Chapter 1 of Third Edition of *An Introduction to Irish Ancestry*

Introduction to genealogical research

The purpose of this book is to help you to trace your Irish ancestry by giving
an account of what is involved in Irish genealogical research.
This book seeks to answers many of the basic questions that might be asked
by those interested in their Irish ancestry. This book assumes that you have
no knowledge at all of genealogical research. It will take you step by step
through the process of drawing up your family tree. You must always keep at
the back of your mind that in genealogy a person must go from the known to
the unknown.

First steps
The first step is to ask yourself some questions about the ancestor or
ancestors that you are interested in, such as the following:
Date of birth
Place of birth
Names of parents
Religion
Trade, profession, occupation or employment
To whom married
Where married
Names of children
Any other information
Which branch of your family are you going to trace? The further back you
go, the more branches your family tree will have, and these branches will
divide into more branches and so on. It is simpler to start on your paternal
line, since you have to follow only one surname.
If you come to a stop with your paternal line, leave it for a while, and follow
another line. There will always be plenty of branches to follow. In your great
grandfather's generation, there are eight different surnames and all may be of
interest to you. "Ancestor" is defined as a person from whom one's father or
mother is descended and tracing your ancestors should not be confined to the
paternal line only.

Preliminary research
The next step is to talk to your family and make a note of what they have to
say. You should then gather up all the information possible from documents,
such as certificates of birth, marriage and death from graveyard inscriptions

from memoriam cards and whatever else can be got hold of. With the information now obtained, you are in a position to talk to an elderly relative. A grandparent would be the best relative from whom to obtain information. If a grandparent is not available, any grandaunt, granduncle or elderly relation possessing a sharp mind can do as well.

The opportunity to talk to an elderly relative should be taken immediately, before it is too late. It should prove a worthwhile exercise as old people like to talk about the past and do not always find someone who is prepared to listen. Always make a note of anything that you are told or use a tape recorder. Afterwards the information obtained should be written down. When sitting down with an elderly person to inquire into your family background, you should bear the following in mind:

1. Give yourself plenty of time.
2. Be careful of hearsay (something heard from somebody else and not known directly). The story is told that during the Great War (1914-1918) a message went down the trenches by word of mouth "Send up reinforcements, we are going to advance", it was received as "Send up three and four pence (three shillings and four pence), we are going to a dance".
3. Tell the person to whom you are speaking little, so as to avoid it being repeated to you later and you treating it as confirmation.
4. Be patient.
5. Use your discretion when it comes to illegitimate births.

Mode of questioning
Be systematic in your questioning
At what age did he/she die?
Was he/she the eldest in that family?
What was the age difference between him/her and the eldest in the family? (This will give you an indication of a date of marriage)
Was there any age difference between the father and mother?
What ages were they when they got married?
Where did the father and mother come in their own families?
The following should also be borne in mind at this stage and later when going through the registers of births: Within a year of marriage, a child was usually born and every one or two years thereafter during the mother's fertile years.

Naming tradition
Children were nearly always called after someone and it was the custom to call the first boy after his paternal grandfather, the second boy after his maternal grandfather, a third boy might have been called after his own father,

an uncle, or grand-uncle on either side of the family. The first and second girl may have been called after the grandmothers and a third girl, after her own mother or an aunt. It is only in the present generation that this practice has begun to wane.

Verify in the records
Do not treat all that you are told by your family and by relations as fact, verification must be sought in the records. For example: The family owned certain property, but were swindled out of it; the swindler or his descendants will often be named (but the story may not be true); members of the family went to America and were never heard of again (they may never have existed in the first place); An ancestor held high rank in the Army or Police (people are always promoted in the telling).

Geographical origin of ancestor
It can be difficult for those abroad to identify which part of Ireland an ancestor may have come from. It may have been passed down through the generations that an ancestor would have come from a seaport, such as Belfast, Cork, Derry, Dublin etc. It becomes more difficult when an Irish ancestor may have sailed from Liverpool, England. There can be no doubt that a person would have traveled to these ports in order to sail from Ireland. Where there is a lack of other evidence available to identify a place of origin, the surname may be the key. Irish surnames are to be found in particular localities, and where both surnames of a married couple are known identification is easier. See *www.IrishSurnames.net* In addition some personal names are particular to certain localities. Chapter 14 on the county distribution of surnames should prove a useful tool in this quest.

How far back can you go?
After searching through the records referred to in the following chapters, the majority of Irish people are most unlikely to be able to trace their ancestors back further than the late eighteenth century. This is because the earlier records are based on the ownership of property and, as practically the entire Irish population was dispossessed in the seventeenth century, any records of their existence are scarce.

Administrative divisions
There are many administrative divisions that one will come across as one goes through the records. What follows is a brief summary of them.

Province: They are Ulster; Munster; Leinster and Connaught. In Gaelic the term is Cuige meaning a fifth, their originally being a province of North Leinster/Meath.

County: Ireland was shired into counties beginning in the twelfth century and the process was completed in the seventeenth century with the Plantation of Ulster (1609). The county boundaries correspond with the principal Gaelic lordships of that period.

Diocese: The dioceses are administrative divisions of the Churches, they date from the twelfth century. The boundaries of the diocese represent ancient Gaelic territories of that time. A search of the parish registers will require the identification of an area within its dioceses.

Barony: The *tuath* was a basic division of Gaelic Ireland and it corresponded to the territory of a sept. The Barony was largely based upon this division. There are a number of baronies in each county. The Barony was used for many of the surveys of the 17th century. The establishment of the County Councils in 1898 saw the barony lose its significance.

Poor Law Union: The Poor Relief Act (Ireland) 1838, established the poor law unions as districts within which the inhabitants were responsible for the poor of the area. The poor law Unions embraced a number of townlands within a radius of ten miles or so, with a large market town as a centre. The boundaries of the Unions bore no relationship to those of the Counties.

Parish: The parish was an area over which a local church had jurisdiction. The civil administration made use of this division, hence civil parish. Many of the genealogical records to be consulted, will require a knowledge of the parochial boundary. The Parish is made up of townlands.

Townland: The townland is the smallest administrative division of land in Ireland. There are approximately 64,000 townlands. The present townlands date from 1837, when they were based upon the ancient ballyboe. The ballyboe was an area of land that would feed one cow. This explains why the larger townlands are found in the areas of poorest land.