Surnames of County Clare

(A TALK GIVEN AT THE MERRIMAN SUMMER SCHOOL, ENNIS 1968)

E. A. MACLYSAGHT,

As this is Brian Merriman week the obvious place to begin a talk on Clare surnames is with the name Merriman. As Merriman it can't be called a Clare name, except for the fact that Brian was a Clareman born at Ennistymon. There has been much discussion as to what his family's name really was. Certainly he called himself Merriman (which of course is a fairly well known English name) but his use of the form Mac Giolla Meidhre in Irish is generally regarded as a jocular invention on his part. I think we can reject the suggestion that they were MacMenamins, which is a Donegal-Sligo name, though it is interesting to recall that his mother's name was Quillkin, also a north Connacht name. Professor Carney holds that they were O'Holohans, itself a good Clare name, well known around Feakle. John O'Donovan's theory is that they were MacNamaras. It was not unusual in the case of populous septs to form a new surname from the Christian name of a prominent member of the main family. The only objection to that theory in this case is that Menamin was not a usual forename with the MacNamaras.

Nowadays we get over this difficulty of too many people with identical names by adding the father's Christian name—even in the official voters lists there are any amount of people styled John MacNamara Pat, Michael O'Brien James and so on. This is not exclusively a Clare custom, but it is not nearly so prevalent elsewhere. Whether or not Brian was really one of them, and I think he was, MacNamara is one of the commonest names in Clare—well, I should use the word numerous rather than common as I have been more than once told off by Americans who take "common" to mean vulgar or uncivilized. In speech, and even sometimes for legal and official purposes, MacNamara is usually called Mac. Nevertheless another Mac name, MacMahon, is even more numerous in Clare than MacNamara. These two Mac names greatly outnumber every other name in Clare, even O'Brien. Statistics are wearisome in a talk, though useful in a written article: even so I might mention that a count I made of the Clare voters lists a few years ago showed 1,584 MacMahons, 1,358 MacNamaras, with O'Brien and Maloney trailing in third and fourth place with something over 900 each. The next four were Kelly, Keane, MacInerney and Ryan. So, as Keane in Clare is a Mac not an O name (Mac Catháin) we have, in the first eight, four Mac and four O names. There is no other county in Ireland where Mac outnumbers O, except in the planted part of Ulster where Scottish names abound. Our indigenous Mac names in Clare, not to mention MacCarthy of Cork and MacGuire of Fermanagh, are surely enough to make nonsense of the prevalent idea in England that Mac names are Scottish and O names are Irish. I know I'm going off at a tangent here but I must also point out the absurdity of another such idea, namely that Mc is Irish and Mac Scottish: of course, Mc is simply an abbreviation of Mac, that is all. And if I may
digress still further for a moment, I might mention another example of what I once called a carefully treasured blunder, namely spelling French and suchlike names with two small f's. People who do that are ignorant of the fact that, in seventeenth century script, capital F looks like two small f's.

To get back to what I was saying before I branched off on a sideline, I mentioned that Keane is Mac not O. It is one of the many surnames from which the prefix was dropped in the period of Gaelic submergence. Under the influence of the Gaelic League, founded in 1893, these have been resumed quite widely, but only in some cases, Sullivan, for example, which comes nineteenth in our Clare count, is now more usually O'Sullivan. If some more figures would not be boring, I can tell you that in 1914 only 27 per cent of the Sullivan voters used the O; 30 years later 60 per cent of them did; and in Limerick city actually 90 per cent of them are registered as O'Sullivan. On the other hand, there are still very few O'Hogans compared with Hogans, or, to take another well known Clare name, seldom if ever do we see the Mac with Considine, a true Mac name.

At this point I am tempted to mention my own name which, like Considine, is an off-shoot of the Clare O'Brien family. The Mac was quite dropped with us until about sixty years ago when twenty families called Lysaght in Clare and Limerick resumed their rightful Mac, all together on the same day. Looking at the Irish form, which is Mac Giolla Iasachta, someone once remarked to me that it looked more like a short story than a name—it was first anglicized Macgillysaghta. According to Woulfe it means 'son of the strange fellow.' He may be right, though that is not in accord with our family tradition—but I'll not bore you with that.

Another Clare Family which resumed the Mac about the same time or a little later is Clancy or MacClancy.

Neighbours of mine, whom we always called 'Kennan' in my early days, now prefer to be called MacKenna—but that is a different matter, because they were always officially MacKenna and only 'Kennan' by word of mouth.

Enough of that, but before I leave this aspect of our subject I must refer to the danger of wrong resumption. I do not mean things like putting in an O or a Mac without any justification, like a case I once met of a man calling himself O'Plunkett; no, the name I have in mind at the moment is Gorman. This is now usually made O'Gorman, but, in fact, in Clare it is correctly MacGorman. As such it appears in Clare is the 'census' of 1659—O'Gorman belongs to Armagh. It was the famous Chevalier O'Gorman who was responsible for this gaffe. He was plain Gorman and decided to 'resume'—but he wrongly chose O instead of Mac, and his example has since been widely followed. Then you get a case like the author of 'The Islandman' (not a Clareman but a Kerryman, it is true). His family was always MacCrohan, but Robin Flower of the British Museum, who sponsored him, put O Crohan on the title page and as such he is now widely known—another gaffe. In the same way the former Taoiseach, Mr. Costello, was always officially described in Government documents in the Irish language as Ó Coisdealbhaigh, instead of the correct Mac Coisdealbhaigh. Another example of this sort of confusion is to be seen in the Limerick surname Mackessy, properly, of course, Ó Macasa in Irish but it often appears in Mackessy as if it were a Mac name.

I have beside me Mrs. Ellis, who most of us think as Ellis Clune. Her relatives, Father George Clune and my great friend Conor Clune (who was murdered in Dublin Castle in 1920), both rightly insisted on being known in Irish as MacCluin though their
name was, in the past, usually made Ó Clumhain, quite wrongly as far as Clare is concerned. Seeing that the family gave its name to Ballymacline there could not be much doubt as to who was right.

Placenames are often a guide to surnames. Take the very English name of Markham, for example. Our Clare Markhams are not English at all, but Markahan, as Ballymarkahan, in the parish of Quin, testifies.

Anglicization causes names to be mispronounced too. My father used to give out if he heard anyone say “Toomond” for Thomond (I seldom hear “Toomond” now, even from Clare people). Outside Clare and Limerick, O’Dea has become “O’Dec.” Jimmy O’Dea’s sister told me that they had fought against this for years in Dublin, but could not get people to pronounce their name properly. Dublin is the worst offender in this respect. There they call Kissane “Kissayne” and Linnane “Limmayne”!

There are, of course, cases where faulty pronunciation has become accepted and correct. We laugh at Americans who call Eoin O’Mahony “O’Mahoney,” but in fact they are, by accident no doubt, nearer to the Irish Ó Mathúna than we are. At least they give the H its full value. Dropping Hs and even Rs, as the English do, is also creeping in; I heard on Radio Éireann the other day Mr. Maher of the N.F.A. called “Mr. Maa.” It is how names are spelt in their anglicized form which first makes them go astray. Devilly was sometimes spelt Devally and so it began to be called “De Valley,” as if it were a French name. Names beginning with de or le are often thought to be French. In the snobbish anti-Irish period there were even people named Devlin calling themselves D’Evelyn, and so on. But here I am going off at a tangent again.

The most comical case of mispronunciation I remember was of the good old Clare name Minogue. In the first World War a neighbour of mine (living near Ballyminogue, by the way) joined the British Army and when he came back he called himself Minogew, which was the way his English mess-mates pronounced it.

Apropos of pronunciation, the name Malone, quite numerous in Clare, is interesting. We call it “Maloon” and the reason for this is that in Thomond it is not a branch of the Clonnacaois sept Ó Maoilleoin, but Ó Mhaoillín, i.e. Muilinn.

We do not have so much translation of names in Clare as elsewhere, like Cavan MacGowans having become Smith. There are a few. Honen has now become Greene. Woulfe treats Honen and Honan as quite different names; in my opinion, as far as Clare is concerned, they are variants of the same Irish name Ó hUaínín—that is not saying that there may not be a distinct sept of Honan in Co. Tipperary. Honan of Iniscathá is, however, Ó hEoghainnín, not Ó hUaínín.

As I say, we have few translations, but we have plenty of cases of the adoption of English names which sound something like the Irish form. Markahan, which I have already mentioned, is an example. Others are Crowe for MacEnchroe, Nestor for Mac an Adhastair and Sexton for Ó Séasráin. The name of the principal organizer of this week’s events is a case in point. I’m sure Con Howard does not want to be thought a member of the English aristocracy, cousin of the Duke of Norfolk, and others: very much on the contrary. The Clare Howards are really O’Heenar. That, and O’Hure, are how it was formerly spelt. Other good Irish names belonging to Clare which look English at first sight are Melody, Durack and Thynne, which we call “Tyne,” but in England it is “Thin.” Rynne is 100% Irish too—the Clare Rynnes are MacBhroin, quite distinct from the Co. Cork lot, Christy Ring and the rest.

Change of name from one Gaelic Irish name to another is unusual, but it happened in the case of one of the important Clare families—O’Grady. The Bradys of Tuamgraney were originally O’Grady.
Clare is notable for having very few Norman names in its mediaeval population. Minster is one. Those we now have in numbers—Barry, Dillon, FitzGerald, Roche, etc.—came in later. Hillery is also in that category. It is of Norman origin all right—from the Latin * hilaris* meaning joyful—but it did not come to Clare in the Anglo-Norman period. Making it out to be an O name—Ó hIrrígle—is a mistake, and I may add that our popular T.D. and Minister for Labour,* though he is almost entirely Gaelic by blood, does not claim to have a Gaelic name.

But to return to the Normans, Cusack must be mentioned; it is fairly numerous in Clare, but it is usually associated with the County through Michael Cusack and the founding of the G.A.A. Of course there were Burkes and Butlers and suchlike in the landlord class. Clare is unusual, also, as the principal landlords had for the most part Gaelic names, notably O'Brien, MacNamara and Maloney.

If we have not Normans, we do—or did—have Elizabethan and even some Cromwellian English, mainly of course in the landlord class which we are considering at the moment—thanks be to God we have few class distinctions now. Studdert is about the best known of these names: it became more closely identified with Clare than, say, Stacpoole, which was found in other parts of Ireland also. Others of this type are Bindon, Hickman, Ivers, Purdon, Spaight, and Westropp. Henn is not really closely associated with Clare, but it has raised a smile far and wide as long as I can remember because of the name they had on their place—Paradise: the Henns of Paradise. One should also mention Frost in this connexion. The Frosts are numerous, and the fact that in Irish they are called An t-Seaca suggests the possibility that they are not of English or Norman origin.

The most interesting of these English names in Clare is Blood. By a coincidence they settled in the territory of Ui Bloid, with the result that it would look as if the Bloods of Ballykitty were indigenous Gaels, whereas the first of these Bloods came from Derbyshire in 1595. 375 years ought to be long enough, God knows, to make settlers as Irish as any Gael, but the fact remains that this mistake should be corrected.

It is easy to make mistakes about names, as with Sexton, Crowe and others. Those are genuine Irish names, but we are speaking now about names which came from England. We have one—Bugler—in my part of the county. This, spelt as it is, would be called "Bewgler" by anyone unacquainted with it, since the musical instrument is so spelt but in fact it is derived from a place in Devonshire in England, and in consequence is pronounced "Buggler."

Some names are very puzzling. Normoyle is an interesting case. When Fr. Woulfe was compiling his valuable book on Irish surnames he got stuck when he came to Normoyle. He asked Richard Foley (better known as Fiachra Elgeach) what he thought, and the latter made a guess, which Fr. Woulfe adopted and used—we know this from a manuscript in the National Library. Well, I said, before I would accept a guess of Foley's I had better check it. I did, and found that, in fact, his guess was right. It is Mac Con Dhormaoile, son of the hound of Formoyle.

Before anyone voices any queries, let me ask one question myself which has long puzzled me, and that is: what is the origin of MacGreen? As I have already said, the Greens of west Clare are Ó hUaíminn, not Mac anything, and the Ulster name Mac Grianna has, as far as I know, no connexion with Clare. Could it be MacGrinn? I do

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* At the time of printing, Dr. Hillery is Minister for External Affairs.
find that version in Griffith's *Valuation of Co. Clare* about 1850, but no MacGreene, a name which appears in the "census" of 1659 as a principal name in Co. Longford.

I have a list made out of all the names for which there are forty or more entries in Griffith's *Valuation of Co. Clare*. It would be impossible to make use of it in this talk, though it raises many questions. Just to take one, for example—Cooney, which numbers no less than 60. This name is usually counted as belonging to Cos. Roscommon and Galway—Ballycooney is in the Loughrea area—but I suspect that the Clare Cooneys are a distinct sept.

The mention of Griffith and the 1659 "census" reminds me that before I finish I should perhaps refer to a few other sources of value for information on Clare surnames, such as the 1821 Freeholders, the Tithe Applotment books of about 1830, the Clare Book of Survey and Distribution (1636-1703), and some printed works like Frost's *History of Clare* (which unfortunately has a poor index) and the recently published *Inchiquin Papers* (which has a very full one). The Parish Registers are, of course, very useful, though they seldom go back further than about 1820 for the Diocese of Killaloe.

But to conclude. I hope that I have demonstrated to you all that the surnames of Co. Clare are noteworthy for their great variety, local peculiarities and interest, and that perhaps more so than those of other Irish counties they well repay a special study in themselves.