

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>Clayman's Servant, amusements</i>	<i>Stornoway</i>
	<i>Simon J. Fraser</i>	<i>Son</i>	<i>W</i>	<i>26</i>		<i>Do. Do.</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. Stornoway</i>
	<i>Miss Miss Ritchie</i>	<i>Servant</i>	<i>W</i>	<i>15</i>		<i>Schoolmaster's Daughter</i>	<i>Do. Stornoway</i>

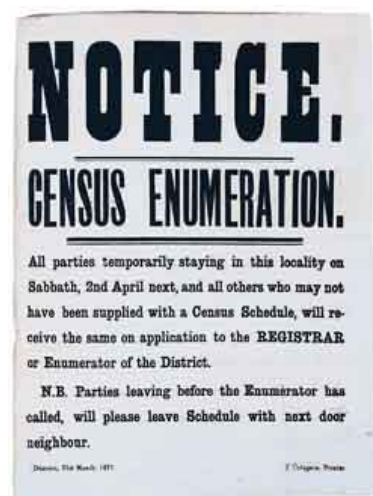
At 18 Jessie Matheson had left home and was working as a servant in Stornoway in the household of her cousin William McLeod, headed by his mother-in-law Mary Fraser and including William's sister-in-law Simona Fraser

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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. Master; General Merchant	Do; Lockroom.
	George 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 McIlwain	Visitor	W.	17	Scholar	Noss; Lochs
	John Do	Do	W.	15	Do	Do; Do
	Mary Do	Do	W.	13	Do	Do; Do
	John McFarlane	Do		6	Do	Do; Barra
	Mary Gunn	Servant	W.	19	House Servant.	Do; Rumorag

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		Lutherburgh
Flora Matheson	Daughter	Mar	36	General Serv.	Rosslhire
Barbara Matheson	Daughter	Mar	27	52	Rosslhire
Isabella Matheson	Daughter	Mar	28		Rosslhire
Kenneth McIver	Infant son	Mar	18m		Rosslhire

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.

Family history research: censuses in other countries

Censuses are a powerful tool when researching your family history. In the September 2024 [issue](#) we looked at New Zealand and Scotland censuses, and in the December 2024 [issue](#) we looked at one case study of how successive census records from Scotland can show how a family grew and later dispersed over time.

But it's not just Scotland we need to look at in order to track down our ancestors and other relatives. In the 1800s and 1900s many Scots moved south of the border in search of jobs and better economic opportunities. You might find your direct ancestors in the England censuses.

Scots migrated to many countries, particularly in the English-speaking world, so you might find your ancestors' descendants in census records in other countries.

Here are some guidelines on how to go about tracking down these records.

England

Censuses from 1841 to 1921 are available online but generally only through commercial services, principally Ancestry and Findmypast. You can search free of charge but have to pay to see full results and digitised images, though remember that you can use these sites at many public libraries.

Some transcripts of census records are available free on the volunteer site [FreeCen](#).

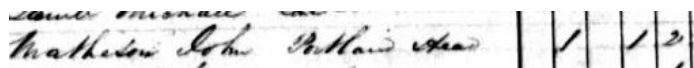
The National Archives has produced a useful [guide](#) to historical censuses in England, Wales, the Isle of Man and Channel Islands.

Census records are made available after 100 years so the 1921 census records came out recently, but don't hold your breath for the next release. All the 1931 records were destroyed by a fire in 1942, and there was no census in 1941 because of the Second World War.

Australia

National censuses have taken place every decade after Australia became a nation in 1901 but, as in New Zealand, individual returns were destroyed after statistical information was collated so there is very little of value for family historians.

There is very patchy coverage of state and territory censuses from 1811 to 1901. Some records have been digitised and available through commercial services such as Ancestry and Findmypast or free at FamilySearch. There is a guide to what's available [here](#).

A snippet of a handwritten census record from 1841. It lists 'Matheson John' as the head of a household, with 'Patterson' as the wife. There are several columns for children, some of which are marked with '1' or '2'.

John Matheson and his family lived at Portland Head in the Hawksbury River district of New South Wales in 1841

Canada

You're in luck if you're searching for Canadian relatives, as a wide range of censuses are available free of charge.

All British colonies, provinces and territories in North America were consolidated into one nation, Canada, in 1867. There have been national censuses every decade since 1871, and you can search these up to 1931. Sub-national censuses from before confederation and a few from prairie provinces after confederation are also available.

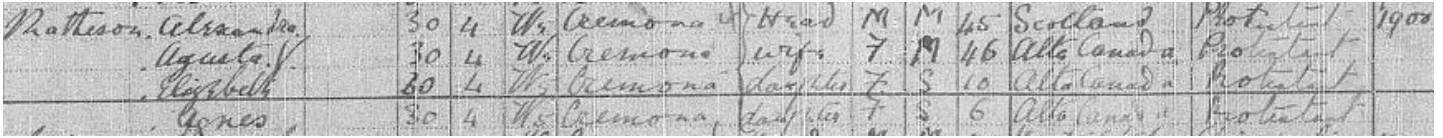
In 1891 Duncan Matheson, born in Inverness, was living at Prestwich in Lancashire as a widower with his widowed daughter. His business as a cotton merchant had made him wealthy, judging from the four servants also in the house.

Hillon Park (Aplemudi)	1			Duncan Matheson	Head	Males	70	J. P. Cotton Merchant	X		Scotland Inverness
				Allice Paddock	Wife	Wid	44				Lancashire Manchester
				Mary Thom	Serv	S	26	Cook Domestic Serv	X		Suffolk
				Elizabeth Potts	Serv	S	18	Kitchenmaid Domestic	X		Staffordshire
				Ellen Smith	Serv	S	26	Housemaid Domestic	X		Sussex
				Mary Monfort	Serv	S	24	Widow Domestic	X		Staffordshire

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Canada (continued)

There's more information on Canadian censuses [here](#).



Matheson, Alexander	30	4	W. Cremona	Head	M	M	45	Scotland	Methodist	1900
Augusta	30	4	W. Cremona	Wife	F	M	46	Alta Canada	Protestant	
Elizabeth	20	4	W. Cremona	Daughter	F	S	10	Alta Canada	Protestant	
James	30	4	W. Cremona	Daughter	F	S	6	Alta Canada	Protestant	

In 1916 Alexander and Augusta Matheson and their two daughters were living on a farm on the prairies near Cremona, Alberta

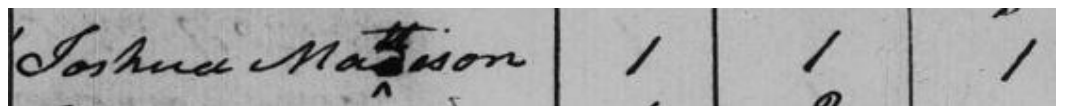
These two census entries, made 116 years apart, show how later censuses contained a lot more information.

1800 is very early for a census that names individuals (even if only the head of the household). The 1916 Alberta census provides information including age, birthplace, religion, year of immigration and family relationships.

USA

US federal censuses date back to 1790 and have been digitised up to 1950. Some are available through the National Archives catalogue but most have been digitised by other organisations. Some of these, such as Ancestry.com, require a subscription (though can often be accessed at public libraries), while others such as Familysearch.org are free to access.

[This](#) is the portal for US census results, and has links to where you can access census records and other helpful information.



Joshua Matheson (with his surname corrected) and family were living in Pownal, Bennington, Vermont in 1800