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Ireland's heritage of geographical names

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Geographical names have been central to Irish tradition from the dawn of history. The medieval Irish created a separate literary genre, the Dindshenchas, meaning 'the lore of notable places', devoted to explaining the origins of the names of geographical features of renown such as Temair, Tara, and Boand, the River Boyne, to mention two. Most of the explanations are highly fanciful and in a large number of cases several explanations for the same name are given, one more absurd than the next.

The vast majority of Ireland's geographical names are of Irish language in origin; others derive from English, while a small but significant number derive from Old Norse. Most Irish-origin place names occur in English written forms only. The process of anglicisation, which culminated in the Ordnance Survey's work of name-standardisation in the 19th century, resulted in rendering the names unintelligible. As a consequence, a great deal of scholarly effort is required to establish the correct original forms of the names.

It is national policy that the geographical names of the country have official standardised Irish-language versions in addition to the existing English versions. In fulfilling this policy, the Place Names Office of the Department of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs is engaged in the systematic research of the geographical names of the country and to date has established correct, standardised Irish spellings for thousands of names. In the process, many more thousands of historical forms of the names have been recorded, along with other important related material, very little of which has been published. The Place Names Office is at present working to make this extensive archive available in a new online database, which is being developed in conjunction with Dublin City University. The Place Names Database of Ireland will enhance public appreciation of Ireland's rich heritage of geographical names.

1 Introduction

The earliest record of geographical names in Ireland is found in the Geography composed by Claudius PTOLEMAEUS of Alexandria in about the year 150 AD. PTOLEMY mentions 47 names in the country, including toponyms and ethnonyms, but the corrupt nature of the manuscript forms makes identification problematic. Several attempts have been made to connect PTOLEMY's names to names occurring in later sources the most recent, and most ambitious, of which seeks to provide identifications for all of them (MAC AN BHAIRD 1991–1993). The current consensus among scholars, however, appears to hold that only about a quarter of PTOLEMY's names are identifiable with certainty (TONER 2000, pp. 79-80). The first reliable place-name forms are those found in the earliest native sources, written in Latin and Irish, which date from the 6th and 7th centuries. The wealth of documents in Irish from the following centuries contain thousands of references to place names, most of which survive to the present.

Geographical names occupy a central position in native tradition from the earliest records down to the

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present day. The early Irish had an abiding interest in the names in their landscape and even created a separate literary genre devoted to them. The *Dindshenchas*, 'the lore of notable places', a body of work in prose and poetry which was composed in the 10th and 11th centuries, seeks to explain the origins of the names of famous geographical features (Ó Cuív 1989–90). It is interesting to note that three of the names mentioned by Ptolemy are the subject of separate *Dindshenchas* poems, namely *Boand*, the River Boyne, *Sinann*, the River Shannon, and *Benn Étair*, Howth (Gwynn 1913, pp. 26, 104, 286).

The country's most renowned place name in medieval times was undoubtedly that of Tara in County Meath. The Hill of Tara is a low-lying ridge situated in rolling fertile land about 30 km north-west of Dublin. The site contains a significant number of archaeological monuments from the prehistoric period associated with the ancient high kingship of Ireland. The king of Tara was regarded, symbolically at least, as king of the whole country (Bhreathnach 1996, p. 87). Even after the demise of its political importance about the 11th century, Tara remained a place of symbolic national importance into modern times.

The Irish name for Tara is *Teamhair*, or *Temair* in medieval orthography; the English form of the name is a reflex of the Irish genitive, *Teamhra*. The *Dindshenchas* contains four poetical and several prose items on Tara, a fact that testifies to the status and renown of the site (Mac Giolla Easpaig 2005, p. 423). Two explanations are given for the name; the first holds that the place is named from a woman buried there, while the second explains the name as a common appellative signifying 'a height, a place with a view'.

The better known explanation derives *Temair* from the name of a mythological woman called *Tea*, who is buried on the summit of the hill. According to this proposition, *Temair* is a reflex of an earlier form, *Tea-mur*, which is explained as a compound of a woman's name *Tea*, and a common noun, *múr*, a borrowing of Latin *murus*, meaning 'a wall or rampart' and by extension 'a burial mound'. The name would translate as 'the rampart or burial mound of Tea'. According to the story, Tea was the daughter of the mythological deity Lugaid and the wife of the equally mythological Erimon who died and was buried at Tara. A quotation from one of the texts will give a flavour of the work:

> *Temuir. Unde nominatur. Ni andsa. Temair .i. Tea-mur .i. múr Tea ingine Lugdach meic Itha. Ben Herimoin meic Miled .i. is and ro hadnacht hí. Unde poeta cecinit.*
> *In cetben luid i n-uaig úair*
> *Don chuáin a Tur Bregain báin*
> *Dianid ainm Temair fir Fáil*

'Temair. Whence is it named? Not difficult. Temair, that is, Teamur, that is, the rampart of Tea daughter

of Lugaid son of Ith, wife of Erimon son of Mil. It is there that she was buried. As the poet has sung: The first woman who went into a cold grave of the host from the Tower of white Bregan, Tea of Brega, the king's wife from whom Temair is named'.

As with most of the etymologies found in the *Dindshenchas* the above explanation is absolutely far-fetched and is lacking any linguistic basis. From the toponymic viewpoint, a compound form such as *Tea-múr*, 'the rampart of Tea', is wholly improbable in Irish place names. The implausibility of the explanation was recognised by one medieval commentator, who suggested an alternative origin for the name. This proposal holds that *Temair* is a common appellative meaning 'a height', which was a borrowing of a Greek word denoting a place with a view. Unfortunately, this explanation of the name is almost of equal implausibility.

The name Temair is the subject of two recent in-depth studies as part of an overall reassessment of the significance of the historical site of Tara. The first study shows that far from being an uniquely attested name, *Temair* is the basis of over 20 other extant place names in the country (Ó Muraíle 2005). In the second contribution, the present writer demonstrates that most of the places named *Temair* had mythological or pre-Christian religious significance similar to that associated with Tara in County Meath. It is argued that the name *Temair* refers to a sacred enclosure and that, linguistically, the name derives from the Indo-European root **tem-*'to cut', a root that is found in the general lexicon of Irish in the appellatives *taman*, 'a trunk', and *tamhnach*, 'a clearing'. The Irish place name, *Temair*, is thus related to both Greek *temenos*, 'a sacred precinct', and Latin *templum*, 'a temple', in its etymology and signification, that is, it refers to a sacred space that has been cut off from the profane world (Mac Giolla Easpaig 2005, pp. 446–448).

As noted in the case of Tara, the explanations of place names found in the *Dindshenchas* are mostly far-fetched and at times downright absurd. This body of work of literature is of undisputed importance from the literary perspective in that it contains mythological and pseudo-historical lore not found elsewhere. For those with an interest in toponymy, the *Dindshenchas* offers a fascinating insight into the high regard in which the medieval literati and their audiences held their heritage of place names.

2   The historical corpus of Ireland's place names

The identification of so many *Temair*-sites in the country, and the subsequent elucidation of the etymology and significance of the name, was facilitated by the immense amount of in-depth research that has been completed on Ireland's geographical names over re-

cent decades, most of it undertaken for the purpose of name standardisation. Ireland has inherited a rich tapestry of geographical names dating from all periods of the last two millennia at least. The whole country, including Northern Ireland, is divided into some 67,000 administrative units, in an historical, hierarchical structure of four provinces, 32 counties, 327 baronies, 2,428 civil parishes and some 60,462 townlands, all bearing their own names. To these historical units have been added the electoral districts of which there are about 3,750; the latter unit is a 19th century creation, consisting of a cluster of townlands, which generally derives its name from a pre-existing place name. The names of all administrative units, including some that are now obsolete, are listed in the General Topographical Index, commonly known as the Townland Index, which was published regularly in association with the national census of population until the beginning of the 20th century (TOPOGRAPHICAL INDEX 1904).

In addition to administrative names, the historical maps of the Ordnance Survey at the scale of 1:10,560 contain thousands of other place names, including names of centres of population (towns, villages and districts), natural features (lakes, rivers, streams, bays, headlands, islands, mountains, hills), and manmade features (early habitation sites, churches, monasteries, graveyards, bridges, crossroads). Furthermore, an immeasurable number of names of minor features survive in oral tradition, particularly in areas on the western seaboard where Irish survives, or survived until recently, as the community language. Some of this material has been recorded on a scientific basis by individual scholars but few collections of these so called 'minor names' have been published. The most recent collections to be published were made on two off-shore islands, Rathlin Island in County Antrim in Northern Ireland (MAC GIOLLA EASPAIG 1989–1990), and Clare Island in County Mayo (Ó MURAÍLE 1999). The majority of orally transmitted place names remain unrecorded and, consequently, they will disappear forever over the next ten to 15 years, with a great loss to Ireland's toponymic inheritance.

The vast majority of the place names of Ireland have their origin in the Irish language, particularly the names of the administrative units and those of major geographical features. Most of these names were coined before the 17th century and a significant number are at least a thousand years older. As noted earlier, literary and historical sources in Irish from the 8th century onwards contain many thousands of place names, many of which can be identified with present-day names. A new dictionary of place names from Irish sources is currently being published in fascicle form by the Locus project in the National University of Ireland, Cork (Ó RIAIN, Ó MURCHADHA & MURRAY 2005). The dictionary, when complete, will replace HOGAN's monumental Onomasticon of a century ago (HOGAN 1910).

3 Non-Irish influence on place names

Ireland experienced sustained attacks from Scandinavian Vikings from the early 9th century and by the middle of that century permanent Norse settlements had been established on the eastern and southern seaboards. For the next two centuries the Scandinavians exerted a strong influence on political and economic life in certain parts of the country. Despite this prolonged presence, however, it is calculated that less than 40 place names are of Scandinavian origin and it has been shown that a number of these are mere adaptations of Irish toponyms (MAC GIOLLA EASPAIG 2002, p. 444). While most of the names refer to coastal islands and headlands, it is notable that the English names of the principal towns of the south-east coast are of Scandinavian origin, namely, Wicklow, Arklow, Wexford and Waterford (MAC GIOLLA EASPAIG 2002, p. 466).

English influence on the place names of the country began with the Anglo-Norman invasion of the 12th and 13th centuries which brought with it a wave of English-speaking settlers to most parts of the country. The new arrivals were to exert a lasting influence on the toponymy of the country, most markedly through the widespread anglicisation of existing place names for the first time. The settlers also created numerous place names in English, many of which survive to the present, particularly in the counties nearest Dublin. A large proportion of the new toponyms consisted of an Anglo-Norman family name and the English element *town*, earlier *tun*, as in, for example, *Fantstown*, County Limerick, which contains the surname le Faunt (Ó MAOLFABHAIL 1990, p. 17). The historical evidence shows that the vast majority of Anglo-Norman place names were translated or otherwise assimilated into Irish during the course of the 14th and the 15th centuries (Ó CEARBHAILL 2006, p. 235). Thus the place name *Mortelstown* in County Tipperary became *Baile an Mhoirtéalaigh*, with English *town* being replaced by the common Irish element *baile*, meaning 'a homestead, a farmstead' followed by the Irish form of the surname *Mortel* or *Martel* (Ó CEARBHAILL 2006, p. 239).

Following the final defeat of the native lords at the beginning of the 17th century, ownership of the land was transferred from the Irish, including those of Anglo-Norman descent, to settlers from England and Scotland through a series of systematic confiscations and plantations. By the end of the century, all but a tiny fraction of the land was in non-Irish hands. English domination was to prevail for the following two centuries in all spheres of life, political, social, economic, cultural and linguistic. The Irish language went into a decline which resulted in its becoming the language of a minority by end of the 19th century, from being the language of the great majority of the population a century earlier. Despite their dominance, however, English speakers left comparatively little mark on the place names of the country during this period. One notable category consists of toponyms which the

new landlords transferred from England as the names for their residences in Ireland. This phenomenon explains how certain townlands in County Galway, for example, share their names with well-known places in the South of England, such as Chelsea, Hampton and Richmond.

4 The anglicisation of Ireland's place names

It is estimated that over 90% of the administrative place names of the country are of Irish language origin. All have come down in anglicised form and only a small proportion has been recorded in Irish language sources. The process of the anglicisation of the place names of the country, that is the writing of names according to the spelling conventions of English, which was begun by the Anglo-Normans in the 12th century culminated in the Ordnance Survey's standardisation of names for its large-scale mapping programme in the second quarter of the 19th century. Because of the great phonemic and orthographical differences between Irish and English, anglicisation had the effect of shrouding place names of Irish origin in an impenetrable fog of unintelligibility. Consequently, a great deal of scholarly effort is required to establish the correct original forms of the names. Valuable work was undertaken to this end by several individuals in the 19th century. Foremost of these was the renowned scholar John O'Donovan, who was employed by the Ordnance Survey to standardise the English spellings of names. As part of his work, O'Donovan travelled throughout the country consulting with Irish speakers wherever he could in order to ascertain 'the original vernacular name'. The Irish form was recorded with an English translation in the Ordnance Survey Name Book (Mac Giolla Easpaig 2008, p. 167). The Irish forms collected by O'Donovan and his colleagues constitute one of the most important sources for the study of Irish place names. P.W. Joyce, the leading authority on place names in the late 19th century, drew heavily on O'Donovan's work in his popular *Irish Names of Places* series (Joyce 1869–1913).

5 The restoration of Irish place-name forms

It was not until the second half of the 20th century that research began on the place names of the country in a systematic manner. Following the establishment of the Irish Free State in 1922 with a native government whose policy was to promote the use of Irish in various areas of public life, there was particular urgency for authoritative work on Irish place names, since Irish forms of those names would be required for regular use by both government departments and the general public. Irish versions of the names of the post-towns

of the country had been published in book-form by the Gaelic League some years previously (Laoide 1905) and these were adopted by the Department of Post and Telegraphs on the foundation of the state. The methodology followed in this work was flawed and there was significant disagreement with the Irish versions it recommended.

The need for authoritative Irish versions was increased with the coming into force of the Constitution of Ireland of 1937, which gave a special status to the Irish language as the national language and the first official language. Accordingly, the Place Names Commission was established in 1946 with terms of reference to establish correct Irish versions of the place names of Ireland and to publish lists of those names in their Irish forms for official use. Ten years later, responsibility for research was given to the Place Names Branch, a newly established division based in the Ordnance Survey. The research approach adopted by the Branch was based on the scientific methodology developed by the institute with responsibility for the study of Swedish place names, now known as the *Ortnamnsarkivet*. This methodology involves collecting all the spellings of a name from historical sources and ascertaining its pronunciation in the local community.

The first task of the Place Names Commission and the Place Names Branch was to establish the correct Irish forms of the names of postal towns, comprising the names of about 2,500 towns and minor settlements. On the advice of the Commission, the Irish forms were given limited legal status in the Place Names (Irish forms) Order 1975 under the provisions of the Place Names (Irish forms) Act 1973 and they were subsequently given equal legal status with their English equivalents in the Place Names (Centres of Population and Districts) Order 2005 under the terms of the Official Languages Act 2003.

6 The work of the Place Names Branch

Following the completion of the work on the names of the postal towns, the Place Names Branch was integrated into the Ordnance Survey's mapping programme, while the role of Place Names Commission became strictly advisory. Research work was directed towards providing the Irish versions of place names on the large scale maps at the scale of 1:2,500 and was undertaken on a county basis. These maps contained the names of townlands, baronies and electoral divisions as well as non-administrative geographical names. In the 1990s, the Place Names Branch provided Irish names for the Ordnance Survey's new 1:50,000 series of tourist and leisure maps, known as the Discovery Series. It was the policy at the time to depict administrative names on the new maps in their English forms only. This approach produced a rather odd toponymic mix, with names of towns and major

natural features, such as rivers and mountains, being depicted in English and Irish, and the names of townlands being shown in English only. This unsatisfactory situation is being rectified as a result of an amendment to the Ordnance Survey Ireland Act 2001 in the Official Languages Act 2003, which requires Ordnance Survey Ireland (OSI) "to depict place names and ancient features in the national mapping and related records and databases in the Irish language or in the English and Irish languages".

Today, the Place Names Branch, which is now within the Department of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs, is engaged in the systematic research of the geographical names by county in order to establish correct Irish forms, with priority being given to administrative names. Thousands of standardised Irish versions have been established to date and a great number of these have been published in the maps of Ordnance Survey of Ireland and in list form in the national gazetteer (GAZETTEER 1989) and in a series of county volumes, the most recent being that for County Tipperary (Ó CEARBHAILL 2004). Most of the Irish name forms have been given equal legal status with their English counterparts through a series of place-names orders made by the Minister for Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs, on the advice of the Place Names Commission under the provisions of the Official Languages Act 2003, Part 5 of which replaced the Place Names Act of 1973. It is government policy that all place names will have legal Irish versions within the next seven to ten years.

The establishing of authoritative Irish versions of the country's place names has the immediate effect of dispersing the fog of unintelligibility mentioned earlier and of making the original meaning of most place names transparent to those with even a basic knowledge of Irish. A number of examples taken from the Gazetteer of Ireland (1989) will illustrate the point. A perusal of the pages of the TOPOGRAPHICAL INDEX (1904) shows that the most common element in townland names is *Bally-*. This element generally reflects the Irish generic element *Baile*, meaning 'a homestead', as in the name Ballygorman in County Donegal, the Irish of which is *Baile Uí Ghormáin*, meaning 'the homestead of Ó Gormáin', where the last part is a family name. In a minority of instances, however, *Bally-* also reflects Irish *Béal*, 'a mouth', or *Béal Átha -*, 'a ford-mouth', as in the name Ballyshannon, County Donegal, for which the Irish is *Béal Átha Seanaidh*, meaning 'the ford-mouth of the assembly-place (*seanadh*)'. Another frequent element in anglicised forms is *Kil(l)-*. In the majority of names this element reflects *Cill*, meaning 'a church', usually one dating from the early medieval period, as in Kilconnell, County Galway, *Cill Chonaill* in Irish, meaning 'the church of Saint Conall'. *Kil(l)*, however, can also reflect Irish *Coill* 'a wood', in some parts of the country, as in Kildorragh, County Cavan, which is *Coill Dorcha*, 'dark wood', in Irish. While most place names are transparent in their Irish forms, a sizable

proportion of names remain opaque and these require further scholarly investigation and elucidation, like two of the names mentioned at the beginning this paper, *Teamhair* (Tara), and *An Bhóinn* (River Boyne).

The most public manifestation of place names everywhere is to be found on directional and informational road signage erected for the convenience of the public. In Ireland the law requires that the Irish form of place names must be displayed on all road signs throughout the country. Consequently, in addition to their primary function, road signs fulfill a cultural and educational function, albeit unintended, in that they provide explanations of the place names to which they refer as in the examples cited above.

In the course of its research to establish standardised Irish spellings of geographical names, the Place Names Branch has recorded a very large corpus of historical forms of the names from a wide range of sources, along with other important related material, including linguistic, geographical, historical and archaeological evidence. It has been a long-term policy to publish the historical documentation for the place names with commentary, together with explanations of individual names. Due to the primary demand of research and of providing Irish forms, publication of this material has had to take second place and only a small proportion of it has been published. To date, two volumes in a proposed series have been published: Ó MAOLFABHAIL (1990) documents and discusses about 2,200 place names in County Limerick, while Ó CEARBHAILL (2007) provides an in-depth analysis of the names containing the element *cill*, 'a church', in the toponymy of County Tipperary. Two further volumes are in preparation, one of which will deal with about 2,600 names in County Wexford, the other with all the place names in the barony of Orrery in County Cork.

7 Place Names Database of Ireland

Demand for official Irish forms of place names has increased greatly over the past five years as a consequence of the enactment of the Official Languages Act 2003, and of the fact that Irish also became an official and working language of the European Union in January 2007. Under the terms of the Official Languages Act, all public bodies are required to publish certain documents, including annual reports, in Irish and English or in Irish only. This means that all place names occurring in these documents must have official Irish forms. A decision was taken to meet this demand by making all the Irish forms of place names established to date available to those who required them through a web-based searchable database. Consequently, the Department of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs engaged the services of Fiontar in Dublin City University on contract in 2007 to develop a web-based

national database of place names in cooperation with the Place Names Branch. Fiontar had already been responsible for the development of the award-winning on-line database of Irish language terminology, *www. focal.ie*. Bunachar Logainmneacha na hÉireann, the Place Names Database of Ireland, *www.logainm.ie*, will be launched officially in October 2008 following a six-month trial period.

By the time it is launched, the database will hold approximately 100,000 names in their standardised English versions, including the 67,000 names of the administrative units described previously, over 10,000 non-administrative geographical names and about 18,000 street names. The total number of names will rise to almost 200,000 when all the street names and all the geographical names shown on the Ordnance Survey's historical large-scale maps have been added. Official Irish versions will be available for approximately 60,000 of the names in the database by the end of 2008 and this will be added to on a daily basis. Other categories of names will be included in the future, including obsolete names recorded in historical documents, and orally transmitted toponyms collected in the course of fieldwork. The place names are ordered hierarchically in the database according to county, barony, civil parish, electoral division and townland. Each townland and geographical feature name is referenced according to the national grid and to the Ordnance Survey's historical 1:10,560 map series. The approximate location of the feature is shown on an outline map of the country and a reference to the sheet of the 1:50,000 map series will be added at a later date. The database is fully searchable by name or part of a name in Irish and English and it is intended during the next phase of development to include a facility to create distribution maps of names according to their constituent elements. The database also contains an audio guide to the pronunciation of both the English and Irish forms of the most important place names and this feature will be expanded to include all place names over the next five years. A list of common elements is being added and it is proposed to include concise explanatory notes on the most well-known names in the near future.

The Place Names Branch has built up a large paper and electronic archive of historical forms and other evidence for names since it was established over 60 years ago. All this material is being input into the database. Material held in Word, Excel and Access files is being transferred automatically, while handwritten and typed material has been scanned. The scanned records will be available to the public until they are eventually converted to digital form. New historical evidence will be added directly to the database during the course of research. The historical forms will be fully searchable according to source, language and constituent elements. The intention is that all of the evidence for the place names in the database will be available to the public by the end of 2010.

The primary purpose of the Place Names Database is to provide authoritative standardised Irish versions of the geographical names of the country on-line to all who require them. As shown above, however, the database is much more than an on-line list of place names. It has already proved itself to be a powerful research tool in the Place Name Branch's programme of standardisation of the Irish versions of geographical names, and it should be of great benefit to others working in the field of place names and related disciplines. Most importantly, the Place Names Database of Ireland will provide the public with an enormous on-line resource with which it can explore the richness and complexity of Ireland's geographical names and thereby enhance understanding of this aspect of our cultural heritage.

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