

Christian Names in Ireland

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I have spent many evenings making a count of Christian names in all kinds of sources from the *Annals of the Four Masters* to modern directories. Any count is of course approximate when one takes, as one must, pages of a source here and there and the result, if other pages had been chosen, would not be identical. However, if enough of such tests are made, we can obtain a very good idea of the popularity of some names and the scarcity of others. Not only does this vary from century to century, but also to some extent from province to province. Again, in some cases Christian names unusual elsewhere are, or have been, frequent in certain families, for example Ulick with Burke, Lysagh with Moore, Florence with MacCarthy or Garrett with FitzGerald.

One fact is outstanding in regard to men's names (I will deal with women's later): in practically every count I did, involving many thousands of persons, John heads the list, whether considering families of Gaelic origin or Norman, whether the period was mediaeval, sixteenth century, seventeenth century or the present day.

This exercise has corrected some mistaken ideas I formerly held. One was that Patrick was not much used before the time of Patrick Sarsfield. I find now that with Gaelic surnames, though not very common as such before the sixteenth century, Patrick becomes numerous thenceforward, being tenth in the list for that century, and with those of Cambro- or Anglo-Norman origin it is about the same. Going back to earlier mediaeval times it is among the twenty-five most numerous in English language sources, but not in the *Annals*, etc., where Giollaphádraig (Gilpatrick) is the form generally used.

I was also surprised at the prevalence of William. One would, of course, expect this where the background is Norman—it is actually second to John in the mediaeval period—but by the sixteenth century, even with Gaelic surnames, it is not far behind that position. It is interesting to note that later its association with William of Orange never caused it to be regarded as undesirable, and today, according to my count, it comes sixth.

In the count I made from present-day sources there were nearly 5,000 men. John (including Seán) totals 699 and Patrick 485; in the 300-400 bracket come James, Michael and Thomas; William has 210; between 100 and 200 are Francis (with Frank), Joseph and Peter; the 50-100 bracket has Brendan, Brian, Charles, Daniel, David, Denis, Dermot, Desmond, Edmond (including Éamonn), Edward, Lawrence and Martin; the 25-50 bracket has Andrew, Anthony, Arthur (with Art), Bernard, Christopher, Donal, Eugene, George, Gerald, Henry, Hugh, Jeremiah, Kevin, Leo, Matthew, Maurice, Noel, Philip, Richard, Robert, Timothy and Vincent; Aidan, Owen, Paul, Stephen and Terence number 20 each; and the others over 10 are Austin, Conor, Cornelius, Fergus, Gerald, Nicholas and Niall. I was surprised to find so few of Declan, Pierce, Roger and Rory.

In the first volume of my *Irish Families* series (pp. 39-40), I have a statistical table

showing the frequency of men's Christian names in four counties, including Clare and Limerick. The leading names are much the same as for the country as a whole. The main difference to be noted in Thomond is that Denis, seventh in the Co. Limerick list, and Edmond ninth, are low in Clare, while Martin and Peter are much more popular in Clare than in Limerick.

Five of the first six for which figures are given above are well represented in every category or period ; but the popularity of Michael is quite modern. To take one example, in my count of mediaeval sources in English I found only nine Michaels compared with 536 Johns. Probably most of these many Johns were Shane or Seán in everyday life. In sixteenth century records Shane nearly equals John ; Michael is rarely met. Another name now popular which is hardly ever found in Gaelic-Irish families in the sixteenth century or earlier is Joseph. Martin and Noel, though not now as numerous as Joseph, are others to which this comment applies.

The revival of the use of Gaelic Christian names has increased since 1900, due perhaps to the influence of the Gaelic League, particularly during the first two decades of the present century. Aidan, Brendan, Cian, Colm, Cormac, Declan, Derek, Finbar, Fintan, Lorcan and Manus are examples of this. Desmond also might be included with these, but in fact it is not a traditional Christian name. Of these, however, only Cormac and Manus were really popular in the Gaelic system, as the *Annals* show. Mahon on the other hand, formerly fairly numerous, does not appear to have been similarly revived. The following result of a count made of names in the *Annals of the Four Masters*, which may be taken as reasonably accurate, shows the pattern (I give the names in their anglicized form) : more than 300 Donal ; 200-300 Conor, Dermot, Donough, Hugh, John, Teige—but if we include Owen (169) with John this would head the list above Donal—100-200 Brian, Cathal, Cormac, Manus, Murrough, Murtagh, Niall, Phelim, Rory, Terlagh ; 50-100 Art, Edmund, Farrell, Henry, Ranall, Thomas, Tomaltagh, William ; 30-50 Collagh, Gilpatrick, James, Loughlin, Mahon, Maurice, Mulrone, and Richard ; others which are not far short of this are Angus, Auliffe, Carbery, Ever, Flan, Fiachra, Fineen, Gillananeve, Gilleese, Matthew, Philip and Piers.

As we have seen, William is a Norman name fully adopted in the Irish system (gaelicizing it as Liam is quite modern—in Irish it was written Uilliam). Walter, on the other hand, which stands high in the Hiberno-Norman lists, is very low in the Gaelic counts. Conversely, the only really numerous Christian name almost entirely confined to the Gaelic category was Tadhg or Teige—its equation with Timothy began much later. Brian is, of course, a Gaelic name ; though fairly popular, especially after 1600, it does not occur with Gaelic families frequently enough to be in the first ten in any of the periods examined. It was also used, though not very extensively, by Hiberno-Norman families. It is worthy of note that it has strangely become popular in England in recent times.

Among the Cromwellians in Ireland we once more find John by a long way the most numerous Christian name. It is followed by Thomas, William, Richard, Robert, George, Henry and James in that order. The one remarkable fact which emerged from my perusal of this source was the almost total absence of Hugh.

With the exception of the *Annals*, *An Leabhar Muimhneach*, MacFirbis, and one or two other such sources, all those available for my purpose were compiled in English. As I have mentioned, many Johns were Shane. This synonymity applies to other names : Donal for example was often entered as Daniel, Rory as Roger, Alastair as

Alexander, Conor as Cornelius. We even find cases where Bernard and Brian were treated as synonymous. The equation of Kennedy with Charles which I noticed once was possibly a clerical error, though Cathal or Cahill was so translated. The use of Jeremiah for Diarmuid or Dermot, like Timothy for Teige, is comparatively modern. In early sources, other than those in Irish, Éamonn, now a numerous name, hardly ever occurs, while Edmond is frequent with Gaelic as well as with Anglo-Norman surnames.

In the course of this enquiry I listed nearly two hundred different traditional men's Christian names. Woulfe gives double that number, but many are so rare as not to be worth considering here: to take the letter A for example he includes Abban, Alvy, Aneslis, Anion, Anthin, Ardal and Avvy.

The derivation of the majority of Christian names is known (least so with the old Celtic names), but this is a branch of the subject outside the scope of this article. Modern works such as Collins' *Dictionary of First Names* follow Woulfe for Irish names so that the occasional errors in his *Sloinne Gaedheal is Gall* (Dublin 1923) are thus perpetuated.

The records I have used give much less information on women's names, especially before 1800. Consequently I can only give the main facts which emerge from the counts I made.

In the mediaeval period, working mainly on names of Norman origin, I found that the following were definitely numerous throughout: Agnes, Alice, Cecilia, Ellen or Elena, Isobella, Johanna (later Joan), Juliana, Mabilla (later Mabel), Margaret, Margery, Matilda; in the later mediaeval period Elinor, Katherine and Mary, all quite rare earlier, begin to become popular. Of true Irish names, Brigid, Finola and Slaney appear most often in the Justiciary Rolls, Patent Rolls, etc., but the paucity of women's names in these records precludes useful accurate information in this respect.

In the sixteenth century, by which time the Hiberno-Normans had become integrated with the Gaels, some seventeen names were noticeably numerous, *viz.* Anne, Anastace, Elinor, Elizabeth (not often, however, found with Gaelic surnames), Ellen or Helen, Ellice, Finola, Gillis, Gráine, Honora, Johanna or Joan, Katherine (more often spelt Catherine), Margaret, Mary, More, Sive, Sheila—Kathleen was still rare.

For the seventeenth century, I made use mainly of the transplantation records. The most popular names in this category seem to be Any, Anastacia, Constance, Elinor, Ellen, Ellice, Finola, Honora, Jenet, Joan, Katherine (still not Kathleen), Margaret, Mary, More, Sara, Sheila and Slaney.

The Registry of Deeds wills (1708-1785) mention women fairly frequently. Mary, Elizabeth and Anne, with over 200, are a long way ahead, Katherine and Jane follow with about 100, and then we have Sara and Margaret with 80, Alice with 50, Elizabeth with 35, while Dorothy, Frances, Hanna, Martha and Susan are on the 25 mark; others which occur fairly often are Barbara, Ellen, Grace, Honoria, Isobella, Lucy and Rebecca. Brigid and Kathleen seldom occur, but from the nature of this source one would expect only a small proportion of Gaelic names.

Finally, to consider the present day for which we have ample sources. The most notable feature is the large number of quite modern names now in use. Many of these, like Amanda, Corinna, Cyra, Imogen, Jemima, Sandra and Wanda, for example, only occurring occasionally. The most numerous now seem to be Anne or Anna, Eileen, Elizabeth, Ethel, Frances, Helen, Katherine, Kathleen, Mary, Margaret, Maureen, Nancy, Patricia, Sara and Susan. Brigid, popular in the nineteenth century as

Bridget, still holds its own in the country but is out of favour in urban areas.

The voters' lists are the most reliable source in this category, and a test of these for Clare and Limerick shows that in both counties the pattern is much the same with regard to the most numerous names, *viz.* Mary, Bridget, Margaret, Catherine (including Kate), Anne, Ellen, Nora, Elizabeth and Kathleen. After that, however, there is a divergency: Delia and Susan come next in Clare but are noticeably scarce in Co. Limerick, whilst Christine is another, though less striking, example of this. Hannah, on the other hand, is numerous in Co. Limerick (in fact it actually comes in the first seven) but is little used in Clare.

Nora is now regarded as a Christian name in its own right, but it originated as an abbreviated form of Honora (which, by the way, is usually spelt Hanora in the Limerick voters' lists). Others in this class of abbreviated or pet forms accepted as baptismal names are Gretta (Margaret), Betty (Elizabeth), Lena (Helena) Karen (Katherine), Nessa (Agnes), Nancy (Ann), Rita (Margarita), Trixie (Beatrice), Sadie and Sally (Sara), and possibly Peggy (Margaret) and Tessy (Teresa). Una, used for Winifred (perhaps because of the sound of Winnie,) is a synonym not a diminutive. As with men's names such synonyms are numerous, for example Joan-Siobhán, Jane-Sinéad, Delia-Brigid, Deborah-Gobnait.

With men's names their abbreviated or pet forms such as Bill, Joe, Ned, Tom, have seldom become accepted as baptismal names—only Frank, and possibly Harry, can be so classified. Dick has become a surname in Ulster.

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In this article I have ignored the use of surnames for first names, so common a feature in America and also in England, as it has never been adopted in Ireland except to a limited extent by the Protestant gentry.