

## Traces

It seems it is an innate human activity to question and delve into the history of our ancestors in order to unearth stories from our family backgrounds and in a sense most significantly to more fully understand ourselves and how we relate to others. From birth, parents note both the physical and personal characteristics their newborn child may share with themselves or their forbearers. It is certainly common to hear amongst Irish families 'Thank God she hasn't got her father's nose' 'Or look, he's got big potatoe hands like your farmer grandfather'. Aside from physical features shared personality traits among family members, like a sense of humour or interest in sporting activity strengthens the sense of belonging within one's own family or clan.

There is a strong desire to trace the link between the present and past and pinpoint how we fit in and where we belong on our own family tree, each of which is completely unique. Often identification by surname is the first stage in locating and identifying your ancestors because a surname provides that vital link with the past. Yet this is not common to all cultures as for instance in African cultures, for example in Rwanda, the concept of the surname does not exist. Each child at the time of their birth is bestowed their own individually created name which may perhaps denote the time or season of birth, or a distinctive physical feature or indeed as an omen of good fortune a strong personal quality such as courage or also a wish for future prosperity.

In Ireland surnames reflect a rich history and the variety of people who have settled in the country. Ireland was one of the first countries to develop a system of hereditary surnames - names, that is, which were handed down from one generation to another. They began to be widely used in the eleventh century as the population grew and first names became an insufficient means of identification.

At first, Irish surnames were formed by adding, for example, 'Mac' to the father's personal name or 'O' to that of any earlier ancestor. For example, 'O'Neill' simply meant 'descendant of Niall (Neil)'. After a while, however, other types of surnames were adopted which were not based on personal names, for example 'Mac Nulty', which meant 'son of the Ulsterman'.

Today's surnames have numerous diverse beginnings. From the first group of settlers who had an impact on surnames the Anglo-Normans in the twelfth century these names included Fitzgerald, Butler, Walsh, Power to the period of the English Plantation where English families by name of Spenser, Hyde, Browne were 'planted' or settled on large areas of land mainly in the midlands of Ireland in the sixteenth century. Certain surnames not only bear associations with particular regions in the country but also indicate perhaps the original religious persuasion of the bearer. For example, at the beginning of the seventeenth century the largest settlement to date occurred. Both English and Scottish people were given incentives to set up home in Ulster resulting in thousands migrating to this province of Ireland. Not only did the

surnames like Patterson, Graham, Ferguson spring to life so to did their Presbyterian way of life characterised by a strong work ethic.

The process of Anglicisation, combined with the fact that before the twentieth century illiteracy was widespread, means that many Irish surnames can be spelt in a variety of ways. Consider, for example, the surname Johnston. Variants of this include Johnstone, Johnston, Johnson, MacEion (son of John), MacOwen, MacKeon, and MacKeown. The surname Kearns can be variously rendered as Cairns, Carns, Cearnas, Kerns and Kearnes.

Through the variety of diverse surnames in existence in Ireland today we can learn the story of our ancestors. Clearly immigration and the settlement of people from other lands is not a new phenomenon for our island. In searching for the hidden meaning in the Anglicized forms of not only surnames but also place names around the country we have the opportunity to explore the roots of our shared European heritage. It is also encouraging to the new wave of modern immigration to Ireland that this has process of adjustment has passed before. There is a sense of fossilisation of cultural heritages layer upon layer each influencing the other. Today it is more difficult to classify a person's country of origin solely by their surname and indeed in the case of many African who come here to live, for basic living purposes like opening a bank account they must appropriate our tradition of identity recognition and adopt a made up surname if they wish to participate fully in Irish society. The new generation will undoubtedly blend this next generation of accessorial genealogy into our ever expanding concept of what it means to be Irish in today's globalised world.