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Thomas E. Jordan

Studies in the Quality of Life in Victorian Britain and Ireland



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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