

WHERE WERE THE METHODISTS?

A review of the distribution of Methodists between
1861 and 1911 in twenty-six counties of Ireland

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Abstract

In pre-independence Ireland and, subsequently, in the Irish Republic, questions about religious affiliation have been included as part of the Census of Population from 1861 onwards. For the 1861 to 1911 period, this information is available for each decennial census. No census was held in 1921 and so the final pre-Free State census was undertaken in 1911. In the present study distribution of Methodists is analysed based on the six pre-independence censuses. Distribution patterns are considered on a national and regional basis. Some initial consideration is given to causes for this distribution; however, this is at an early stage in this preliminary study.

Introduction

In 1851 a Religious Worship Census was undertaken in the whole of the United Kingdom except for Ireland. Thus, much information is available about religious affiliation, buildings and occupancy rates for England, Wales and Scotland. However, this survey was not carried out in Ireland and so less detailed information is available about the fourth United Kingdom country. However, the Census of Population for Ireland from 1861 onwards included questions relating to religion. While many of the original census books have been lost (or deliberately destroyed) the summary volumes remain accessible for the decennial censuses from 1861 to 1911. No census was held in the Republic of Ireland (as it eventually became) after 1911 until 1926, when the religious affiliation of respondents was again explored. Questions asked for information about the religious

affiliation of persons and varying amounts of detail about other aspects of their life; for example, literacy rates and occupations were analysed by religious grouping in some censuses. Summary tables are still available at a number of geographical scales, ranging from State level to District Electoral Division (DED). DEDs (known as Wards within County Boroughs) were the smallest scale enumeration areas for which figures were normally published – although data were actually collected for the smaller areas of Townlands (in rural areas) and Streets (urban areas). The options for religious affiliation were Catholics, Protestant Episcopalians, Presbyterians, Methodists, Baptists and Jews, and ‘others’ in all of the censuses considered in this paper which presents a preliminary review of the distribution of the people called Methodists during the pre-independence period from 1861 until 1911.

Methodology

Data on religious affiliation from 1861 until 1911 for the whole State, for each province and each county were obtained using Table 9: Number of persons of each religion in each county and county borough in Saorstát Éireann at each census year from 1861 (CSO, 1926). This information was transcribed into an Excel spreadsheet and then used in conjunction with a GIS programme to produce maps to illustrate the distribution of Methodists at county level for each census for which data were available. A preliminary consideration of reasons for the observed distributions was then undertaken and it is proposed that further analysis of this data will take place in the future, along with consideration of the comparable data for the post-1911 censuses.

Distribution of Methodists in 1861 (Figure 1)

In 1861, approximately four people per thousand of the population recorded that they were Methodists in the census. The highest proportion of Methodists was in two of the Ulster counties (Donegal with 9.9 and Cavan with 8.6 per thousand people) followed by Leitrim (8.2). All three counties are adjacent to the six counties of Ulster which later constituted Northern Ireland. Interestingly, Monaghan, the third Ulster county, had a much lower proportion, with only 3.5 per thousand. Sligo, adjacent to Leitrim and within the northern area of Ireland, also had 6.2 per thousand Methodists. This represents a major cluster around and within Ulster – the area with the highest proportion of Protestants within the island of Ireland in 1861 and up to the present day.

In the rest of the country, two counties within the ‘Pale’ (Wicklow 8.3 and Dublin 7.0) showed higher than average Methodist and, indeed, Protestant representation in general. Counties Laois (5.4) and Offaly (4.5) represent a less prominent concentration in the Midlands, while Cork represents an isolated ‘pocket’ in Munster, having 4.9 Methodists per 1,000 population. When figures for other non-Catholics were examined, in general, areas with high numbers of Methodists also had high representation by the other two main Protestant denominations, the Anglican and the Presbyterian Churches. Based on the Religious Census of England in 1851, it has been suggested¹ that Methodism grew mostly where the Anglican Church was weakest, and was least represented in areas where other ‘dissenting’ groups, such as Presbyterians, were strongest. This pattern appears to be generally replicated in Ireland, as noted by Hempton who found ‘Methodism took strongest root in areas with an existing Protestant, especially Anglican, population that was only loosely committed to an established denomination’.² Indeed, Cooney observes, ‘That small numbers of Presbyterians joined the Methodist societies is probable, though difficult to establish, but it is significant that Methodist societies are sparse in those areas where Presbyterianism is strongest’.³ This would suggest that there may be some support for an inverse relationship between Methodist and Presbyterian strength, but there is evidence for a symbiotic relationship between Anglicanism and Methodism.

Changes between 1861–1871 (Figure 2)

Between 1861 and 1871 there was a slight increase in the proportion of Methodists in the total population, rising from 4.0 to 4.2 per thousand, and the main concentrations remained in the same areas. As this period was a time of considerable emigration, it would appear that the Methodist part of the population was less involved in this than other groups. However, all counties had concentrations of less than nine Methodists per thousand population in 1871, and the northern grouping showed the greatest decline. This may reflect the influence of the 1859 Ulster revival on the earlier figures, as these counties were either part of, or contiguous to, Ulster.

¹ K. D. M. Snell, and Paul Ell, *Rival Jerusalems: the Geography of Victorian Religion* (West Nyack, USA: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 131.

² David Hempton, ‘Methodism in Irish Society, 1770–1830’, in *The Religion of the People: Methodism and Popular Religion c. 1750–1900* (London: Routledge, 1996), pp. 35–6.

³ Dudley L. Cooney, *The Methodists in Ireland: A Short History* (Blackrock: Columba Press, 2001), p. 43.

As Cooney notes, 'Bringing people in was one thing, but keeping them was another.'⁴ For example Donegal experienced a decline of 536 people, so it now had 8.3 Methodists per 1,000. The proportion of Methodists did increase in Dublin to 8.0 per thousand. Apart from emigration, this was also a time when people migrated from rural to urban areas, and so it is at least possible that a proportion of the 'missing' Methodists from other counties had moved to the capital. There were also some other areas where the Methodist population showed some increase, for example, in Longford (from 1.3 to 1.9). This represents an actual increase in total numbers, although small – from 94 in 1861 to 124 in 1871. In the Midlands, Kildare, adjacent to counties Dublin and Wicklow with relatively high concentrations and to two others of moderate concentration, also showed an increased Methodist presence and, like Longford, reported both an increase in total numbers (from 375 to 500) as well as an increased rate (4.1 in 1861 rising to 6.0 in 1871). In later censuses for which the full data is available there is evidence of army involvement in Methodism (for example in the 1911 Census, which is considered later), it is possible that the Curragh and other military establishments may have had some influence on the Kildare figures at this earlier date. Some change is also shown in the South East – with Wexford showing a small decrease, while neighbouring Waterford displays a small increase. As in the earlier census, Kilkenny remains at a low level compared to its surrounding counties. Currently no explanation has been suggested for the relatively low level of Methodism in the county, although this does correspond with similar lower levels for other non-Roman Catholic denominations.

Changes between 1871 and 1881 (Figure 3)

Between 1871 and 1881 the total population of the 26 counties decreased from 4,053,187 to 3,873,155. However, the Methodist group showed an overall increase of 755 rising from 16,905 to 17,660. Despite this rise, a small number of counties did show a decrease in Methodists, both per thousand people and in actual numeric terms. These were Carlow and Kildare in Leinster, Tipperary and Waterford in Munster, and Mayo and Sligo in Connaught. All of the counties adjacent to the six counties of present-day Northern Ireland showed an increase in proportion of Methodists from 1871, with Donegal now having 9.8 and Leitrim 9.2 as the highest ones in the area. Even Louth, previously having a lower

⁴ Cooney, *Methodists in Ireland*, p. 74.

proportion than all of the other 'adjacent' counties, now reported 3.2 per thousand, compared to 2.5 in the previous census. The Dublin region cluster also reported increased proportions of Methodists, with Wicklow now having the same proportion as Donegal, and Dublin having 8.9 per thousand total population. At this time growth in the south-west was notable, with Cork, Kerry and Limerick all reporting increases in proportion of Methodists. Both Limerick and Kerry experienced an increase in actual number of people, with Kerry's growth of 137 exceeded only by Donegal and Dublin. In general, Connaught, with the exceptions of Sligo and Leitrim, remained an area of very limited Methodist presence, with no county reporting more than 1.3 Methodists per thousand residents. The other counties to maintain low proportions of Methodists at this time are Meath – despite its proximity to the Northern cluster – and Kilkenny.

Changes between 1881 and 1891 (Figure 4)

The census in 1891 reported the greatest number of Methodists ever recorded as residents of the State, a total of 18,513. Growth was particularly marked in County Dublin between 1881 and 1891. While this might merely reflect migration to the area from more rural counties, it is reasonable to suggest that it also reflects the results of a series of revival missions that took place between the two censuses. The first of these was not specifically Methodist, but undertaken by Moody (the American evangelist preacher) and Sankey (noted American Methodist gospel singer and composer of religious music). This was followed by a United Mission by the Rev. Hugh Price Hughes, 'a powerful Methodist preacher, with ... unconventional Christianity'.⁵ In 1885 Rev. Thomas Cook led a Methodist-based revival when '700 names of enquirers were taken, and a large number of these began and continued to serve their Lord and Master'.⁶ At that time Kildare, adjoining Dublin, also experienced an increase in Methodist identification rising from 5.2 to 8.2 per thousand over the 10 year period. This effect also appears to have been felt further into the Midlands, with Laois, for example, increasing from 5.5 persons per thousand in 1881 to 8.1 by 1891. Surprisingly, the Methodist

⁵ R. Lee Cole, *A History of Methodism in Dublin* (Dublin: printed for the author by R. T. White, 1932), p. 124.

⁶ R. Lee Cole, *History of Methodism in Ireland, 1860–1960* (Belfast: Irish Methodist Publishing Co., 1960), p. 19.

population only increased by four people. However, this county had the lowest proportion of non-Roman Catholic people within Leinster and, of those, a very high proportion were Church of Ireland. The general increase was also observed in the south, with Kilkenny recording an increase for the first time and counties Cork and Tipperary also showing an increase. In the Northern grouping, only Donegal and Cavan experienced real growth, although Monaghan and Sligo recorded some slight increase.

Changes between 1891 and 1901 (Figure 5)

During the period 1891–1901 the total population of Ireland decreased by 7.12% from 3,468,694 to 3,221,823. Within this total, there was a slightly smaller percentage decline in the non-Roman Catholic population and the rate of decline was much smaller for the Methodists (3.46%) than for the other two major Protestant groups (Table 1).

In fact, the Methodist population actually increased in Leinster, by 0.26 per thousand, or 207 people. Within Leinster the areas which had both actual and proportional gains were County Carlow (34 people) and Dublin. Within Dublin, the County Borough had an overall growth of 634 people, but the county had a decline of 99. As noted by Cooney, in the towns and cities members of the Methodist Church tended to be 'craftspeople and shopkeepers with a few gentle folk' and these types of people were likely to be concentrated in the city area (particularly craftspeople and traders) rather than in the wider county.⁷ Growth of the overall population was also confined to the County Borough and so the Methodist increase may merely reflect growth of the urban population as a whole. The only other counties showing an increase were Westmeath (44 additions), Tipperary (which only gained two additional Methodists) and Limerick, where numerical growth was, like Dublin, confined to the County Borough, with a small decline in the rest of the county. Other counties showed an increase in Methodists per thousand population, but these merely reflected the lower decline in Methodist numbers than in the overall population; for example Longford's Methodist population declined by eight, but this represented an increase of 0.3 people per thousand of the total population. There would seem to be no obvious reason why the Methodist decline should be smaller than that of the overall non-Roman Catholic population.

Table 1: Percentage population change in intercensal periods between 1891 and 1911

	Overall change [%]	Non RC [%]	C. of I. [%]	Presbyterian [%]	Methodist [%]
1891–1901	-7.12	-7.07	-7.86	-9.24	-3.46
1901–1911	-2.55	-4.77	-5.57	-2.63	-8.01

Changes between 1901 and 1911 (Figure 6)

By 1911 all counties except Kildare, Dublin and Waterford showed a decrease in actual numbers of Methodists, although the overall pattern of concentration of Methodists in different areas of the country remained the same. The decline between 1901 and 1911 was greater than that in the previous period (0.81 per thousand compared with only 0.35) and is considerably higher than the overall decline of both the total population and of the other non-Roman Catholic groups (Table 1). It is likely that this decrease (in common with the rest of the non-Roman Catholic population) reflected the increasing focus on Home Rule during this intercensal period and the related disquiet of this group about the potential effects of this process. Towards the end of the period, in 1910, the British Government agreed to introduce a Home Rule bill following an agreement on other matters with the Irish Parliamentary Party, possibly spurring people to move away in larger numbers. However, there is no reason to suppose that this affected Methodists more than other non-Roman Catholics. The largest increase in Methodists was in Kildare from 6.6 per thousand to 8.6. This growth is likely to reflect the increasingly tense political situation of the period, as the individual census records for 1911 show that of the 461 Methodists, 258 (56%) had addresses that were either in the Curragh Military Camp or the Kildare Barracks (National Archive, 2013a). In contrast in 1901, there were only six Methodists with addresses in the Curragh Camp and a small number of others in Curragh East, who may have also been employed by, or the family member of, soldiers of the military camp (National Archive, 2013b). The other two counties showed only small positive changes. When the patterns of change are examined there is no clear regional pattern of degree of decline.

⁷ Cooney, *Methodists in Ireland*, p. 39.

per thousand people

- above 9.00
- 7.51-9.00
- 6.01-7.50
- ▨ 4.51-6.00
- ▩ 3.01-4.50
- 1.51-3.00
- 0.10-1.50
- ▨ Northern Ireland

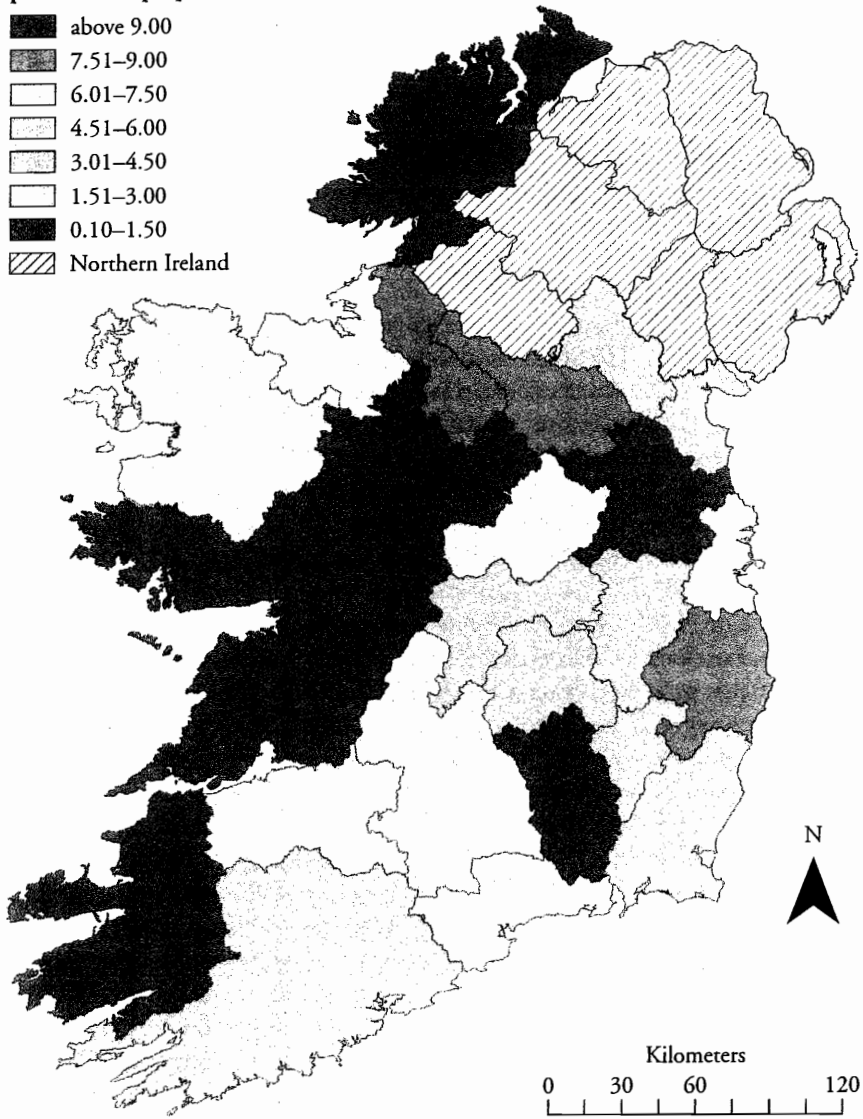


Figure 1: Methodists in twenty-six counties of Ireland: 1861

per thousand people

- above 9.00
- 7.51-9.00
- 6.01-7.50
- ▨ 4.51-6.00
- ▩ 3.01-4.50
- 1.51-3.00
- 0.10-1.50
- ▨ Northern Ireland

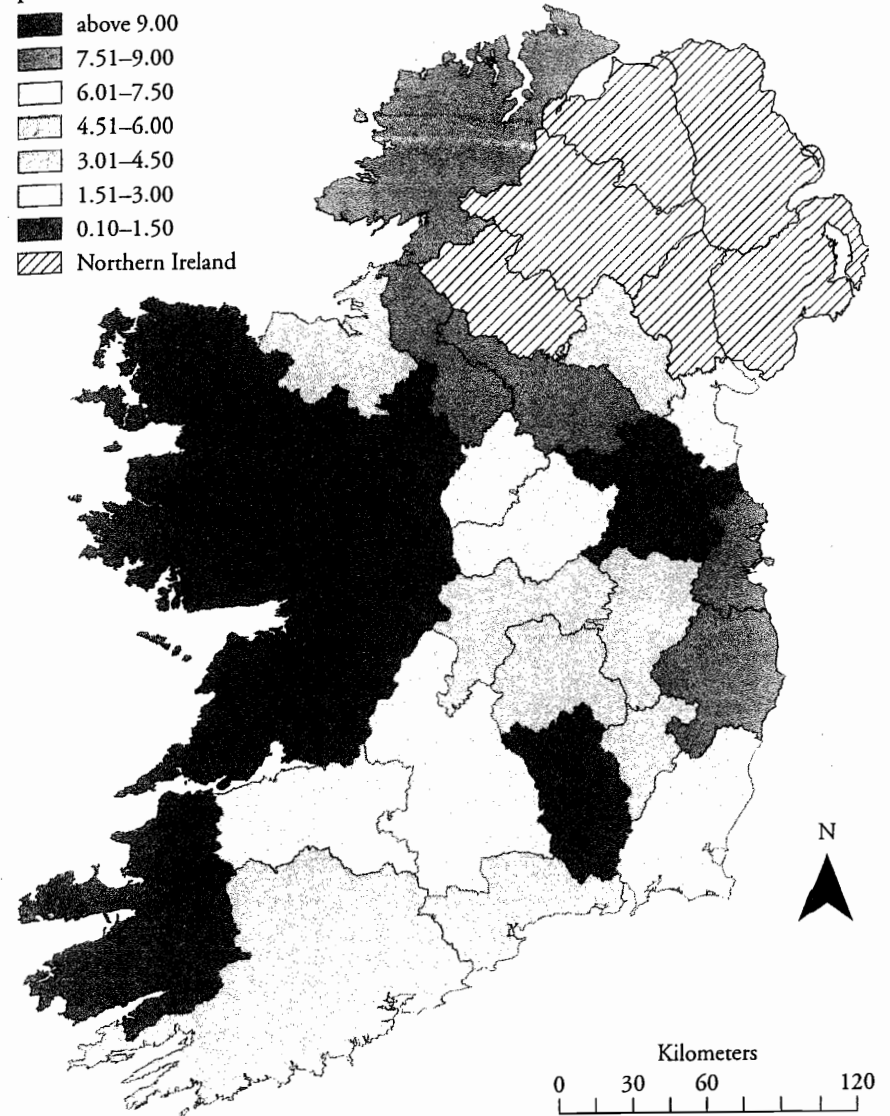


Figure 2: Methodists in twenty-six counties of Ireland: 1871

per thousand people

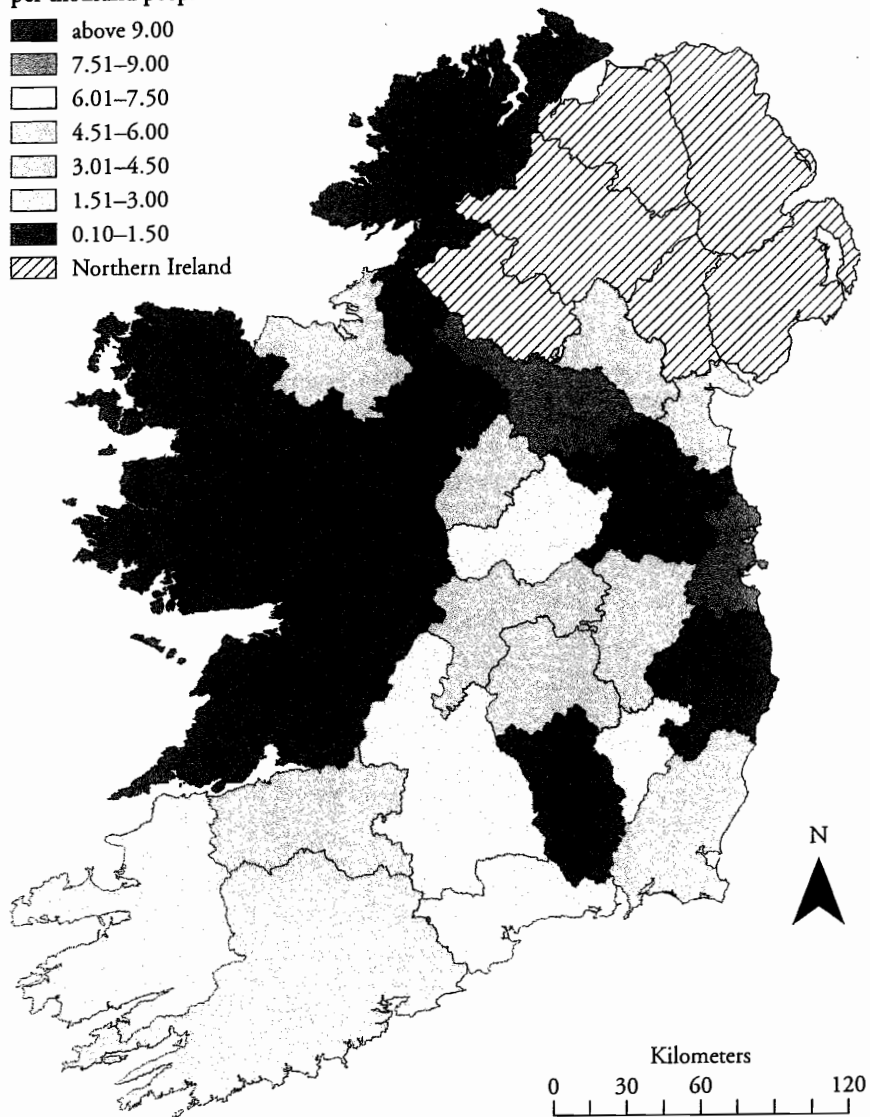
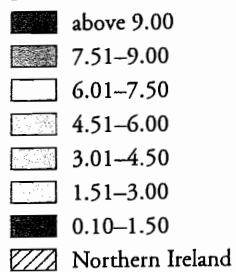


Figure 3: Methodists in twenty-six counties of Ireland: 1881

per thousand people

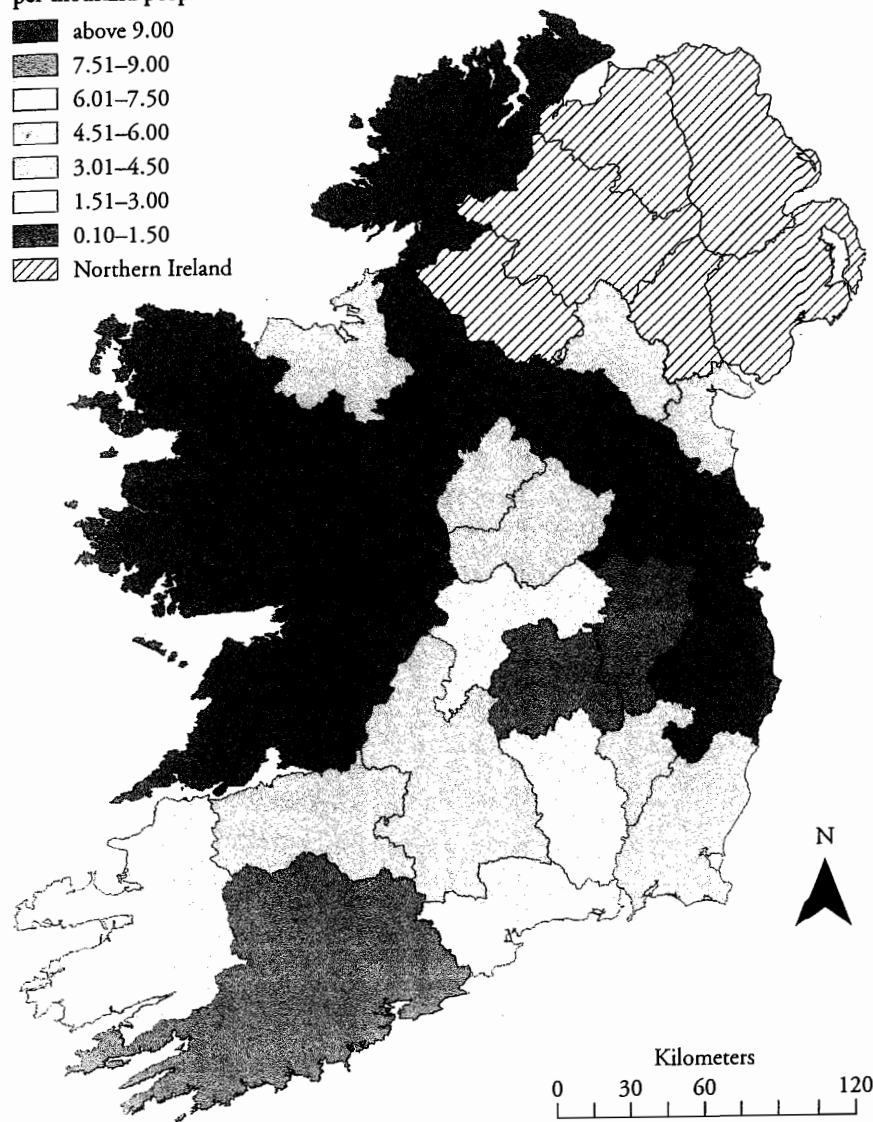
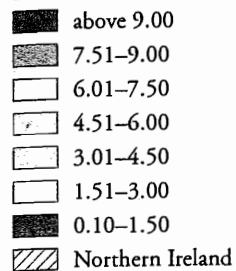


Figure 4: Methodists in twenty-six counties of Ireland: 1891

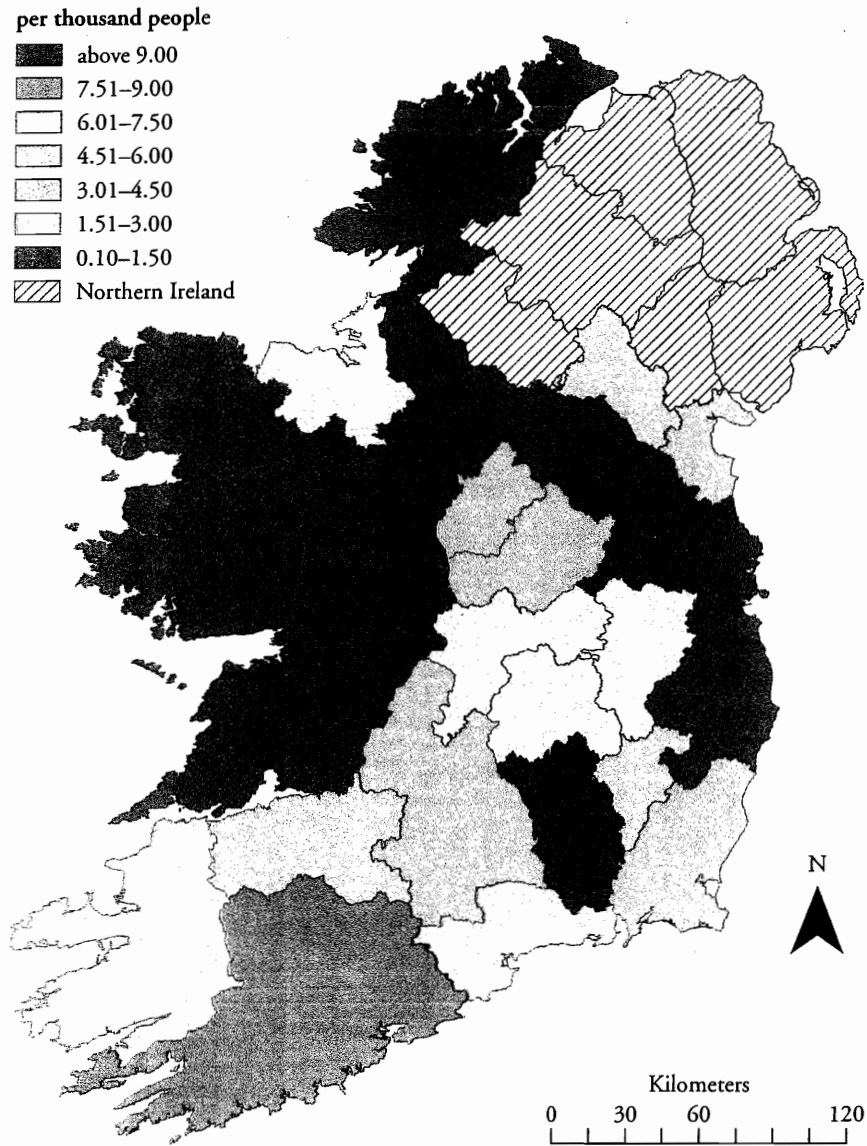


Figure 5: Methodists in twenty-six counties of Ireland: 1901

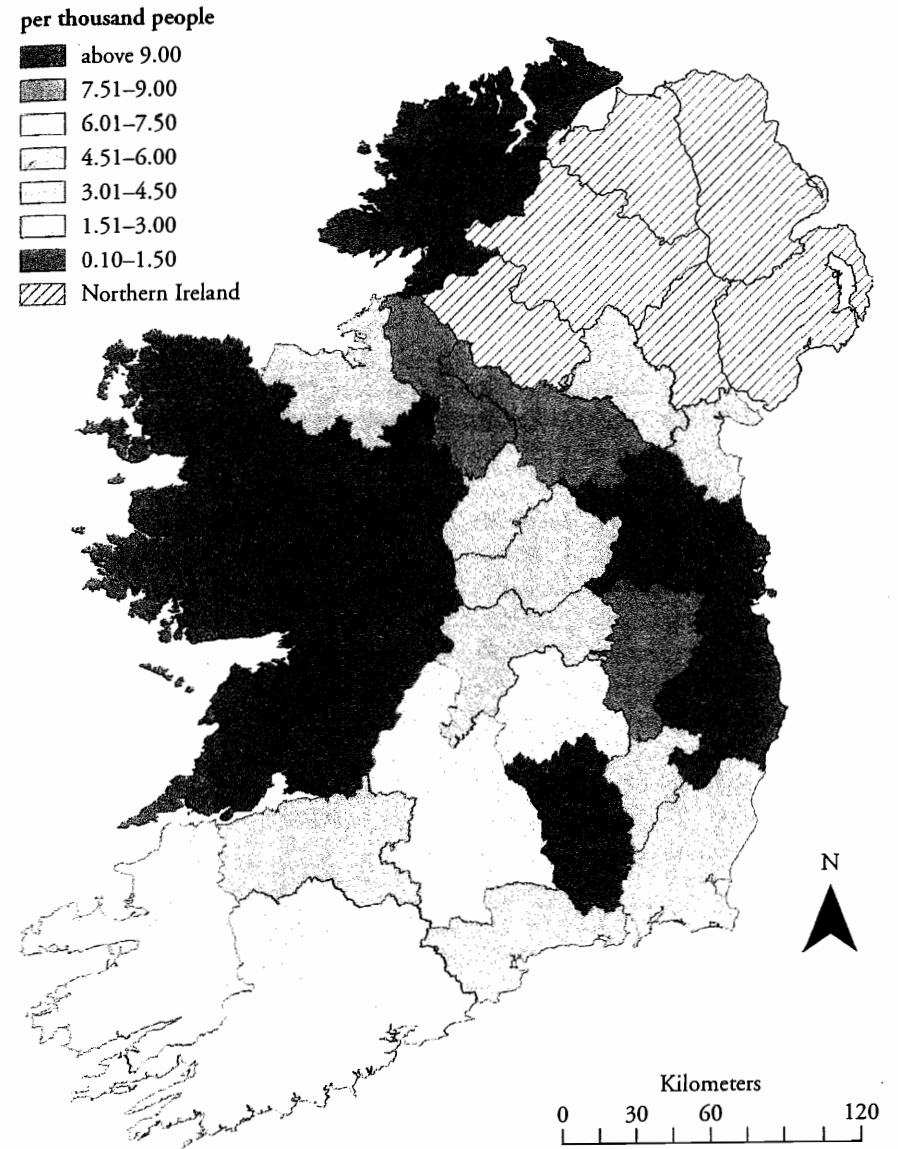


Figure 6: Methodists in twenty-six counties of Ireland: 1911

Discussion

In this preliminary examination of the distribution of the Methodists in the Republic of Ireland between 1861 and 1911, clear areas of concentration have been identified in the northern part of the country, with proximity to the six counties of Ulster that are part of present-day Northern Ireland. This reflects the overall pattern of Protestant settlement of the north of Ireland. The second major concentration over the whole period is in the Greater Dublin area, particularly Counties Dublin and Wicklow, an area of considerable settlement by those from 'across the water' and of Protestant institutions for a long period before the date of the first census considered here.

The growth of the areas contiguous to these two major concentrations, for example across the Midlands and southwards in Leinster, may be argued to reflect gradual diffusion of ideas and people from these core areas to nearby places. The concentration in the south-west, particularly in Cork, is not explicable in terms of diffusion from nearby places. However, early Methodists preached and carried out acts of charity within the county that led to early establishment of a Methodist community from which the concentration is likely to have developed. The areas of low concentration, particularly the province of Connaught, remain constant throughout the period and may reflect the continuing influence of the displacement of native Irish from the more fertile areas of Ireland and the effects of repression of Roman Catholics by British (and Protestant) authorities. The effects of the Famine, and the associated proselytising of some Protestant groups as part of their efforts to provide relief during the Famine of the 1840s may also be factors affecting Methodist numbers in that province.

Further work on examining the changing distributions identified in this paper and on the reasons for these is planned and, it is hoped, will result in developing an understanding of both where the Methodists were and why they were there. A study of the post-Independence distribution of Methodists is also planned to follow on from the present study.

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