthwhile on its own merits. That is, reconstruction of the past is generally accepted as a matter of formulating a people's patrimony—the cultural heritage which shapes the dynamics of current affairs, and of the current quality of life.

In this work, the intent is to explore a range of substantive and methodological matters which arise when attempting to recover a sense of quality of life in an age long gone. The setting is the British Isles, with attention to England (and Wales), and Ireland. Two settings with a wealth of accessible information. The time perspective is the nineteenth century for the most part. However, it is possible to explore quality of life in a still earlier era, to a degree, and information from the seventeenth century is presented in the last essay.

The case for exploring quality of life using England and Ireland in the nineteenth century as the example is based on the availability of information. In particular, the compatible censuses of both countries are a repository of information in numerical form. In addition, the censuses expanded across the decades incorporating a widening grasp of the two societies' social complex. However, the convenience of census data is a partial solution to the challenge to reproduce a picture of a people's quality of life. Quite different in form, but no less useful are documents such as diaries, memoirs, biographies, novels, and even gravestone inscriptions—bearing in mind Dr. Johnson's advice that in the matter of lapidary inscriptions no one is under oath.

In the case of Ireland, and Dublin in particular, the attempt to explore quality of life before the nineteenth century is difficult, but not impossible. Across the

twentieth century, and now into the twenty first, a group of scholars rescued a number of seventeenth century Dublin parish records and transcribed them. Also, there is a survey of about 600 families living in south Co. Dublin around 1650 which gives remarkable detail of physical traits (Butlin 1965).

For England in the same era, there are both belle-lettristic and numerical sources to guide an exploration of the circumstances of people's lives. The diaries of John Evelyn (Bowie 1983) and Samuel Pepys (Le Galleinne 2003) are informative, while the *Brief lives* penned fitfully by John Aubrey (Dick 1949) convey intimate details of prominent figures, and of the times. In that regard, Aubrey conveys the ethos of the early modern period, one in which men strived to implement the New Learning propounded by Francis Bacon; at the same time, his little sketches of his contemporaries convey the superstitions of his era in which men were haunted and ghosts appeared to some quite regularly. Aubrey also conveyed the radical changes of his era which saw the execution of Charles I, and the rise of Oliver Cromwell, and a brief experience of Puritanism. Aubrey lived through the destruction of cultural elements of historic significance such as the vandalism of ancient paintings in churches.

There are six essays in this volume, and they can be construed variously as exercises in content and methodology of quality of life in Victorian Britain. Three essays address Ireland and three examine the English situation. Two are methodological, and one, the second in the set, is an account of a major Victorian effort to examine the quality of health across the British Isles. The final report in 1883 is known by the name of the Chair in 1883, Francis Galton.

The first essay, *Housing as Quality of Life: Dublin, 1798–1821*, analyzes the results of an unpublished survey of Dublin's housing in 1798 by the Rev. James Whitelaw.

The second essay, *The Anthropometric Committee of the British Association for the advancement of Science, 1875–1883*, describes one of the Victorian efforts to understand the condition of England question. In the 1870s, the British Association undertook to survey the physique of the population of the British Isles. The question had been posed over the preceding decades as observers encountered what appeared to be a progressive decline in the people's health.

The third essay, *Mars and Hygeia: The Application of Army Data on Height to the quality of Life in the British Population*, examines the condition of people in various settlements.

The fourth essay, "*The Great Contrast*": *Factor Analysis applied to the Quality of Life in the Era of the Irish Famine*, examines by statistical means the changes in selected social elements.

The fifth essay, *Victorian Economic Change and Heights: a Note on Lagged Effects*, shares with the preceding essay a statistical theme of exploring ways to elucidate changes in Victorian society.

The sixth essay, *Quality gaffe: Accessing seventeenth century Data. The example of Dublin*, uses parish records which recorded civic and church affairs, including taxation to support the care of abandoned children, and the interment of

those who were found dead within parish boundaries. From names, ages, and similar details, we can begin to appreciate life in Ireland.

These essays are elements of a narrative in which the goal is to create a representation of quality of life in years gone by. Whether the sources are numerical or literary there is a process of evaluation under way as sources are scrutinized. Missing from the list of sources are documents lost to war, fire, and neglect, and the accounts of times past recorded in oral rather than written traditions.

- The inquirer selects and discards, opens doors only to find other portals, and strives for balance in perspective. In one style, the resulting sketch is numerical and factual; in another style, words form a trope—a generalization, sketching various themes and elements in the life cycle (Jordan 2012). In one instance, a synthesis of empiricism—cartography, and history yielded a blend of information quite unique in its depth and scope (Smyth 2006). In all effective methods, the product is a formulation of things long past, but often with the continuities implicit in human nature. Whatever the technique adopted (Jordan 2009–2012), we seek to shape fragments of human experience into an account of quality of life. We do so amidst varying conditions whose complexity we approximate at best, but whose clarity is an implicit goal whatever the technique we adopt.

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