The Formation of Gaelic Surnames in Ireland: Choosing the Eponyms

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Introduction

By Mac and O you'll always know true Irishmen they say,
But if they lack both O and Mac, no Irishmen are they.

Nowadays, this old couplet would be labelled racist, or at least politically incorrect. And even in the strict sense of Gaelic origin, it ignores such adjectival surnames as Caomhánach (Kavanagh), Cinnsealach (Kinsella), Déiseach (Deasy), etc. It does, however, point up the fact that the majority of Irish family names were formed by putting either O or Mac before a personal name.

The use of *mac* or son as a distinguishing mark is a very old and a very widespread one. We need only think of Thomson, Dickson, Harrison, and going back to Biblical times, Ham son of Japhet, Simon bar Jonah, and so on. But the employment of *Ua* or *Ó* (grandson— sometimes granddaughter) in the formulation of surnames appears to be peculiar to Gaelic Ireland where it became the dominating formula. The aim of this paper is to explore the development of what is arguably the earliest surname system in western Europe.

When the Anglo-Normans arrived in Ireland in the late twelfth century, the inhabitants there had been using surnames for over a century and a half, while the newcomers were still designating themselves as Gerald of Wales, Milo of Cogan, Meiler son of Henry, Maurice son of Gerald. That Maurice's father, incidentally, Gerald, constable of Windsor, was the one sent in 1102 to ask Muirchertach ('Murcard, king of Ireland') to give his

daughter, Lafracoth, in marriage to Arnulf, lord of Pembroke,[1] a marriage
through which the blood-line of the O Briens can be traced in the British
royal family, Muirchertach being of the first generation to bear the surname
Ó Briain.

Mac and Ua

Early forms of *mac* and *ua* were used (in the genitive *maqi* and *avi*) to
designate descent in the oldest Irish writings, namely, the inscriptions on
Ogam stones, which were usually grave-markers. On a stone found in an
east Cork souterrain in 1844, for example, the inscription on one edge reads
'Brusco maqi Dovalesci', and on another 'Colomagni avi Ducuri'.[2] One
cannot always be sure, however, that *ua* (from **avos*) connotes
'grandfather', as it could also mean 'ancestor', just like the cognate Latin
avus. The evidence of the annals tends to show that x *mac* y was the normal
designation in the early Christian period. For my examples I draw almost
exclusively from the Annals of Ulster,[3] generally regarded as the most
original and dependable. They contain quite a number of fifth-century
annals, regarded with some suspicion by historians, but for what it is worth,
I counted fifteen names containing *mac* (or *filius*) in these entries, and not
one featured *ua* (or *nepos*).

    Not until 549 do we find the word *nepos* in an entry and even here it does
not seem to imply 'grandson'. The name preceding it, Finnio maccu
Telduib, presents an added complication. *Maccu / moccu* is another term
often used in Ogam inscriptions, indicating membership of a particular
tribal group, the name following it being usually the eponymous ancestor of
the tribe. In 638 the abbot of Clonmacnoise was Crónán moccu
Lóeghde—probably of the Corcu Lóegde. With regard to Finnio maccu
Telduib, better known to us as Finnian of Clonard, I was able to check on
his genealogy in two sources. Firstly, *Corpus Genealogiarum Hiberniae*,
that indispensable guide based on the earliest collection of genealogies,
found in Rawlinson B.502, dating from *c*.1132, collated with those from the

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[1] E. Curtis, *A History of Medieval Ireland*, 2nd edn (London, 1938), p. 10.

[2] R. A. S. Macalister, *Corpus Inscriptionum Insularum Celticarum*, vol. 1
(Dublin, 1945), p. 67.

[3] *The Annals of Ulster (to A.D. 1131)*, edited by S. Mac Airt and G. Mac Niocaill
(Dublin, 1983). In the early period, entries in the Annals of Ulster are mainly in
Latin; those in Irish were probably entered later.

Books of Leinster, Lecan and Ballymote.[4] Without the aid of this corpus, it would be an arduous task to place the names entered in the annals in their proper genealogical setting. A second compilation, *Corpus Genealogiarum Sanctorum Hiberniae*, is equally indispensable for following up the genealogies, whether real or imaginary, of the early Irish saints.[5] Finnian of Clonard appears in both collections, and is alleged to be seven to nine generations removed from Ailill Telduib, whence his title, Finnio maccu Telduib. A bishop of the same tribe, Colman moccu Delduib, died in 654. Incidentally, Michael O'Brien, in a Rhys lecture in 1957, stated that 'this method of naming is found only in the case of saints, druids and a few poets. It is practically confined to the minor tribes and probably represents a non-Goidelic system'.[6]

I strongly suspect that in the 549 entry (Colaim nepos Craumhthainan) 'nepos' is used to translate *moccu*. Colum was the abbot of Terryglass, and in *Corpus Genealogiarum Sanctorum Hiberniae* his genealogy places him six generations from Crimthannán Mór, eponymous ancestor of the Uí Chrimthannáin in what is now north Co. Laois.

The problem with *moccu* is that later scribes and chroniclers took it for *mac uí*, i.e. great-grandson. So at 603 we have 'Quies Finntain filii nepotis Ecdach', which may be a translation of Fintan moccu Echdach, Fintan being probably of the Ceinél nEchach. But the genealogy of Fintan of Cluain Eidnech contrives to make him a great-grandson of Eochaid. Perhaps he was, but there is an even more apposite example. The Annals of Ulster record the birth of Lugaid maccu Ochae, also known as Molua of Clonfert, in 554, and his death in 609. He was probably of the Corcu Óche, but one genealogist put two names between Molua and Corc Ócha, deftly making him great-grandson to reflect *mac uí*. He must not have been aware that a fellow-genealogist had, perhaps with more accuracy, placed him seven generations from Ócha. So, with a third added for good measure, there are three different pedigrees for Molua in *Corpus Genealogiarum Sanctorum Hiberniae*.

In 572 we find 'Occisio da oea Muiredaigh' (Báetán and Eochaid). This

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[4] Edited by M. A. O'Brien (Dublin, 1962).

[5] Edited by P. Ó Riain (Dublin, 1985).

[6] 'Old Irish personal names: M. A. O'Brien's Rhys lecture notes, 1957', edited by R. Baumgarten, *Celtica*, 10 (1972), 211–36 (p. 218).

brings us nearer the accepted meaning of *ua*, as Báetán was a grandson of Muiredach, though Eochaid was a great-grandson. However, the fact that the entry is mainly in Irish again gives the impression that it is not contemporary. The earliest definite use of 'nepos' meaning grandson in the Annals of Ulster would seem to be in 629: 'nepotes Aedain, Rigullon, Faelbe'. This was a convenient way of coupling a son of Conaing with a son of Eochaid, as they were both apparently grandsons of Áedán mac Gabráin, the one who was said to have been ordained king of Dál Riata by Colum Cille in Scotland.[7]

This harking back to a famed grandfather rather than to a little-known father is an obvious factor in the introduction of *ua* in names. In 693 we meet 'Bran nepos Faelaen, rex Lagenentium'. Fáelán also had been a king of Laigin, but his son, Conall, Bran's father, had not. As against that, in 738 we have 'Faelan nepos Brain, Laginensium rex', and in 780 his brother, 'Muiredach nepos Brain, rex Laigen', even though their father, Murchad, had also been king of Laigin—a group of septs in what is now the southern part of the province of Leinster.

Membership of a replaced or discarded segment of a sept seems to have been a contributing factor as well. In 670 the Annals of Ulster record the deaths of Máel Dúin nepos Rónáin and Dúnchad ua Rónáin. The grandfather was probably Rónán mac Colmáin, king of Laigin from 604 to 624. His son, Crunnmáel, also reigned, but Máel Dúin and Dúnchad do not appear to have been sons of Crunnmáel. Nor were they kings; in fact this dynasty, Uí Cheinnselaig, apart from a brief appearance in 738, yielded the kingship of Laigin to the Uí Dúnlainge for almost four centuries.[8]

Uí
A further stimulus to the employment of *ua* was the introduction of its plural *uí* to denote a tribal group, in much the same way as *síl, ceinél, clann*. (The earlier tribal names were single or compound terms, such as Conmaicne, Luigne, Ciarraige, etc.). In the Annals of Ulster, as early as 498 we find 'i crich Oa nGabla'—too early, I would say. The fact that the entry is in Irish indicates that it is a later interpolation. Likewise a simple entry in 562, 'Bellum Mona Daire', is repeated and expanded in the following year to

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[7] *Adomnán of Iona: Life of St Columba*, edited by R. Sharpe (Harmondsworth, 1995), p. 209.

[8] F. J. Byrne, *Irish Kings and High-Kings* (London, 1973), p. 290.

'Bellum Mona Daire Lothair for Cruithniu re nUib Neill in Tuaiscirt' ('The battle of Móin Daire Lothair [won] over the Cruithin by the Uí Néill of the North'). It is unlikely that the appellation 'Uí Néill in Tuaiscirt' was in use in the sixth century; its antithesis, Uí Néill an Deiscirt (Uí Néill of the South), is not attested before 722 (Annals of Tigernach 721). In the same way sixth-century examples from the 'Annals of Tigernach'[9] have to be regarded as non-contemporary. For example, in the 552 entry, 'Bass Eachach maic Connlai, rig Ulad, a quo Hui Eachach Ulad nati sunt' ('Death of Eochaid, son of Connla, king of Ulaid, from whom the Uí Echach of Ulaid descend'), the second part could not have been composed until at least a century later.

In the Annals of Ulster at 579 we come to what may be the first true occurrence of *Uí* meaning 'descendants'—'mors Bruidighi regis nepotum Failgi'. Failge Berraide (whom T. F. O'Rahilly considered to be the ancestor of Uí Fhailge)[10] was slain in 516, so that sixty-three years later he could have had great-grandchildren as well as grandchildren. Uí Fhailge appear again in 604, and quite frequently in the eighth century. In 598 we find 'rex nepotum Mc Uais', later well known as Uí Meic Uais of the north and midlands. Next to appear are Uí Echach (of Ulster) in 603, with seven references in the eighth century. Then Uí Néill in 604, Uí Mhaine 627, Uí Cheinnselaig 647, Uí Áedáin 649, Uí Briúin 666, Uí Fhidgeinte 667, Uí Thuirtri 669 and Uí Méith 674.

The evidence from the Annals of Ulster accordingly suggests that the *Uí* system commenced in the late sixth century, with fourteen examples in the seventh, ninety in the eighth, and increasing. Which makes it difficult to understand why Mac Neill, in his 1911 article on early Irish population groups, states that 'In the genealogies, but not in general usage, there is a partial revival of sept-names in Uí, probably in the eleventh century, perhaps due to professional familiarity with the early nomenclature'.[11] It seems obvious from the annals that the number of sept-names with *Uí* kept increasing down the centuries, and any additional increase in the eleventh

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[9] *The Annals of Tigernach*, edited by W. Stokes (Felinfach, 1993; reprinted from *Revue Celtique*, 16–18 (1895–97)).

[10] T. F. O'Rahilly, *Early Irish History and Mythology* (Dublin, 1964), p. 19.

[11] J. Mac Neill, 'Early Irish population groups: their nomenclature, classification, and chronology', *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy*, 29C (1911–12), 59–114 (p. 82).

century would be due to the introduction of family surnames with *Uí*.

Family Names

Perhaps it is time I began to deal with actual family names. The list of *Ua* surnames in the appendix—where modern anglicized forms are also given—provides dates of decease of the eponymous ancestors. Some of these are marked 'e.' for 'estimate', calculated as follows:

Using *Corpus Genealogiarum Hiberniae* as source, I extracted thirty genealogies which could be traced in the annals and dated for at least ten generations. This gave a total of 416 generations, which when divided into a total of 13,779 years, furnished an average generation gap of 33.2 years, i.e. the number of years between the death of a father and that of his son / successor. It is a most convenient span, since one can calculate three generations as almost exactly one hundred years. By my calculations, adding sixty-six years to the date of death of the eponym will give an approximate date for the death of his grandson, and at any time subsequent to that, in his great-grandson's era, one could expect the surname to have come into use. When it came to pinpointing the actual eponym in the genealogy, where the personal name was unique—as for example Mórda of the Laígis—no difficulty arose. Where there was repetition of the name in the pedigree, I depended mainly on the O Clery Book of Genealogies[12] (compiled around 1630), as Ó Cléirigh was usually willing to indicate (correctly, I hope) which Domhnall was the one 'ó ráiter Ua Domhnaill' (from whom is named O Donnell) and so on. *An Leabhar Muimhneach*[13] also helped, but in some cases I had to work it out unaided, and here I felt the lack of convenient access to Mac Fhir Bhisigh's great Book of Genealogies (compiled in the mid-seventeenth century). Which is why I am among those who eagerly await the imminent publication of Nollaig Ó Muraíle's edition of this indispensable source.

With regard to the first name on the list, there is no obituary of Cléirech in the annals, but as his son, Maolfabaill mac Clerig died in 891, and his grandson, Mael Curarda ua Clérig, in 923 (thirty-two years later), a date of 858 for Cléirech cannot be too far out. We are fortunate in having obituary dates for Cléirech's son, grandson and great-grandson—the last described

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[12] 'The O Clery Book of Genealogies', edited by S. Pender, *Analecta Hibernica*, 18 (1951).
[13] *An Leabhar Muimhneach*, edited by T. Ó Donnchadha (Baile Átha Cliath, 1940).

in the Annals of Ulster 980 as Comaltan H. Cleirigh, arguably the first Irishman, if not the first European, to have his personal name and family name recorded. The family in question was the dominant one in Aidne, equivalent to the diocese of Kilmacduagh in south Co. Galway, but on the question as to why the phenomenon should have arisen in this area I am afraid I have no opinion to offer. There are several theories regarding the origin of surnames at this particular juncture; you will find a summary of these in Prof. Tomás Ó Canann's article, to which I shall refer at a later stage.[14]

More relevant to the title of my paper is the reason why Cléirech was chosen as eponym—the very one not considered of sufficient importance to have his death recorded in the annals. Contrary to popular opinion, it cannot be taken as a general rule that families chose a famous ancestor as their eponym. Some did, for example the leading family of the northern Uí Néill who honoured Niall Glúndub, the high-king who died in heroic combat against the Vikings of Dublin in 919. As it happened, this caused some confusion, since Uí Néill was already the designation of their old tribal unit in the north, which claimed descent from Niall Noígiallach and from which also derived the Uí Domnaill and the Uí Chatháin. Then the Uí Chellacháin of Munster chose Cellachán of Cashel, whom Donnchadh Ó Corráin terms 'the last notable king of the Eóganacht'.[15]

Curiously, however, both of these families yielded pride of place to rival dynasties who disdained the use of a surname until much later. Niall Glúndub was succeeded as high-king by Máel Sechnaill of the southern Uí Néill, remembered for his opposition to the rise of Brian Bórama, and it was not until the time of his great-grandson and namesake, Máel Sechnaill Ua Máelshechnaill (d.1115) that this branch had a surname. So too with the leading family of Eóganacht Chaisil ('of Cashel'), whose king, Muiredach (d.1092), although a descendant of Cellachán, could not be called Ua Cellacháin, as this surname had been appropriated by his cousins. He was known simply as the son of Carthach. Although his father's sole claim to fame was that he was burned in a house in 1045, Muiredach's regnant sons, Tadc and Cormac, were, both in the Annals of Inisfallen[16] and in Mac

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[14] T. Ó Canann, 'Aspects of an early Irish surname: *Ua Canannáin*', *Studia Hibernica*, 27 (1993), 113–44.

[15] D. Ó Corráin, *Ireland Before the Normans* (Dublin, 1972), p. 114.

[16] *The Annals of Inisfallen*, edited by S. Mac Airt (Dublin, 1951).

Carthaigh's Book,[17] referred to as 'm.m. Carthaig' ('the son of the son of Carthach'). Even as late as 1169, Cormac's son, Diarmait, is termed 'm.m. Carthaigh'— which he was not—and it was not until 1176 that Mac Carthaigh's book titled him Diarmaid Mór Mac Carthaigh.

The point I am making here is that, generally speaking, the higher the standing of the family group, the later a surname was assumed—a syndrome alive and well up to the present day when exalted personages are known simply as Elizabeth, Leopold, John Paul etc., no surname being necessary. The prime example of that era was, of course, Brian Bórama, who in the year 1004 had his amanuensis inscribe his name in the Book of Armagh simply as 'Brian imperator Scotorum'.[18] This does not accord with Geoffrey Keating's claim: 'Is é Brian fós tug sloinnte fá seach ar fhearaibh Éireann as a n-aitheantar gach síltreabh fá seach dhíobh'. ('It was Brian, too, who gave the men of Ireland distinct surnames by which each separate sept of them is distinguished from the rest').[19] There is no known authority for this statement, but the fallacy has often been repeated, by Eugene O'Curry for example,[20] and quite recently I picked up a large newly-published volume on Irish family names, in which the very first sentence of the introduction reads: 'The great king of Ireland, Brian Boru, is said to have invented surnames'.[21]

In fact, the opposite is the case. The kings of Dál Cais disregarded the use of a surname until the time of Brian's great-grandsons. Similarly with the Mac Murroughs of Leinster, it was not until the early twelfth century that the grandsons of Murchad who died in 1070 took the name Mac Murchadha, the notorious Diarmait Mac Murchadha being one of the first. The exception to this practice was the ruling family of Connacht. The leading family of Síl Muiredaig took its surname from Conchobar mac Taidc who died in 973. His great-grandson, Áed 'of the gapped spear', is called 'Áed Ua Conchobair' in the Annals of Ulster 1067.

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[17] *Miscellaneous Irish Annals*, edited by S. Ó hInnse (Dublin, 1947).

[18] *Liber Ardmachanus: the Book of Armagh*, edited by J. Gwynn (Dublin & London, 1913), p. 32 (f. 16v).

[19] *The History of Ireland by Geoffrey Keating, D.D.*, vol. iii, edited by P. S. Dinneen (London, 1908), p. 262.

[20] E. O'Curry, *Lectures on the Manuscript Materials of Ancient Irish History* (Dublin, 1861), p. 214.

[21] I. Grehan, *The Dictionary of Irish Family Names* (Boulder, Colorado, 1997).

The reason I stress 'great-grandson' is obvious. *Ua* still meant 'grandson' at this period, and where, for example, Tadc ua Conchobair, who was slain in 1030, was actually a grandson of Conchobar, it would not be correct to speak of his surname. It is notoriously difficult to distinguish in tenth- and eleventh-century annals between *ua*, 'grandson', and *Ua*, descendant. The *Dictionary of the Irish Language* article on *ua*[22] draws on Mac Neill's 1911 article, quoting his view on *Uí*, and also his three examples of early surnames from the Annals of Ulster, namely, Oengus .h. Maelsechnaill, Tigernach .h. Cleirigh and Ruaidri .h. Canannan. As Brian Ó Cuív has pointed out, these are very questionable instances.[23] The first, Óengus, had a grandfather, Máel Sechnaill, and died in 915, about a century before the family name evolved. Tigernach, who died in 919, was probably, like Máel Curarda who died in 923, a grandson of Cléirech. Prof. Ó Cuív also questioned the status of Ruaidrí, whom he took to be a grandson of Canannán. However, in a recent article in *Studia Hibernica*[24] Tomás Ó Canann rebutted this, quoting from a fourteenth-century genealogy in the National Library of Ireland, which begins: 'Ruaidhrí m. Mailcolaim m. Diarmada m. Canandan'. He maintains that this is the Ruaidrí Ua Canannáin referred to in 953 (Chronicum Scotorum)[25] and who was slain in 950 (Annals of Ulster).

Prof. Ó Canann makes a strong case for designating Ruaidrí as the earliest surname-bearer in Ireland, contrary to the accepted view that Ó Cléirig was first. But there has to be some doubt. The estimated date for Canannán's demise that I give in the appendix is 870, obtained by adding sixty-six years to the date of his grandfather's death, 804. This would bring Ruaidrí closer to being a grandson of Canannán. The problem with the name Ruaidrí is its popularity among the family group; no indication is given in the annals as to who was the father of Ruaidrí of 950. The Ruaidrí of the National Library of Ireland genealogy was a son of Máel-coluim, a more unusual name. It so happens that a Máel-coluim ua Canannáin, king of Ceinél Conaill, died in 957, seven years later than Ruaidrí, which makes it appear more likely that the Ruaidrí of 950 was a brother, rather than a son,

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[22] *Contributions to a Dictionary of the Irish Language*, Letter U, edited by T. Condon (Dublin, 1976), p. 1.

[23] B. Ó Cuív, *Aspects of Irish Personal Names* (Dublin, 1986), pp. 32–34.

[24] Ó Canann, 'Aspects of an early Irish surname'.

[25] *Chronicum Scotorum*, edited by W. M. Hennessy (London, 1866).

of Máel-coluim, and so a grandson of Canannán.

In the same article, Ó Canann makes reference to an obituary of Cenn Fáelad Ua Dúngalaig in 955, found only in the Annals of Inisfallen, whom he takes to be king of Múscraige Tíre and great-grandson of Dúngalach (*Corpus Genealogiarum Hiberniae* 367). But at 1078 the Annals of Inisfallen again give an obit of a Cenn Fáelad Hua Dungalaig, this time naming him king of Múscraige Tíre, and here confirmed by the Annals of Tigernach and the Annals of the Four Masters.[26] Accordingly, there has to be further doubt about the early emergence of this surname.

In relation to annalistic entries containing *ua*, unless there is additional evidence, particularly a father's name, it is often impossible to decide whether grandson or descendant is intended. In a twelve-year period, for example, between 927 and 938, the Annals of Ulster contain five references to Sitriuc ua hÍmair, three to Gothfraith ua hÍmair and two to Amlaíb ua hÍmair. It is tempting to regard this as an early Hiberno-Viking surname, but it seems more likely that they were three grandsons of Ímar.

Reverting to the O Connors of Connacht, the reason for their comparatively early adoption of a surname may relate to the fact that, as pointed out by Prof. F. J. Byrne, the Síl Muiredaig were unique in that sovereignty passed directly from father to son for seven generations.[27] They also ran counter to the trend in choosing an eponym which was already in use by Uí Chonchobair families in the other three provinces— in Uí Fhailge in Leinster, Glenn Geimin in Ulster, Corcu Mruad and Ciarraige Luachra in Munster. Other families gave precedence to names which were distinctive over those of famous ancestors. A striking example of this are the Osraige of Co. Kilkenny, a sept whose influence had greatly expanded when their king, Donnchad, seized the kingship of all the Laigin in 1037–39. One would have expected his successors to opt for Mac Donnchada as their family name, yet they preferred the more distinctive eponym, Gilla Pátraic, borne by both Donnchad's father and son. In later years, Mac Gilla Phátraic was Englished as Fitzpatrick.

The Osraige may have taken pattern from their near neighbours, the Laígis, who also disregarded famous ancestors such as Cerball mac Dúnlaing in favour of the uniquely-named Mórda, a name meaning 'proud',

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[26] *Annals of the Kingdom of Ireland, by the Four Masters,* edited by J. O'Donovan (Dublin, 1856; De Búrca reprint, 1990).

[27] Byrne, *Irish Kings and High-Kings*, p. 253.

and never, as far as I know, used elsewhere. This, in turn may have induced a neighbouring branch of the Uí Fhailge to choose Dímmasach, also meaning 'proud', as their eponym (O Dempseys).

Here we must exercise caution in regard to looking for 'meanings' in surnames, a popular pursuit with some. Fr Woulfe's otherwise praiseworthy work[28] may be responsible for much of this, when he endeavoured to explain the original meanings of personal names from which surnames derived, without adverting to the time-lag between the adoption of the two types of names. While it is true that personal names originally had meanings—Áed, 'fire', Carthach, 'loving person', Murchad, 'sea-battler', etc.,—these would have lost their meaning long before the ninth century, becoming simply names. I entirely agree with Michael O'Brien's dogma: 'a name has no meaning'.[29] I do not for a moment imagine that I come from a long line of sea-battlers, just that somewhere along the way an ancestor was named Murchad, and that is all. One does not look for 'meanings' in such names as Johnson or Williams; why should Irish names be any different?

Such a quest could be even misleading, as for example in the case of Uí Mathgamna, the leading family of Uí Echach in Munster. Mathgamain is an old Irish word for a bear, but there is no likelihood here of an ancient animal totem. It just so happened that through a marriage with a daughter of Brian Bórama, the Dalcassian name, Mathgamain, came into the family at this time, and was adopted as a new and distinctive eponym.

Taking the lists in the appendix, and comparing them with the extensive index of *Corpus Genealogiarum Hiberniae*, we find three names which appear there only twice in all: Canannán, Dub-dírma, Súildubán; the following appear just once: Aidíth, Bráenán, Cáem, Caíndelbán, Dubda, Egra, Eiden, Mórda, Gilla Cellaig, Artán, Gilla Mocholmóc. A further six are not found there at all: Brádach, Céilechán, Dorchad, Gadar, Cruadláech, Cú Chenann. This underlines the care taken to preserve a distinctive identity, which after all was the overriding purpose of the exercise in the first place.

A further indication of the desire for novelty is the borrowing of Viking personal names as eponyms. I referred to Ua hÍmair above. There were two Gaelic families of that name, one in Sligo and one in Thomond. An

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[28] P. Woulfe, *Sloinnte Gaedheal is Gall: Irish Names and Surnames* (Dublin, 1923).
[29] In 'Old Irish personal names', edited by Baumgarten, p. 217.

Eóganacht family took Amlaíb (Olaf) to give us Mac Auliffe, and the Kerry
family of Ua Siochfhrada (Sugrue) chose Sigefrith. The Mac Ragnaill
(Reynolds) family of Co. Leitrim opted for Ragnall (Reginald) while a
Roscommon family and a branch of the Maguires of Fermanagh chose
Magnus and became Meic Magnusa (Mac Manus). Even Lochlainn, the
Irish term for both Vikings and their country of origin, was pressed into
service in Ulster and also in Co. Clare (Mac Loughlin).

    I should like to stress at this point that the names in the appendix
generally represent those given prominence by annalists and genealogists.
As a glance through Fr Woulfe's or MacLysaght's work[30] will show, there
were hundreds of less important surnames whose origins remain obscure
because their bearers were people of little consequence. One comes across
such surnames in tracts such as Crichad an Chaoilli[31] and Geinelach Chorca
Laoighdhe[32] relating to Co. Cork, or those on the Uí Mhaine[33] and Uí
Fhiachrach[34] of Connacht. Frequently too they are to be found in official or
semi-official records, again with no clue as to their origin. One example is
the name Ó Dreada or Draddy, which makes its first appearance in the
Justiciary Rolls of the late thirteenth century,[35] located in east Cork, and
occurs sparingly throughout the fourteenth century. There is one reference
to the name in the Pipe Roll of Cloyne, dated 1403,[36] and a few more in the
Elizabethan fiants.[37] Those engaged in Irish studies will be familiar with the
name of Seán Ó Dreada who in the early nineteenth century was equally
well known as a scribe of Gaelic MSS and as a stonecutter who loved to

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[30] E. MacLysaght, *The Surnames of Ireland* (Shannon, 1969) (inter alia).

[31] *Crichad an Chaoilli: Being the Topography of Ancient Fermoy*, edited by P.
Power (Cork, 1932).

[32] In *Miscellany of the Celtic Society*, edited by J. O'Donovan (Dublin, 1849), pp.
1–144.

[33] *The Tribes and Customs of Hy-Many*, edited by J. O'Donovan (Dublin, 1843).

[34] *The Genealogies, Tribes, and Customs of Hy-Fiachrach*, edited by J. O'Donovan
(Dublin, 1844).

[35] *Calendar of the Justiciary Rolls of Ireland*, vol. 1, edited by J. Mills (Dublin,
1905), p. 97 (Comdinus Odradi, AD 1297).

[36] *The Pipe Roll of Cloyne*, edited by P. MacCotter and K. Nicholls (Cloyne, 1996),
p. 126; see note 321 (pp. 245–46) for occurrences of the surname in the fourteenth
century and later.

[37] *The Irish Fiants of the Tudor Sovereigns* (De Búrca reprint, Dublin, 1994), fiants
3974, 4111, 6485, 6486, 6511, 6515.

finish off a headstone inscription with a quatrain in Irish.[38] Today, the name though very rare is still extant in east Cork, a remarkable instance of historical continuity.

A number of lesser-known family names originated with professional ecclesiastical families associated with the many early monastic sites in Ireland. Some of these would appear to have been specially fashioned to suit the bearer, without reference to any ancestor. An interesting example is to be found among the successors of Comgall of Bangor—Aonghus Ua Cruimthir in 1030 and Learghus Ua Cruimhthir in 1096, a surname derived from an early Irish word for a priest, through Old Welsh from the Latin 'presbyter'. The abbot of Kells in 1128 was Conaing Ua Beiccléighinn, whose learning appears to have been small. The chief scholar of Armagh in 1046 was Maolpáttraig Ua Bileoice, whose name seems to have come from the leaf of a book. The names Ua Mancháin, associated with Glendalough, and Ua Scolaige with Lothra (Lorrha, Co. Tipperary), are eminently suited to churchmen, and one wonders did they really have ancestors named Manchán ('little monk') and Scolaige ('scholar'). Then there was Samuel Ua hAngli, bishop of Dublin in 1121, whose tomb may still be seen in St Michan's. He had succeeded his uncle, Donngus or Donatus, styled Hua Aingliu in the Annals of Inisfallen (1095). Fr John Ryan assumed that they belonged to the Uí Ainlige family of Co. Roscommon,[39] but I would suggest that *ainglide* (angelic) was, like Samuel, adopted for monastic use; Donngus was a monk of Canterbury, and Samuel of St Alban's.

But most of the hereditary ecclesiastical families were, as Prof. Ó Corráin observes, 'discard segments of royal lineages, pushed out of the political struggle and forced to reprise themselves in the church. Once established there, they proved extremely tenacious ...'.[40] So we find hereditary erenagh family names such as Ua Braín at Clonmacnoise, Ua Beolláin at Drumcliff, Co. Sligo, where W. B. Yeats lies buried, Ua Brolcháin and Ua Flannacáin in Derry and Armagh, Ua Fallamain at

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[38] See B. Ó Conchúir, *Scríobhaithe Chorcaí 1700-1850* (Baile Átha Cliath, 1982), pp. 61–63.

[39] J. Ryan, 'Pre-Norman Dublin', *Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries in Ireland*, 79 (1949), 64–83 (p. 79).

[40] 'The early Irish churches: some aspects of organisation', in *Irish Antiquity: Essays and Studies Presented to Professor M. J. O'Kelly*, edited by D. Ó Corráin (Cork, 1981), pp. 327–41 (p. 328).

Clonard, Ua Meic Tíre in Cloyne and Ua Selbaig in Cork. Succession was normally from father to son; as Kathleen Hughes remarks: 'Marriage for the coarb had become a respectable and recognized convention'.[41] It is no surprise then when we encounter such surnames as Mac an Aba, Mac an tSagairt or even Mac an Easpaig—sons of the abbot, priest and bishop, respectively.

This brings us to the subject of *mac*-type surnames, for which there is a list of twenty-six eponyms in the appendix. The most noticeable difference here is that they are generally later than the *Ua*-surnames. I could find no *Mac*-eponym whose demise was earlier than the year 1000. Where the average year of death for the fifty-two *Ua*-type eponyms was 958 AD, that for the *Mac* ones was 1103, which represents an average difference of almost 150 years. There is evidence too in the annals of initial confusion between *Ua* and *Mac* in some cases; Mac Lochlainn in Ulster was quite often written Ua Lochlainn, and there are also examples of Ua Carthaig and Ua Gilla Phátraic.

Once *Mac* had become established, however, it came to be used for almost all new surnames after the eleventh century. Occupation-type names form one group—Mac an Bháird, Mac an Ghobhann, Mac an Leagha, Mac an Mhaoir, Mac an tSaoi, Mac an tSaoir (sons of the bard, smith, leech, steward, savant, wright, respectively)—names whose date of origin it is very difficult to estimate. The only example of this type with *Ua* that I have come across is Ua an Cháinte (descendant of the satirist), applied to a bardic family in west Cork.

Another fillip to *Mac*-type surnames came with the influx of Anglo-Norman families. Not only was *Mac* substituted for 'fitz' in such names as Mac Gearailt, Mac Giobúin, Mac Muiris, but it was also used in conjunction with a personal name in place of an original Norman surname, e.g. de Angulo > Mac Oistealbh (son of Jocelyn), Bermingham > Mac Fheorais (son of Pierce), Archdeacon > Mac Ódo (son of Odo), and so on. The name FitzElias in Co. Kerry became Mac Uileagóid in Irish, re-anglicized as Mac Elligott. This must not be confused with Mac Gillycuddy (of the Reeks), which is an example of a Gaelic family name formed as late as the sixteenth century by a branch of the O Sullivans, using

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[41] K. Hughes, *The Church in Early Irish Society* (London, 1966), p. 246. The terms 'coarb' (*comarba*) and 'erenagh' (*airchinnech*) originally referred to holders of abbatial office, but later signified hereditary tenants of monastic lands.

the traditional personal name, Giolla Mochuda, servant of St Mochuda of Lismore.

To summarize my theories on the surname eponyms, some were chosen for reflected glory, others related to occupations, and in the case of a few ecclesiastical families appear to have been specially formed. Quite a number must have been adopted casually on the basis that it was time to assume a family surname, but a still greater number seem to have been deliberately chosen to provide a surname which was distinctive and peculiar to a single family group.

Finally, a word about the proliferation of the major surnames at the expense of the lesser ones. This is particularly noticeable in what were the Gaelic-dominated areas in the north and west of Ireland, where dominant names such as O Brien of Thomond, O Connor of Connacht and O Neill of Ulster expanded to such an extent that they are reckoned among the ten most numerous surnames in Ireland. This displacement of weaker families took place on a large scale, but it can be more easily studied on a small scale. For example, the Uí Laoghaire of Corca Laoighdhe, displaced by the Anglo-Normans in the thirteenth century, moved into the mountainous fastnesses of West Muskerry, where their territory amounted to something less than than the parish of Inchigeelagh (Uíbh Laoghaire). In 1641 the Civil Survey recorded thirty-five landholders there, of whom thirty-four were O Learys. That there were other surnames in the parish we know from the Elizabethan Fiants, but they were all 'men of no property'. And from this small nucleus, the O Learys increased in numbers to such an extent that they became the sixty-second most numerous surname in Ireland.[42]

This underlines the significance of geographical location. For instance, the Leinster sept of Uí Brain in the security of the Wicklow mountains proliferated to such an extent that Byrne is now also one of the top ten Irish surnames, while Mac Gilla Mocholmóc, the surname of a wealthier sept but one seated in the vulnerable flatlands near Dublin, became extinct. It is very noticeable too that the surnames of once powerful families in the east, such as Uí Máelshechlainn in Westmeath or Mac Murrough in Wexford are now very thin on the ground.

But all of this does not explain why the most numerous surname of all in

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[42] D. Ó Murchadha, 'Gaelic land tenure in Co. Cork: Uíbh Laoghaire in the seventeenth century', in *Cork: History and Society*, edited by P. O'Flanagan and C. G. Buttimer (Dublin, 1993), pp. 213–48.

Ireland is Ó Murchadha or Murphy, a family name never associated with great territorial sway, nor indeed why Ó Ceallaigh or Kelly should be in second place. A partial explanation may lie in the fact that there were unrelated families of Uí Mhurchadha in all four provinces, and in the case of Uí Cheallaigh, Fr Woulfe lists nine separate families, those of Uí Mhaine in Connacht being particularly prominent.

There is a great deal of research still to be done in these areas, but any such study urgently requires an up-to-date survey. The figures on which I am dependent are taken from the *Special Report on Surnames in Ireland*,[43] published in 1909 and based on the Births Index for 1890. That was over a hundred years ago. Surely in this era of high technology it should be feasible to make an accurate head-count of surnames, county by county, so that we would no longer be dependent on 1890 estimates as we approach AD 2000.

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[43] R. E. Matheson, *Special Report on Surnames in Ireland* (Dublin, 1909).

APPENDIX

Eponyms of *Ua*-type surnames

Name	Obit (e.=est.)	Surname
Cléirech	858 (e.)	O Clery
Máel Doraid	868 (e.)	O Mulderry
Canannán	870 (e.)	O Cannon
Áengus (Clann Cholgan)	882 (e.)	O Hennessy
Cellach (Uí Mhaine)	888 (e.)	O Kelly
Flann (Line)	888 (e.)	O Flynn
Dubdírma	889 (e.)	(Mac) Dermot
Aidíth	898	O Haidy
Ruarc	898	O Rourke
Rian	900	O Ryan
Uallachán	915 (e.)	O Houlihan
Dubda	916 (e.)	O Dowd
Niall	919	O Neill
Bráenán	921 (e.)	O Brennan
Cáem	921 (e.)	O Keeffe
Caíndelbán	927	O Quinlan
Egra	928	O Hara
Loingsech	932	O Lynch
Céilechán	933	O Keelaghan
Domnall	939	O Donnell
Mórda	946 (e.)	O Moore
Conchobar (Glenn Geimin)	950 (e.)	O Connor
Cellachán	954	O Callaghan
Cerball (Airgialla / Oriel)	956 (e.)	O Carroll
Rogallach	956 (e.)	O Reilly
Tuathal	958	O Toole
Dímmasach	962 (e.)	O Dempsey
Fáelán	966	O Phelan
Gadra	967 (e.)	O Gara
Flaithbertach	968 (e.)	O Flaherty

Name	Obit (e.=est.)	Surname
Conchobar (Connachta)	973	O Connor
Dálach	973 (e.)	O Daly
Súildubán	976 (e.)	O Sullivan
Cerball (Éile / Ely)	978 (e.)	O Carroll
Conchobar (Failge / Offaly)	979	O Connor
Dondubán	980	O Donovan
Lochlainn (Corcu Mruad)	983	O Loughlin
Fergal	984 (e.)	O Farrell
Falloman	988 (e.)	O Fallon
Cú Chenann	992	O Concannon
Conchobar (Corcu Mruad)	1003	O Connor
Eochaid	1004	O Haughey
Brian	1014	O Brien
Brecc	1018 (e.)	O Bric
Bran	1018	O Byrne
Máel Sechnaill	1022	(Mac) Loughlin
Cenn Éitig	1023 (e.)	O Kennedy
Senchán	1024	O Shanahan
Donnchad	1030 (e.)	O Donoghue
Mathgamain	1044 (e.)	O Mahony
Eiden	1058 (e.)	O Hyne
Cruadláech (An)	1089 (e.)	O Crowley

Eponyms of *Mac*-type surnames

Gilla Cellaig	1004	Mac Kilkelly
Artán	1005	Mac Cartan
Mathgamain (Fernmag / Farney)	1022	Mac Mahon
Odar	1043 (e.)	Maguire
Carthach	1045	Mac Carthy
Gilla Mocholmóc	1051 (e.)	—
Cochlán	1053	Mac Coghlan
Gilla Pátraic	1055	Fitzpatrick
Mac Raith	1064 (e.)	Mac Grath
Cú Mara	1066 (e.)	Mac Namara
Murchad	1070	Mac Murrough
Áengus	1075 (e.)	Mac Guinness
Donn Sléibe	1091	Mac Aleavy
Ragnall	1106 (e.)	(Mac) Reynold
Dorchad	1118 (e.)	Mac Gourkey
Carrgamain	1127	(O) Growney
Mathgamain (Dál Cais)	1129	Mac Mahon
Samradán	1131 (e.)	Mac Gowran
Diarmait	1144 (e.)	Mac Dermot
Domnall (Iarla Áentroma / Earl of Antrim)	1149 (e)	Mac Donnell
Brádach	1156 (e.)	Mac Brady
Airechtach	1164 (e.)	Mac Gerrity
Amlaíb	1176 (e.)	Mac Auliffe
Flannchad	1187 (e.)	Mac Clancy
Áeducán	1197 (e.)	Mac Egan
Donnchad 1250 (e.)	1250 (e.)	Mac Donagh