

‘But what hope is there for a nation which lives on potatoes?’: A Brief History of the Statistical and Social Inquiry Society of Ireland

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Abstract This paper gives a brief history of the Society. It suggests that what is remarkable about the Society is not its origin but its longevity: it is the sixth longest surviving statistical society in the world at 177 years old when almost all such societies perished in their infancy. The survival and continued relevance of this volunteer organisation is attributed to two factors: council and other active members have the ear of policymakers, often as advisers, and the Society offers the rest of us an opportunity to participate in the debate of evidence-based reforms to help make a better future for those in Ireland.

Keywords: Ireland, learned society, statistical society, economic society, reform society, economic policy formation in Ireland

JELs: B15, B25, I23, Z18

1. THE NEED FOR A STATISTICAL SOCIETY

Ireland and the Irish were in crisis. At home, the Great Irish Famine was ongoing with widespread suffering and distress. Abroad, the majority of Irish were to be found at the lowest state of the labouring classes in Britain and US, with racial discrimination adding further disadvantage to their poverty. Even Frederick Engels's empathy to labour could not stretch to 'these people having grown up almost without civilisation, accustomed from youth to every sort of privation, rough, intemperate, and improvident, bring all their brutal habits with them' who have 'discovered the minimum of the necessities of life, and are now making the English workers acquainted with it.'² Ireland was failing the Irish, and there was little refuge elsewhere in these hard times.

Something had to be done. In October 1847, nine or ten men met in the rooms in Trinity College Dublin of the newly appointed Whately Professor of Political Economy, Professor William Neilson Hancock. Hancock, then just 27 years of age, knew with all the certainty of youth and the confidence of early academic eminence that his science could help better manage Ireland. He had invited men of similar mind, whose knowledge and experience would be invaluable to this task: James .A. Lawson (a former Whately Professor and future Attorney General), J. Kells Ingram (a Trinity academic and polymath), G. Johnson Allman (Professor of Mathematics at Queen's College Galway), Robert Ball (a distinguished naturalist and geologist), W. Cooke Taylor (prolific author on political, economic and social matters and now a civil servant), Steward Blacker, Professor Patton, and Rev. R.M. Kennedy.³ At this meeting, they agreed to establish the Dublin Statistical Society.

There was nothing particularly remarkable in establishing a statistical society: it would have been more remarkable if no such society was formed in Ireland as such societies were being set up in many of the major cities across the UK in the mid-nineteenth century. In the UK, society and its institutions were changing rapidly and, especially for the working class, the changes were not obviously for the better. Statistics were needed - the term 'statistics' at that time referred to data, largely of a demographic or economic nature, which shed light on the state of the nation. Moreover, there was an urgency to getting such statistics as there was widespread unease that the merging industrial and urban society was unstable when as Thomas Carlyle characterised it in 1840, 'Cash Payment has become the sole nexus of man and

¹ I am indebted to several earlier histories of SSISI in preparing this paper, especially the history of up to the eve of the Irish Free State in Millin (1919), the history of the first hundred years in Black (1947), the history up to 1988 in Black (1988), and the history of the first 150 years in Daly (1997) and, more concisely, in Daly (1998). I also thank the many current Council Members that gave me feedback on an earlier draft.

² Quotes from the Chapter headed *Irish Immigration* in Engels (1845).

³ Millin (1919), p. 606. He states ten gentlemen but lists only nine.

men',⁴ sentiments later echoed by Marx and Engels in 1848.⁵ The state of Ireland was even more precarious.

2. THE REMARKABLE LONGEVITY

In fact, the Statistical Society of Dublin cannot claim to be the first such organisation on this island: the Statistical Society of Ulster was formed earlier in 1838. Nor was it the last: the Belfast Social Inquiry Society was established in 1851 (also originating with W. N. Hancock although never wholly independent of the Society in Dublin). We may also speculate that, were it not for the formation of the Statistical Society of Dublin, other societies with related aims – such as a society focussed on penal reform⁶ – would undoubtedly have formed.

The remarkable fact about the Society is not its origin but its longevity: 'the Statistical and Social Inquiry Society of Ireland can claim that there are only two similar societies in these Islands older than it, and indeed only five in the whole world' (Black 1947, p.4). The other two in the British Isles are the Manchester Statistical Society (founded in 1833), and the London (now Royal) Statistical Society in 1834. Gone are the statistical societies of Glasgow (founded 1836), Bristol (1836), Liverpool (1838), Edinburgh, Leeds, Aberdeen, and many more, most of which did not survive even to 1850.⁷

Any history of the Statistical Society of Dublin, which within a couple of decades expanded to the Statistical and Social Inquiry Society of Ireland (abbreviated to SSISI and pronounced 'Sissie'), must account for its survival when so many others did not. Equally, it must also account for the continued relevance of such a volunteer organisation with the emergence over the next 177 years of well-resourced organisations covering parts of its mandate, such as, say, the Central Statistics Office and the Economic and Social Research Institute.

3. FIRM FOUNDATIONS: 1847-1862

The small gathering of Professor Hancock in October 1847 was committed to their cause and knew others in influential positions of similar views, or at least supportive of them. They also knew that their science for improving Ireland could have little effect in the short-term – it was a long term project. Hancock, who chaired the meeting, modelled the new society in Dublin along the lines of the Statistical Section of the British Association for the Advancement of Science,⁸ which had earlier evolved into the Statistical Society of London (subsequently the Royal Statistical Society).

The original objective of the Dublin Statistical Society was in 'promoting the study of Statistical and Economical Knowledge', with naturally a particular attention to Ireland and its social and economic challenges. One of the main objectives was, in fact, pedagogical for 'a science so important as that of Political Economy was not be confined to a few...but... to be diffused generally amongst the people', as the President emphasised at the end of the first session (Whately 1848, pp.3-4). Moreover, 'it was desirable for the welfare and prosperity of society, that the true principles of [Political Economy] should be understood and acted upon' (ibid., p.7). This objective was considerably more ambitious than the original scope of the Statistical Society in London, whose *raison d'être* could have been drafted by Mr Gradgrind:⁹ 'the collection and classification of all facts illustrative of the present condition and prospects of Society, especially as it exists in the British Dominions.'¹⁰

The objectives of the Society being broadly sketched out, Hancock with the help of others in the room, must have moved on to identifying and subsequently approaching other influential men willing to give their time and energy to help achieve these ends. This was promptly done. A more formal meeting was arranged in the premises of the Royal Irish Academy on 22nd November 1847, when it was resolved to establish 'The Statistical Society of Dublin', with the Archbishop of Dublin, The Most Rev. Richard Whately (who had a

⁴ Carlyle (1940), p. 61 and similar on p.66.

⁵ Marx & Engels (1848) put it, the reorganisation 'left remaining no other nexus between man and man than naked self-interest, than callous 'cash payment''.

⁶ See Black (1947), p. 4.

⁷ Wilcox (1934), p. 419.

⁸ Black (1947), p. 4.

⁹ Or, as Mr Gradgrind said: 'Now, what I want is, Facts. Teach these boys and girls nothing but Facts. Facts alone are wanted in life. Plant nothing else, and root out everything else. You can only form the minds of reasoning animals upon Facts: nothing else will ever be of any service to them. Quote from the first paragraph of Charles Dickens satirical novel, *Hard Times*, first published in 1854.

¹⁰ Quoted from the History section of the website of the Royal Statistical Society at www.rss.org.uk.

well-known interest in political economy) as the President, Captain Thomas A. Larcom (civil servant responsible for the Ordnance Survey of Ireland, the 1841 Census of Ireland, also responsible for famine relief when Commissioner of Public Works, and later Under-Secretary for Ireland) as a Vice-President, the other Vice-President being Mountiford Longfield (former Whately Professor of Political Economy). The two young secretaries came from the original meeting: James A. Lawson and, of course, W. Neilson Hancock with Stewart Blacker the elected Treasurer. The office bearers were joined by 12 Council members, including Sir Robert Kane, Surgeon Wilde (significant contribution to the census of Ireland), and four of the originating group not given officer roles.

It is a little tedious to list names of once important individuals, now only known to specialist historians. However, these individuals, and subsequent generations of individuals of their kind, are a key reason for the longevity of this Society. Other than Presidents, there is no finite term for officers or council members and some have remained active in the Society for many decades. Hancock was so committed to its ideals that he served as a secretary until he resigned 1881, served the next year as President and remained as a vice-President until he died in 1888. In addition, he read no fewer than 88 papers to the Society. There are many other examples of such dedication, although somewhat less extreme. John Kells Ingram, the longest survivor of the originating members and one whose interest ran more to social issues than economics, served as secretary 1855-1857, President 1878-88 and remained active until his death in 1907. He read seven papers to the Society (excluding the obituary of his long-term colleague W. Neilson Hancock) and, like other members, also held the Presidency of the Royal Irish Academy. Brief biographical portraits of the Past Presidents of the Society are available on-line at www.ssis.ie, fuller sketches of the Presidents in the first hundred year in Black (1947), and the on-line archive of the journals of the Society from 1847 to date, also at www.ssis.ie, contains longer obituaries of individuals who made a significant contribution to the Society.

In political economy, as in much else, Dublin is a small town. It so happened that a decade before the founding of the Society, a Dublin businessman, John Barrington, had left in his will an endowment of several thousand pounds for the express purpose of delivering lectures on Political Economy to as wide an audience in Ireland as possible with the stipulation that such lectures would avoid party politics and religious doctrine. The Statistical Society of Dublin also decrees in its rules from its foundation that: 'No communication shall be read before the Society involving topics likely to produce discussions connected with religious differences or party politics' (currently part of Rule 14). This fortuitous circumstance could hardly be a coincidence. In any event, the Barrington Trust was used, under the administration of the Society to deliver the Barrington Lectures. The monies from the Barrington Trust, £120 per annum in 1849, allowed four lecturers to be appointed, each to give one lecture in Dublin and six in a provincial town. These monies allowed the Society to achieve an immediate impact from its early days. The Barrington Lectures continue to this day, although now the shrunk proceeds of the trust are applied as a medal and monetary prize for the best paper by an author early in their professional career.

Early papers read to the Statistical Society of Dublin were subsequently published in pamphlet form if considered deserving of a wider audience, the pamphlets designed to be gathered into volumes. With over seventy papers read in the first seven years found so deserving, it was decided to establish a regular journal of selected papers, which has continued from 1855 to the present time. Rankin (2011) treats the Society's published output up to 1890 and puts it in the context of other such publications at that time in Ireland and elsewhere.

Some of the members of the Statistical Society of Dublin, anxious to accelerate the broader aims that attracted them to it, established another society, the Society for Promoting Scientific Inquiries into Social Reform (abbreviated to the Social Inquiry Society), with considerably higher membership subscriptions so that, as stated in their first annual report in 1851, they could commission research and 'obtain reports on complicated and difficult investigations, entirely beyond the reach of the voluntary and unpaid exertions of individual inquirers in the Statistical Society' (quoted in Black 1947, p.9).

In any event, this offshoot lasted independently just five years before its aims and residual funds were amalgamated with the Statistical Society of Dublin. In 1862 this was formalised when the name and the aims were changed to its final form: 'The title of the Society shall be The Statistical and Social Inquiry Society of Ireland. The object of the Society shall be the promotion of the study of statistics, jurisprudence, and social and economic science' (currently Rule 1). There was also a change of rule in 1862 that allowed admission of women (as associates), although it was more than a century later before the Society had its first female president (Dr Thekla Beere, 1971-74).

Nothing much changed to the organisation of SSISI over the following 150 years. Ireland changed. SSISI provided a platform to monitor and evaluate the changes, and propose others.

4. THE SOUL OF SSISI

Hancock read a paper at the first ordinary meeting of Society in December 1847 to give hope that Ireland's ills were not because it was full of Irish people, as contended by Carlyle, Engels, and other commentators:

'To the mind of an economist the contrast between a destitute peasantry and prolific resources suggests an investigation into the social arrangements of the country, where such an anomaly prevails. The result of this inquiry, wherever it has been pursued, has been to vindicate the character of our common nature from the charge of general indolence, by showing that such anomalies arise from the social arrangements transmitted from less enlightened ages, being at variance with the teachings of science.' (Hancock 1847, p.3).

In a subsequent paper in the session, he went on to take issue with C.E. Trevelyan, then responsible for overseeing famine relief in Ireland, who believed that the famine was 'a direct stroke of the All-wise and All-merciful Providence' and despaired for Ireland when he rhetorically asked: 'But what hope is there for a nation which lives on potatoes?' (Hancock 1848, p.7).

Hancock and his fellow economists' recipe for bettering Ireland followed the economic orthodoxy of the time and was simply to sweep away all the impediments to the free run of laissez-faire's invisible hand. So a major theme in the papers read over the next few decades was to bring Irish laws, insofar as they could impact the financial incentives for factors of production, into line with those of rapidly developing nations, but most especially those of England.

However, there are as many ways of bettering the conditions of man as there are individual value systems, and many papers discussed reflected differing beliefs as to what was good and worthwhile. Some argued for equal rights,¹¹ some argued for opportunities for all to realise their potential¹² - for children, for women, for the elderly, for the disabled. Sometimes it was found necessary to highlight the plight of certain sections of the community - for instance, the long hours of bakers or housing or sanitation conditions of those in urban areas. Daly (1997) includes an appendix with an index of papers presented to SSISI organised by subject matter that highlights certain reoccurring themes over the decades: education, crime, agriculture, banking, the census, cooperatives, land ownership and purchase, currency, drunkenness, employment, law reform, emigration, population, public health, taxation, trade, etc. The archive of the approximately 1,500 papers read to the Society, freely available at www.ssis.ie, can also be explored by theme.

Black (1947) contends the Society was at its prime between 1862-1888, with a membership close to 300, ordinary meeting gathering an audience of about 80, and some Annual or Inaugural meetings attracting well in excess of 300 - such a significant event in Dublin at that time that special trains were run.¹³ The following period, 1889-1918, was one where survivorship was to be regarded as success - membership was down, finances were difficult curtailing special investigations, and suitable papers were not forthcoming. Hancock had died in 1888, and perhaps some of enthusiasm and energy of the Society passed away with him. The papers over the three decades following his death had perhaps less of a reform agenda than a commentary on trends in society.

A political rising in 1916 made a call to arms for independence, anticipating a new Ireland that '... declares its resolve to pursue the happiness and prosperity of the whole nation and of all its parts, cherishing all of the children of the nation equally.'¹⁴ Subsequent events eventually led to an Ireland independent from the UK from 1922. The objectives of the Society once again aligned with the mood of the times. The new state needed good statistics, needed good institutions and sound plans to deliver on the promise of 'happiness and prosperity of the whole nation'. SSISI reissued its call:

'We heartily invite your co-operation, and whether statistician or economist, social reformer or jurist, you will find in our society a free platform, on which men and women - for both are equally admissible-can sink for the time being their religious and political differences, and unite in a common effort to improve the welfare of their fellow-countrymen...' (Millin 1919, p.620)

¹¹ See, for instance, Webb (1867): 'The burthen of proof that women have no such right [to vote] rests entirely with the opponents of the idea.' p.457

¹² See, for instance, Gibson (1862): 'It is so palpably unjust to urge that men's wages should be kept up by keeping women's down, that it is rarely mentioned without wordy qualifications. If there is a burden to be borne it should not be all placed on the woman's shoulders. The labour fund belongs to all labourers, male as well as female; and the labour market should be thrown open to all comers.' Or Stoker (1863) on the need to educate the deaf and dumb, which was, incidentally, the first paper to the Society read by a woman.

¹³ Black (1947), p.22.

¹⁴ From *The Proclamation of the Irish Republic in 1916*.

Membership almost doubled between 1921 and 1925, and rose substantially further in 1931-33.¹⁵ The Society's new membership was drawn from the new Civil Service, commercial concerns and, as always, academia. By its centenary in 1947, SSISI had a membership 'little short of the best levels attained in the golden years of the mid-Victorian enthusiasm for statistical studies' (Black (1988), p.169).

One of the new members, Dr T.J. Kieran, was Director of Broadcasting in Radio Éireann, the state broadcaster, and he organised the broadcast of a Society's discussion on 'The Population Problem' in 1937 and on 'Unemployment' in 1940.¹⁶ This experiment was repeated when a series of some fourteen lectures on Irish social and economic history was broadcast each week from September 1997 to February 1998 on the occasion of SSISI 150th anniversary. These lectures were subsequently published in the book, *From Famine to Feast: Economic and Social Change on Ireland: 1847-1997* under the editorship of K.A. Kennedy, a past president.

Leadership or senior roles in the new institutions that formed after Ireland's independence – from State Departments, to the Central Statistics Office, to the Central Bank, to the Economic and Social Research Institute – often coincided with men and women on the Council of SSISI. The tenor of papers became somewhat more statistical – social and, more especially, vital and economic – especially from the 1950s. The Council of SSISI had an overview of the topical policy issues and knowledge of what research was being conducted in the departments, institutions and universities. Rather than wait for papers to be submitted, they often chose topics and actively encouraged papers on such topics. This was especially true for the annual symposia where several papers were presented on a topical issue – emigration, pension reform, economic policy or planning, etc. – which often provided different perspectives and facilitated discussion on a report by a State Commission. Individuals on Council also took a particular interest in members early in their research careers, encouraging them to submit papers, especially for the Barrington Prize. This approach ensured that the Society maintained its relevance and influence in policy research and formulation. It also helped attract the best papers when competition came from other research outlets such as, say, the Economic and Social Review, Administration, Irish Banking Review, Quarterly Economic Commentary.

5. ACHIEVEMENTS OF SSISI

An appendix to the Report of Council in 1881 summarised, as its title suggests: 'What the Statistical and Social Inquiry Society of Ireland has effected (1847-1880)'. The list comprised largely of law reforms, often bringing Irish legislation into line with that of England, on matters such as taxation, patents, tenant rights, limited liability of companies, local government, probate, etc. It highlights that SSISI also had a considerable impact on social conditions – in the treatment of pauper children, in caring for those with disabilities, in sanitation in urban areas. Recommendations on the collection of official statistics, such as monitoring the births, deaths and marriages in Ireland, were made and Acts followed. The list is not complete: it modestly omits Hancock's (1860) paper on the long hours of bakers, which prompted a special government commission to further investigate, which led to an Act in 1863 regulating their working conditions and limiting their hours of work.¹⁷

So, we may ask, what the Statistical and Social Inquiry Society of Ireland effected, 1881-2024? In these changed times, we must be more circumspect than the Council of 1881 in making a direct *post hoc ergo propter hoc* line of reasoning. Such a rationale could make the claim that, say, Whitaker's paper of 1956 anticipates Ireland's future industrial policy,¹⁸ or stretching the point to breaking, that papers read to the Society on the advantages of a decimal currency (e.g., Galbraith (1853), Cherry (1888)) led to its eventual adoption in 1971. Considerably more knowledge of the process leading to the policy action is needed to make such a claim credible.

However, it is still possible to make claims for significant achievements of the Society, with convincing evidence. Two principal claims are, I believe, justified by the evidence.

First, over the 177 years since the Society was founded, it has attracted individuals with three shared beliefs: (i) a belief that better policy decisions in economic and social affairs are made using an evidence-based approach, (ii) a belief that they have something to contribute to this debate, and, (iii) a belief there was a need to engage with others to learn, to debate and refine ideas. The most important attribute such members brought to SSISI was hope: the hope that their deliberations would help make a better future for Ireland.

¹⁵ Black (1947), p.43 and footnote on p.45.

¹⁶ Ibid. p. 46.

¹⁷ Black (1947), p. 25.

¹⁸ A claim made in Daly (1997), p. 153.

Second, I contend that many of those reading papers, and those on the Council and other active members, were policymakers or had the ear of policymakers, often as advisers. This was true of the individuals who formed the first Council down to the present day. The Council of 2024 includes leaders, and former leaders (and quite possibly future leaders) of such institutions as the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI), the Central Bank, the Central Statistics Office, as well as economics professors in UCD and Trinity.¹⁹ Though the institutions helping manage Irish economic and social affairs have changed, particularly after the establishment of an independent Ireland, still many of the most influential policy advisers, at the most crucial times, had a close connection to the Society and many were office bearers – men instrumental in forming policy and building policymaking institutions in the new Ireland such as, say, T.K. Whitaker, Roy Geary, Joseph Brennan (all presidents and active members in SSISI). The central role of the ‘hopeful and helpful’ members that applied through SSISI for the Ford Foundation grant that set up the ESRI in 1960 and allowed ‘an independent constitution for the Institute, which has been preserved ever since’,²⁰ is well-documented (see Murray (2012)).

If these two claims are conceded, then we can conclude that the Society still brings together reform-minded social scientists and influential policy advisers to discuss and refine ideas for reform. It might not be possible to trace a line between a paper read and discussed at SSISI and a later change to social or economic policy, but it is often those involved in the former who are instrumental in the latter.

The Society cannot lay claim to the achievement of its members: its achievement is in bringing such reformers in contact with each other to stimulate, encourage, and maybe even embolden them to pursue the debated reform. ‘It is amazing,’ a President of the Society once quipped to me in another context, ‘how much you can achieve if you let others take the credit.’

It would be wrong to conclude that SSISI is or was all about giving a platform and networking opportunities to influential people. It is perhaps more for us humbler folk in history who share its objectives but otherwise would find no opportunity to contribute. I come from the relatively small actuarial profession and am struck by the number of actuaries who were attracted to SSISI (before our own professional body was established in 1972) to highlight and suggest reforms on issues of public interest that fell within their purview, such as high mortality amongst the working class or the need for reform in pension provision.²¹

6. PLUS ÇA CHANGE

The Royal Statistical Society, SSISI, and the Manchester Statistical Society are the only surviving statistical societies in these isles dating from the nineteenth century. The RSS evolved into a professional and international body for the emerging science of statistics, and its journal divided into different specialisms. The Manchester Statistical Society survived, but did not have a rebirth with a nation that reinvigorated the fading SSISI.

SSISI – its structure, Council, membership, Journal and topics treated - is remarkably unchanged since 1862. There have been, of course, some minor changes. From the 1920s, the discussion following delivery of a paper was also captured in the journal, which allows a broader perspective on an issue and is a stepping stone for more junior member not as yet ready to produce a full paper. In 2007, the complete archive of published papers and discussions was made freely available on-line on the Society’s website at www.ssis.ie, complete with comprehensive search tools. With an average of about eight or nine papers read in each annual session, and some 177 sessions since 1847, there are about 1,500 papers accessible in the archive. There are 139 individual members and 21 group members in January 2016 – but with an all-welcome no-charge policy to meetings, and free access to all papers, past and present - there is no need any longer to become a member to participate. Indeed, meetings are now broadcast live and recorded.

Professor Hancock and his associates has long passed away, and generations in between, but not the resolve of SSISI’s members to improve the economic and social conditions in Ireland by evidence-based policymaking.

¹⁹ The largest change over the 177 years is perhaps that in more recent decades leading members of the legal profession, a stalwart in the early years, are unfortunately missing.

²⁰ Quoted from the ESRI website. <https://www.esri.ie/about-us/a-history-of-the-esri>.

²¹ Actuaries including William John Hancock (also a Council member) and William Honohan (also President).

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DISCUSSION

Seán Lyons: There are significant benefits from SSISI's long-standing practice of recording and publishing the comments made by attendees along with each paper. Often in academic publishing the authors' voices are the only ones we hear, although there are understood to be peer reviewers and editors somewhere behind the scenes. This may be changing recently for some journals with the advent of open peer review processes, but SSISI all along provided a record of what ordinary attendees thought the issues raised in each paper. This showed respect for ordinary members who had not reached the level of prominence of Whately or Hancock, and it provided an added incentive for ordinary members to put forward their ideas.