

Researching the placenames of Co. Clare: methodology, sources, restoration

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The Placenames Branch is part of the Department of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs. Prior to 2000, the office was attached to the Ordnance Survey of Ireland. The function of the Placenames Branch, in co-operation with *An Coimisiún Logainmneacha*, a Government appointed advisory body, is to research the placenames of Ireland in order to provide the correct Irish forms of those names for publication and official use. I would firstly like to give an overview of the research we have undertaken to date on the toponymy of Co. Clare and I also wish to say a little about the official status of Irish placenames.

All of the post-towns within the county were researched initially and a provisional list of their Irish forms was published in 1960, circa ninety names in all, encompassing the towns, villages and other less important centres of population. Following a number of emendations, the official names of the post-towns of Ireland were published in *Ainmneacha Gaeilge na mBailte Poist* in 1969 and in 1975, by order under the Place-Names (Irish Forms) Act of 1973, the Irish names of post-towns within the State were given legal status. The same names, as well as a number of the important landscape features, are also recorded in the *Gazetteer of Ireland*, which was published in 1989. The Place-Names (Irish Forms) Act has now been superseded by the Official Languages Act 2003.

In the course of the 1980s research on the toponymy of Co. Clare was initially directed towards the provision of Irish names for the Ordnance Survey's 1:2500 series of large-scale metric maps. One of the large geographical areas that was resurveyed at that time included all of Co. Limerick as well as parts of the adjoining counties, including south-east Clare. The area of toponymic research gradually expanded with the result that by 1987, the authoritative Irish forms of over 1,100 townland names and about 50 parish names in Co. Clare had been established, .i.e. slightly over half the traditional administrative names of the county. Authoritative Irish names were thus provided for townlands, parishes, baronies and significant geographical features. The townland and parish names of the following areas have yet to be systematically examined, the baronies of Burren, Corcomroe, Ibrickan and Moyarta along the western seaboard, Inchiquin Barony to the East of the Burren and also the parishes of Clonrush, Inishcaltra and Kilbarron in the barony of Leitrim, which were restored to Co. Clare from Co. Galway under the Local Government (Ireland) Act of 1898. A start has been made on the remaining names: In 2003 we collected in electronic format all relevant information, that is available on the unresearched townlands and parishes in the hand-written Ordnance Survey parish namebooks of 1839 circa. The original manuscripts are now kept in the National Archives. We have also recorded the local pronunciation of all such administrative names within the county, as discussed below in the final paragraph.

During the 1990s we provided some Irish names for the Ordnance Survey 1:50 000 series of maps, entitled the *Discovery Series* or **Sraith Eolais**. Unfortunately, it was the policy at the time to record traditional administrative names, such as townlands, in English only in non-Gaeltacht areas, in other words the most common type of name on these maps is not written in Irish outside of the Gaeltachtaí.

The Ordnance Survey Ireland Act (2001), has been amended in the Official Languages Act (2003), and there is now an obligation, 'to depict placenames and ancient features in the

national mapping and related records and databases in the Irish language or in the English and Irish languages'.

The Placenames Branch has also recommended the Irish forms of various other categories of names within Co. Clare, such as important river names in conjunction with a signage scheme undertaken by the Central Fisheries Board in 1995, all District Electoral Division names, names of important archaeological, historical and environmental sites and many other place-names that are requested on an ongoing basis for translation by Government Departments, State agencies, local authorities and the general public. We are also involved in a relatively new bilingual townland signage scheme applicable to designated CLAR ('Ceantair Laga Ard Riachtanais') areas, encompassing parts of Co. Clare.

Although street-names are the responsibility of the relevant local authority, we have received requests for assistance and have provided Irish forms of the street names for various towns in Co. Clare, such as Kilkee, Kilrush and Ennis. The assistance of local historians is of benefit in helping to elucidate the origin of certain street-names. One example that springs to mind is *Harmony Row* in Ennis, the origin of which was explained to us by a local historian, Seán Spellisey—it took its name from an early nineteenth century town house, Harmony Hall.

We are also often consulted on the translation of new housing estate-names within the county. Names that are unconnected with the topography, history or landscape of the area can pose problems for the translator. For instance, we received a request from Ennis Urban District Council in 1997 to translate *Abbeyville* and *Springfield Orchard*, two new housing developments near Ennis. The would be translator was left to ponder on the precise meaning of the French word *ville* in this context, or whether spring meant a well, a season or was it a surname? There is also the possibility that names such as these were taken from a different location. We were able to establish that such was the case in regard to the private housing development *Willsgrove* near Ennis. Having requested further information on the origin of the name before attempting a translation, we were informed that the developer had chosen the name of a village called *Willsgrove* in Co. Roscommon. That particular name is a fairly modern coinage: in Lewis's *Topographical Dictionary* (1837 vol. I 118), *Willsgrove*, the property of W. R. Will Esq., is listed amongst the 'principal seats' in the parish of Ballintober, Co. Roscommon. The original Irish name of *Willsgrove*, Co. Roscommon has no connection with the English name: it is **Cluanach**, meaning 'a place of wet pastureland'. Therefore, in this instance, should one transfer both Irish and English names from their traditional location in Co. Roscommon to Co. Clare?

There is one further example of the transferral of a placename from one geographical location to another that I wish to mention. This concerns the village of *Boston* near the Galway border in north Clare. In the Ordnance Survey namebook of 1839 (parish of Kilkeedy), the name 'Boston village' is classified as a 'fancy name' or 'nickname' and it is described as consisting of 'a few cabins situated on the property of the marquis of Thomond'. *Boston* is in origin an English placename, the name of a town in Lincolnshire, which was subsequently re-used in North America. Its appearance in Co. Clare does not pre-date the eighteenth or early nineteenth century. The Irish name of the village on modern signposts is **Móinín na gCloigeann**. This is without historical foundation and arose, I assume, from confusion with the townland of *Moneennagliggin North or Boston* near Cratloe in South Clare. The latter was called *Cragganaclugin* (i. **Creagán an Chloiginn** probably) in a document of 1659 and **Móinín na gCloigeann** in 1839 signifying 'the little bog of the skulls'. It is obvious therefore that the Irish name of Boston near Cratloe has been erroneously transferred to North Clare.

I now wish to turn to some of the more traditional names of the county. Clare itself as the name of the county is no older than 1574, when (and I quote from *Calendar of the Carew Manuscripts, 1601-3*) ‘Thomond in the one county to be named the county of Clare... containeth whole Thomond’ (Brewer & Bullen, 1870, 471-2). It is of interest that *Thomond* was not chosen as the name of the county. This was due to the importance of the castle and town of *Clare* at the time: ‘This countie beareth the name of the Castle of Clare belonging to the Earle of Thomond’ we are informed in *The Description of Ireland in 1598* (Hogan, 1878, 124). One can gauge an idea of its importance from references such as that found in *Annála Rioghachta Éireann* or the Annals of the Four Masters in the year 1558 to Clonroad, Bunratty and ‘An Clár Mór’ as chief towns of the country [of Thomond]: ‘Cluain Ramhfoda, Bunraite 7 An Clár Mór puirt oireachais na tíre’ (O’Donovan, 1856 V 1562). There are early references to a ford called Áth Dá Charadh: for instance the boundaries of Corca Bhaiscinn are described in the The Book of Lecan manuscript as ‘ota Lem Chonculaind co lar Atha da Chara’, in the Book of Ballymote version of the same text this becomes ‘Clar Atha Dachara’, and in another manuscript (TCD H.3.17) we are informed that ‘Ath Deachara’ is the place where ‘the River Fergus meets the sea’ (see Ó Riain, Ó Murchadha, Murray, 2003, 126). **Áth Dá Charadh** means ‘the ford of two weirs’. From its description and location, the ford may well have been at the present bridge of Clarecastle where the tidal River Fergus divides into two streams. The short vowels *o* and *a* often interchange in Irish. Consequently, other examples of the same word in the placenames of Co. Clare are **Ceann Cora** (or **Coradh**), the famous O’Brien stronghold at Killaloe, **Gort na Cora** in the Parish of Killadysert, meaning ‘the field of the weir’, *Corravorrin* on the north-eastern side of Ennis where a bridge spans the Fergus—the latter possibly means ‘the weir of **Bairr(fh)ionn**’—**Cora Finne**, meaning ‘white ford’, if *finne* is the petrified feminine, genitive, singular of the adjective *fionn* (i.e. ‘of the white ford’ originally), or ‘ford of brightness’, if *finne* is an abstract noun.

The earliest contemporary reference to *Clare* as a placename is a Latin entry recorded in the *Annals of Inisfallen* in the year 1314, ‘Donnchad Ó Briain took a great prey from the enemy beyond Clár’ (Mac Airt, 1951, 417; translated by the editor). The Augustinian abbey of SS. Peter and Paul is referred to as **Mainistir in Chláir** in the *Caithréim*, or ‘triumph’, of Toir-dhealbhach which deals with the political and military turmoil in Thomond in the latter half of the thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries and which was probably composed in the mid-fourteenth century. There are two possible explanations of **Clár** in this instance. One was recorded by Eugene Curry in the Ordnance Survey Letters of 1839, ‘The name of this Parish (Clareabbey) as well as the county, is popularly believed, and I think with good reason, from a board or plank, which was placed across the River Fergus at this place... before a bridge had been built there’ (O’Flanagan, 1928, II 44/113). The second meaning was given by John O’Donovan, another of the Irish scholars employed by the Ordnance Survey at the time, who translated **Clár** as ‘plain’ in his edition of the Annals of the Four Masters. This seems more plausible, given that the land is remarkably flat in this area. The latter meaning is common in placenames, such as **Clár Chlainne Mhuiris** / *Claremorris* in Co. Mayo for instance. The diminutive form, **Cláirín** / *Claureen*, is the name of a townland by the River Fergus on the north-western side of Ennis.

I would like to say a little more about the placename *Thomond*, which is derived from **Tuadhmhumba**, literally ‘North Munster’. I wish to draw your attention to its pronunciation in Modern Irish. In the poetry of Aindrias Mac Cruitín for instance, **Tuamhain** rhymes with *uaigh*, *buad[h]* (Ó Luaighnigh, 1935, 3) and equally in *Cúirt an Mheon Oíche* **Tuamhain** has been reduced to one syllable (Ó Murchú, 1982, 22 etc.). This is as a result of a regular phonetic change to the sounds of Southern Irish dialects, whereby medial *-bh-*, *-mh-* when not followed by a long vowel was lost. Another such example is **Muiríúch Cille**, **Tuaithe**, or

Murrooghkilly, *-toohy* in English, near Blackhead, which is a dialectal realisation of **Murbhach** meaning a level stretch of land by the sea-coast. A short vowel preceding the lost consonant is lengthened (or becomes a diphthong), as is illustrated by the following place-names: *Toonagh* or **Tamhnach** in the parish of Clooney, meaning ‘a grassy or arable patch of land’ and recorded in 1839 as **Túnach** in the Ordnance Survey parish namebook, and also *Pollagoona* or **Poll an Ghamhna** in North Eastern Clare, ‘the hole of the calf’.

The same phonetic change is, I believe, evident in the placename Clonroad, one of the important strongholds of the O’Briens, which was reputedly built in the early thirteenth century by Donnchadh Cairbreach Ó Briain according to Caithréim Thoirdhealbháigh (= Cluain Rámfada O’Grady, 1929, 2). The placename is recorded in the Annals of Inisfallen and in the Annals known as Mac Carthaigh’s Book under the year 1311, as Cluain Ramada and Cluain Ramfada respectively. In the accompanying translation of the text, the first example has been standardised by its editor as Cluain Rámfhata (Mac Airt, 1951, 407) the second example has been standardised as Cluain Rámhfhada (Ó hInnse, 1947, 109). As lenited *f*, (i.e. *-fhada*), is not pronounced in Irish, there would be no difference in pronunciation between Rámhata and Rámhfhada. Later evidence of the placename, such as that provided by various English documents, shows that the medial consonant *-mh-* of the second element was no longer pronounced by the latter half of the sixteenth century at the latest, e.g. Clonrawde in a list of castles compiled about 1580 (see Ó hÓgáin, 1938, 120).

It is generally assumed that Cluain Rámhfhada is the correct form of the name, and it is explained as ‘long rowing’ (Joyce, 1869, 442). If this interpretation is correct, **rámh-fhada* must be regarded as a compound word with initial stress, in order to explain the later historic forms of the name, **Cluain Ráda**, **Rúda**, **Ród(a)** as discussed in the next paragraph. Another possible explanation is to assume that the noun *rámhad* is the underlying second element. This word has two meanings in Early Irish law texts, ‘a cleared area in front of a king’s fortress’, or ‘a road’ (Kelly, 1997, 543–4). It is probable that the same word occurs in the following obsolete placename found in the *Book of Survey and Distribution* for Co. Clare, Donroade (Simington, Mac Giolla Choille, 1967 526). It was located, seemingly, within the modern townland of *Cregmoher* (= *Cahirnemohor* in *Book of Survey and Distribution*), parish of Rath.

The placename is written **Cluainramhadh** (variation **Cluainriumhadh**) in an edition of the poems composed by the eighteenth century poet Seon Ó hUaithnín (Ó hAnluain, 1973, 58 & 80). The metrical assonance of the poem requires the sound *ú* in the syllable following **Cluain**. I have seen but one of the manuscripts in which the original poem was written, namely R.I.A. 24 B 11, and **Cluanramhad** is the spelling employed by its scribe, Brian Ó Luanaigh. I would suggest that **Cluain Rúd(a)** was the intended pronunciation. The two lines of poetry would thus read: ‘Is do réitigh mo chúis ar aonach an Túrtaigh / Ar aonach Chluain *Rúda is an Chláir thíos’. This proposal is supported by a later Clare composition entitled *Iománaithe Chill Choirne* (‘the hurlers of Kilcorney’), published in *Irisleabhar na Gaedhilge* in 1904, in which the second word, **(Cluain) Rúda**, rhymes with the placename **Cúige** and with *bhuaileamair*. The realisation of **Cluain Rámhata** as **Cluain Rúda** can be compared with the pronunciation of various words recorded in the Irish of Co. Clare, such as *rámhann* ‘a spade’ which was pronounced *rín* and *lámhach* ‘to shoot’ pronounced *lúch* (Ua Súilleabháin 1994, 488). The aforementioned author has suggested that that the *á* vowel (long) developed to *ó*, which further progressed to *ú* in this environment. This is supported by an observation of Nils Holmer’s in his study of *The Dialects of Co. Clare*—the material for which he collected in 1946—regarding the pronunciation of the aforementioned verbal noun *lámhach*, which, he noted ‘is variously pronounced *lúch*, *lóch*, or *lách* (all with a nasal vowel) in the various parts

of the county' (Holmer, 1962, 10; see also O'Rahilly, 1942, 133). There is in fact evidence that (**Cluain**) **Rámhada** was also pronounced **Ród(a)**. This ó sound occurs in a poem of uncertain authorship attributed in manuscripts to Seon Ó hUaithnín ('Aguisín: Ag moladh Éamoinn Coimín', Ó hAnluain 1973, 81): 'Ó Inis Chluain Rámhada [pronounced *Róda] go teora Mhuirisín / Fhóidre, an firín sásta'. The local Irish form of the placename was recorded as **Cluain Romhad** in the Ordnance Survey namebook of 1839 (Drumcliff Parish).

I now wish to refer to Ennis, the county's principal town. The earliest references are to the Franciscan Friary which was founded in 1247 according, for instance, to the Annals of the Four Masters (O'Donovan, 1856, III 326), 'Mainistir Innse i dTuadhmmhumhain'. Other possible foundation dates are discussed in Gwynn & Hadcock (1970, 249-50). The placename is usually referred to as **Inis**, without qualification, in Irish sources, and occasionally as **Inis Cluana Rámhada** with variations, such as **Inis Chluain Róda** above. The primary meaning of *inis* is an island, whether in the sea, such as **Inis Caorach** or *Mutton Island* in English, in a lake such as **Inis Cealtra** / *Inishcaltra*, or **Inse Chrónáin** / *Inchicronan* or in a river such as **Inis Cathaigh** / *Scattery Island*, **Inis Tiobraid** / *Inishtubbrid* and various other islands at the confluence of the Rivers Fergus and Shannon. A secondary meaning is that of 'river meadow' and this seems a more likely explanation in the present instance, referring to the low-lying land by the Fergus. **Inis Díomáin** / *Ennistimon* also conveys the latter meaning. *Inse*, the obsolete accusative and dative form of the word *inis*, (from Old Irish *insi*), often replaces *inis*; the aforementioned *Inchicronan* is an example of this, as much of the earlier evidence in Latin documentation represents **Inis Crónáin**, such as *Inis Cronayn* in a Latin text dated 1443 (Gleeson, 1943, 29). In contrast, the contemporary Irish form of 1839 is recorded as **Inse Chrónáin** in the Ordnance Survey namebook (Inchicronan Parish).

I have discussed heretofore a number of placenames that illustrate how the pronunciation of placenames is liable to change in the course of time, and that these changes are part of the historical development of the language. This has furthermore a direct bearing on the spelling of such placenames in Modern Irish.

The placename *Lifford*, north of Clonroad townland, serves to further illustrate this point. Some of the earlier forms of the name from Latin or English documents are as follows, 'the two *Liffers*' (1621), *Leffers* (1624), *Lifford* (1624c), *Liffor* (1659), *Leaffard* (1656), *Lefferoughtra* (1719). The final 's' of the earliest forms is the plural marker in English. The contemporary Irish form of the name and an earlier reconstructed spelling were given by the placenames' scholar John O'Donovan in the relevant parish namebook of 1839, 'Leithbhear pronounced Leifear'. O'Donovan's postulated early form is undoubtedly correct: **Leithbhear** is an old compound formed from *leith* meaning 'side' (similar to the first element of *Leighlin* / **Leithghlinn**, 'glen-side', in Co. Carlow,) and *bior*, 'water'. *Lifford* is, in fact surrounded by two branches of the River Fergus. Note that medial *-f-* is already evident in the seventeenth century forms of the name. Similarly, the like-named *Lifford* in Co. Donegal is a further example of **Leifear** from earlier **Leithbhear**—it is recorded as **Caislen Lifir** in the *Annals of Connacht* in the year 1543 for instance.

According to the standard spelling of Modern Irish, the consonant groups *-thmh-* or *-thbh-* are reduced to *-f-*; hence the adjective *rathmhar* 'prosperous' is now spelt *rafar* for instance. A comparison can be made with the consonant group *-thdh-*, which has also been reduced to a single devoiced consonant, *-t-* in this instance. By way of illustration, the two townlands named *Leitrim* / **Liatroim** in Co. Clare are indicative of an earlier compound **Liath-dhroim**. The reduction to *-t-* is already evident in the earliest examples of the names, *Letryme* in the year 1608 for instance, in Kilmihil Parish.

Up to now, I have concentrated on the historical development, restoration and modern spelling of various placenames in the Irish language. The question of spelling is also relevant to the English forms of certain placenames. Thus *Ballyvaghan* has been used on Ordnance Survey maps since the first edition of the Ordnance Survey map series at scale six inches to one mile for the county, although *Ballyvaughan* is now the prevalent local spelling. The following list reproduces all the spellings of the name, noted in the Ordnance Survey name-book of 1839, in which the current modes of writing the placename were given, as well as those collected from historical documents such as various late sixteenth and seventeenth century Inquisitions (= Inq.) and Henry Pelham's map of Co. Clare published in 1787 (= Pelham).

Ballyvoughan & Island	Boundary Survey
Ballyvaghane	Pelham
Ballyvahane	High Constable
Ballyvahane	Co. Bk
Ballyveaghan	Inq. Elizabeth
Ballivyhine	Inq. James I
Ballyveaghane	Inq. James I
Ballvoghane	Inq. James I
Ballyvoghán	Inq. Charles I
Baile Uí Bhiocháin	written in pencil
Baile Uí Bheacháin, 'O'Beahan's town'	JOD
Ballyvaghan	JOD

Note that none of the authorities or historical sources recorded the name as it is commonly spelt nowadays. The modern spelling was probably influenced by the Welsh Surname *Vaughan*, an anglicisation of *Bychan* (Morgan & Morgan, 1986, 58). The Irish entry in pencil, **Baile Uí Bhiocháin**, was probably recorded in the locality. Compare with Stiofán Ó hEalaoire's pronunciation of the placename, **Bail Í Bhocháin, Bhucháin** (Ó Duilearga, 1981, 243, 297). The standardised Irish name, **Baile Uí Bheacháin**, is in John O'Donovan's handwriting (= JOD). It was also recorded prior to that in Irish texts, such as the *Ancient Irish Deeds and Writings* published by James Hardiman in 1826. The spelling recommended for the Ordnance Survey maps, *Ballyvaghan*, was authorised by the aforementioned O'Donovan. It does not agree with any of the recorded authorities, but as Andrews (1975, 125) has demonstrated in his book dealing with the early edition of Ordnance Survey maps, such a rejection of all written forms was not unusual.

I have pointed out the importance of Irish-language sources in elucidating the origin and development of our placenames. It should be stressed however, that the vast majority of surviving administrative names were first recorded, or reconstructed, in Irish in conjunction with the aforementioned series of Ordnance Survey maps, and earlier forms are generally transmitted in English or in Latin documentation. Co. Clare is more fortunate than many other counties by virtue of the fact that a variety of Irish sources, such as documents of a legal nature, have survived. Documents such as the aforementioned *Ancient Irish Deeds and Writings* (Hardiman, 1826) and the documents in Irish that form part of the Inchiquin archive (Mac Niocaill, 1970) are a valuable repository of topographical information. A great deal of useful genealogical, historical and pseudo-historical material has been amassed from manuscripts and other sources by Seán Ó hÓgáin in *Conntae an Chláir* (1938). The material is, however, unattractively presented and, as Mícheál Ó Duígeannáin noted (1939, 229), there is a lack of critical judgement. One should also note that many of the recommended Irish forms and explanations of townland names in the appendix to James Frost's *History and*

Topography of the County of Clare (1893, new. edit. 1978) are, at best, dubious and often incorrect.

In general the earliest recorded examples of extant Irish placenames do not pre-date the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. They are found in surveys of land and ownership, such as *The Books of Survey and Distribution*, 'The Down Survey', the so-called *Census* of 1659, in inquisitions, fiants, patents and other State documents of the period, in ecclesiastical sources and in family papers. Such sources were written in Latin or English.

The following account by Liam Price (1951, 93-4) reveals the potential of this material:

For the great majority of our existing place-names Irish sources are lacking. Consequently we have to use the English and Latin documents in order to make a full and methodical investigation of Irish place-names. It is an obvious disadvantage, but it is not as great as would appear at first sight. The documents were written at a time when most of the people who pronounced the name spoke Irish, even if the clerks who wrote them did not. They wrote down the names as they heard them spoken, so that we get them written in a phonetic English spelling. Although, on account of the great difference between Irish and English, this is a very defective method of writing the sound of the Irish language, it does nevertheless, preserve for us better than might be thought the sounds of Irish names... The transcription of Irish names into English in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries often preserves quite clearly the original form of a name, which is now altered out of recognition.

Éamonn de hÓir (1972-3, 200), former head of the Placenames Branch, pointed out the deficiencies of such a process of transliteration or 'dictation'—to use the term favoured by J. H. Andrews (1992)—:

The accuracy with which, the Irish name heard by the Englishman was recorded in writing by him was limited, in the first place, by his capacity for hearing and distinguishing unfamiliar sounds and, in the second place, by the capacity of the orthography he was using for indicating the sounds he heard. In the material we now have available to work on allowance must also be made for mis-transcription.

I wish to give an example of one particular placename that amply illustrates the advantages and difficulties associated with the documentation of a particular name. The placename in question, *Dysert* or *Dysert O'Dea*, is well documented from the fourteenth century onwards. Earlier recorded examples of the name are preserved in the notes to various Irish martyrologies in which *St. Tola* (or *Tóla*) is commemorated on the 30th of March, for instance, 'Tola o Disirt Tola i n-uachtar Dhail Cais' in a note accompanying at least two manuscript versions of *The martyrology of Óengus* (Stokes, 1905, 102 & 1880, 66) and subsequently in *The martyrology of Gorman* (c.1170), 'Tola, epscop ó Disert Tola i n-Uachtar DálCais' (Stokes, 1895, 64). In one manuscript version of his pedigree in the medieval genealogies of Irish saints, *Tola Craidbech m. Dunchada* is reputed to be 'ho Disiurt Tola i nOes iar Fhorcus' .i. west of the River Fergus (Ó Riain, 1985, 35). The saint's cult at *Dysart*, now in the barony of Delvin, Co. Westmeath is also noted in another manuscript version of *Féilire Óengusso*, 'o Disiurt Tóla i nDelbna móir Mide' (Stokes, 1905, 102). The latter place is referred to as **Disert Tola** in various Annals of the tenth and eleventh centuries, and sub-sequently as *Desertally* in the Down Survey (1655c), **Dist. Tala** and **Disert Tála** in the Ordnance Survey namebook (p. Killulagh, 1837).

It is of interest that the same ecclesiastical settlement term, *díseart*, should be attached to the saint's name in two disparate locations in which his cult is known to have existed. This word is a Latin borrowing, which is usually translated 'hermitage', 'isolated place' or 'a place apart'. It has also survived, for instance, as qualifying element in the placename *Killadysert / Cill an Dísert* by the Shannon Estuary, which was formerly called **Díseart Muirthile** and also in the name *Dysert*, without any qualification, near Killimer.

At least some *Díseart* sites are connected with the *Céli Dé* spiritual reform movement that flourished in the eight and ninth centuries (O Dwyer, 1981; Flanagan, 1984, 34-6). It is possible therefore that the two *díseart* sites to which the name *Tola* was attached were founded by 'Tole, episcopus Cluana Iraid' (Mac Airt & Mac Niocaill, 1983, 190), whose death is recorded between 733 and 738.

His traditional feast-day was still remembered in the parish of Dysert, Co. Clare, in the early nineteenth century according to Eugene Curry's first-hand account which he wrote in the *Ordnance Survey Letters: Co. Clare* (1839):

The people all about here call it **Cross-Bhánála**, i.e. 'Bánála's Cross', and believe that Bánála, who they think was a woman, was the patron Saint of this Parish, but it is easy to see how this mistake grew up with the corruption of the name... [<] **Cros-Bhán-Thola**, i.e., 'the White Cross of Tola', which subsequently was corrupted into one word thus, **Cros Bhanola**, which was further altered into **Bánála**, and supposed to express the foundress of the church.... There is a holy well a little southeast of the Church called **Tobar Bhánála**, at which Stations and a Patron were held formerly on the 30th March, St. Tola's day, but the Patron has been discontinued for many years. The 30th of March is still held holy by many persons in the Parish. (O'Flanagan, 1928, I 52 142-4)

The historical evidence of the Clare placename shows that **(An) Díseart** was generally written without qualification, for example *Disert* ('Papal Taxation' 1302c) (Sweetman & Handcock, 1886, 300), 'gusin nDisert...mar a raib isdad comnaide í Degaid' (1350c) (O'Grady, 1929, 142), 'parraisi an Diseirt' (1592) (Mac Niocaill, 1970, 50), 'ón Dísert' (1599) (O'Donovan, 1856, VI 2100), **an Díseart** (1750c) (O'Grady, 1926, 71).

I have discovered but one historical example of the surname *Ó Deá* (earlier *Ó Deadhaidh*, *Deaghaidh*), the traditional coarbs of the church, as placename qualifier, i.e. one of the names given in the parish namebook of 1839, **díseart uí dheághaidh**.

Many of the references in Latin ecclesiastical sources from the late fourteenth to the early sixteenth century point to ***Díseart Maoile Tala** as the contemporary realisation of the placename, such as *Dissertmolacala* (1394), *Dissertnolacala*, *Dissertmolacala* (1400), *Dissercthmallathala* (1426), *Disertmaelatala*, *Disserth Mellathala* (1432) *Siseremaelletule*, *Disertmaellatala* (1493), *Dissermeyalltaloyd* (1510). Those examples are taken from the published 'Annates' levied on Papal appointments to the Diocese of Killaloe (Gleeson, 1943) and from the Calendar of Papal Letters (Bliss, Twemlow et al., 1893-1986). Allowance must be made for the possibility of copying.

Maol, meaning 'servant of' 'devoted to', often precedes the names of saints in the formation of early Irish personal names. An example is preserved in the placename *Lismulbreedy / Lios Mhaoilbhríde* in the parish of Killone. I have already pointed out in the case of *cora, cara* that a short *o* and short *a* vowel are interchangeable in Irish in certain environments. Another such example is *Mollough* townland near Kilrush which is recorded in Irish sources both as

Magh Locha and **Lacha**, ‘the plain of the lake’. This variation may also account for *Tola / Tala*.

Eugene Curry, as previously cited, conjectured that the local Irish pronunciation of *St. Tola's Well* and *St. Tola's Cross* in the early nineteenth century, .i. ‘Tobar Bhánála’, and ‘Cros Bhánála’ preserved a form of the saint’s name preceded by the adjective *bán*, referring to the whiteness of the cross. A similar explanation underlies the ‘corrected’ Irish form in the Ordnance Survey namebook (Parish of Dysert) of that period, ‘Cloch Mhánála *recte* Cros Bhán Tóla’. The word ‘cloch’ may have referred to the pedestal of the cross which, we know from the Ordnance Survey Letters, had become detached from the cross itself. The name of the cross is still remembered nowadays by some of the older inhabitants and pronounced (approximately) as ‘krokmonaula’ or ‘krokvonaula’—the primary stress in on the second last syllable.

There are two further nineteenth century references to the cross and the Saint’s name worth considering. The earlier reference is taken from *The Statistical Survey* of 1808: ‘Near the church and round tower of Dysert O’Dea, a very curious one [cross] lies on the ground; it represents (it is said) St. Monalagh...’ (Dutton, 1808, 352). Ó Murchadha (2000, 226, n.4) also provides a reference to ‘St. Monalagh’ to whom: ‘the Catholic parish church [of Dysert] erected in 1856...is dedicated, apparently following local tradition, but there is no saint of that name to be found in the Irish calendars’. There is, it seems, a persistent local tradition, dateable to the early nineteenth century of a saint called *Monalagh*, *Mánála* or *Bánála*. The initial *Bán*-may be a hypercorrected form resulting from lenited *m*- > lenited *b*-.

At this point, I wish to refer to an unusual example of the placename, dated 1594, which is found in The Inchiquin Manuscripts, i.e. Diserte Mandala (Ainsworth, 1961, 288). Although this could easily be discounted as a scribal error for the proposed fourteenth - fifteenth century form of the name, **Maol Tala**, it could equally reflect the historic linguistic process of dissimilation, by which one of two adjacent syllables containing the same sound, such as *l* in this instance, ‘dissimilates’ to a homorganic consonant such as *n*, .i. ***Maoltala** > ***Maontala**, **Maondala** (?). Another example of dissimilation—in a different environment—is provided by the placename *Lisronagh* in Co. Tipperary which was recorded as *Lios Ruanach* in 1580, but which comes from earlier **Lios Ruadhrach** (= *Lisrodhrach* 1260). I can only conjecture at present, without further research, that the Saint’s name may have further evolved to the nineteenth century forms of the name as set out previously.

The names of minor features, field names and microtoponymy in general are also of great interest. A former colleague of mine, Máire Ní Sheighin, who is engaged in digitising material from the Ordnance Survey Namebooks, drew my attention to the following ringfort name, which serves to illustrate the multifarious richness of microtoponymy. It is recorded in the Parish Namebook of Clooney, barony of Corcomroe, **Lios Fear Beag na gComán**, and translated as ‘fort of the little hurlers, i.e. of the fairies’. The descriptive remarks accompanying the name simply state that it was ‘a fort celebrated for fairies’. One can only speculate on the folklore that must have been attached to this place formerly!

In conclusion, I wish to refer to another source, which is of vital importance to the elucidation and reconstruction of placenames in Irish, .i. orally transmitted material. There are almost 200 placenames in the texts recorded by Nils Holmer from native Irish speakers in 1946 and subsequently published in *The Dialects of Co. Clare* (1962, 1965). Many more placenames, relevant to Co. Clare, are found in the archives of the folklore Department—about 100 such names occur in the folklore collection *Leabhar Stiofáin Uí Ealaoire*, which

was undertaken by Séamus Ó Duilearga between 1930 and 1943 (Ó Duilearga & Ó hÓgáin, 1981). The Placenames Office recorded material specifically from Irish speakers in various parts of Co. Clare in 1965 and in 1966. The toponymic material collected by Breandán Ó Cíobháin in the vicinity of Loop Head was subsequently published in the journal *Dinnseanchas* (vols. 3 & 4, 1968-71). I have recorded the traditional, local pronunciation of placenames from native English speakers throughout the county, and in 1985 I collected a limited amount of material from Irish speakers in the Doolin and Gleninagh areas. The following two placenames from East Clare illustrate the value of local pronunciation: the townland of *Keelderry* is situated near O'Callaghansmills. It is locally pronounced with initial stress, which helps us determine that the placename is a compound word, from the original Irish **Caoldoire**, meaning 'narrow oak-grove'. There is a townland called *Killaderry* about five km further south, near the village of Broadford. In this instance the syllable with primary stress is the penultimate, *-der-* which would be in accordance with an Irish placename of three separate words, **Cill an Doire**, 'the church of the oak-grove'

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