

How to Construct a Gaelic Name (and not get it returned or changed)

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Comment [bnp1]: This is a really nice little article, but I think the addition of the material that's come from the Griogair letter might be a good addition.

The Languages of Ireland and Scotland

In our period, there were several languages spoken in Ireland and Scotland. Today we're going to talk about Gaelic, which was spoken in both Ireland and Scotland. Today Scots Gaelic and Irish Gaelic are quite distinct, but in period they were pretty similar. In addition a version of English was spoken in each area. In Scotland, it's called Scots and broadly spoken in the Lowlands. In Ireland, it's English and the folks who speak it are called Anglo-Irish.

Names can be constructed either in Gaelic or in these forms of English. Many names have forms in both Gaelic and English, because people speaking these two languages have lived side by side for so long. Here are some examples:

Modern Scots	Period Scots	Late Period Gaelic
Duncan MacLeod	Dunkane M'Loyd or Dwnkane Makclويد	Donnchad mac Leòid
Angus MacBane	Angus M'Bane or Anggues mc behan	Aonghus mac Bheathain

Putting a Name Together: the Structure

Gaelic names follow a simple pattern: everyone has a given name, followed by a phrase that identifies who your father is. In addition, you may have a simple descriptive byname or another phrase identifying either your grandfather or your clan affiliation. We'll talk about how to construct each of them in a minute.

But first, there's a few gory bits. Gaelic spelling changed significantly over time. Around 1200, there was a major spelling reform that significantly changed the appearance of names. Thus, throughout our discussion, we'll look at both early period (before 1200) and late period (after 1200) spellings for names. In addition, in Gaelic the genitive (possessive) forms are different from the normal names; these forms are used for the names of your father, grandfather, or founding clan member. Last but not least, there's a process of softening sounds, called lenition, that occurs in certain contexts. In some contexts lenition is written with a period under the softened consonant; however, in this document it will be written with an h following the consonant. But don't get too worried; we'll talk about each of these things again when it comes up.

Name Elements: Given Names

In Gaelic, people have a single given name. There are no documented cases of people with a middle name. In fact, a Gaelic name with a middle name will be returned. Many of the names that we think of as being typically Irish, like Patrick and Michael, weren't used in Gaelic, because the names were thought too sacred. Instead, names meaning something like 'servant of Patrick' Giolla Phádraig was used.

So where do you look for given names? There are a couple of good sources. For Irish Gaelic, the place to start is *Irish Names*, a book by Donnchadh Ó Corráin and Fidelma Maguire (note that his name is Gaelicized, while hers is Anglicized). This book lists a huge number of names used in period. However, it also includes some names that were only used in myth and legend. These names may not be registerable. If there are saints of that name, or descriptions of real people, then it should be fine. The spelling(s) before the colon date to before 1200; the first spelling after the colon is generally a late period spelling, but other spellings are probably modern.

For years, that was really all we had for Irish names; now there are a wide variety of resources available on the World Wide Web. Now, we have many more sources. The most important is Mari Elspeth nic Bryan's "Index of Names in Irish Annals," which gives the names and bynames of real people from several of the Irish historical documents.

Sources for Scots Gaelic are more limited. Generally, the best starting point is the Web article "A Simple Guide to Constructing 12th Century Scottish Gaelic Names" by Sharon Krossa (Effric Neyn Ken3ocht Mcherrald). The second place to look for men's given names is *Surnames of Scotland*, by George Black. While this book is basically about Scots names, it includes many names that were used in Gaelic and Scots, and gives the modern Gaelic spelling for them. However, you have to do this with care, because many names don't have Gaelic equivalents, at least not

equivalents used in period. Effric has also created a broader list of "Scottish Gaelic Names." Finally, many of the names used in Ireland were also used in Scotland, so you can go back to the Irish Gaelic sources mentioned above.

Name Elements: Patronymic Byname

The next step is to pick out a name for your father. There are two ways to go about this. The first is to pick out another given name and track down the genitive form. The second is to start with an Anglicized surname and track down the Gaelic form. We'll talk about how to do each. No, I don't know any rules to form the genitive if you know the given name; there are many patterns, and only the real experts could figure out which one to use.

If you know the Anglicized version of the surname you want, you can simply look it up. For Ireland, there is a book *The Surnames of Ireland* by Edward MacLysaght. It's organized by English spelling, but gives Gaelic spellings of many surnames. Surnames that start with Mac or O are sorted as if the Mac or O weren't there. If there's not a Gaelic spelling given, it's probably because it's not a Gaelic name. For Scotland, the place to start is with Black's *Surnames of Scotland*, which lists surnames strictly alphabetically (so all Mac names are together). The Gaelic form should be given in the text, usually right after the heading. In addition, there is a work by Patrick Woulfe *Sloinne Gaedheal is Gall: Irish Names and Surnames* that is organized by Gaelic spellings, so it's somewhat harder to find them.

The other approach is to pick out a name and then look for the genitive form. Pick out the father's name just like you chose the given name. The first place to look for the genitive form is in the place you found the given name. Tangwystyl's "100 Most Popular Men's Names in Early Medieval Ireland" gives genitive forms. If you can't find it there, the next thing to do is guess and check. Pick up one of the books mentioned above and try to find something that sounds like the name. So, if you picked out *Faolán*, you might look under F and find nothing relevant, but under Ph you'll find (O) Phelan and the Gaelic genitive *Faoláin*. Sometimes you have to use your imagination a little, but you can generally find the form without too much difficulty.

There are almost no cases known of the mother's name being used, and they all involve special cases, like claims to a throne. At this time, using a woman's name has been grounds for return.

So, now what do you do with it? Men use the connector *mac* 'son of' and women use *ingen* (before 1200) or *inghean* (after 1200). If you've gotten the form from Tangwystyl's article, you want the early spelling, if you've gotten it from one of the books, you want the late period. When in doubt, use one but write clearly what your client really wants.

So, if your father was named *Áed* (early) or *Aodh* (late), you'd be:

	Before 1200	After 1200
Man	Fergus mac Áeda	Fearghus mac Aodha
Woman	Medb ingen Áeda	Meadhbh inghean Aodha

Now, there's still one more complication, and that's lenition. Lenition is the softening of a sound, which occurs in several contexts: the one we're interested in here is that it happens to the initial consonant of a man's name in the genitive after *ingen/inghean*. Before 1200, lenition was written for c (as ch), for f (as fh), for s (as sh), for t (as th) and sometimes for p (as ph). In some ways of writing, there is a dot over the letter to indicate lenition instead of the h. Either way of writing it is fine, but registered forms always use h (for clarity). After 1200, all these letters continue to be lenited, and b (bh), d (dh), g (gh), and m (mh) are added.

So, if your father was named *Ferchar* (early) or *Fearchar* (late), you'd be:

	Before 1200	After 1200
Man	Donnchad mac Ferchair	Donnchadh mac Fearchair
Woman:	Derbforgeaill ingen Fherchair	Dearbhorgaill inghean Fhearchair

Clan Affiliations

Clan affiliations are rarely found in Scottish Gaelic names. While you certainly can and be part of a clan, that is rarely indicated in a name. In Ireland, bynames indicating clan membership appear by the 11th century. They take the form *Ó* for men and *ingen uí* (early, the late form is *inghean uí*) followed by the name of the ancestor for whom the clan is named.

So, if your clan is named after a Conchobhair (Anglicized as Connor), you'd be:

	Before 1200	After 1200
Man	Donnchad ua Conchobhair	Donnchadh Ó Conchobhair
Woman:	Mór ingen uí Chonchobhair	Mór inghean uí Conchobhair

Descriptive bynames

Occasionally people have descriptive bynames in Gaelic, like *Finn* 'fair' or *Dub* 'black'. When these occur, they are placed immediately after the given name. For women, they generally are lenited, though there is a long list of exceptions, which can be found in "Quick and Easy Gaelic Names."

So, if you're blond, you might be known as so-and-so the Fair:

	Before 1200	After 1200
Man	Domnall Finn	Domhnall Fionn
Woman:	Áine Fhinn	Áine Fhionn

Certain kinds of bynames are extremely rare in Gaelic. You almost never find a locative byname (one that says where you're from). You do find names like that in Scots, but not in Gaelic. Occupational bynames (ones that say what you do for a living) are also very rare. The handful of bynames like that identify titles of social rank and consequence: earl, bishop, abbot, priest, judge, but not tailor or shopkeeper.

Complex Bynames

A single person can have more than one byname, though it's rare to see more than two of these types. To combine a descriptive byname with either a patronymic byname or a byname of clan affiliation, just put the descriptive byname first and the other name second.

So, if your father was named *Áed* (early) or *Aodh* (late) and you're blond, you'd be:

	Before 1200	After 1200
Man	Fergus Finn mac Áeda	Fearghus Fionn mac Aodha
Woman	Medb Finn ingen Áeda	Medhbh Fhionn inghean Aodha

Combining patronymic bynames with bynames of clan affiliation is a little trickier, because the masculine *Ó* changes to *uí*. So,

So, if your father is Ferchar and your clan is named after a guy named Conchobhar, you'd be:

	Before 1200	After 1200
Man	Donnchad mac Ferchair uí Conchobhair	Donnchadh mac Fearchair uí Conchobhair
Woman:	Mór ingen Fherchair uí Chonchobhair	Mór inghean Fhearchair uí Conchobhair

There's one last case that we haven't talked about: two generational patronymic bynames (that tell who your grandfather is as well as your father). Instead of using *mac* again for the grandfather, you use a modified form, *meic* (before 1200) or *mhic* (after 1200).

So, if your father is Ferchar mac Cormaic (son of Cormac), you'd be:

	Before 1200	After 1200
Man	Donnchad mac Ferchair meic Cormaic	Donnchadh mac Fearchair mhic Cormaic
Woman:	Mór ingen Fherchair meic Chormaic	Mór inghean Fhearchair mhic Chormaic

Conclusions

So is your brain full yet? Mine too. This is really confusing at first, but over time it gets progressively easier. Eventually, it'll seem easy. Most people have a simple name with just their name and their father's name. Don't forget, I look up stuff all the time: I wrote this handout with MacLysaught, Black, and web articles open.

So, here are more complete listings for how to find all the articles and books I talked about:

Sources for Given Names

Ó Corráin, Donnchadh and Fidelma Maguire, *Irish Names* (Dublin: The Lilliput Press, 1990).

The most extensive source for medieval Irish Gaelic given names. Although these are specifically Irish names, many of them were also used in Gaelic Scotland. Remember, there are also non-human names here.

Jones, Heather Rose (Tangwystyl verch Morgant Glasvryn), "100 Most Popular Men's Names in Early Medieval Ireland" (WWW: J. Mittleman, 1998) [URL:<http://www.s-gabriel.org/names/tangwystyl/irish100>].

Lists about one hundred of the most common Irish Gaelic masculine given names in the *Corpus Genealogiarum Hiberniae*, a collection of Irish genealogical material from the pre-Norman period (i.e., roughly pre-12th century). Although these are Irish Gaelic names, many of them were probably used for similar period Scottish Gaels. The genitive forms of the men's given names are included.

Mari Elspeth nic Bryan, "Index of Names from the Iris Annals" (WWW: J. Mittleman, 2000)

[URL:<http://www.medievalscotland.org/kmo/Annals>].

Lists Irish Gaelic names from various annals, volumes of the history of Ireland covering a broad timeframe. Although these are Irish Gaelic names, many of them were probably used for similar period Scottish Gaels.

Krossa, Sharon L. (Effric neyn Kenyeoch), "A Simple Guide to Constructing 12th Century Scottish Gaelic Names", (WWW: Privately pub., 1997) [URL:<http://www.MedievalScotland.org/scotnames/simplescotgaelicnames12.shtml>].

Lists masculine (and two feminine) given names from the 12th century Gaelic notes in the *Book of Deer*. Some genitive forms of men's given names are included.

Black, George F., *The Surnames of Scotland: Their Origin, Meaning and History*, (New York: The New York Public Library, 1986).

Gives a variety of Scots names that led to surnames, and their (modern) Gaelic forms. Not everything here is relevant, but there's plenty here.

Bynames

MacLysaght, Edward, *The Surnames of Ireland* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press Ltd., 1985).

Lists a large number of Anglicized Irish surnames. Many of them are Anglicized versions of Gaelic names.

Black, George F., *The Surnames of Scotland: Their Origin, Meaning and History*, (New York: The New York Public Library, 1986).

Gives a variety of Scots surnames and their (modern) Gaelic forms. Not everything here is relevant, but there's plenty here, as a lot of Scots surnames were adopted from Gaelic.

Woulfe, Patrick, *Sloinnte Gaedheal is Gall: Irish Names and Surnames* (Kansas City: Irish Genealogical Foundation).

A good source for Irish clan affiliation bynames.