The British 19th Century Surname Atlas

By George Redmonds

This is the title of a CD-ROM just published by Archer Software that includes distribution maps for all of the surnames (over 400,000) that feature in the census of 1881 for England, Scotland, and Wales. No Irish data is available. The user can enter any of these surnames and the map displayed on the screen will immediately demonstrate its distribution in Great Britain. Even as late as 1881 most surnames had distinctive patterns of distribution and many still predominated in just a single region. The maps clearly illustrate these patterns. The information can be presented in two different ways, using either the counties or the Poor Law union districts to define the regions. The names of the districts and the totals can be added to the maps and you can choose to have the data shown in the accompanying tables as actual numbers or as densities; each method has its advantages. Maps can then be printed at any scale and copied to the clipboard for pasting into printed documents or the creation of web graphics.

Ever since H.B. Guppy published his groundbreaking book entitled *The Homes of Family Names in Great Britain* (1890) it has been recognized that the distribution of a surname is often the vital clue to its origin and history. That idea has since been developed in the volumes published in the English Surnames Series, which commenced publication in 1973. Various attempts have been made in that period to map surname distributions in a way that would satisfactorily identify the significant areas of concentration. It started in my own *Yorkshire: West Riding,* with statistics extracted from telephone directories and maps drawn by James Wrathall employing traditional cartographic symbols. These were designed to illustrate the distribution of names such as Raistrick, Culpan, Pogson, and Beanland, and the ramification of Armitage in the West Riding from 1538 to 1800.

Colin Rogers' *The Surname Detective* (1995) used maps based on data from telephone directories countrywide to investigate the distribution of English surnames that were apparently commonplace rather than obviously distinctive. Against the odds, Rogers was able to produce interesting results for such names as Black, Clay, Smith, and Walker. David Hey developed a different technique in the publication of his 1997 Phillimore lecture, using a computer database developed from data in the civil registration indexes of deaths between 1842 and 1846. The "districts" shown on his maps were predominantly those employed by the registrars, although he occasionally found it convenient to show the counties as they were before the boundary changes of 1974. The same techniques were used in *Family Names and Family History* (2000).

Much more recently, Kevin Schurer of Essex University and Bryan Sykes of Oxford created computer-generated distribution maps to support their research in the fields of biology and sociology. The results have been very successful and genealogists find much that is valuable in the maps but they have never been freely available. Stephen Archer's surname atlas CD is therefore of major importance to all genealogists with British ancestry and it must be hoped that it will not be too long before similar maps for earlier periods are made available. The only realistic resource for such a scheme at present is data from the hearth taxes of 1662 to 1688.

However, the surname maps are not the only reason for my wholehearted enthusiasm for this newly produced title. These maps also cover all the *forenames* used in 1881, a task that was of secondary importance to Archer. The fact is that my own research into forenames, which is now just one of the alternative terms for what we once called Christian names, has made it clear how distinctive their histories and distributions can be, and these findings will be published by the Public Record Office early in 2004. The period I have covered is from the 1300s to the present day but it is fair to say that most of the statistical evidence is for the earlier centuries in that period. I am delighted therefore to find that forename distribution maps for 1881 make such significant points.

For example, there were 2249 males with the first name Squire in 1881. This is usually commented on as a nineteenth-century "status" coinage, comparable with Earl, and yet my own research shows that it was in favour with a family called Firth in west Yorkshire from the mid-1600s, soon passing from them to their neighbours. Stephen Archer's map shows that 1174 of all the "Squires" were still in Yorkshire in 1881 and another 900 or so were in neighbouring parts of other counties. It was virtually unknown outside that relatively small area and seems likely to derive from the surname, which was well established in that part of Yorkshire.

From the sixteenth century many first names were derived from surnames and the distribution maps confirm that these were usually most popular in the same region as the surnames. The data for Pascoe and Dyson, which are from opposite ends of the country, will illustrate that point. Pascoe is a Cornish dialect variant of Pascall, a word that was originally an adjective meaning “of Easter” and, in 1881, there were over 2000 families with the surname in Cornwall, by far the biggest concentration in the country. Other significant clusters were in London and neighbouring Devon. The pattern for Pascoe as a first name was much the same, with 53 men so called in Cornwall out of a national total of 93.

The surname Dyson means “son of Dye,” a pet form of Dyonisia, and its origin was in the tiny hamlet of Linthwaite in west Yorkshire, close to the border with Lancashire. The lady in question was Dyonisia of Linthwaite and, along with her son John Dyson, she figures in local records from c.1300. In 1881 there were over 7500 families with the surname in west Yorkshire and adjoining parts of Lancashire out of a national total of just over 9000. Dyson as a first name was borne by 483 men and, of these, 408 were in that same district. Others were in neighbouring counties and in London.

There were far more first names with localised distributions than most people would imagine and they were of different types. Digory, for example, seems to have come into use in the Tudor period, inspired by Sir Degare, the central figure in a medieval romance. Its initial use was almost entirely confined to Cornwall and Devon and in 1881 there were still some 50 men in that region who bore the name. It was unknown in most counties. Similarly there were numerous Thurstons in Lancashire, part of a tradition that goes back to the twelfth century, and Tedbers in Yorkshire - all linked to a much earlier Theobald. Some Saints’ names and some Old Testament names also had marked regional concentrations, as did the many Scottish first names that would subsequently spread south and dominate the frequency lists for England and Wales in the early twentieth century.

We can take Colin, the diminutive of Nicholas, as an example. There were 4261 males with this name in the census and almost three-quarters of these were in Scotland, heavily concentrated in the western half of the country. There were just 25 Colins in Wales and 6 in the City of London. Lanarkshire was the county with the highest total (661) whilst the highest concentration was in Argyll, where there were 492 Colins in every 100,000 individuals in the region. In Cornwall, by contrast, the ratio was 2 per 100,000, with only 7 men called Colin. The statistics alone are impressive evidence but Stephen Archer’s maps present us immediately with a visual image that says far more than words. It is a brilliant achievement.

This CD-ROM is available for $20 (U.S) or £12 (U.K.) from Archer Software. Visit their website for additional information or to order.