

The Strange World of Surnames in Irish - the Macs and the Os !

Last month we looked at Irish first names or Christian names *as Gaeilge* and this month we look at how surnames are handled in the Irish language. Irish surnames, by virtue of our huge diaspora, are common enough throughout the English-speaking world. According to the latest census the most common surname (or *sloinne* as Gaeilge) in Ireland is Murphy (Ó Murchú) - no surprise there then. This is followed in popularity order by Kelly (Ó Ceallaigh), O'Brien (Ó Briain), Ryan (Ó Riain) and Walsh (Breatnach).

Numerous surnames (*sloinnte*) can be associated with their various counties: Doherty (Donegal), O'Leary (Cork), Byrne (Wicklow), Shanahan (Tipperary), etc. The common prefixes to Irish surnames are **Mac** (or Mc), **O** and **Fitz**. Ó is a preposition in Irish meaning *from* and when prefixed to a surname it means descended from (so Seán Ó Ceallaigh really means John, descendent of Kelly). Mac both in Irish and Scottish Gaelic (*Gàidhlig*) means *son* - so Séamas MacDónaill means James son of Donald. The element Fitz in some Irish and also English surnames comes from the Norman French word for son (modern French: *fils*) and is usually rendered as Mac if used in Irish (e.g. former Taoiseach Garret FitzGerald whose Irish name is **Gearóid Mac Gearailt**).

By and large the male surname in its basic form remains the same whether the man is married or unmarried¹. It is however with female surnames that things get a little more complicated and the female surname can change significantly from the male version of the surname in both the married and unmarried state. In the table below we look at the correct forms of surname for a female both of unmarried and married status - as it is the surname of the female that mutates in comparison to the male (in Column 5 the female surname before marriage is not relevant).

| Surname Type | Surname Example | Man | Woman – unmarried or not changing surname after marriage | Woman – using the husband's surname after marriage |
|--------------------|------------------------|--------------------|--|--|
| O Surname | Murphy Ó Murchú | Pádraig Ó Murchú | Máire Ní Mhurchú | Sinéad Uí Mhurchú |
| Mac Surname | MacManus Mac Mánais | Pádraig Mac Mánais | Máire Nic Mhánais | Sinéad Mhic Mhánais |

The key observation from above (column 5) is that when a female marries an O type surname her new married surname is prefixed by **Uí** - if she marries a Mac type surname her new married surname is prefixed by **Mhic**. The new married surname is also aspirated in both cases.

Also note (column 4) that a female surname of the O type is prefixed by **Ní**² and a female surname of the MAC type is prefixed by **Nic** (*in the unmarried state*). The surname is aspirated in both cases.

Of course, nowadays, it goes without saying that a woman may still wish to use her maiden name after marriage - the above tables are show the traditional conventions used within the Irish language.

Notáí

1. The male surname will change in the ***Tuiseal Gairmeach*** (Vocative Case) -
Pádraig Ó Murchú would be addressed as ***a Phádraig Uí Mhurchú*** and Pádraig Mac Mánaís
would be addressed as ***a Phádraig Mhic Mhánais***.
2. Do not confuse **Ní** with ***née*** (as often seen in obituary notices) - ***née*** is a French word used to
indicate a woman's birth name. It is coincidental that it sounds a bit like **Ní**.