

Family history research — using censuses

by Andrew Matheson

Census records can be one of the most powerful tools for finding out who your ancestors were, where they lived and what they did.

In the last issue we looked at Scottish census records, particularly those between 1841 and 1921. Here's an example of how to use these to discover a family's story.

Unlocking your family's story

Using census records I have unravelled much of the story of my ancestors Angus and Catherine Matheson who lived on the Isle of Lewis in the 19th century.

I have four census records for their household in Callanish from 1841 to 1871 inclusive, which track the growth of the family and how the children moved away from home.

Angus (a school master) died soon after the 1871 census was taken, and the next two censuses show the widowed Catherine living in Stornoway with family before she died in 1895. That's half a century of snapshots of this family.

Not all the family were present in the home as expected each census night, so a little sleuthing is needed to track them down. This gives clues about their later lives. Be careful, though. Just because you find someone with the right name and age somewhere else on census night doesn't mean they are the missing family member.

For example, Angus and Catherine's daughter Jessie (Janet) was not recorded at home in the 1851 census. At 18 she could well have been working, and I found a Jessie Matheson of that age who was a servant in Stornoway on census day. It would be careless to assume this was my missing relative, because Jessie Matheson wasn't an uncommon name in the area.

But it turns out that this Jessie Matheson was in the household of William and Eliza McLeod — and I know that William was Jessie's cousin on her mother's side.

The Jessie recorded there in the census was born in Lochs parish, which I knew, and her occupation was given as "schoolmaster's daughter". So that is pretty good corroboration of this being the right Jessie Matheson. Without that confirmation I would have been guessing.

Name of Street, Place, or Road, and Name or No. of House	Name and Surname of each Person who abode in the house, on the Night of the 30th March, 1851	Relation to Head of family	Condition	Age of		Rank, Profession, or Occupation	Where Born
				Males	Females		
<i>Kenneth Street</i>	<i>Mary Fraser</i>	<i>Head</i>	<i>Wid</i>	<i>52</i>		<i>Claypinner's Widow, annuitant</i>	<i>Stornoway</i>
	<i>Simon J. Fraser</i>	<i>Son</i>	<i>W</i>	<i>26</i>		<i>Do. Doer</i>	<i>Do. Stornoway</i>
	<i>Elizabeth McLeod</i>	<i>Daughter</i>	<i>Wid</i>	<i>30</i>		<i>An Officer's Wife R. N.</i>	<i>Do. Stornoway</i>
	<i>William McLeod</i>	<i>Son-in-law</i>	<i>Wid</i>	<i>31</i>		<i>Graduate of the University of Edinburgh</i>	<i>Do. Stornoway</i>
	<i>Jessie Matheson</i>	<i>Servant</i>	<i>W</i>	<i>18</i>		<i>Schoolmaster's Daughter</i>	<i>Do. Lochs</i>
	<i>Miss Isaac Ritchie</i>	<i>Servant</i>	<i>W</i>	<i>15</i>		<i>Shoemaker's Daughter</i>	<i>Do. Stornoway</i>

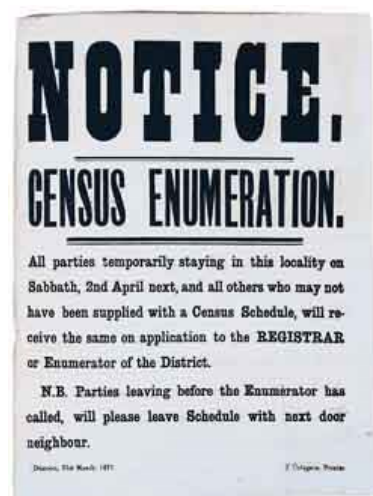
At 18 Jessie Matheson had left home and was working as a servant in Stornoway in the household of her cousin William McLeod, headed by his mother-in-law Mary Fraser and including William's sister-in-law Simona Fraser

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Jessie's brother Donald was also away from home on census day in 1851, but by searching on ScotlandsPeople I found a Donald Matheson lodging in the Stornoway household of Angus McDonald. Again, how can I be sure this is my man?

His occupation was given as 'Clerk, Ordinance Survey', and the Donald Matheson I was looking for went on to have a distinguished career as a surveyor. The census recorded his place of birth as Lochinver in Sutherland, where Angus and Catherine lived before moving to the Isle of Lewis and where 'my' Donald was born, so this is definitely the Donald Matheson I was looking for.

As with his sister Jessie, the census record paints a detailed picture of the diverse household he was living in.



Point Street	Angus McDonald	Head	W.	43	Quar. Dyper; General merchant	Do; Lockroom.
	Howard John Do	Brother	W.	30	Do; General merchant.	Do; Do
	Jessie Do	Niece	W.	14	Housekeeper	Do; Do
	Donald Matheson	Lodger	W.	21	Clerk. Ordinance Survey.	Sutherland; Lochinver
	Alexander McIlmossie	Visitor	W.	17	Scholar	Noss; Loches
	John Do	Do	W.	15	Do	Do; Do
	Mary Do	Do	W.	13	Do	Do; Do
	John McFarlane	Do		6	Do	Do; Barvas
	Mary Gunn	Servant	W.	19	House Servant.	Do; Hemmrag

In 1851 Donald was lodging in Stornoway with two bachelor brothers, probably in business together, their niece as housekeeper, four school pupils (three of whom were probably siblings) and a domestic servant.

Census forms will tell you much more than simply who was at a property on a certain date. Depending on the country and the year of the census, there can be a lot more information to glean from looking at these old forms. This could be place of birth, job, education level, income, year of arrival in the country, year of marriage or even value of their house.

It pays to study census forms carefully and learn what headings and abbreviations mean. There are good guides available online.

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It's not only family members who are missing at census time who help tell a family's story — additional people in the household are revealing too.

By 1871 Angus and Catherine's daughter Isabella was married and living 15 miles away in the village of Laxay. On census night, though, she and her infant son Kenneth were back in the Matheson family home in Callanish along with her parents and two unmarried sisters.

As Angus died just 18 days after the census was taken, it's likely she was helping the family at a difficult time. The fact that she was caught in the census back in the family home is another insight into the family's life.

Censuses are a once-in-a-decade snapshot of households and individuals, but by tracking people over a series of censuses and cross-checking with other sources you can build up a rich picture of your ancestors' lives.

If you follow a person down through different censuses you can see how their family grows then shrinks as children move from home, and how often someone changes address. But you might find that their age or birthplace change too — showing that not all census information is accurate. As with everything in family history, it's important to cross-check with other sources where possible.

Angus Matheson	Head	Mar	72	F. C. Teacher	Callanish
Elizabeth Matheson	Wife	Mar	69		Lutherbyrd Bay
Flora Matheson	Daughter	Mar	36	General Serv.	Rosslhire 1/2
Barbara Matheson	Daughter	Mar	27	52	Rosslhire 1/2
Isabella Matheson	Daughter	Mar	28		Rosslhire 1/2
Kenneth McIver	Infant son	Mar	18m		Rosslhire 1/2

The 1871 census recorded Angus Matheson, Free Church Teacher, 18 days before he died. His daughter Isabella McIver, with her surname corrected, was back in her parents' house with her infant son.