TRADITIONAL IRISH NAMING PATTERNS   Part of an article from Ireland Reaching Out (Ireland XO)

For about two centuries (from the late 1700s through to the early to mid-1900s) the Irish favored a precise convention for naming their children that can suggest what names to look for in a previous generation. All that's needed is for *one* sibling in a family to have used this pattern with accuracy (even if one's own direct ancestor deviated a little).

- **Irish Naming Practice for Boys**

1st son named after the paternal grandfather (his father's father);

2nd son after the maternal grandfather (his mother's father);

3rd son after his father;

4th son after his eldest paternal uncle (his father's eldest brother) and so on in that order.

- **Practice for Girls Irish Naming**

NOTE: wasn't always followed as closely as it was for boys

1st daughter named after the maternal grandmother (her mother's mother);

2nd daughter after the paternal grandmother (her father's mother);

3rd daughter after her mother;

4th daughter after her mother's eldest sister; and so on in that order.

When remarried: the name of the deceased first wife was often given to the first-born daughter of the new wife.

Reliability and Exceptions to the Rule

The problem with relying too heavily on naming patterns (apart from the fact that not all families adhered to this naming custom) is that the pattern can be upset when:

- the parent and grandparent share the same name;
- a child named after a grandparent/ parent did not survive, it was common practice in the 19th-century to re-assign important family names to the next-born child (see INFANT DEATHS below);
- a child was born sickly or dying (the name of the paternal grandfather might be 'set-aside' for a viable birth).
- a parish priest may have rejected an ancestral Gaelic name, insisting upon a saint's name instead. (At home the parents often continued to call the child by the Gaelic name, but used the baptism name in official documents).

The poorer the class, the more likely the above naming convention was followed to the letter. Wealthier families may have deviated for a number of reasons such as:

- a significant childless relative or persona with an inheritance coming (e.g. a local priest, schoolteacher, or emigrated relative) would be 'honored' by having a child named after them;
- fashion (for girls names);
- a close relative had just died, and their name was used out of respect.
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Middle First Names

Middle names, as we understand them today were not common among the poor in 19th-century Ireland. In the Old Gaelic tradition, a child was identified by patronymic (the father's first name) rather than surname/family name.

For example, the middle name of "Tom **Sheánín** Mac Donnacha" is not a baptismal second-name but rather, a local identifier i.e. "Tom son of **Johnny** McDonough".

This tradition, in day-to-day conversation, is still alive and well in the west of Ireland. Unfortunately, it was not carried through to official or church records. So what did the officials do when the sub-division of land led to multiple occupants of one townland sharing the name of a grandfather? Griffith's Valuation is one official record to sometimes make use of the patronymic (i.e. the father's name was noted in brackets) - a massive clue!

e.g. "John Kelly (Mike)" and "John Kelly (Pat)" residing in the same townland should be explored as likely first cousins.

Middle and Double-barrelled Surnames

Surnames used as a middle name were the reserve of the gentry in Ireland. Protestant and Catholic cess-payers used middle names as a vehicle for the preservation of a mother's maiden name when it held some prestige or inheritance.

The double-barrelled surname was usually adopted as a condition of marriage/inheritance, to keep the name alive when there was no male heir.

In mid-19th century America, the custom of even poor Irish immigrants honoring family members through a child's middle name increased dramatically. When little or no paper trail exists, first and middle names are also very useful hints for tracking down lineages. By the turn of the 20th century, the "old family name" that continues to pass down through multiple generations should be explored as the first name of a much-revered mother/ father of the emigrating ancestor. Reverse-genealogists will find this extremely helpful when searching for extended family State-side.

INFANT DEATHS

The **repetitive use of a given name** for two or more siblings is a major clue as to (a) potential grandparent names and (b) the estimated year of death of the previous child who had that name. The repetition of a baptism name, tells us that the parents very much wanted to keep this name alive within the family. Infant mortality was high in the 19th-century but in most cases, there is nothing recorded about infant deaths in Ireland until compulsory GRO began in 1864. (Also, a better understanding of infection and antisepsis in the latter half of the century, helped reduce infection rates in childbirth).

In gap-filled baptism records (where no repetition of a given name is apparent) the frequency of infant deaths can also be spotted by the **re-invitation of a godparent** to sponsor later baptism(s). Not only does this indicate that a previous godchild has died young, but it is also a tell-tale sign that the godparent was a close neighbour. In the case of poorer families, the sponsor likely to have resided in the same or adjacent townland, and may not appear on any land records. For the tax or cess-payer, the sponsor is likely to appear on land records in the same or adjacent parish. When a sponsor with an **unusual surname** is **repeatedly invited to godparent** by the same couple, this signals that this individual was a close in-law (i.e. married to a sibling of the child's mother or father).

Stillborn and unbaptised infants

During the Counter-Reformation, the Catholic Church implemented strict reforms regarding unbaptized infants. From the early 17th century in Ireland, the burial of unbaptized babies in consecrated Roman Catholic graveyards was prohibited. According to Catholic Doctrine, the unbaptised would spend an eternity in 'Limbo' (halfway between heaven and hell). With infant mortality so high, Catholics rushed to have their babies **baptised within 3 days of birth**, to avoid having to bury their beloved child in an unmarked grave on 'unconsecrated ground' (along with the mentally disabled, suicides, beggars, executed criminals, and other prohibited burials). Thus ancient burial sites, known as *cillín (killeen)* were used as burial grounds for the unbaptised. Regional variations may refer to such *cill (kill or kyle) burial grounds* as *cealltrach (caldragh)*, *ceallúrach (calluragh)* or *lisín (lisheen)*. A characteristic of many cilliní burials was the placement of white quartz pebbles along with other stone pebbles on the child's grave. This practice continued in Ireland until the Second Vatican Council in the 1960s (followed by much parental campaigning to have these grounds consecrated).

[From 1 January 1864, by law](), all parents were obligated to register the births and deaths of their children, to include infants who died before baptism could take place.

USING THE PATTERNS TO SOLVE GAP-RIDDEN BAPTISM RECORDS

With little else to go on pre-1864, church records can be a godsend. But how can we possibly figure out if this naming pattern was adhered to if the marriage began before records exist, or a when parish register has gaps and omissions? Whatever the way the records turn up, there are some traditional practices (based on anecdotal evidence) that can inform how you proceed, depending on the period of research:

Before the Great Irish Famine

- The groom was usually age 22 when he married (a little older if educated first);
- The bride usually married at age 18 (age 16 if the family urgently needed a man to come in and help out on the farm);
- The marriage took place in **her home parish** (the poorer the couple the more likely he was a neighbour);
- If the groom came from an **outside parish**, only the parish name (not the townland) was recorded as his address;
- The witnesses lived locally and were likely to have been the relatives who were involved in making the match or introduction;
- The couple's baptism window was **28 years** and 14+ pregnancies on average;
- For the first 5 years of their marriage, a new baby could have been born annually;
- After that, a child was born every two years (every 2-3 years towards the end);
- The godparents were strictly siblings and siblings-in-law (in the case of small tenant farmers);
- Baptisms took place in the family home, and usually within 3 days of birth;
- The priest would have celebrated with the family and, in his state of inebriation, may not have recorded the mother's name correctly (e.g. mixing it up with the godmother) upon his return;
- If either was widowed with young children, they remarried quickly (after the 12-month mourning period).

After the Great Irish Famine

- The groom was significantly older. He could not wed without land to his name (and remained a "labourer" on the family farm until a parent died).
- He was typically the **youngest** son, tasked with minding his ageing parents – the older siblings having emigrated (to send money home);

- Having inherited the family farm, and now officially a "farmer" a young wife (half his age) with a matching dowry was sought out.
- The bride married age 20, the marriage took place in **her home parish** and matches were made from a greater distance (which *could* cross a county boundary). Matches were very often made at the fairs, so one should encircle the nearest market town and consider all directions;
- The marriage witnesses were more likely to be close first cousins (one from each side). A priest who was a relative was also preferred;
- The couple's baptism window averaged **25 years**. She went home to have her first babies (so they may be found registered in *her* ancestral parish, and not the one they were raised in);
- A new child was born every two years (petering off to every three years towards the end);
- A Catholic mother could not attend mass after giving birth until she was "churched" (cleansed of sin) in the back sacristy;
- Baptisms took place in the local church, records were better kept and included the address;
- The godparents were close neighbours (siblings and siblings-in-law where possible, although emigration began to take its toll). If godparent choices appear to favour one side of the family, look beyond the parish for the other parent's family;
- If he was widowed with young children, he remarried quickly (after the 12-month mourning period). She, on the other hand, may have just had to manage.

IRISH BAPTISM TRADITIONS & CUSTOMS

Early Christian teachings on the sacrament of **baptism** (by which to cleanse ancestral original sin) continued to be shared by both Catholic and Protestant traditions in Ireland. For this reason, baptism records in Ireland are a highly-valuable genealogical resource for everyone.

- Record-keeping of **Roman Catholic** baptisms was banned until Penal Laws relaxed in the late 18th-Century. Catholic baptismal records only date back to the late 1700s for larger towns and cities. For rural and poorer Catholic parishes, records only began in the 19th century (as late as the 1850s in the west of Ireland).
- The **Anglican** church was officially recognised as the **Church of Ireland** (C of I) from 1580–1869. In 1876, the Co of I ordered by law to store its parish registers in the Public Record Office, Dublin (PRO). Not all parishes had complied with this order when the PRO went up in flames in 1922. So, the one-third of C of I parish registers, held locally, still survive today.
- During Penal times land-owning Catholics **converted** to the Church of Ireland (to protect their interests) and may have **reverted** in the 19th century once these laws relaxed (so look both ways);
- To see **what records have survived** for a specific parish, for which period, and where to find them, check out: John Grenham's Placename Index

The "Italian" in the family

Some Catholic priests recorded the first names of all parties in Latin. As many traditional Gaelic given names didn't have an official Latin or "Christian" equivalent, each priest had his own creative way of addressing that challenge.

Another point worth noting is that the child's **mother** and **female sponsors** were always recorded under their **maiden name** (regardless of marital status). Sometimes the priest, in confusion, transposed the first name or surname on a record, so keep an open mind if one record in your list appears odd. Curiously, fewer errors were made with male names in records.

The Stipend

Catholic priests often recorded the "stipend" paid to the priest in the righthand column of the baptism registers. Pre-famine records indicate that

- "two and six" (2/6 = two shillings and sixpence) was the standard stipend paid by a small farmer in the west of Ireland;
- wealthier graziers or middlemen tended to give £1.10 when times were good;
- a stipend 0/0 is a tell-tale sign that the parent(s) were poverty-stricken and "pauper" was sometimes added to the notes.

Sponsors / Godparents

In both traditions, a sponsor or godparent was supposed to exert a supporting influence on the child especially in regards to their faith. In real practice, the pattern of godparent selection depended on wealth and proximity. In the case of the Cess-paying gentry, a relative or prestigious family friend would fit the bill. In the Protestant tradition, there should be 2 sponsors for any baptism (save for adults) but sometimes you see just one. In the Catholic tradition, the absence of a second sponsor usually indicates an anomaly (e.g. a single mother giving birth in secret in another parish).

The poorer class of Catholics (rarely named on land records, but living in a townland in some sort of extended-family rundale system) followed a specific **godparent convention** to the letter:

- **every sponsor/ godparent was either a sibling or a sibling in-law** of one of the child's parents. It's that simple.
- surnames that do not match the parents' surnames are **in-laws** and key to knocking down brick walls.

"Wetting the baby's head" in Ireland does not mean the act of baptism itself, but rather the celebratory drinks that would follow the ceremony!

What next?

To unlock your family tree and break down brick walls in your genealogy research, follow that unexpected sponsor's surname in the baptism records:

1. Search familysearch.org, for that **unusual sponsor surname paired with the family** name(s) of the parents (in the same parish) to determine which side it belongs to;
2. Gather the baptismal records for that new couple and **note their godparenting choices** on either rootsireland.ie (paid) or registers.nli.ie (free);
3. **Look out for a godparenting invitation being reciprocated** e.g. the father sponsoring one baptism and the mother another for this other couple.
4. This reveals another family in your tree... who may just have those naming patterns (or a marriage record) that will give you the very lead back to a townland or earlier generation, that you were looking for!