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What's New? Review

With most of the major Irish genealogical record collections fully digitised and available online, a new pattern for record releases seems to be emerging. Beautiful things come in small packages.



By Claire Santry

After this summer's extravagant hamper-sized deliveries of new and free records, most notably from the Virtual Research Treasury of Ireland (VRTI), many Irish family historians, myself included, have enjoyed a research binge the likes of which many of us haven't experienced since Peak Genealogy in the 2010s. Back then, as online access ramped up to include the big beasts of genealogy – censuses, BMDs, church records and census substitutes – it seemed freshly indexed and usually imaged record sets were arriving almost every week.

They were! In 2014, FindMyPast even introduced a pre-weekend release routine. *FindMyPast Fridays* is still going strong, even if the frequency of new record sets joining the Ireland collection has dramatically reduced. This year's St Patrick's Day saw an impressive upload of just under one million records, but there's been little else since.

With digitisation at full pelt for the best part of a decade, it wasn't immediately obvious that the flow of easy-to-digitise historical collections had begun to slow. Releases of fresh material continued, of course, often allowing us to add more detail to our ancestors' stories, broaden our family trees and, sometimes to step back a generation or so in time. But more complex digitisation projects, often of localised, or esoteric record-sets, still await their day in the limelight when the necessary funding, staff resources and even suitable technology might kick-start their transformation into online material.

A trio of important island-wide historical collections still await full digitisation. Each holds millions of records. The project to place online the Church of Ireland's sacramental registers, launched in 2018, seems to be moving at a snail's pace, and there is still no official ETA for completion; the official Registry of Deeds' project has also been a few years in planning with only intention on show so far; and the release and digitisation of the Land Commission's records has moved barely one notch forward from being a pipe dream.

With most of the national collections already available, smaller and less frequent record releases have become the new normal, even if the occasional 'roll out the red carpet' dump of records such as that from VRTI in early summer may send us into a short term frenzy.

In support of this notion, just take a look at the following wonderful variety of historical materials released over the last three months. Some are larger than others, but small packages are very much in fashion.

Ancestry (www.ancestry.co.uk/search/collections/catalog) added four specifically Irish collections, each of them a gem.

- Portadown, Northern Ireland, Street Directories, 1910 and 1959
- Ireland, Women's Army Auxiliary WWI, 1916-1920
- Ireland, Paupers in Workhouses Who Were Born in England, Wales, or Scotland, 1863 index
- Londonderry, Northern Ireland, Freeman Records, 1673-1945

The first three record sets hold just 6,863 name-indexed entries, while the fourth is a browse-only image collection.

In comparison with the giant supplier Ancestry, our home-grown RootsIreland.ie database is a tiddler with fewer than 23 million records in its online archive yet it remains an essential resource for all Irish genealogists. It seems it can punch above its weight, too, with more than 58,000 records uploaded in the same period. These were a mix of church records, headstone inscriptions



The county of Armagh gets its name from Ard Mhacha meaning 'Macha's Height'. Macha was a legendary queen from the Iron Age and her name was initially associated with the site of Emhain Mhacha which is adjacent to the modern city of Armagh. Emhain Mhacha or Navan Fort, as it is often now known as, was the royal capital of the kings of Ulster. It was here that the legends of Cúchulainn and the Red Branch Knights are associated with. It was probably due to the status of the area that Saint Patrick was drawn to the territory and where he reputedly built his first church. Armagh retained its status due to its patrician association and by the eighth century it was accepted as the ecclesiastical capital of Ireland, a status that continues on today.

Prior to the establishment of Armagh as a county in 1586, the area that eventually became the county was part of the kingdom of Oriel, a territory that also took in large portions of Monaghan and Louth. Gaelic territories in the area of the modern county included Oneilland, Orior and Clanbrassil.

The very fertile land of the north of the county became extensively planted with settlers from England and Scotland who remain prominent to this day while the hills and forests of south Armagh helped retain the distinct Gaelic identity of that party of the county.

Whilst the names listed here are not a comprehensive 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 Armagh that they are associated with or originate in.

O'Hanlon - Ó hAnluain

From a personal name meaning 'of the champion'. They were chiefs of Upper and Lower Orior where they ruled from Tandragee Castle. At one stage they were one of the most important septs of east Ulster. After the plantation of Ulster they lost their status as Gaelic chieftains and retreated to the hills and woods of Armagh where Redmond O'Hanlon became the most famous of the Gaelic outlaws who resisted English rule in the seventeenth century. The sept has become widely dispersed and is now common in both Munster and Leinster.

MacCann - Mac Cana

Cana or Cano is a personal name meaning a 'wolf cub'. They were lords of Clanbrassil, a Gaelic territory on the southern shoreline of Lough Neagh. While still numerous in that area, they are now numerous in other parts of Ulster as well as Leinster.

O'Hare - Ó hÍr or Ó hÉir

'Descendant of Ír'a name believed to mean 'long-lasting'. The name was borne by a legendary ancestor of a prehistoric population group. The O'Hare sept occupied central Armagh and were related to the O'Hanlons. The O'Hares of Connacht are from a different sept while Hare was an English name that came here after the plantation.

Murphy - Mac Murchaidh

From the very common Gaelic name Murchadh which means 'sea warrior'. As the surname hails from such a popular personal name, numerous families adapted the name as their own family name. The most well-known septs are that of Wexford and Cork where the name is spelt Ó Murchadha.

Most Ulster Murphys hail from a sept that controlled the area of Muintir Birn on the Tyrone- Armagh border. They were ousted by the powerful O'Neills