

Readership Survey Findings – Part 1

By the Editor

– 1 –

As most readers of this Journal know, a readership survey was carried out in the past year. Enclosed with the Newsletter published in June by the Co. Tipperary Historical Society (which publishes this Journal) was a single-page questionnaire. It contained twelve questions – seven basic ones, two more of a supplementary nature, and finally three aimed at eliciting information about our readers themselves. The form and content of the questions were determined by a professional academic psychologist, who is not a reader of this Journal and has no connection with this county.

Over a three-month period, from July 1 to October 2, 120 completed forms reached me. Since 500 forms were sent to every paid-up member of the Society, the response amounted to 24%. While this may strike some readers (as it did me initially) as a disappointingly low figure, I am informed by experts that it is about “par for the course”. I understand that it is considerably better than a similar survey done in recent years by a well known Summer School. The first question to decide is whether this response is genuinely representative of readers. I propose to assume that it is; it is, after all, arguable that the failure of 76% of those polled to respond may be interpreted as satisfaction generally with the Journal.

Who in fact did reply? As the survey was confidential, postmarks were not recorded; but predictably most replies bore Irish stamps. However, a random check of postmarks suggests that a high proportion came from outside Co. Tipperary. Also, a number of replies came from the UK, Canada, Australia and the U.S. In fact, foreign replies amounted to 22.5% of replies, while those from the U.S. and Canada together amounted to 14%.

Next, what ages are our readers? Just over 52% are in the 41-65 age-group; 30% are in the over 65s, and 11% in the 26-40 age group. Not a single reply stated that it came from a reader under 25. Perhaps they read a Journal bought by a parent or (much more likely) rely on the library of a third-level institution or a local branch library. No less than 7½% declined to give their ages!

Who then are our readers? By far the biggest percentage – 52% again – described themselves as amateur historians, with general readers forming the second largest category at 35½%. Only 2½% owned up to being professional historians, with another 11⅓% falling into other categories. The latter included 7 genealogists, four local historians (presumably not amateurs!), three librarians, and 3 who described themselves, respectively, as professional geographer, professional archaeologist and simply “academic” (presumably not in history). (If the editor’s arithmetic is reliable, this left two who failed to describe themselves.)

How widely read is the Journal? For a start, we print 1,000 copies annually, of which in most years 700-800 are sold within 6-9 months. In recent years orders for back numbers have depleted our reserves; for three years no back numbers are now left. The survey showed that 39% of Journals bought are read by a single reader only. However, 32% are read by two people. Curiously, only 6.5% are read by three; but 18% are read by more than three. Overall, these figures suggest that 56.5% of Journals are read by at least two people.

Next, to report on the **replies to the seven basic questions**. Asked if less space should be given to the **19th century**, 52% strongly disagreed, with only 5% strongly agreeing and 18½ having no view. Clearly the 19th century is a favourite with a majority of readers.

Asked if less space should be given to **1900-1923**, 30% strongly disagreed, with 12% strongly agreeing and almost 16% having no view. This seems to indicate that about one-third of readers favour material on what might be loosely called the War of Independence period. Regarding material relating to the **post-1925 period**, readers were more evenly divided. Over 19% were strongly against such articles, but 22% strongly in favour with 35% having no view.

For the editor, always trying to balance longer articles with shorter ones, and faced with a recent decision to try to keep the Journal to 150-170 pages, the question on **material running to over 20 pages** was the most interesting of the basic queries. Here the response was clear. No less than 46.5% agreed with a 20-page maximum, with only 12.5% strongly disagreeing, but 19% being neutral.

On **archaeology**, 19% favoured more; 10% were against more, with 30% expressing no view. Asked if **periods earlier than the 19th century** should be covered, 45% strongly agreed, with only 7.5% strongly against. On whether there should be more **genealogy**, readers were more evenly divided, with 31% strongly in favour but 12.5% strongly against. Curiously, in view of the number of specific comments on, and interest in, genealogy, 26% of readers had no view on this subject.

On the two questions asking for areas or topics of interest, and suggestions for improving the Journal, a large and varied number of responses was received, which for reasons of space must await analysis in the 1998 Journal. Suffice it to reveal here that amongst areas in which interest was expressed by a significant number of readers were the Cromwellian period, folklore, 1798, the Penal Laws and geography. Next year, together with a further analysis, I propose to give a statistical breakdown, for our first ten years, of contributions by authors and by topics or periods.

Summary of Main Queries

Question	Yes	No	Neutral
Maxium 20 pages?	46%	12.5%	19%
Less space to 1900-23?	12.5%	30%	16%
More on 1925+?	22%	19%	35%
Less space to 19th century?	5%	52.5%	18%
More to pre-19th century	45.5%	17.5%	12.5%
More genealogy?	31%	12.5%	26%
More archaeology?	19%	10%	30%