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# North and South of the Border: Parallel Place Name Research in Ireland

## **Abstract**

Irish language place-names were largely recorded in non-standardized anglicized spelling, which is variously subject to influences like diverging dialects, and socio-historical change. Following the partition of Ireland in 1921, place name research and authority is disconnected. In the Republic of Ireland, Irish is the first official language, reflected in support via a number of statutory bodies. The Placenames Committee within the Department of Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht (Government of Ireland) is the main authority on place names, and advises government on official place names as defined in legislation (Official Languages Act, 2003). The Logainm.ie place names database and Meitheal Logainm.ie community place name collection project, developed by Dublin City University, reflect further Government support for place-name scholarship and usage.

Irish has (currently) no similar legal protection in Northern Ireland, and therefore no official requirement for Irish versions of names for administrative or other purposes. Despite this, the Northern Ireland Place-Name Project (NIPNP), based in Queen's University, Belfast (currently funded by the Northern Ireland Executive, conducts research on the origins of place names. This paper outlines the background and current state of place name research in Ireland in both jurisdictions, and highlights areas of overlap and future all-Ireland collaboration.

### **Keywords**

Irish place-names, Irish language, anglicisation, community place-name collection, bilingual place-names

## 1. Introduction

The overwhelming majority of Irish place names in use in Ireland today have their origins in the Irish language. There is, of course, evidence in some names of other languages, such as Old Norse, left by the Vikings in coastal regions in names such as *Carlingford* (*Kerlingfjörðr* ‘narrow sea-inlet of the hag’)<sup>1</sup> and *Strangford* (*Strangr Fjörðr* ‘strong sea-inlet’). The period following the Anglo-Norman invasion of Ireland in the twelfth century left us names of English origin like *Kirkistown* and *Palmerston*, and some that were subsequently Gaelicised, like *Ballywalter*. The Anglo-Normans also introduced elements of French origin to the Irish namescape, such as *graunge* ‘grain-producing land’ and *bretasche* ‘palisade’, which then entered the Irish language as *gráinseach* and *briotás* respectively.

Despite this sporadic interference from other language families, most Irish place names, particularly those that feature in the historical administrative system of land division of Ireland, and those of natural physical features, are of Irish language origin. These names often retain some resemblance to their original Irish language form, having undergone a process of transmission or ‘transliteration’ from Irish into English,<sup>2</sup> and often emerge similarly in English across the island of Ireland. Of course, there are complexities associated with this process: the contrasting morpho-phonologies of Celtic and Germanic languages; errors of transcription and interpretation; a tendency for analogy with English, and the development of anglicised forms to recognisable English words (*díseart* ‘hermitage’ as *-desert*, *droim* ‘ridge’ as *-drum*, and both *cill* ‘church’ and *coill* ‘wood’ as *kill*-). While the anglicisation process is largely viewed as a negative one, with connotations of cultural destruction and emerging forms seen as meaningless, chaotic or even ‘gibberish’, the process

<sup>1</sup> Names coined by the Vikings often have Celtic predecessors. For example, Carlingford Lough is first mentioned in the Annals of Ulster in 852 AD by its ancient Gaelic name *Cuan Snamh Aigneach* ‘swift sea-channel/swimming-place’.

<sup>2</sup> A process aided strongly by the introduction of a sophisticated administrative system in the 12th century which led to the first documentation of a great number of historic names, albeit in English sources and recorded in accordance with the spelling conventions of contemporary English at that time.

of language transmission here is not entirely devoid of regularity (Ó Mainín, 2017, p. 2), and it is often the case that trends can be identified in common place names across the country. Take, for example, the Irish place name *Ráth Cúil* ‘fort of the nook’. This same form appears anglicized as *Rathcoole* in County Antrim in Northern Ireland, and again almost identically, as *Rathcool*, in County Cork, some 350 km south. A significant proportion of commonly observed elements in Irish place names derive from noteworthy features of the natural landscape as well as from man-made features, and both of these appear alongside qualifying components, such as names (family names, personal names, names of saints or mythological characters), and descriptive adjectives, which means we can follow general anglicisation patterns and recognise many names with the same origin at polar ends of the island. This is despite various external influences on the names and on place-name research in Ireland such as linguistic developments across diverging dialects, historical events and societal changes. In some cases, however, both linguistic and extralinguistic factors can cause individual names to diverge to a point where they are today unrecognisable as originating from the one same form. One example is the common place-name element *cnoc* ‘hill’, which is realised variously as *knock*, *crock* and *cronk*, which are all attested in County Down alone (Tracey, 2021). It is at this point that consideration of both historical evidence and general trends is invaluable to researchers, north and south, whose work endeavours to discover the origins of contemporary place names.

## 2. A common linguistic and cultural background

The place names of Ireland developed along a common path until the Partition of the island in 1921. Up until this point administrative place names were structured in a hierarchy of land units from counties, baronies, civil parishes and townlands (small local areas, of which there are over 60,000 on the whole island). These land units, though a function of British administration in Ireland, were often based on units that formed part of older Gaelic systems of landholding. The names of most of these units, along with those of major topographical features, have their origin in the Irish language. The majority

of such names date to before the 17th century and many are much older (Mac Giolla Easpaig, 2008, p. 165), and thus originate from a time when Irish was the vernacular on the entire island. Given that language shift gradually began to take hold from the 17th century onwards, many later minor names are, by contrast, of English origin, particularly in the longer-anglicized areas in Leinster. A field name survey carried out in County Meath, for instance, found that only 10–11% of field names collected in that county were of Irish-language origin (Meath Field Names Project, 2019), whereas minor names collected on Achill Island off the west coast of County Mayo, are overwhelmingly of Irish origin (Mac Gabhann, 2014).

Only a small number of places, generally those of greater significance such as towns and major topographical features are mentioned in Irish-language literary tradition, which flourished up until the 17th century. This means that many names have been documented only in their anglicized form. The adoption of English forms of Irish place names, initiated with the large-scale documentation of lands by the Anglo-Normans in the 12th century, continued in subsequent centuries with anglicized forms being adopted by all arms of the administrative system, by the church and by newly settled English speaking landowners. However up until the early 19th century, only the names of the principal towns of the country had converged to a standard form, and townland and other minor names appeared in various guises throughout the country, and even in the same localities by different bodies (Mac Giolla Easpaig, 2008, p. 164). This situation led to the Ordnance Survey's employment of Celtic scholar John O'Donovan to collect evidence on place names in the field and provide standardised English language place names for inclusion on the Ordnance Survey's series of maps at the scale of six inches to the mile, developed from the first large-scale survey of Ireland in 1824, and these spellings remain the official standard spelling to today.

Though place names were sometimes translated (often inaccurately) into English<sup>3</sup> and sometimes even replaced with new coinages,<sup>4</sup> by far the most

<sup>3</sup> An example of a reasonably accurate translation being *Swinford* in County Mayo, translated from the original Irish name *Béal Átha na Muice* 'the ford mouth of the pig (swine)'.

<sup>4</sup> Such an example being *Port Laoise* in County Laois, which was officially named *Maryborough* until 1929. The Irish name *Port Laoise*, was recorded by John O'Donovan of the Ordnance Survey as being in use among the last Irish speakers in the vicinity of the town in 1838. See <https://www.logainm.ie/ga/28626>

common method of anglicisation was the phonetic rendering of Irish names using English orthography (De hÓir, 1972–1973, p. 195). This process was *ad hoc* and often produced different anglicized versions of the same original Irish word. For example, the common place-name element *doire* ‘oak wood’, of which the most well-known iteration is the city and county of Doire/Derry,<sup>5</sup> can be anglicized variously as *derry*, *derra*, *derri* and *dirri* amongst other possibilities. The predominance of common elements and the often-predictable anglicisation of these elements means we can elucidate the original meaning of these names with the help of historical, geographical and archaeological evidence. That being said, anglicisation does present difficulties in ascertaining the origin of names. A common problem encountered in Irish place-name research is that *cill* (‘church’) and *coill* have generally both been anglicized as *kil(l)*, for example *Kilmore* in Armagh derives from *An Chill Mhór* ‘the big church’ whereas the identical *Kilmore* in Dublin derives from *An Choill Mhór* ‘the big wood’. Another issue often encountered by researchers relates to *bally*, generally used as an anglicized form of *baile* ‘town’, the most common element in Irish place names. *Bally*, however, is also sometimes used in anglicized forms of other elements such as *buaille* (‘cattle fold’), *béal átha* (‘ford mouth’) and *bealach* (‘way, pass’), which can create difficulty in distinguishing these elements from one another based solely on individual anglicized forms. For example, *Ballyedmond* in County Laois derives from *Buaille Éamainn* ‘Éamann’s cattle fold’ whereas its namesake *Ballyedmond* in County Down derives from *Baile Éamainn* ‘Éamann’s town’.

The Irish language declined rapidly through the 18th and 19th centuries. By the mid-19th century, language shift was more or less complete in most of Leinster outside of some pockets in Louth, Meath and Kilkenny, where some native speakers survived into the 20th century (Ní Mhungaile, 2015, p. 553). Native Irish speakers lingered much longer in areas of Connacht, Munster and Ulster, where recordings<sup>6</sup> were made of the last speakers in many of the counties of those provinces in the first half of the 20th century. Currently,

<sup>5</sup> In 1613 Derry was renamed *Londonderry* by the planter London companies on account of their association with the city of London. In official governmental documents in Northern Ireland and the UK, the city and townland is generally referred to as Londonderry; in the Republic of Ireland, it is referred to as Derry.

<sup>6</sup> Examples of such recordings can be found at The Doegen Records Web Project (<https://doegen.ie/>).

three main surviving dialects of Irish are recognised: Ulster Irish, now represented by the dialect spoken in Donegal, but originally spoken throughout the province of Ulster; Connacht Irish, now associated with Galway and Mayo, but originally spoken throughout the province of Connacht, and Munster Irish, referring to the dialects spoken in Cork, Kerry and Waterford, but originally spoken throughout that province. Many subdialects which are now extinct are well-attested, such as the dialect spoken in South-East Ulster.<sup>7</sup> Other dialects have been completely lost however, and very little is known about the dialect spoken in Leinster. Anglicized forms of place names can however provide a clue to certain pronunciations in extinct dialects. The sound change *cn* > *cr*, *gn* > *gr*, *mn* > *mr*, a feature common in the surviving dialects of Ulster and Connacht Irish, is often attested in anglicized forms of place names containing the element *cnoc* ‘hill’, even in long-anglicized parts of the country. Following *cnoc* ‘hill’, mentioned above, a diminutive form *An Cnocán* ‘the hill-ock’ in Kildare has been anglicized as *Crockaun*, and *Cnoc Sheáin* ‘Seán’s hill’ in Dublin as *Crockshane*, indicating the pronunciation of *cnoc* as *croc* was present in the dialects spoken in both areas.

### 3. Diverging ideologies north-south about Irish in the public space

With the Gaelic revival in the late 19th century, there emerged a new interest in Irish language and culture. In 1905 and 1911, the Gaelic League published lists of the Gaelic versions of anglicized names (Laoide, 1905, 1911). The founder of the Gaelic League (who was to become the first President of Ireland in 1938), Douglas Hyde, directly addressed the place-names issue in 1892:

On the whole, our place names have been treated with about the same respect as if they were the names of a savage tribe which had never before been reduced to writing, and with about the same intelligence and contempt as vulgar English squatters treat the topo-graphical nomenclature of the Red Indians (...) I hope

<sup>7</sup> See McGahan, 2009.

and trust that where it may be done without any great inconvenience a native Irish Government will be induced to provide for the restoration of our place names on something like a rational basis. (Ó Conaire, 1986, p. 166)

Even before independence and partition, the introduction of local government to Ireland in 1898 facilitated the introduction of place-name policies in sympathy with Irish cultural nationalism of the time. Names such as *Offaly* (formerly *King's County*), *Laois* (formerly *Queen's County*) and *Dún Laoghaire* (formerly *Kingstown*) were in use before they were officially sanctioned by the Free State (Ó Maolfabhail, 1992, p. 18).

The Government of Ireland act of 1920 facilitated the establishment of parliaments in Belfast and Dublin. The subsequent partition of Ireland in 1921 and the establishment of the Irish Free state the following year set the scene for divergence on place naming in the north-south jurisdictions. In the Irish republic, partition provided an Irish government sympathetic to the promotion of the Irish language in various areas of public life, including a demand for authoritative commentary on Irish forms of place names for use in official documentation. The Irish Constitution made Irish the official language of the country.

Partition and the formation of Northern Ireland led to a starkly different situation for Irish place names in the counties that remained part of the United Kingdom. Northern Ireland was created from the six north-eastern Ulster counties of (London)Derry, Tyrone, Fermanagh, Antrim, Down and Armagh. The Northern Ireland Government's resistance to the Irish language in any official capacity followed from longer-standing Unionist suspicion of and hostility towards the language, at the time of the emergence of the Gaelic League in Ulster. From the 1930s onwards "Irish was grudgingly tolerated as a foreign language within the education system but, unlike other languages, was subject to periodic abuse from Unionist politicians" (Andrews, 1997, p. 38).

The use of Irish language place names in the public space was also banned, with a 1949 Public Health and Local Government Act which prohibited Northern Irish local authorities from erecting signs in Irish (or more precisely requiring that 'they shall not cause such name [by which a street is known] to be put up or painted otherwise than in English'). This provision was repealed in 1995, making bilingual street signs lawful (but not mandatory);

and authority on erection of bilingual signage is now with Northern Ireland's eleven local councils.

The Irish language has no legal protection in Northern Ireland. Unlike the cases of Welsh in Wales (Welsh Language Act, 1993) and Scottish Gaelic in Scotland (Gaelic Language (Scotland) Act, 2005), the Irish Language has no official status in Northern Ireland and therefore there is no official requirement for Irish versions of place names for administrative or other purposes. In recent years (since 2017), disagreements over proposed legislative protection for the Irish language has been the cause of political stalemate in Northern Ireland, with the two largest political parties, the Democratic Unionist Party and Sinn Féin, unable to agree on the potential status of the Irish language. The parties re-entered government in January 2020 with the publication of the 'New Decade New Approach' agreement, which promises an Office of Identity and Cultural Expression and commissioners for both the Irish language and Ulster Scots, although bilingual signage provision remains the responsibility of councils. Despite changes in the direction of language legislation in Northern Ireland, there remains a great deal of resistance to the inclusion of Irish in the linguistic landscape (Dunlevy, 2021).

#### **4. Standard methods for researching Irish place names**

There is agreement among place-name scholars north and south on the methods for researching place names. The method of research employed by the Placenames Branch involves the collection of historical written forms of place names as well as modern local pronunciation for linguistic analysis (Mac Giolla Easpaig, 2008, p. 170). Written forms are collected from a wide range of sources, such as legal documents like Fiantis (16th and 17th century), and land deeds (mostly from the 18th and 19th centuries), surveys and maps, such as the Down Survey and the accompanying Books of Survey and Distribution (17th century) as well as maps and surveys taken on a local level to varying degrees such as estate maps. The work of the original Ordnance Survey carried out in the 1830s and 40s, particularly the Parish Namebooks, are essential to such research. A similar method of research is carried out by

the Northern Ireland Place-name Project, and the fruits of such work can be found in “The Place-names of Northern Ireland” series and the “Logainmneacha na hÉireann” series as well as on the PlacenamesNI.org and Logainm.ie websites.

## 5. Place-names research in the Republic of Ireland

A number of statutory bodies have had responsibility for place-name provision in the Republic of Ireland, starting with The Placenames Commission (now the Placenames Committee), established by the Irish Government in 1946 and tasked with “investigation of the place-names of Ireland in order to determine the correct original Irish forms of those names in so far as they can be established”, and “the preparation of lists of those names, in their Irish forms, for publication and for official use” (Ó Maolfabhail, 1992, p. 138). The Place-names Branch was established to support the Commission by the Ordnance Survey of Ireland in 1955, and it now sits within the Government department responsible for the Irish language, where it continues to undertake research into the place names of Ireland to provide authoritative Irish language versions of those place names for official and public use. Government support for place-name scholarship is reflected in legislation such as The Placenames (Irish Forms) Act 1973 and The Official Languages Act of 2003.

Logainm.ie, the Placenames Database of Ireland, was created by Gaois, Dublin City University, in collaboration with The Placenames Branch (Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media) and was launched in 2008. The site provides a comprehensive management system for data, archival records and place-names research conducted by the State. It is also a public resource. Logainm.ie’s sister website Meitheal Logainm.ie, a website which provides a crowdsourcing tool for pooling, storing and sharing data about minor place names, was launched in 2016.

A major difference between the research aims of the Placenames Branch and the Northern Ireland Place-name Project is that, due to the official status enjoyed by the Irish Language in the Republic of Ireland, the main aim of the Placename Branch’s research is to provide authoritative Irish-language

versions of all administrative place names in that jurisdiction, whereas the Northern Ireland Place-name Project has no such obligation, although they do provide Irish language forms of place names on request from local councils. This means that names of English origin in the Republic of Ireland sometimes need to be translated into Irish. An example of such is the late English coinage *Deerpark*, an extremely common townland name associated with landed estates, generally translated to *Páirc na bhFianna* in official Irish versions. In regard to names of Irish origin which are only known anglicized form, difficulty can arise where the origin of a name cannot be ascertained to any degree of certainty as Irish versions of such names still must be provided. In such cases, an official Irish form is given with a phonetic approximation in Irish orthography based on historical anglicized forms and local pronunciation. An example of such a case is *Ballyhire* in County Wexford for which *Baile Shaighir* ‘the town(land) of -?’ is given as the official Irish version of the name:

However as the etymology of the place-name is unclear, the precursor is best represented by the phonetic approximation *Baile Shaighir*. This spelling is close to the present-day spoken form and also contains s- as reflected in some of the earlier examples of the name. (Ó Cruaíoch & Mac Giolla Chomhghaill, 2016, p. 338)

## 6. Place-names research in Northern Ireland

Despite the once palpable resistance to the Irish language, and invisibility of Irish language place names in Northern Ireland discussed above, place names have been identified as being a potential component within new inclusive senses of location rather than the deconstruction of belonging, and the acceptance of ‘varieties of Irishness’ (Nash, 1999, p. 471). Indeed, various bodies have contributed to research on and promotion of historical names including the Ulster Place-Name Society (1952) and the Ulster Federation for Local Studies (1974). The Northern Ireland Place-Name Project at Queen’s University Belfast has its origins in a commission for the Department of Celtic by the Department of Environment in Northern Ireland in 1987. The main aim of the

project is to research the origins and meanings of local place names, based on a corpus of over 30,000 names of settlements and physical features. Unlike Logainm.ie in the south, the project does not enjoy long-term funding and it suffered a seven-year long hiatus when the then Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure withdrew funding from the project in 2010. In recent years (2017–2021), the project has been funded by the Department of Finance within the Northern Ireland Executive, through their project partners in Land and Property Services who provide mapping and other technical support.

The project is currently undertaking migration to a new database and website, incorporating provision in the software so that place names can be analysed on an all-island basis, in collaboration with the outputs of Logainm.ie. Further details on plans for collaboration are discussed below.

## 7. All-island collaboration

Despite the differences outlined above, there is great potential for collaboration between the two projects, not least in the potential of an all-island perspective on place names.

In 2016, 11,066 cross-references were created between the two databases. The benefits include the ability to access names in Northern Ireland via Logainm.ie as well as through PlacenamesNI.org and the sharing of archive material to the benefit of both databases. Since 2008, the Logainm project has been providing audio recordings of place names. In 2019, The Northern Ireland Place-Name Project began collaborating on this project, with sound files now available for Counties Down and Antrim, and there are plans to create provision for the other counties in due course.

Beginning in August 2021, the projects north and south will again collaborate in a project entitled “OS200: Digitally Re-Mapping Ireland’s Ordnance Survey Heritage”, funded by a UK-Ireland ‘Collaboration in the Digital Humanities’ Research Grant (AHRC-IRC). The project will collate historic Ordnance Survey maps and other materials (Memoirs, Letters and Name Books) and provide access to these materials online for academic and public use with a view

of exploring hidden and forgotten aspects of the work of the Ordnance Survey as they mapped and recorded names, landscapes and localities.

## 8. Conclusion

Place names on the island of Ireland share a common linguistic and cultural background, with the vast majority of administrative names and names of topographical features being of Irish-language origin. The partition of the island into two distinct jurisdictions in 1921 led to a divergence in the status of the Irish language on the island. Although comprehensive toponymic study has been carried out on both sides of the border, there are some distinct differences in terms of the end goals of the research. That being said, cooperation between place-name scholars from both jurisdictions has been fruitful and will continue to be an essential element of toponymic research in Ireland into the future.

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