NUI MAYNOOTH
Ollscoil na hÉireann Má Nuad

NIRSA INTERNSHIP 2001

Department of Modern History

Project Title: Design, construction and operation of an Microsoft Access database to accommodate records of L.W. Brockliss' and P. Ferte's '*Irish clerics in France in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries: a statistical study*'.

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Academic Sponsor: Dr. Thomas O'Connor.

Description of project:

This database project was conceptualised to facilitate the transfer of the existing set of records of Irish clerics who trained in France compiled as the result of scholarly research by L.W. B. Brockliss and P. Ferté[1] and now lodged with, and published by, the Royal Irish Academy, to a digital format. Dr. Brockliss has kindly granted permission for his work to be employed in this project. The records representing the four archiepiscopal provinces of Armagh, Cashel, Dublin, and Tuam are at present spread over 115 pages of a prosopography entitled *Irish clerics in France in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries: a statistical study'*.

This study is arranged by archiepiscopal province, and then by each constituent diocese with an alphabetical listing of surnames. The data represents an undertaking to extract extant relevant material relating to Irish clerical students who studied in France in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Although six Irish colleges existed to train Irish priests in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries at Paris, Nantes, Bordeaux, Douai, Toulouse and Lille (a seventh, Poitiers had closed in 1766)[2], in practice the Brockliss and Ferté's researches were limited to those to found at Paris and Toulouse. The records of the other colleges have, unfortunately, not survived the passage of time and at best only fragmentary morsels of this information can be located. However this unfortunate deficiency in the archives is less of an impediment to compiling a record of Irish priests in France than it may seem at first sight, since a great many of those who went abroad to study gravitated toward

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[1] Brockliss, L.W.B. & Ferté, P., 'Irish clerics in France in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth centuries: a statistical study' in *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy,* vol. 87, c, no. 9, pp 527-572 (Dublin, 1987).

Paris, and the authors themselves wished to present their work merely as a starting point for further research and study on this subject rather than as the comprehensive or definitive conclusion.[3] Indeed the situation as regards the availability of primary facts on this period has been summed up as follows:

> Researchers in the humanities and social sciences in Ireland currently lack access to coherent, comprehensive information on the thousands of Irish people who travelled to Europe between the Reformation and the French Revolution. Apart from a number of monographs the European Irish are unknown. This situation has impoverished practically every area of research in historical, social and cultural studies, leaving a significant element of the Irish historical experience untouched by serious scientific research. (The Irish in Europe project)

The aim of this project then is to take this data which, at the moment, by its size and format is difficult to access, and transfer it to an immensely more flexible electronic database format. This would have the crucial advantage of improving accessibility and efficiency, whilst easily allowing new information to be entered. It would utilise the considerable power of a computer program to carry out complex searches and computations using a query facility. Using the analytical capability of the computer program to examine what will be a cohesive database of an actual community of people rather than a disparate collection of individuals also raises the exciting prospect of detecting patterns and correlations not previously observed. The over reliance on the details of prominent but often unrepresentative high profile individuals can be replaced with a more inclusive picture of the wider community, utilising the equally valuable records of the many less celebrated members of this Irish migrant society. An electronic database will also be more amenable to expansion as knowledge in this area grows, being far less complicated and costly than

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[2] Ibid., p529.
[3] Ibid., p530.

the publication of additional supplements to a printed work. In addition this information when contained in an electronic database can be easily linked to other related database projects in the future as research on the migration of Irish people, and their modes of integration into host societies in the Western European region develops, perhaps under the auspices of the National Institute for Regional and Spatial Analysis.

Methodology:

The first step in transferring the data from paper to electronic format was to identify a suitable computer package. Microsoft Access was chosen as the programme most suitable for this project for a number of reasons. Firstly, it provides the necessary computing power and flexibility without the need for a long period of potentially expensive and time consuming training in, and gaining experience of, a complex programming language.

Access is also included as a standard component of the Microsoft Office suite of software. The almost universal application of this software platform is important to maximise the accessibility of the database.

Microsoft Access database files can also be exported to other computer packages; therefore if the project progresses to a point where a more specialised computer package is required to further manipulate and present the data, if the creation of an searchable Internet accessible database was envisaged for instance, the most important, and time consuming, part of that process will already have been completed: the transferral of hardcopy data to an electronic format.

Following the evaluation and selection of the most suitable database program the practical aspect of the creation of the database began

Relational databases

If a database is an organised collection of data, a relational database, such as Microsoft Access is one that organises this data into related tables. Each table has a name, and is composed of several columns; and rows containing data for each of the columns. A relational database represents all data in these tables and provides the user with retrieval operations that generate new tables from existing ones.

The crucial element of each table is the design of the columns, or fields which hold the various elements of information input into the application. Having learned from training on an ECDL module devoted to Access and from speaking with the designer of a database intended to store and manipulate very similar historical information, that the design of the fields is the single most important step in the overall successful creation of the database, it was then decided to concentrate on this component initially.

After analysing and breaking down the historical information contained in the prosopography a structure of three tables was developed: one to record and display personal information; one to accommodate educational information and finally a table to receive career and achievement data.

Each table then required the design and layout of the fields; depending on the table it could include headings such as SURNAME, FIRSTNAME,

BORN, DIED, DIOCESE, DATE OF REGISTRATION, QUALIFICATION OBTAINED, etc. Following the successful design of the database fields came the process of data input, transferring the paper lists to the digital format.

The database is now complete and ready for use as an academic resource. The possibilities for this database are exciting and the project will in time provide a valuable tool to all those with a research interest in this area.

Foundation for Further Development:

Graphical user interface. Similar to the Library catalogue and Windows itself. Expansion of the project could follow this line utilising the advantage of an easy to use and appealing Graphical User Interface based on the unseen engine of the database. Like Windows itself which is based on unseen strings of program code, yet we never, thankfully, have to interact with the fundamentals of programming. The Graphical User Interface receives and translates our keyboard or mouse inputs into meaningful data for the operating system of the computer. Ideally, this project would make use of this blueprint to improve ease and style of presentation.

CDROM

These last two elements would be of crucial importance if the full potential of this project, and those similar to it, is to be realised The publication of academic endeavours such this database as a commercial product on CDROM, directly by NIRSA itself or in cooperation with external associates could hopefully be a possibility.

Such an undertaking harmonises very much with Nirsa's interdisciplinary focus on the phenomenon of migration: To conclude with some apt words of Dr. O'Connor:

'Contact with other disciplines, especially <u>*statistics, geography and sociology*</u> *has provided historians with new models for understanding not only why but how people migrated.'* 'Ireland and Europe, 1580-1815: some historiographical remarks' in The Irish in Europe 1580-1815.p10

Perhaps continued and increased contact amongst these disciplines can be further developed, supported and sustained in the future by the objectives and initiatives of NIRSA.

GUIDE TO THE DATABASE

The database is entitled '*Brockliss and Ferté Prosopography'* and consists of three tables called: Personal Details; Education and Qualifications; and Career and Achievements. Each table records relevant information for all of the 1533 subjects of Brockliss' and Ferté's study under these categories.

The file opens on a main switchboard screen which presents four options:

1. *Personal Details:* a command button to open these records in 'form' view which is the standard Access viewing format.
2. *Education and Qualifications:* a command button to open these records.
3. *Career and Achievements:* a command button to open these records.
4. *Exit:* a command button to exit the database.

Clicking on any of the first three buttons opens a table of information in form view. Navigation in this view is achieved by using the command buttons at the lower left of the form to move forward or back through the records. The number of records currently being displayed is also presented here. When all records are being utilised the figure here will be 1533. During various search operations the figure will vary to match results found.

UTILISATION OF THE DATABASE

The database supports all Access sort, filter and query operations. However, the following procedures are likely to be of most use: (these procedures are common to all three tables)

USING THE SORT ASCENDING/DESCENDING BUTTONS:

Place the cursor in any chosen field of interest such as surname or diocese (depending on the selected record set) and click either the sort ascend button to sort the entries from highest to lowest, or the sort descend button for reverse order. The database will be sorted according to ID Number when opened first.

FILTER BY SELECTION:

This procedure can be used to find only those records that contain selected information. This can, for example, be used to find only those whose surname is Murphy, or were born in a given year. This procedure can be used successively to refine information down to very narrow specifications. In the case of those whose name has been found to be Murphy this set of records can be filtered again to find those whose name is John and then to find only those born in Cork. These searches can be saved and printed.

Using this procedure in conjunction with the figure displaying the number of records under analysis can easily calculate the number of students from the Archiepiscopal province of Armagh, or the number from a specific diocese, or find the most common surname or county of origin. It is important to remember to remove the filter to return to the full set of records at the end of an operation of this type.

FIND:

This dialogue box enables specific characters to be found. It would be possible to locate 'Newcastle' as a place name, for example, using this method.

LIST OF FIELDS

Personal details:	Education and Qualifications
ID number	ID number
Surname	Surname
Firstname	Firstname
Middle name	Seminary
Province	Year of registration
Diocese	Faculty
County	University
Address	Qualification 1
Born	Date1
Died	University1
Clerical position	Qualification2
Notes	Date2
	University2
	Qualification3
	Date3
	University3
	Notes

Career and Achievements:

ID number

Surname

Firstname

Church office

College office

Year

College

Lay office

Year(s)

Place

Student society

Returned to Ireland

Parish(es)

Year of return

Remained in France

Parish(es) assigned

Year of appointment

Comments

Published works

Images

Sources

Map