

Oâ€™s By many Other Names: Common Myths About Irish Surnames

By Marie E. Daly

“All serial killers drank milk as children. My neighbors drank milk as children. Therefore, my neighbors must be serial killers. Or, all milk drinkers are serial killers.” Some might have extended the argument to say, “Therefore, milk causes homicidal tendencies.” Anyone who took Logic 101 in college knows about this fallacious argument, which erroneously applies the characteristic of a small subset (serial killers) to another subset (neighbors) or to a large population (all milk drinkers). But similar errors of logic sometimes appear in genealogies. Many myths about surnames have been generalized from observations about particular families. Genealogists err in relying on these myths or assumptions instead of searching for evidence, in making omissions while searching for surnames, or in discarding *bona fide* ancestors from the family tree. The following is a far-from-exhaustive list of myths and assumptions that sometimes lead the beginning genealogist astray.

Many of the Sullivans came from the Beara peninsula in County Cork. My ancestor is named Sullivan. Therefore, my ancestor came from the Beara peninsula.

While the Sullivan ancestor may have originated from Beara, there were still plenty of Sullivans elsewhere in Ireland—Kerry, Limerick, Galway and Tipperary, for instance. Genealogists cannot look at a map showing the distribution of surnames in Ireland and deduce that their ancestors came from a particular place. Records providing the origin of an Irish immigrant ancestor most often are found in the New World country, so genealogists must focus their initial research there rather than in Ireland.

This person spells his name Matthew Dailey. My ancestor spelled his name Daley. Therefore, this person cannot be my ancestor.

Irish surnames were recorded by hurried and careless bureaucrats, who misspelled and even made up names. The literacy rate among nineteenth-century Irish immigrants fleeing hunger and privation was low. As a result of their indigence, many were poorly educated and could not write their names. They signed documents with the letter *X*. Matthew Daley’s surname was spelled Daly, Daley, Daily, Dailey, Dayley, or Dally in various nineteenth-century records. By 1900, his son had changed his name to Daly. By searching for this individual under a single spelling, a researcher would not find many valuable sources. The problem of variant spelling is so common to surname indexes that a special indexing system called “soundex ” was devised to lump similar sounding names together. Thus, the surname Daly in all its forms would be found under D400 in a soundex index. Unfortunately, not all indexes use soundex codes, so genealogists must search under many different spellings of a surname. Genealogists must also remember to search to include the possibility of the O’ or Mc being added or dropped. For instance, McCarthy should also be researched under McCarty, McCartney, Carty and Carthy. A perusal of the O’Sullivan surname should include Sullivan as well. So researchers must extend their scope to include any and all variant spellings of surnames.

All MacDonalds are Scottish and all McDonalds are Irish.

This maxim is useless to the genealogist since there are so many exceptions. For example, in Prince Edward Island, records of the Scottish clan spell the name McDonald. Furthermore, in the face of prejudice, our ancestors may have changed the spelling of their surnames to acquire some advantage or avoid some stigma. Thus an Irishman named Owen McDonnell may have changed his name to John MacDonald in the New World. Walsh might become Welch, Mahoney become Matthews, and so on.

Many people with the surname Mullin are Irish. Therefore, the Mayflower voyager Priscilla Mullins was Irish.

Actually no one knows where Priscilla Mullins was born, but her father was most certainly English. In a misplaced quest for status, some Irish-Americans have claimed national icons as their own. (Their energies might be better spent drawing attention to the real heroism of Irish immigrants.)

The surname Kelley indicates a Protestant family, while the surname Kelly indicates a Catholic one.

The particular spelling of a surname can result from the choice of a bureaucrat, the illiteracy of an ancestor, changing customs over time, or the preference of one family member. Members of the same family do spell their names differently, and orthography has nothing to do with religion. The presence of a variant spelling within a town may, however, sometimes— but not always— help distinguish one family from another. When using census records, genealogists should be aware that the information within a particular town may have been gathered by different census takers who used their own idiosyncratic spelling system. Analysis of handwriting is one way of determining that more than one census taker was at work in the same area.

Neil McGuigan cannot be the brother of James Goodwin.

Before the nineteenth century, most people in the west of Ireland spoke in the Irish language. Surnames and given names had not been anglicized. We had ancestors named Grainne O Maille, Diarmuid MacCartaig, Eilis Ni Feargail, Murraid O Flaitbeartaig, Sile Ni Suileabain, and Concobar O Docartaig, instead of Grace O'Malley, Jeremiah McCarthy, Elizabeth Farrell, Morgan Flaherty, Julia Sullivan, and Cornelius Doherty. Anglicized surnames often appear remarkably different from the original Irish name. The name McGuigan became Goodwin or Goodfellow. One brother may have chosen the Irish spelling, another the English. Thus a Neil McGuigan could very well have had a brother named James Goodwin.

A man named James Mickey Owen could not be a member of the Kelly family.

In some areas of Ireland, certain surnames were so common, an informal naming system based upon extended family relationships, called patronymics, were used to distinguish families. In the parish of Ballinascreen, Co. Derry, the Kellys were “Mickey Owens” and “Johnny Pauls,” after grandfathers and great-grandfathers. Other common names in certain places developed patronymics: Dohertys in Inishowen, Co. Donegal, Mahoneys in Bandon, Donovans in Clonakilty, and Sullivans in Castletownbere, Co. Cork, and so on. In other cases, a word referring to a physical description was added to distinguish the person: Roe or Ruagh, Dubh, or Bán for red, black, or light hair, respectively. In the nineteenth-century land census, Griffith's Valuation, one may see words like “hernish” or “more” in italics after a surname. The name, John McDevitt (hernish), in the parish of Lower Fahan, Co. Donegal, indicates his family had been the herenach or church wardens in medieval times. “More” meant the individual was large. Local and parish histories often provide information about the patronymics of the area's leading families.

This exercise in Logic 101 was presented to help beginning genealogists focus on the true work of tracing their families. They must realize that easy assumptions about their ancestors' surnames cannot substitute for basic research and hard work. Nevertheless, some knowledge about an ancestor's clan or surname may help identify variant names and spellings. The following list of books and Websites may provide some information regarding particular surnames.

A number of books dealing with Irish surnames and clans have been published over the years, and many of these can be found in local libraries and LDS branch libraries. The first three books were written by the Chief Herald of Ireland, an early expert on Irish family names. Books can be purchased from bookstores in Ireland or the U. S. The website [Irish Internet Hub](#) provides a list of online bookstores but omits the famous Dublin bookstore [Hodges Figgis](#).

- *Irish Families: Their Names, Arms and Origins*, by Edward MacLysaght (Dublin: H. Figgis, 1957).
- *Supplement to Irish Families*, by Edward MacLysaght (Dublin: Helicon, 1964).
- *More Irish Families*, by Edward MacLysaght (Blackrock, Dublin and Portland, Oreg.: Irish Academic Press, 1996).
- *Irish Names and Surnames*, by Rev. Patrick Woulfe (Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing Company, 1923, reprinted 1993).
- *Irish Family Histories*, by Ida Grehan, Knight of Glin, and Donal Begley (Boulder, Colo.: Roberts Rinehart Publishers, 1993).
- *Book of Irish Names: First, Family and Place Names*, by Ida Grehan and P. W. Joyce (New York: Sterling Publishing Company, 1989).
- *The Clans and Families of Ireland: the Heritage and Heraldry of Irish Clans and Families*, by John Grenham (Goldenbridge, Dublin: Gill and MacMillan, 1993).

- *The Book of Irish Families Great and Small* , by Michael O’Laughlin (Kansas City, Mo.: Irish Genealogical Foundation, 1992).
- *Families of County Clare* , by Michael C. O’Laughlin (Kansas City, Mo.: Irish Genealogical Foundation, 1994).
- *Families of County Kerry* , by Michael C. O’Laughlin (Kansas City, Mo.: Irish Genealogical Foundation, 1994).
- *Family Names of County Cork* , by Diarmuid O’Murchadha (Dun Laoghaire, Dublin: Glendale Press, 1985).

The Websites of a number of clan associations publish a general history of the surname, host clan gatherings, and provide internet bulletin boards for people to post queries. The bulletin boards are particularly helpful, since they narrow the field to people interested in that surname only.

[TIARA](#)

Clans and Names of Ireland

[The Tara Hall of Cyberspace](#)

[Clans of Ireland, Ltd.](#)

Usenet Newsgroup for Irish Surnames: [soc.genealogy.surnames.ireland](#)