

# Some Armagh surnames

by Gerry Oates

Surnames were first introduced in Ireland in the early part of the 10<sup>th</sup> century and the earliest recorded surname is *Ó Cléirigh* (Ó Clery) from the year 916<sup>1</sup>. The system of nomenclature adopted by the Irish was to prefix *Mac* (son) to the genitive case of the father's personal name, or *Ó / Ua* (grandson) to that of the grandfather. The plural form *Uí* was often used to denote a tribal group as in *Uí Néill*, the extended O'Neill clan<sup>2</sup>.

In the period prior to the Anglo-Norman invasion of the late 12<sup>th</sup> century the personal names in use in Ireland were almost exclusively of Celtic origin. Even though Christianity had taken hold from the first half of the 5<sup>th</sup> century the Irish were slow to adopt biblical names or the Latin and Greek names of the early Christian saints. The few Norse names that had been introduced by the Vikings and their followers had but little influence on the overwhelming Celtic character of Irish personal names<sup>3</sup>. The practice of prefixing *Mac* and *Ó / Ua* to the patronymic necessitated the use of large numbers of names and Professor O'Brien in his research on Old Irish Personal Names collected more than 12,000 individual names<sup>4</sup>.

## Co. Armagh Septs

Most Irish surnames are still to be found in large numbers in the parts of the country where they originated<sup>5</sup>. With this in mind I intend to take a brief look at the 'Pedigrees of Co. Armagh Septs' by J. B. Arthurs which lists the tribal divisions that populated the lands around Armagh between the 4<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> centuries as described in the Annals (viz. Book Of Leinster, Book of Lecan, Book of Ballymote, Annals of Ulster)<sup>6</sup>. While some of the information contained in the Annals may be pseudo-history and unreliable, the personal names recorded were those that were prevalent at the time, so it is not unreasonable to suppose

that many of the surnames extant in Co. Armagh at the present time may be derived from Old Irish personal names recorded in genealogies of the septs that populated the area between the 5<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> centuries. As the same process was happening throughout Ireland, it is also true that similar surnames based on the same personal names, but unrelated, appeared in different parts of the country at different times.

## Haughey

One of the most common personal names in the Armagh septs is *Eochaidh* and its variants *Eochu*, *Eochucán* and *Eochaiden*, from the Old Irish *ech* 'horse'. If we prefix *Ó* to *Eochaidh* we have *Ó hEochaidh* which has been anglicized to *Haughey*, a surname still numerous in the vicinity of Armagh city where there is also a townland *Ballyaghy* (*Baile Uí Eochaidh*, 'Haughey's homestead') close to the ancient site of Navan Fort. Another townland named after them is *Cavanballaghy* mentioned in *The Text of Inquisition of 1609* regarding the plantation of confiscated lands:

*And that the sept of Munteraghie (Muintir Uí Eochaidh – Haughey) and their ancestors, time out of mind, have been likewise seized of and in the town and lands of Cavanballaghy (Cabhán Bhaile Uí Eochaidh) with appurtances, in the said territory of Clanazole (Glenaul) ...<sup>7</sup>*

This surname has been historically associated with the ancient territory of Oriel which includes the counties of Monaghan and much of Armagh and has a number of variant forms in *Hoy*, *Hoey*, *Haffey* and *Hackett*. When *Mac* is prefixed to the personal form it becomes *Mac Eachaidh* (Mac Caughey) and in some cases *Mac* becomes *Mag* on account of the initial vowel of *Eochaidh/Eachaidh* and gives us the anglicized form *Mac Gahey*.

*Eochaid(h)*, 'horse-rider', was used widely as a personal name throughout Ireland and, together with *Eochu*, was the second most popular male name in early Irish so-

ciety<sup>8</sup>. The surname *Haughey* is also found in S.W. Donegal where the same process of name formation took place<sup>9</sup>.

*Cumascach*, ('the confuser'), is another personal name which occurs with regular frequency from the 8<sup>th</sup> to the 11<sup>th</sup> centuries. The Irish form *Mac Cumascaigh*, now *Comiskey* and *MacComiskey*, is recorded first in the Clones area of North Monaghan but later moved to South Monaghan in the 11<sup>th</sup> century<sup>10</sup>. From there they spread into South Armagh and North Louth and are still to be found in these areas today.

The personal name *Treinshir* 'strong man' is recorded for the year 1002<sup>11</sup>. If we prefix *Mac* it gives us the modern Irish form *Mac Threínshir*, better known without the prefix as *Trainor* and sometimes *Traynor*. In some cases the *Mac* has been retained and we find it anglicized as *Mac Creanor*; corrupt forms of the anglicized version without the *Mac* prefix, *Reanor/Raynor* also exist. The surname *Trainor* is still largely associated with Armagh as well as parts of Monaghan and Louth.

## Donnelly

*Donngal*, meaning 'of princely valour'<sup>12</sup> is recorded for the year 791 in the *Uí Bresail Airthir* sept<sup>13</sup>. *Donngal* became one of the more popular personal names in medieval Ireland; it becomes the surname *Ó Donnghaile* in modern Irish, better known today as *Donnelly*. Woulfe claims they were descended from one *Donngal*, fourth in descent from *Domhnall*, King of Aileach and brother of *Niall Glúndubh*, the ancestor of the *O'Neills* and that their original home was on the Donegal/Tyrone border near Lifford<sup>14</sup>. Later, the *Donnellys* became a *Cenél Eoghain* sept which covered much of North and West Armagh where they are still numerous today, particularly adjacent to the Blackwater where it separates the modern counties of Tyrone and Armagh. Their stronghold, *Baile Uí Dhonnghaile* (Castlecaulfield), was close to the seat of O'Neill power. *Donnellys* were

a noted bardic family, but their chief was hereditary marshall of O'Neill's forces and it is particularly as soldiers that they are remembered.<sup>15</sup>

A very interesting personal name is recorded twice *Dub Emna* 'the black-haired one from Eamhain (Navan)'. When Ó is prefixed it becomes *Ó Duibheamhna* in the modern form and Mac Lysaght claims they were chiefs of *Uí Breasail Iarthair*, a territory west of Armagh. It is generally anglicized as *Devenney* and is often confused with a Donegal family of the same name (*Ó Duibheannaigh* in Irish). There are a number of variations found throughout Ireland – *O'Duwany*, *O'Devany*, *O'Dovany*<sup>16</sup> – but all are pronounced with the emphasis on the second syllable, except in Armagh where the stress falls on the first syllable [div'ni].

## McConville

*Connmáel*, later *Connhaol* 'wolf warrior', was a fairly uncommon early name which occurs among the Airgialla (Oriel) people<sup>17</sup>. This name became *Mac Connhaoil*, the modern *McConville*, the name of an Oriel sept found largely in Cos. Armagh, Down and Louth at present<sup>18</sup>. *Drumconwell* (*Druim Conmháil*, 'ridge of *Connmáel*') is the name of a townland about two miles south of Armagh where an ogham stone was discovered bearing 5-6<sup>th</sup> century inscriptions which Warner posits includes the name *Cunamaglos* (O.Ir. *Connmáel*)<sup>19</sup>.

Another personal name which occurs frequently among the Armagh septs is *Cernach* ('victorious, triumphant') and the name *Clann Chearnaigh* ('the offspring of *Cernach*') refers to an area in the middle of the present-day county<sup>20</sup>. The current anglicized form of this name is *Kearney* (or *Carney*), which is not uncommon in and around Armagh; the variant *McKearney* is also found.

The death of a member of the *Uí Níallán* sept named *Cernach* is recorded for the year 784. This *Cernach*'s grandfather, *Eichnech* ('force') was king of the Airthir (Orior) area in the east of the county and it is from this *Eichnech* (later *Eigneche*) that the clan *Ó hÉiginigh* are descended<sup>21</sup>. This is the family name we now know as

*Heaney*, and there are still considerable numbers bearing the name, particularly in the north-east of the county adjacent to their ancestral patrimony.

## O'Toole and Toal

*Tuathal* ('ruler of the people') was the name of many Irish kings and heroes; a certain *Tuathal Máelgarb* was a 6<sup>th</sup> century king of the *Uí Néill* and *Tuathal mac Augáine* who died in 958 was king of Leinster<sup>22</sup>. This personal name became the surname *Ó Tuathail*, anglicized *O'Toole*, and is very common in Co. Wicklow where they were clann chieftains for many centuries. The personal name also occurs regularly in the Armagh genealogies, but locally the surname usually takes the form *Toal* and is still common throughout the county. Yet another version of the same personal name is *Tohill* which is found frequently in Derry and Antrim.

When Ó prefixes the personal name *Anluan* ('great warrior') it becomes *Ó hAnluain* in modern Irish which produces *O'Hanlon* in English. Prior to the Plantation of Ulster in the early 17<sup>th</sup> century *O'Hanlons* were kings of Airthir (Orior), territories situated on the eastern boundary of the modern county and the seat of their power was at Loughgilly<sup>23</sup>. The personal name *Anluan* first appears in the *Uí Níallán* sept towards the ends of the 8<sup>th</sup> century and is described as the 'royal sept *Uí Anluain*'<sup>24</sup>

Another name among the descendants of the *Uí Níallán* is *Ardgal* ('valourous as a bear'). The modern surname *Mac Ardghail* (*Mac Ardle*) is derived from this form and the name is widely found in Armagh and the neighbouring counties of Monaghan and Louth. Both Mac Lysaght and Bell maintain they are a branch of the *Mac Mahon* clan of Oriel, first noted as *Sliocht Ardghail Mhóir Mhic Mathúna* ('the race of Ardghal Mór Mac Mahon')<sup>25</sup>.

*Mac Cooney* and (*Mac*) *Carragher* are two surnames which are peculiar to South Armagh. The Irish version of the former is *Mac Cumhaighe*<sup>26</sup> and stems

from the ancient personal name *Cu Maige* ('hound of the plain')<sup>27</sup> and it occurs in the *Uí Níallán* sept and again in 745 among the *Uí Cruinn*<sup>28</sup>. *Mac Fhearchair* is the Irish version of the *Carragher*, from the personal name *Fearchar* ('friendly') which also turns up among the *Uí Cruinn*. In English it appears with and without *Mac* and is sometimes confused with the Scottish name *Farquhar*.

## Viking names

An interesting personal name in the *Clann Shínaig* sept is *Sitriuc*<sup>29</sup>, which is a Gaelicized version of the Old Norse name *Sigtrygg* ('true victory')<sup>30</sup>. It wasn't usual, of course, for Gaels to adopt foreign names, nevertheless a number of Scandinavian names did find their way into Irish society with the intermarriage of Gael and Viking. In Irish this became *Mac Shitric*<sup>31</sup> and in English, *McKitterick*. In Scotland this name is usually written *McKetterick*. Mac Lysaght claims it is not uncommon in the old territory of Oriel (Monaghan) and neighbouring counties and also that *Hanson* is a synonym for it in Co. Armagh<sup>32</sup>.

Another Viking personal name that was adopted by the Irish, Scots and Welsh is *Ivaar*. In Old Irish this was *Ímar* (later, *Íomhar*) and a *St. Ímar Úa hAedagáin* was the teacher of St. Malachy in Armagh<sup>33</sup>. The Armagh genealogies record the death of

an *Ímar* in 1161 of the *Uí Meith Macha* sept<sup>34</sup>. With *Mac* prefixed this name

became *Mac Íomhair*, anglicized *MacKeever*, and is still common throughout the northern part of the county. Mac Lysaght suggests that some *MacKeevers* may be *Mac Éimhir*, from the forename *Éimhear* (*Heber*), a favourite with the *Mac Mahon* clan of Monaghan<sup>35</sup>.

*Murphy* is the most common surname in Ireland and in Co. Armagh it is the single most numerous name<sup>36</sup>. It is derived from the Old Irish personal name *Murchadh* ('sea warrior'), one of the most popular early Irish names for men<sup>5</sup> and as such the surname *Ó Murchadha* developed in

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several parts of the country at different times. In Ulster it was prefixed with *Mac* to produce two forms *Mac Murchadh* and *Mac Murchaidh*; the clan originally owned the territory of Muintir Birn (Minterburn) in South Tyrone, but were dislodged by the *O'Neills* and subsequently settled in the mountainous region of South Armagh<sup>37</sup>. The family names which appear in the above article are not necessarily descended from particular persons named in the genealogies of the Armagh sept. However, a considerable number of the personal names from which the surnames derive were common in the area during the period in question (4<sup>th</sup> C – 12<sup>th</sup>C) which suggests that the personal name was quite likely adopted as a surname during or after the period when surnames were being adopted. Furthermore, the fact that many of these surnames are still found in large numbers in the county adds to the speculation that many still inhabit their ancient patrimony. ❖

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Woulfe, Patrick, 1923, *Sloinnte Gaedheal is Gall*, xv
- <sup>2</sup> Ó Murchadha, Diarmaid, 1999 *The Formation of Gaelic Surnames in Ireland: Choosing Eponyms*, (Nomina, 22 29)
- <sup>3</sup> Woulfe, Patrick, *Op.cit.*, 7
- <sup>4</sup> O'Brien, M.A (ed. R Baumgarten), 1973, *Old Irish Personal Names*, (Celtica, X, 217)
- <sup>5</sup> MacLysaght, Edward, 1973, *The Surnames of Ireland*, xv
- <sup>6</sup> Arthurs, J.B., 1954, *Early Septs & Territories of Co. Armagh*, *Bulletin of the Ulster Place-Name Society* Vol. II 3, 54
- <sup>7</sup> Glancy, Michael, 1954, *The Church-lands of C. Armagh*, *Seanchas Ard Mhacha*, Vol. I 86
- <sup>8</sup> Ó Corráin, Donnchadh/Maguire, Fidelma, 1990, *Irish Names*, 86-7
- <sup>9</sup> Bell, Robert, 1988, *The Book of Ulster Surnames*, 91-2
- <sup>10</sup> Mac Lysaght, Edward, *More Irish Families*, 61
- <sup>11</sup> Arthurs, J.B, 1954, *Op. cit.*, 48
- <sup>12</sup> Ó Corráin, Donnchadh/Maguire, Fidelma, 1990, *Op.cit.*, 76
- <sup>13</sup> Arthurs, J.B, 1954, *Op. cit.*, 48
- <sup>14</sup> Woulfe, Patrick, 1923, *Op. cit.*, 505
- <sup>15</sup> Bell, Robert, 1988, *Op. cit.*, 55
- <sup>16</sup> MacLysaght, Edward, 1996, *Op. cit.*, 80
- <sup>17</sup> Ó Corráin, Donnchadh/Maguire, Fidelma, 1990, *Op. cit.*, 58
- <sup>18</sup> MacLysaght, Edward, 1973, *Op. cit.*, 56
- <sup>19</sup> Warner, Richard, B, 1991, *The Drumconwell Ogham & its Implications*, *Emania* 8 41-51
- <sup>20</sup> Muhr, Kay, 2001, *Territories, People & Place-Names in Co. Armagh*, 301 ('*Armagh – History and Society*' ed. Hughes, A.J/Nolan )
- <sup>21</sup> Muhr, Kay, 2001 *Op. cit.*, 301
- <sup>22</sup> Ó Corráin, Donnchadh/Maguire, Fidelma, 1990, *Op. cit.*, 173
- <sup>23</sup> Muhr, Kay, 2001, *Op. cit.*, 300
- <sup>24</sup> Arthurs, J.B, 1954, *Op. cit.*, 52
- <sup>25</sup> Bell, Robert, 1988, *Op. cit.*, 130
- <sup>26</sup> MacLysaght, Edward, 1973, *Op. cit.*, 57
- <sup>27</sup> Ó Corráin, Donnchadh/Maguire, Fidelma, 1990, *Op. cit.*, 64
- <sup>28</sup> Arthurs, J.B, 1954, *Op. cit.*, 52-3
- <sup>29</sup> Arthurs, J.B, 1954, *Op. cit.*, 51
- <sup>30</sup> Hanks, P/Hodges, F/Mills, A.D/Room, A, 1998, *The Oxford Names Companion*, 418
- <sup>31</sup> MacLysaght, Edward, 1973, *Op. cit.*, 185-6
- <sup>32</sup> MacLysaght, Edward, 1996, *Op. cit.*, 140
- <sup>33</sup> Ó Corráin, Donnchadh/Maguire, Fidelma, 1990, *Op. cit.*, 117
- <sup>34</sup> Arthurs, J.B, 1954, *Op. cit.*, 55
- <sup>35</sup> MacLysaght, Edward, 1973, *Op. cit.*, 173
- <sup>36</sup> Bell, Robert, 1988, *Op. cit.*, 201
- <sup>37</sup> Bell, Robert, 1988, *Op. cit.*, 201

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