Comment by Seán Ó Riain on Liam Mac Mathúna's Paper on Irish Names

Go raibh míle maith agat, a Liam. Bhaineas an-taitneamh as do pháipéar, agus d'fhoghlaimíos roinnt mhaith as.

Congratulations to Liam on his fine paper on an area which, as Liam points out, has not received the attention it deserves.

Summary: Liam's study examines how the indigenous system of Gaelic personal names was moulded to the requirements of a foreign, English-medium administration, and how the early 20th century cultural revival prompted the re-establishment of an Irish-language nomenclature. It sets out the native Irish system of surnames, which distinguishes formally between male and female (married/unmarried) and show how this was assimilated into the very different English system, where one surname fits all. The naming system of Modern Irish is currently under a new kind of pressure, as it reacts in different ways in the Gaeltacht and outside it to the desire of women to be no longer marked as married/unmarried by the form of their surname.

The importance of Irish names, and indeed of Celtic Names in general, was often underestimated in the past, but appears to be finally receiving recognition. For instance, in the Oxford "Concise Dictionary of First Names", 1992 edition, we read (p. viii):

> "After Christianity and Germanic royalty, the greatest influence on the stock of names in the English-speaking world has been the Celtic tradition. Many names are now used throughout the world by people who may be only vaguely aware, if at all, of their derivation from Irish, Scottish Gaelic or from Welsh. Examples are *Brian, Bridget, Donald, Duncan, Ian, Kenneth, Kevin, Neil* and *Sheila* from Irish and Scotish Gaelic and *Gareth, Gladys, Gwendolen* and *Trevor* from Welsh."

The antiquity of the Irish naming system is also gaining recognition. In Kenneth Allen's "Family Names in Australia and New Zealand", we read (p. 12):

> "When surnames began to be adopted in England, Ireland already had its own system."

Here my first question to Liam: Woulfe in his 1923 "Sloinnte Gael is Gall", p xx, writes:

> "It is a remarkable fact … that Ireland was the first country after the fall of the Western Empire to adopt hereditary surnames."

Q1: *To what extent has Woulfe's statement been borne out by subsequent research?*

As we are discussing names, perhaps you will permit a remark on the name of tradition whose names this paper discussed. I note Liam's use of the adjective "Irish" rather than "Gaelic" to describe Ireland's distinctive names. This is, admittedly, less a problem in English than in many Continental languages, including German – I've lost count of the

people who say "*Meinen Sie Gälisch*?" when I mention "*die irische Sprache*", and I usually resist the temptation to reply "*Sprechen Sie Germanisch*?"

When the colonial administration in late 19th Century Ireland finally and grudgingly permitted the teaching of Irish in primary schools, it referred to the language first as "Celtic" and then as "Gaelic". The term "Irish" was avoided, as it might have encouraged separatist nationalism. Prof. Máirtín Ó Murchú remarked in 1985:

> "In Ireland the word *Gaelic* … has a distinctly pejorative connotation when used of the language, its use being intended to imply that the language is of peripheral status in present-day Ireland."

In addition to this connotation, the term *Gaelic* lead to confusion between Irish and Scottish Gaelic, which are generally considered 2 languages and not 1. It would be strange to refer to Chancellor Schröder and President Bush as "**2 speakers of Germanic**". These arguments apply to Continental languages as much as they do to English, and it is heartening to note the slow growth of the term "Irisch" to refer to the language in German. To give 2 examples: my German version of the Constitution of Ireland states

> "*Das Irische ist als die Nationalsprache erste Amtssprache*".

In 1999 the largest Irish-German dictionary was called simply „*Wörterbuch Irisch-Deutsch*".

And, coming back to personal names, Ó Corráin and Maguire's 1981 "*Gaelic Personal Names*" had become simply "*Irish Names*" when re-issued in 1990.

A number of points from Liam's paper are particularly striking. In a footnote on p 6, referring to Brian Friel's famous play "*Translations*", he mentions "the playwright's acceptance of the historical inevitability of this process, the same ideological viewpoint as that of the general Field Day publishing endeavor. This ties in with the point I made this morning concerning the 1991 Field Day Anthology.

Two short quotations illustrate both the colonial mind, and the Irish reaction to it.

In a 1982 pamphlet Gwen Mulholland quotes the words of James I, from an "Act of the Privy Council 1616":

> "*Forasmekle as the kingis Majestie haveing a speciall care and regaird that … the vulgar Inglish toung be universallie plantit, and the Irishe language, which is one of the cheif and principall causes of barbaritie and incivilitie amongis the inhabitants of the Isles and Heylandis, may be aboleit and removit*;"

The view of the author of "Irish Surnames/Sloinnte na hÉireann" 1997, Seán de Bhulbh, is worth noting. He writes (my translation):

> *"Every Irish surname was turned into worthless gibberish, an act of cultural vandalism akin to blowing up the "Musée du Louvre" or burning "La Capella Sistina" to the ground."*

Liam refers to the duality of name forms, i.e. the idea that all names must have an Irish and an English form. I agree with his conclusion that the tendency for one person to use two forms of his/her name is lessening. However it seems to be even more strongly established in Scotland than in Ireland. Col. Eoghan Ó Néill once told me that he asked a Scot why she did not use the Scottish Gaelic form of her name on all occasions, and received the reply: "Ní bhaineann sé le mo chultúr." (It is not part of my culture). In the light of the above quotation from James I, one begins to understand what she meant.

A number of other points from Liam's paper are of particular interest: For instance, the propensity of the English-speaking Irish to use an Irish first name with an anglicized surname. Liam gives us the example of the hybrid Pádraig Pearse. Names such as Seán Murphy or **Máire Kelly** are very common, but anglicized first names with Irish surnames are very rare: John Ó Murchú or **Mary Ní Cheallaigh**. It would be interesting to speculate on the reason for this. My own impression is that it may stem from the historic diglossia of English for official purposes and Irish as the language of the home and hearth. My father's first name, officially John, often became Seán when used by his siblings, particularly when they wished to convey a positive emotional connotation. It may also be an indication that official Ireland did not keep pace with the general population in the process of regaelicization of names.

The amazing thoroughness of the Anglicization process of Irish personal and place names, which sometimes goes much further than its equivalent in Scotland, is noteworthy. For instance the form "*lough*", where Scotland conserves the traditional spelling and pronunciation "*loch*", as in "Loch Ness". The "lough" form would appear to have little in its favor: it is longer than the Irish word; it is less clear how it should be pronounced (i.e. to rime with "rough", or "through" or "bough" – in fact it does not rime with any of the –ough words.); and it is neither Irish nor English. The only explanation for the coining of this and many other such forms appears to be the desire of the colonized to obliterate their own naming system, and indeed everything which reminded them that they were Irish.

The change from English to Irish and the anglicization or sometimes translation of Irish place and family names often produced bizarre results. For example, the wholesale translation of the traditional Irish name *Mac Gabhann* as Smith in the Cavan-Monaghan areas gives the false impression that there was huge English colonization of this area – one easily overlooks the fact that most Irish people called Smith are really translated Mac Gabhanns, and not necessarily of English descent. Place names fared no better: a village in north Co. Dublin which is aptly described by its Irish name "*Fuar-Chnoc*" (cold hill), is completely garbled in its anglicized version to become "*Four Knox*"!

As I have always used only the Irish form of my name only, my personal experience of such usage, in both the Irish and international contexts, may be of interest. My apologies if this appears subjective, but I believe there is no objectivity for Irish people in such matters: one either uses an Irish name, or an anglicized version of it, and there is no neutral form.

Liam remarks on p 9 that "Irish language versions are preferred by a significant minority". My impression of the growing use of Irish names in the Irish diplomatic service bears this out: it is certainly more common than in the general population. To mention a few colleagues: **Seán Ó hUiginn, Antóin Mac Unfraidh, Daithí Ó Ceallaigh, Paula Ní Shlatarra, Gearóid Ó Broin, Máirtín Ó Fainín, Colm Ó Floinn, Úna Ní Dhúill, Deirdre Ní Fhallúin, Lesley Ní Bhriain, Clíodna Ní Mhurchú, Alma Ní Choigligh, Sinéad Nic Coitir, Breandán Ó Caollaí, Seán Ó hAodha, Cian Ó Lionáin, Stiofán Ó Dálaigh, Colm Ó Conaill, Earnán Ó Cléirigh.** A minority, certainly, but a growing minority.

My birth certificate showed an anglicized form of my name, but at the age of 12 I convinced my parents to formally re-register my birth, to legally eliminate any anglicizations of my name, and convinced my younger brother to do likewise. When, still a student, I stood as a candidate in local elections in Tipperary, I was advised several times that it would be electorally wiser to re-anglicize my name. I stuck with the Irish name, and lost by 12 votes!

The question of names can be quite emotional for Irish people. At a seminar on "Irish identity in an integrating Europe" at the Embassy here in Berlin 2 years ago, I was strongly criticized by a young Irish woman for using an Irish name. I refrained from immediately giving her the response she would have got from me 20 years ago, to see what other reactions her attack would provoke. A number of speakers defended the right of everybody to choose the version of their own name they wished to use, but the most interesting reaction came from an Irish journalist then working with Reuters in Berlin, Clifford **Coonan**. He wrote the Irish forms of his surname, **Ó Cuanáin**, in large letters on his name-sign, and turned it round so that the Irish form faced the audience.

There are also amusing aspects.

When the former President of the National University of Ireland, Galway, **Colm Ó hEocha**, was appointed chairman of the New Ireland Forum in the 1980s, a BBC correspondent was heard to remark: "The Irish have done this deliberately: choosing a Forum chairman whose name we can't pronounce."

I had an acquaintance in Australia whose name was Sean St. Leger, who, like most Americans, wrote "Seán" without its accent mark, or fada. He was in his 70s when we first met, but as soon as I told him that "sean" is the Irish for "old", he promptly re-instated the accent mark in his name!

We have 2 daughters, **Aisling Ní Riain** and **Ciara Ní Riain**. A number of letters from their schools in Berlin have been addressed to "**Herr Dr. Ní Riain**". Our second daughter, Ciara, was born in Poland. After some initial surprise as to why I wanted to give my daughter a different surname from my own, there was no difficulty in having her registered as Ciara Ní Riain, although this was possibly the first time that Irish names in their full complexity were ever registered in Warsaw. I simply mentioned that the Ó Riain/Ní Riain dichotomy was our equivalent of the Polish **Kowalski/Kowalska**!

My wife, who is Swiss, uses the Ó Riain form, as she fears that the traditional Bean Uí Riain form could convey the false impression that her Irish is fluent. On one occasion she was admitted to a hospital in Dublin for a few days, and overheard some elderly patients saying that "Ó Riain must be the Swiss form of Ryan"!

A final question to Liam: the absence of native Irish words for "Mum" and "Dad" – the Táin forms "popa" and "muime" are used for foster-parents – would appear to be evidence that children normally addressed the parents by their first names in ancient Irish society.

Q2: *Are you aware of any further evidence that this was the norm?*

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