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What's In A Name?

James G Ryan Examines Variants Of Family Names



A regular challenge for Irish family historians is the variation that occurs in the spelling of family names. In a recent project conducted by Ancestor Network to research the completeness of the early Civil birth Records, some clear examples were identified. The study extracted around 400 baptismal records from 36 random Catholic parishes in early 1864 and then established which of the births had been registered. The research uncovered many examples of spelling differences between the names recorded in the baptismal records and in the civil register. These are interesting as they involve the same child, in the same region and within a short time period. Baptism of a Catholic child generally occurred within a few days of birth, while civil registration was required within three weeks of birth ¹.

7he parties to the above process are the person registering the name, the Catholic Priest and the District Registrar. The latter were medical doctors, and almost all (700 of the 756 appointed in 1864) were also the Medical Officers in their Poor Law Union. What are the possible reasons for the name variations?

Accent

One source of variation in some forms of record is the way in which names may be distorted by local accent. However, both priest and doctor were local residents whose ear would have been finely attuned to accents.

Literacy

If the family member registering the birth is literate, we would expect that they would provide their preferred spelling, although that is difficult to validate at this remove. If the person was illiterate, they would be at the mercy of the priest

and doctor as to the how the name was spelled. The 1861 census shows that 42% of the population were illiterate. This ranged from 34% in Leinster Province (the East and SE counties) to 63% in Connaught (the mid -West counties). Anecdotal evidence would suggest that District Registrars were high status figures and few, even among the literate, would have questioned the way in which they spelled the names in the record.

Language

In 1861, 19% of the total population used Irish or Gaelic as their spoken language, and many of these would have not have any English. The proportion varied significantly by region. Irish was spoken by around 40% of those in the Western counties of Connaught and Munster but by only 2% in the Eastern counties². Many of these would have recorded the birth using the Irish forms of their names, and the registrar or priest would have translated it into an English form.

The degree of accuracy and sympathy with which this was done would depend on the individual record-taker. Some registrars used similarly-sounding English names, while others attempted accurate synonyms of the Irish form. In regard to the ability of District Registrars to speak Irish, figures for 1864 are not available, but in 1901 less than 10% of medical doctors indicated an ability to speak the language. In our research we have also found instances where families used the 'anglicised' forms of their names for some purposes, and the original Irish form in others.

Family Custom

Robert Matheson published an exhaustive study³ on the variants that occurred in the early civil records of births, deaths and marriages. In this he notes that variation in the spelling of names sometimes occurred between branches, or individuals, within a family. However, we are here dealing with the parents of

What's New?

Review

Ireland's record collections come in all shapes and sizes and in all kinds of condition, often poor, illegible and incomplete, but among the most recent arrivals there are some real beauties, lovingly conserved and well indexed.

By Claire Santry



I've awarded Top Dog status to the global giant genealogy Ancestry for its efforts over the last few months to deliver some high quality and fresh Irish family history collections. Gone are the days when the reiteration or repackaging of a record set that's been in multiple major databases for a decade or two will send me into a happy tizzy. By contrast, I've been unable to stop myself diving straight in to some of Ancestry's recent releases.

These latest offerings are records that are either making their online debut or have previously been accessible only in some limited way via a private or specialist archive. I can't resist them, even when the title alone tells me the collection is unlikely to be holding details of my ancestors. Such has been the case with these recent additions, which were dominated by two occupational themes – medical and whisky production/distribution – and they come expertly conserved and imaged. They are:

- Ireland, Patient and Staff Hospital Registers, 1816-1919
- UK & Ireland Medical Registers, 1859–1943
- Ireland, Apothecary Records, 1736–1920

- Ireland, Kirkpatrick Index of Physicians, 1650-1952
- Ireland, RCPI Registers, 1887–1920
- Ireland, Jameson Bottling Agreements with Publicans, 1909–1965
- Ireland, Jameson Distillery Staff Wage & Employment Books, 1862-1969

The last in the list was uploaded about 18 months ago, but as it ties up neatly with the newer Jameson record-set, I've included it. To explore these collections, follow the links in [Ancestry's Ireland catalogue](#) (tinyurl.com/AncestryCat-IE).

Full Text Search Added To Rootsireland.ie

Another database, albeit much smaller, came in as runner-up on my unofficial awards podium. Step up Rootsireland.ie. A steady pace of new uploads has been maintained, with additions arriving from Mayo, Kerry, East Galway and Tipperary (a total of more than 53,000 records), since the turn of the year. However, it was a brand-new feature on the platform that has really caught the attention of researchers.

It is a Full Text Search function, and allows family historians to search for words (not names or places) that appear in various records. This allows you to search for occupations – take it easy on the labourers and farmers – or status such as illegitimate, foundling, twin, widow, or other information of interest. To access the text search, you need to have a subscription, be logged in, and making a one-county search. Only then can you select the Full Text option below the 'Search' button, which you'll find between the 'Home' and 'MyAccount' in the main menu.

This new text search facility is a useful addition to the database and is already opening up the database, especially to historians and other researchers, making selective topic searches.

As there are usually three places on a podium, I'm going to rather grudgingly give a bronze medal to IrishGenealogy.ie, the state-managed free database of historical civil registration records and register images. My feelings on the site are mixed. It is, without doubt, a wonderful database to have freely at our disposal. However, while the annual 'rolling year' update of births, marriages and deaths finally reached the live collection, images of the oldest civil death registers (1864–1870) did not. They have been on the 'missing' list for three years!



County Clare arose from the kingdom of Thuadhmhumhain, which means 'North Munster' and which became anglicised as Thomond. The territory took in the present counties of Clare and Limerick as well the part of Tipperary around Nenagh. The tribal group Dál gCais were the main group that populated the area from the tenth century onwards. When the county structures were established in Ireland, Thomond was the initial name given in 1565 to the present day Banner county and was part of Connacht. It then was transferred to Munster in 1602 and became known as County Clare. Throughout this period and up to today, the surnames that dominate in the county are mostly of Dalcassian origin. Whilst the names listed here are not a comprehensive list of those in the county, they do give a sense of the surnames found there. Some minor names have been included as it is mainly in County Clare that they are associated with. Although some of the names listed here are also found in other parts of Ireland, they have specific links to County Clare.

O'Brien

Took their name from Brian Boraimhe (anglicised as Boru), tenth century high king of Ireland- Brian signifies 'noble'. Their stronghold was Kincora near Killaloe and they originated out of the Dalcassian clan known as Uí Toirdealbhaigh. Subsequently the great Ó Briain sept divided into several branches in Counties Clare, Limerick, Tipperary and Waterford. In the top ten Irish surnames.

Mac Namara

Mac Conmara- hound of the sea. The most important sept of the Dál gCais after the O'Briens to whom they were marshals. They ruled from Clancullen in east Clare.

O'Loughlin

Ó Lochlainn. Lochlainn is an Irish term signifying a Scandinavian or viking. An important Dalcassian sept located in the north-west of Clare. The O'Loughlins shared a lot of territory with the

O'Connors with whom they fought intermittently, only uniting against the O'Briens.

O'Connor

Ó Conchubhair- a name meaning the lover of hounds. They held sway in the western region now known as the barony of Corcomroe and called in the sixteenth century Tuath Mor O'Conor. A separate important family of O'Connors were prominent in Connacht.

Mac Tierney

Mac an Airchinnigh, Airchinneach was a holder of church lands. Another important sept of Thomond and one of the most numerous names in Co. Clare. There was also another separate family of the name in Elphin.

Mac Mahon

Mac Mahon is now the most numerous surname in the county. The name originates in the personal name

Mathghamhan meaning a bear. The name of two sept, both of importance. That of Thomond descends from Mahon O'Brien, grandson of Brian Boru while the other sept was based in Co. Monaghan.

O'Dea

Ó Deághaidh, more often modernised to Ó Deá. The name is believed to be made up of 'Deagh (Good) and ádh (luck)'. They were one of the principal Dalcassian septs and chiefs of Uí Fearmaic, which comprised the greater part of the barony of Inchiquin in County Clare. Dysart O'Dea was part of the O'Dea homeland.

Naughton

Naughton is from a well known personal name Neachtan believed to mean 'descendant of the waters'. The most important sept of this name, Ó Neachtain, was of the ancient territory of Uí Maine in south Connacht while the Naghtens of Clare are a Dalcassian sept as the same stock as the O'Quinns located in the district north of Corofin in County Clare.