

The Decade of Centenaries 1912-23 – the Role of Parish Records in Commemoration

By Sylvia Turner

The Decade of Centenaries Programme has led to a great variety of commemorative events and literature, both at a national and local level. The Representative Church Body (RCB) Library has made a significant contribution to Commemoration of the Decade with online exhibitions such as the role of the Church under two jurisdictions, the 1916 Rising and, just recently, Christmas 1921. The accounts in the Church of Ireland Gazette have played a fundamental part in these commemorations.

The Centenary celebrations feel particularly close to me as my mother would have been 100 on January 6th 2022, her birthday explained to me as being very important as being the day the Anglo-Irish Treaty was signed in the Dáil. She was baptised within days of her birth and she used her baptism certificate for identity purposes, having no civil certificate of birth until she moved to England where it was not accepted.

The focus of the Archive of the Month this January 2022 has been to highlight the significant increase in the library's holdings of parish registers. The holdings at the RCB Library have gathered momentum in recent years with the retrieval of Parish Registers held locally and the Anglican Record Project to make the parish registers available in a digital format, so making them accessible online.

Clearly, the RCB Parish Registers have an ever-increasing value to genealogists but in this Decade of Centenaries, they provide valuable evidence to complement the 1911 census. The Census of 1911 identifies the backdrop to this tumultuous Decade of political events, of a country that was in the grip of a poverty and health emergency. The census revealed that Dublin had the worst housing conditions of any city in the United Kingdom. Tenements in inner-city Dublin were overcrowded, and disease-ridden and malnourishment was prevalent. Conditions in the rural areas could be equally as bad for many as data gathered about housing revealed those living in damp, poorly ventilated and overcrowded accommodation – conditions ripe for spreading disease.

Although there is an element of truth in the view that Protestants were affluent, owning more land and having a more privileged position under British rule, there were Protestants in the lower-socio-economic groups who provided services for affluent members of their religions, working the land, supplying trades and servicing the 'big' country houses. My mother's family were part of this latter group.

Twenty years ago, I approached the incumbent of my grandmother's family church in Geashill, Co. Offaly, to find out if he had more details about the family. Using the Parish Registers still held at the Church, he copied all the births, deaths and marriages related to the family by hand and what he revealed was distressing. My mother knew her two aunts well and knew of two uncles who had died when young men. However, the records revealed that my grandmother had twelve – not four – siblings most of whom had died in their teenage years or early twenties. It took a long time for her daughters to adjust to this knowledge and realise their mother had carried this burden all her life. Further research revealed that most of her siblings had died of tuberculosis (TB), endemic in Ireland at the time, being the most common cause of death in 1911.

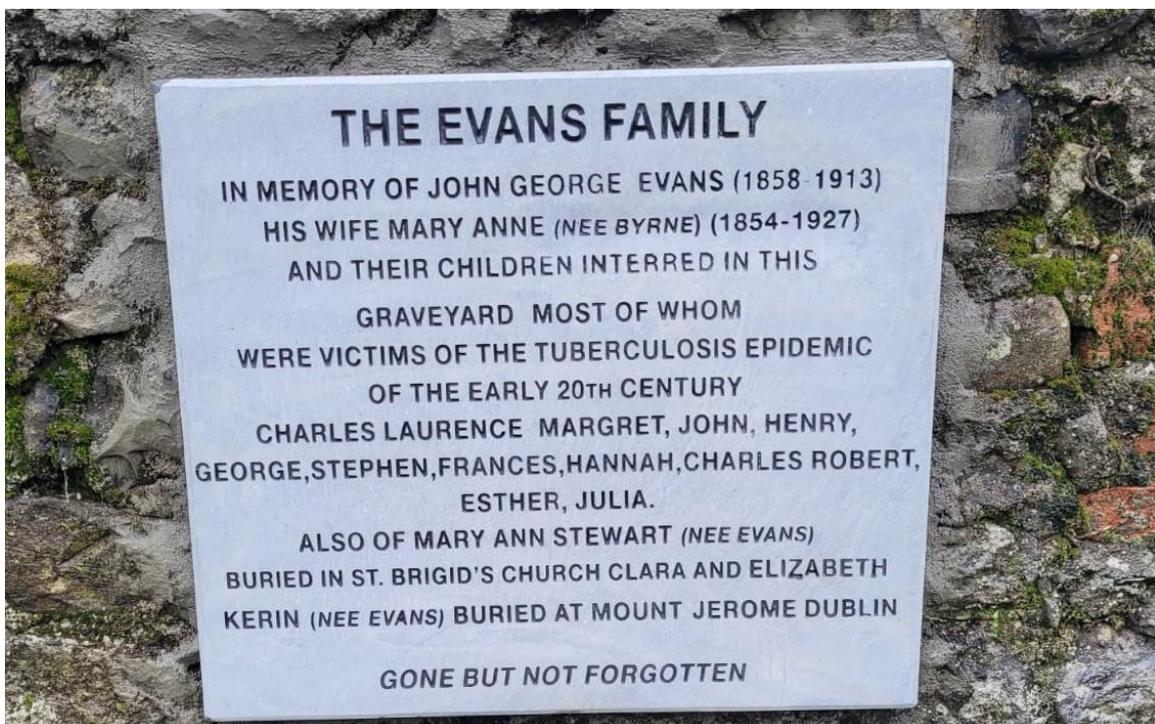
It is clear that the Decade 1912-1923 is remembered by some families not just by political events but the poverty endured and deaths that occurred. The health of the country was worsened further when the 1918 influenza pandemic arrived in Ireland from Europe as soldiers returned from fighting in World War 1. It killed approximately 20% of the population. The current pandemic has led to a

range of commemorative work such as the publication of Ida Milne's book 'Stacking the Coffins' (2018) and the reception commemorating the Great Flu Epidemic of 1918-1919 hosted by President Higgins in May 2019. In his address, the President noted that *'Despite the fact that it claimed many more lives than the Easter Rising, the War of Independence and the Civil War combined, the Great Flu is rarely incorporated into the narrative of 20th-century Ireland.'*

Just as we were slow to learn the lessons of the 1918 influenza pandemic through little commemorative activity during the last century, it would seem that the same public health issue is emerging with TB. In October 2021, the World Health Organisation (WHO) reported that the Covid-19 pandemic has reversed years of global progress in tackling TB for the first time in over a decade. Resources have been reallocated to the Covid 19 response and people have struggled to find treatment due to lockdowns.

Evidence of such high numbers of deaths is hard to find amongst the poorer members of society as the erection of gravestones requires sufficient finances. All that can be left is anecdotal evidence passed down through generations and parish records. The fact that my grandmother did not speak of the deaths of her siblings was not unusual due to the stigma surrounding TB, seen as a disease of the poor. Additionally, although civil registration of births, deaths and marriages was a legal requirement from 1864, it is estimated that up to 15% of births and marriages were unregistered, and 30% of deaths. Reasons varied from inability to pay the registration fee, problems travelling to the registration office or, in the case of deaths, whole families could be destroyed.

At the time my grandmother gave birth to my mother, her youngest daughter, she had lost both her father and the majority of her 12 siblings to TB, most dying in their teens and early twenties. Parish Registers can both provide evidence of births, deaths and marriages and so help fill in the gaps in civil registration. As a mark of respect to our ancestors and all those people who suffered a similar fate, a memorial has been erected to them in Geashill churchyard where they are buried.



With particular thanks to the Revd. J Leslie Crampton, former incumbent, and the Revd. Fran Grasham and Vestry of Geashill Killeigh Parish, Offaly.

Sylvia Turner January 2022