

## John O'Donovan and Thomas le Keu: preliminary comments on processes of Anglicisation in Irish surnames

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The problems in identifying the origins and the processes of the adoption of surnames in medieval Ireland are analysed and discussed. Reliance on the work of nineteenth-century scholars is questioned and the need to broaden research from a reliance on the pedigrees of the landowning families is advised.

In 2013, a government-sponsored initiative entitled 'The Gathering' attracted many visitors with the 'broad based aim of engaging the people of Ireland to invite ancestral relatives and friends to attend 5,000 Gatherings right across the country'.<sup>1</sup> Although not noted in the final report, this exercise focussed the minds of many on the nature of ancestral links implied by the sharing of a common surname and encouraged Irish people to take up the pursuit of genetic genealogy. This is the study of DNA patterns in Y-chromosomes (in men) and mitochondria (in women) which can be used to identify more precisely one's genetic ancestry. As yet, however, little attention has been paid in the modern era to the processes through which surnames were formed and adopted in Ireland although such research is clearly key to understanding at least some of the genetic patterns identified through the study of DNA.<sup>2</sup>

The great nineteenth-century scholar John O'Donovan is most famous for his topographical research for the Ordnance Survey and the mapping of modern Ireland. His lively engagement with Irish language materials and his determination to promote an accurate and detailed knowledge of what he termed native 'Milesian' culture also resulted in a wide range of publications signposting the way for subsequent researchers across the entire field of early Irish history. One aspect of his work which has perhaps not received the detailed scrutiny that it deserves was his remarks on the formation of Irish surnames. Reading his field letters from the 1830s and 40s, it is apparent that he was already engaged at that point in investigating the genealogies of many land-owning families and such records form the basis of two books on the *Uí Mhaine* (1843) and the *Uí Fhiachrach* (1844).<sup>3</sup> It was only in 1862, however, that O'Donovan's important synthesis on Irish surname formation was published as an introduction to his edition of two fourteenth-century topographical poems.<sup>4</sup> His study preceded more famous compilations by later authorities such as John O'Hart in 1893, the Reverend Patrick Woulfe in 1922

<sup>1</sup> 'Latest Press Release' [www.thegatheringireland.com/Media-Room.aspx](http://www.thegatheringireland.com/Media-Room.aspx) (accessed 15 July 2015). The final report is accessible on the same website.

<sup>2</sup> For English research in this area, see George Redmonds, Turi King and David Hey, *Surnames, DNA and Family History* (Oxford, 2011).

<sup>3</sup> John O'Donovan (ed.), *The Tribes and Customs of Hy-Many* (Dublin, 1843); *The Genealogies, Tribes, and Customs of Hy Fiachrach* (Dublin, 1844).

<sup>4</sup> *The topographical poems of John O'Dubhagain and Giolla na Naomh O'Huidrin*, ed. John O'Donovan (Dublin, 1862).

and the works of Edward Mac Lysaght in the mid twentieth century.<sup>5</sup> Examination of these publications makes clear the considerable debt their authors owed to the Kilkenny man and emphasises the extent to which O'Donovan's work continues to underlie many of the still current theories.

O'Donovan's discussion begins by making reference to the popular tradition that it was Brian Boru who first invented Irish surnames and he alluded to 'the most ancient authority', a text which he left undated but ascribed to Brian's *ollamh*, Mac Liag, in H 2.15.<sup>6</sup> Rather than rely on such a claim, however, O'Donovan sought to explore its validity by exploring the dates for the progenitors of various important Irish families as recorded in the annals. As a result of this exercise, he deduced that:

it is, therefore, clear that Irish family names, or hereditary surnames, are formed from the genitive case singular of the names of ancestors who flourished in the tenth, or beginning of the eleventh century, or at least from the year 850 till 1290, by prefixing *O'* or *Mac* as O'Neill, Mac Carthy, Mac Murrough. The prefix *O'* otherwise written *Ua*, literally signifies *nepos* or grandson, in which sense it is still used in the province of Ulster; and in a more enlarged sense, any male descendant.<sup>7</sup>

O'Donovan noted that some Irish families changed the progenitor after whom they were named and cited the O'Mulronys of North Roscommon who later became Mac Dermotts after 'Dermott, chief of Moylurg who died in the year 1159'. He mentioned how offshoots of the O'Briens of Thomond became the Mac I Brien Ara, Mac Brien Coonagh and Mac Brien Aharlagh although such names had since been lost and the families concerned had reverted back to using the surname O'Brien.<sup>8</sup> He talked of the Irish fondness for by-names or nicknames which he characterised as resulting from 'some acquirement, personal peculiarity, disposition or quality of mind or from their places of fosterage and very frequently from the places where they died or were killed.'<sup>9</sup> He spoke of how incoming Norman families adopted Irish naming formulae so that, for example, the De Burgos became Mac Williams after their ancestor, William Fitz Adelm De Burgo and he detailed how various sub-branches of the family in Galway and Mayo later took on other patronymics in their turn, as in the case of the 'Mac Shoneens now Jennings'.<sup>10</sup> He also spoke of how native Irish families adopted English language surnames and he quoted an enactment of the Irish parliament in 1464:

At the request of the commons, it is ordered and established by authority of the said Parliament. That every Irishman, that dwells betwixt or amongst Englishmen in the county of Dublin, Myeth, Uriell and Kildare, shall go like to one Englishman in apparel, and shaving of his beard above the mouth and shall be within one

<sup>5</sup> John O'Hart, *Irish pedigrees or the origin and stem of the Irish nation* (Dublin, 1892); Patrick Wolfe, *Sloinnte Gaedheal is Gall: Irish names and surnames* (Dublin, 1922); Edward MacLysaght, *Irish families: their names, arms and origins* (Dublin, 1957); Idem, *More Irish families* (Dublin, 1960); Idem, *The surnames of Ireland* (Dublin, 1973).

<sup>6</sup> *Topographical poems*, ed. O'Donovan, p. 9. The earliest evidence for this tradition traced by me to date is in the poems *Éisd a Lughaidh rem labhra* by Tadhg mac Daire MacBruaideadha, first attested in RIA 471. R.I.A. no 740 (C/vi/3) and *Ro chuala ar tagrais a Thaidg* by Lughaidh Ó Cleirigh first attested in 471. R.I.A. no 740 (C/vi/3). See 'Bardic poetry Data-Base', [bardic.celt.dias.ie/main.html](http://bardic.celt.dias.ie/main.html) (accessed 15th July 2015).

<sup>7</sup> *Topographical poems*, ed. O'Donovan, p. 12.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 11.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 17.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibidem*, pp 21-2.

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yeare sworne the liege man of the king in the hands of the lieutenant or deputy, or such as he will assigne to receive this oath, for the multitude that is to be sworne and shall take to him an English surname of one towne as Sutton, Chester, Trym, Skryne, Corke, Kinsale: or colour as white, blacke, browne: or art or science, as smith or carpenter; or office as cooke, butler; and that he and his issue shall use this name under payne of forfeiting of his goods yearely ...<sup>11</sup>

O'Donovan was writing at a time of major change in the immediate aftermath of Catholic Emancipation and his career spanned the period of the Great Potato Famine. Like all historians, his interpretations of medieval Ireland were affected by his contemporary circumstances.<sup>12</sup> For those reading him today, some of the interest lies in the incidental details which he includes, showing how bilingualism and issues of status, real and perceived, actively affected surnames in use in his own era. He speaks, for example, of a John Geoghegan (whose family, the MacEochagain, had descended from an early leader of the *Cenél Fiachach* in modern Westmeath) who applied to George IV and won the right to call himself John O'Neill after his rather more remote ancestor, Niall of the Nine Hostages.<sup>13</sup> This man chose his own surname in a very public manner but O'Donovan also makes it clear that many other contemporaries were doing the same in a rather more informal and spontaneous fashion:

The families among the lower ranks, who have translated, anglicised or totally changed their ancient surnames, are very numerous and are daily becoming more and more so. Besides the cause already mentioned, [ridicule of English magistrates and lawyers] two reasons may be assigned for this desire which prevails at present among the lower classes for the continued adoption of English surnames: first the English language is becoming that universally spoken among those classes, who now believe that many Irish surnames do not sound very euphoniously in that tongue; secondly, the names translated or totally changed are, with very few exceptions, of no celebrity in Irish history, and when they do not sound well in English, the owners wish to change them to respectable English or Scotch names, in order that they may obtain English or Scotch armorial bearings and cease to be considered as of plebeian Irish blood. As this change is going on rapidly in every part of Ireland, it appears desirable to give here some notices of the Milesian or Scotie names that have thus become metamorphosed.<sup>14</sup>

The idea that the 'lower ranks' were interested in obtaining armorial bearings alerts us to the issue of O'Donovan's social perspective and it is worth bearing in mind that John O'Donovan saw himself as belonging to the class of what might loosely be called Catholic gentry while he could describe those who gave him Irish language information on place-names, (men such as bailiffs), as 'aborigines' and peasantry.<sup>15</sup> A wry comment highlights the impact of this perspective:

<sup>11</sup> Ibidem, pp 25-6, quoting from *The statutes at large passed in the parliaments held in Ireland*, ed. James G. Butler (13 vols, Dublin, 1786) I, p. 29.

<sup>12</sup> Damien Murray, *Romanticism, Nationalism and Irish Antiquarian Societies, 1840-80* (Maynooth, 2000) pp 23-33 & 96-123.

<sup>13</sup> *Topographical poems*, ed. O'Donovan, p. 13.

<sup>14</sup> Ibidem, p. 42.

<sup>15</sup> Catherine Swift, 'John O'Donovan and the framing of early medieval Ireland in the nineteenth century' in *Bullán*, i (1994) pp 91-103.

persons sent from this office engaged in taking down the pedigree of some beggar or tinker and establishing him the lineal descendant of some Irish chief whose ancient estate they most carefully mark out by Boundaries, and they have actually in several instances...nominated some desperate characters as the rightful heirs of those territories.<sup>16</sup>

The list of anglicised surname forms which O'Donovan provided for his readers is drawn from all four provinces but one, in particular, is identified with Kerry and Thomond where 'the ancient name of O'Navin is now often anglicised Bowen, because Cnavin signifies *a small bone*.'<sup>17</sup>

Looking at the eighteenth and nineteenth century trade directories of Limerick, made available on the web by Limerick City Library, there are no examples of O'Navin listed there and only two examples of Bowen.<sup>18</sup> Griffith's Primary Valuation of 1847-1864, produced contemporaneously with O'Donovan's work, lists 8 Bowens in Limerick, 2 in Clare, 17 in Tipperary and none in Kerry while there are no O'Navins at all.<sup>19</sup> Robert Matheson at the end of the century does not include these names in his study of surnames although he does add the detail that Bowens living near Court Matrix in west Limerick saw themselves as Palatine in origin.<sup>20</sup> The local data available in these sources, therefore, do not corroborate O'Donovan's identification of the two names at least in the Limerick area. This is unfortunate as what O'Donovan wrote is paraphrased by Rev. Patrick Woulfe in his *Sloinne Gaedhel is Gall* and through that volume, the Bowen/Cnámhín linkage has now become widely available on the web.

It could be that the O'Navin families had simply died out by the end of the nineteenth century: census data for Clare between 1841 and 1861 indicates a drop in population from 286,394 to 166,305; a fall in Kerry from 293,880 to 201,800, in Limerick from 330,029 to 217,277 and in Tipperary from 435,553 to 249,106.<sup>21</sup> In such a context many families and surnames are likely to have disappeared – a point of great interest to modern geneticists when researching the extent to which modern population may be still representative of our medieval genetic ancestry.<sup>22</sup> Given that trade directories only cover a minority of the population, it is possible, therefore, that O'Donovan's remarks were accurate for a pre-Famine period but were no longer relevant by the later nineteenth century.

The same identification is made by O'Donovan's brother-in-law and close collaborator, Eugene O'Curry, in his contemporary account of O'Brien genealogies:

<sup>16</sup> Quoted by Nollaig Ó Muraile in 'Seán Ó Donnabháin', *Scoláirí Gaeilge: Léachtaí Cholm Cille* xxvii (Maynooth, 1997) pp 11-82.

<sup>17</sup> *Topographical poems*, ed. O'Donovan, p. 43.

<sup>18</sup> [www.limerickcity.ie/webapps/TradesReg/TradesReg.aspx](http://www.limerickcity.ie/webapps/TradesReg/TradesReg.aspx) (accessed 15th July 2015); One example of Bowen in Ferrar (1769) and one in Pigot (1824). Neither Bowen nor Cnavin are found in the Clare census of 1901 – see; [www.clarelibrary.ie/eolas/coclare/genealogy/1901census/name\\_index/surname\\_index.htm](http://www.clarelibrary.ie/eolas/coclare/genealogy/1901census/name_index/surname_index.htm) (accessed 12 July 2015).

<sup>19</sup> [www.irishtimes.com/ancestor/surname/index.cfm?fuseaction=Go.&UserID](http://www.irishtimes.com/ancestor/surname/index.cfm?fuseaction=Go.&UserID) (accessed 16 July 2015)

<sup>20</sup> Sir Robert Edwin Matheson, *Appendix to the Twenty-ninth Detailed Annual Report of the Registrar-general of Marriages, Births, and Deaths in Ireland: Special Report on Surnames in Ireland: With Notes as to Numerical Strength, Derivation, Ethnology, and Distribution; Based on Information Extracted from the Indexes of the General Register Office*, p. 25. Confirmed by Richard Hayes, 'The German colony on County Limerick', *North Munster Antiquarian Journal*, i (1936) pp 42-52 who further states that in the 1930s, the surname Bowen was best attested around Rathkeale, p. 53.

<sup>21</sup> W.E. Vaughan and A.J. Fitzpatrick (eds), *Irish historical statistics: Population, 1821-1971* (Dublin, 1978) pp 8-10.

<sup>22</sup> T.E. King & M. Jobling, 'Founders, drift and infidelity: the relationship between Y chromosome diversity and patrilineal surnames', in *Molecular Biology and Evolution*, xxvi, no. 5 (2009) pp 1093-1102.

Lachtna the son of Corc had a valiant son, Lorcán, (a name / now Anglicised Lawrence). Lorcán had three sons, Cinneidigh or Kennedy; Cosgrach and Bran. From Cosgrach, the second son, descend the O'Lorcans or Larkins; the O'Sheehans; the O'Cnaimhins (now Bowens); the O'Hogans, the O'Flahertys; the O'Gloiarns; the O'Aingidys; and the O'Maines.<sup>23</sup>

Although O'Curry does not indicate this clearly, the genealogical account in which this O'Cnaimhín/Bowen linkage occurs, appears drawn from what he himself termed the Book of Munster.<sup>24</sup> Edited by Tadhg Ó Donnchadha under the title *An Leabhar Muimhneach* in 1940, the latter states that two manuscripts, including MS 23 E 26 written in 1717, have notes written in O'Curry's hand. Richard Tiber, the scribe of 23 E 26 suggests that the tract is put together by Domnall Uí Dhuinnín (whose family are identified as *ollamhain* or learned family to the Meic Carthaigh and who is thought to have written the Stowe manuscript A iv.1 in 1627) and Tadhg mac Dáire mac Bruaideadha (whose kin played the same role for the O'Briens and the wider Dál Cais.)<sup>25</sup> Luke McNerney has outlined Tadhg's biography in some detail: he wrote poems to the sons of the Earl of Clanrickard (who died in 1582) and was famously involved in *Iomharbhágh na bhfileadh - Contention of the Bards c.1616*. He may have been born as early as c.1550 and had died by 1626. He owned five quarters of land rent free in Ibrickan and his principal residence was at Knockanalban in south-west Clare (he also had access to lands around Ennis) while his sister Finola (married to Mac Fhlannchadha, master at Ennis) fostered the O'Brien Earl of Thomond.<sup>26</sup>

Assuming that Tiber's identifications of the original authors are correct, this seventeenth-century tract lists three families of Uí Chnámhín in the Thomond area.<sup>27</sup> One is the Uí Chnámhín mic Conghaile, said to be descended, as O'Curry stated, from Brian Boru's uncle. A separate group, the Uí Cnámhín mic Ionmhainéin, are linked to a more remote O'Brien ancestor, the nephew of St Flannan. Finally, a third family, are also linked to the royal O'Brien line through the Aes Cluana, an O'Brien grouping whose name gave rise to the Norman manor of Escalon, around Carrigogunnell in Co.Limerick.<sup>28</sup> The extent to which this tract is historically accurate as an account of ancestors who lived up to a thousand years before the era of the authors can, of course, be debated<sup>29</sup>: this is one of the areas in which DNA research into particular families will yield important new avenues of research.<sup>30</sup> My own view would be that the fame of the O'Briens, rulers of

<sup>23</sup> Eugene O'Curry, *Lectures on the Manuscript Materials of Ancient Irish History* (Dublin, 1861, reprinted 1995) pp 210-11

<sup>24</sup> *Ibidem*, pp 237-8.

<sup>25</sup> *An Leabhar Muimhneach*, ed. Tadhg Ó Donnchadha (Dublin, 1940) p. xiv.

<sup>26</sup> Luke McNerney, 'Lettermoylan of Clann Bhruaideadha' in *North Munster Antiquarian Journal*, lii (2012) pp 81-114.

<sup>27</sup> *Leabhar Muimhneach*, pp 302, 307, 309.

<sup>28</sup> See Brian Hodkinson's index to the Black Book of Limerick which states of Escalon/Aes Cluana 'A cantred name; probably based on Carrigogunnell and covering, at least, the areas of Kilkeedy and Crecora parishes'; [www.limerick.ie/sites/default/files/atoms/files/media10341en.pdf](http://www.limerick.ie/sites/default/files/atoms/files/media10341en.pdf) (accessed 10 June 2015); T. J. Westropp in 'The Ancient Castles of the County of Limerick (Central and South-Eastern Baronies)', *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy*, xxvi, C (1906-7) pp 143-200.

<sup>29</sup> See D. Ó Corráin's article, 'Dál Cais - church and dynasty', *Ériu* 24 (1973) pp 51-63 where the genealogical information from *An Leabhar Muimhneach* is taken as entirely accurate for the pre-Norman period. In later works, the author is much more sceptical about genealogical records; see *Idem*, 'Creating the past: the early Irish genealogical tradition', *Peritia*, xii (1998) pp 177-208.

<sup>30</sup> Denis Wright, 'A set of Distinctive Marker Values Defines a Y-STR Signature for Gaelic Dalcassian Families', in *Journal of Genetic Genealogy*, v, no. 1 (2009) pp 1-7; Bradley T. Larkin, 'Larkin DNA Project - Ancestral Parish Sampling on the Shannon River' in *Journal of Genetic Genealogy* vi, no. 1 (2010) pp 1-24.

Thomond for the best part of six hundred years, acted as a magnet for many families seeking a prestigious ancestor and that much of Tadhg's material is affected by such processes. It is very noticeable that many of the families in *An Leabhar Muimneach* are simply identified by surname and prestigious ancestor with no intermediate figures being mentioned at all, a pattern which reminds us of the comment by the Dublin apothecary, Thomas Smyth, in 1561:

Their is in Irland four shepts in maner all Rimers.... The seconde sorte is the Shankee (*seanchaidh*), which is to saye in English, the petigrer... They make the ignoraunt men of the country to belyve that they be discended of Alexander the Great or of Darius or of Caesar, or of some other notable prince, which makes the ignorant people to run madde and cerieth not what they do; the which is very hurtfull to the realme.<sup>31</sup>

The twelfth-century genealogies, which represent our earliest substantial body of such data, identify only one figure called Cnáimíne amongst the c.12,000 individuals sharing something over 3,500 names between them which occur there.<sup>32</sup> This Cnáimíne belongs to the considerably more obscure family ruling Éile in Tipperary rather than to the Uí Thoirdelbhaigh, the ruling dynasty of the Dál Cais and ancestors of the later O'Brien kings.<sup>33</sup> This is where, as we have seen, the biggest cluster of Bowens occurred in the mid nineteenth century.

On the other hand, a rather more common phenomenon in Tipperary in Griffith's mid-nineteenth-century survey are the sixteen families of Nevins, the seventeen families of Navins, the eight families of Navan and the single family surnamed Naven. There are no equivalents to these in Limerick or Kerry and only two such families in Clare. Far from Bowen being the automatic translation for 'O'Cnavin', a simple Anglicisation appears far more common. Further back in time, the Elizabethan Fiants provide us with two forms M' Cnaayne and M'Cnavin, both of whom, however are associated not with Tipperary or indeed Thomond but with Galway.<sup>34</sup> In his *More Irish Families*, Edward MacLysaght describes this Connacht family as a sept of the Uí Maine, first recorded in 1159 and later as a group whose chief was based in Crannagh Mac Nevin in the parish of Tynagh, near Loughrea. The surname, he says, becomes Navin or more rarely Knavin in Mayo while in Clare it is often Neville. He identifies as a separate grouping entirely the families of O'Neafsey, Crampsy and Bonar which he describes as originating amongst the Ó Cnáimsighe of County Donegal and in contradiction to O'Donovan, he dismisses the association with Bonar as 'a pseudo-translation of the word bone.'<sup>35</sup>

Where does all this leave us? Firstly, what O'Donovan and O'Curry give us as contemporary evidence for nineteenth-century changes in the use of surnames has to be understood in the context of their activities as scholars immersed in Irish language sources and driven by a wish to promote 'Milesian culture' in a rapidly changing nineteenth-century world and one in which the Irish language was dying as a living language

<sup>31</sup> H.F. Hore, 'Irish bardism in 1561', *Ulster Journal of Archaeology*, vi (1858) pp 165-7.

<sup>32</sup> Brian Ó Cuiiv, *Aspects of Irish personal names* (Dublin, 1986).

<sup>33</sup> *Corpus Genealogiarum Hiberniae*, I, ed. M.A. O'Brien (Dublin, 1962) p. 249.

<sup>34</sup> *The Irish Fiants of the Tudor Sovereigns during the Reigns of Henry VIII, Edward VI, Philip & Mary, and Elizabeth I* (4 vols, reprint, Dublin, 1994) 4140. In the same source we find the name Bowen on a number of occasions but all but one of these are located in Leinster where they are most frequently associated with Ballyadam in Co. Laois.

<sup>35</sup> MacLysaght, *More Irish families*, pp 16, 140-1. (I am grateful to Edward Kneafcy who first alerted me to the existence of this name).

across great swathes of the country. They were busy pioneers working with limited data sets and unedited manuscripts and the correlations which they drew cannot simply be accepted as automatically valid without further scrutiny. Their correlations are matters of opinion and do not have the anonymous and dispassionate credibility of the census, burial records or ships' passenger lists. The criticism which Thomas Flannery made of O'Donovan's grammatical work has wider validity:

It cannot be denied that...O'Donovan's grammar had great defects. The author seems never to have quite made up his mind as to whether he was writing or should write a grammar of the modern living language or one of medieval Irish, for his book exhibits the strange anomaly of modern forms of declension and conjugation with medieval illustrations and quotations. The living Irish language and the literary remains of the later centuries he almost ignores.<sup>36</sup>

Unquestionably, the huge changes in Irish society in the mid nineteenth century caused by potato famines and the massive emigration to English-speaking countries had an enormous impact on processes of Anglicisation.<sup>37</sup> Changes in the forms of Irish surnames are part of that story and, given the poverty and desperation of many of the people concerned, it is a reasonable assumption that many of these changes happened in an organic and undocumented fashion. Twenty-first century families seeking to identify their ancestors through DNA analysis or more traditional historically based investigations, should not be solely reliant on the incidental comments of busy nineteenth-century scholars. Wider studies of Anglicisation and other processes involved in the formation of Irish surnames are a living part of Irish cultural heritage and deserve to be investigated in detail.<sup>38</sup>

Part of that work will be to look at those surnames which are not those of land-owning lineages, traditionally the focus for professional genealogists and the creators of Irish pedigrees. It is interesting that all the comments to date on the various forms of Ó Cnavin, Mac Cnamhín, Ó Cnaimsighe and so forth are geographically based, locating the name in particular parts of Ireland. It is clear, however, that surnames incorporating the element *cnám* or bone are very widely dispersed in Irish-speaking Ireland and it is worth considering the possibility that it may, in at least some instances, have originated as an occupational name. Woulfe's comment that it represented a matronymic<sup>39</sup> appears to draw on similar information to that used by Patrick Dineen in his Dictionary where the translation of *cnáimseach* is given as mid-wife. This in turn seems to have informed Vendreyes' identification of *cnáimseach* as 'sage femme' (wise woman) and the compilers of the *Dictionary of the Irish language*<sup>40</sup> although the latter go on to cite a story from Manus Ó Domnaill's sixteenth-century *Betha Colaim Chille* which makes it clear that in Donegal the family ancestor was seen as male:

<sup>36</sup> Quoted from Thomas Flannery, 'John O'Donovan' in *Denver's Irish Monthly*, xii (1902) pp 1-24:9 by Ó Muraíle, 'Seán Ó Donnabháin', p. 41.

<sup>37</sup> Garret Fitzgerald, 'Irish-speaking in the pre-Famine period: a study based on the 1911 Census Data for People born before 1851 and still alive in 1911', in *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy*, ciii, C (2003) pp 191-283.

<sup>38</sup> An ongoing project entitled *Global Limerick DNA* is currently being established by the author in conjunction with Irish Ancestry Research Centre and Limerick Museum to carry out some of this research.

<sup>39</sup> Woulfe, *Sloimne*, p. 469.

<sup>40</sup> *Foclóir Gaedhilge agus Béarla: An Irish English Dictionary* ed. Patrick S. Dineen (Irish Texts Society, Dublin 1927) p. 213; *Lexique Étymologique de l'Irlandais ancien de J. Vendryes - Lettre C* eds E. Bachellery and P.-Y. Lambert (Dublin and Paris 1987) p.129; *Dictionary of the Irish Language based mainly on Old and Middle Irish materials*, ed. E.G. Quinn et al. (Dublin 1913-76) C:265.

[Columcille] went to the tomb wherein Connla the craftsman [*cerd*] was laid and he let open the tomb. And he assembled the bones of Connla and blessed and hallowed them. And he said, 'In the name of Jesu Christ, arise from the dead, Connla the smith [*cerd*].' And at the word of Columcille straightaway he rose up in the presence of all, as he might rise up from sleep. And he lived twenty years after that and he begat children. And of his seed is the clan Cnaimhsige, by reason that he had been a long time in bones ere he was brought back to life. [*Conadh ara slicht ataid cland cnaimhsighe trena beith fen ina cnamhaibh aimsir foda riana aithbeogad.*]<sup>41</sup>

At the other end of the country from Donegal, a Scandlán Ua Cnámsige is recorded in the *Annals of Inisfallen* as an anchorite who died in 1095, while the *Annals of the Four Masters* add the detail that he was of Lismore. Perhaps, therefore, the Irish-speakers who translated the name as Boner had the right of it and we should see these various forms of *Cnám*-surnames as representing families of bone-setters and physicians at work in various parts of Ireland. O'Donovan's patriotic pride in 'Milesian' tradition, as well as his particular interest in Catholic landowners, apparently led him to conclude that occupational surnames, such as Cook, Carpenter, Smith and Butler only entered Irish surnames in the late fifteenth century in the reign of Edward IV but in fact, occupational names used as by-names can already be traced in Middle Irish literature from the twelfth century.

The saga *Mesca Ulad* is a rollicking account of a cavalcade of Ulster warriors who set out on a drunken spree and ended up in east Limerick, within sight of *Lind Luimnigh* (the pool of Limerick), Lough Gur, *crích Uaithne* (Owney), *crích na Dési Bice* (Small County) and *Sliabh nÉblinni* (Slieve Felim).<sup>42</sup> In this account we find four individuals identified by their occupation: Trisgatal Trénfher .i. *trénfher tigi Conchobair* (the strong man of the house of Conchobar); Róimid Rigóinmit, *ónmit Conchobair* (Conchobar's fool), Blad Briuga mac Fiachna (Blad the hospitaller) and Reordae *Drúth* (the low-status entertainer).<sup>43</sup> Occupational by-names of this kind are not particularly common in Irish writing and such formulations do not appear in the contemporary saga *Togail Bruidne Da Dergae* which also provides us with many Middle Irish names. Perhaps one reason they occur here is because, unusually in Irish literature, these are named figures from lower ranks in society. A hierarchical or class-based entitlement to claim lineage seems to be the concept underlying an encounter between Fenian warriors in the thirteenth-century *Accallam na Senórach*:

'Where do you come from?' asked the warrior. They told him their names, their *sloinnté* [lineages] and their adventures. 'Who are you, dear man?' they asked. 'I am Blathmac *Bóaire*', a farmer [of the rank of commoners].<sup>44</sup>

Alternatively, perhaps, one might consider the potential influence of migrants in the Shannon estuary and its hinterland in encouraging this unusual form of personal identification. Occupational names are a pronounced feature of surname formation in Britain

<sup>41</sup> Maghnas Ó Domnaill, *Betha Colaim Chille: Life of Columcille*, eds. and trans. A. O'Kelleher and G. Schoepperle (Dublin, 1994, reprint of 1918 edition) pp 148-50.

<sup>42</sup> *Mesca Ulad* ed. J. Carmichael Watson (Dublin, 1941); provisional translation by John Carey in *The Celtic heroic age* eds. J.T. Koch & J. Carey (Andover, 1994) pp 95-117. The Limerick location of the site which forms the focus of the tale has been identified by Eamon Kelly, Tom Condit and Larry Walsh, as Friarstown, Co. Limerick, 7.5 km south of Limerick city; Eamon P. Kelly and Tom Condit, 'Limerick's Tara', in *Archaeology Ireland*, 12 (Summer 1998) pp 18-22.

<sup>43</sup> *Mesca Ulad*, ed. Watson, pp 29, 31, 40.

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and appear to be a particular feature in areas influenced by Scandinavian settlement. In her study of Scandinavian personal names from Lincolnshire and Yorkshire, for example, Gillian Fellows Jensen identified many individuals with the names *Bóndi* (farmer), *Karli* (a free-man) and *Sveinn* (a young man or servant) but also names such as *Sútari* (a shoe-maker), *Skyti* (a marksman), *Skjaldari* (shield-maker), *Skinnari* (dealer in hides), *Plógmann* (a ploughman), *Lagmann* (a lawman), *Kaupmann* (a merchant) *Hoggvandi* (hewer of wood) *Húskafl* (retainer) and *Greppi* (a poet). Interestingly, she also draws attention to one such name, *Farmann* (a merchant), which Michael Dolley had identified on coins dated to c.1100 as being that of a Dublin moneyer.<sup>45</sup>

By the late thirteenth century, occupational names amongst the incoming Norman-French speaking colonists were a clear feature of the naming formulae in use in Limerick city and its immediate hinterland. A particularly interesting example are the descendants of Master Thomas de Cocis, dean of St Mary's Cathedral in Limerick from the 1270s to c.1300 according to the *Black Book of Limerick*. His name is recorded there in Latin but it also occurs in the Calendar of Justiciary Rolls as *Thomas le Keu* in French. In English, this means 'cook' and since Thomas received land in Mungret c.1270 from Robert of St Edmund, it seems reasonable to identify him with the family of Galfridus Coke, the most important burgess in the manor of Mungret and a man who controlled the largest part of the estate, with 340 acres, in the manorial inquisition of 1337.<sup>46</sup> In the Limerick of the late thirteenth century, then, a name which had presumably arisen initially as an occupational by-name had become a hereditary surname which had no implications for one's role in society. It seems perfectly possible that the Ó Cnáimhín of Thomond, together with the similarly named families from other parts of Ireland, could have originated in a similar fashion. If this premise is accepted, however, it means making the assumption that the royal O'Brien pedigrees given for the Thomond Ó Cnáimhín in the seventeenth-century *An Leabhar Muimneach* are later formulations, bespeaking the subsequent ambitions of such families rather than their original roles in Irish society.

Genetic genealogy is a historical pursuit of growing interest to many but while there are commercial firms available to examine one's DNA in laboratories, the historical understanding of surname formation and dispersal is still underdeveloped. This is one of the features which has led to a certain degree of frustration amongst some of those who were encouraged by the 2013 Gathering to research their family origins. If this research is to develop further as an academic field of enquiry, there needs to be a major examination of the wide variety of Irish and English surnames and their complex interactions both on a local level within Ireland and in the new countries in which Irish emigrants settled. Given the huge new data sets available for research, many of them readily available through digital media, we cannot continue to rely on the work of our nineteenth-century predecessors. In particular, we need to acknowledge the continuing focus of surname historians on the pedigrees of land-owning families and begin to celebrate the diverse cultural history of our craftsmen, our professional classes and our urban citizens in equal measure.

<sup>44</sup> 'Acallamh na senórach', ed. and trans. Whitley Stokes, in *Irische Texte mit Wörterbuch* eds. Ernst Windisch and Whitley Stokes, iv, no.1 (4 vols, Leipzig, 1880-91) p. 203; *Tales of the elders of Ireland (Acallam na Senórach)* eds. A. Dooley and Harry Roe (Oxford, 1999) pp 204-5.

<sup>45</sup> Gillian Fellows Jensen, *Scandinavian personal names in Lincolnshire and Yorkshire* (Copenhagen, 1968) pp 60-1, 79, 104-5, 146-7, 148, 161-4, 183, 208-9, 248-9, 255, 272-3, 276-81; Michael Dolley, *Viking coins of the Danelaw and of Dublin* (London, 1965) p. 80.

<sup>46</sup> Brian Hodkinson, 'Who was who in medieval Limerick: from manuscript sources', [www.limerickcity.ie/media/Who%20was%20who%20in%20medieval%20Limerick.pdf](http://www.limerickcity.ie/media/Who%20was%20who%20in%20medieval%20Limerick.pdf) (accessed 9 July 2015).