

# Indexing personal names

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## Irish prefixes and the alphabetization of personal names

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*Ireland is a bilingual nation and one of the earliest countries to evolve a system of hereditary surnames. 'Mac's and 'O's abound, but 'Fitz's and other prefixes as well. Surnames vary for men and women bearing the same family name; the prefix changes to Mhic, Nic, Uí or Ní. Further complications are created by transliteration and translation from Irish to English. Róisín Nic Cóil explores the problems this presents for alphabetization and some possible solutions.*

### 'Irish' and its usage

'Irish' is a term that identifies something of Irish nationality and also the language spoken in Ireland. 'Gaelic' most frequently refers to the native language of Scotland, but 'Gaelic' also relates to the grouping within Ireland of Irish speakers and those close to the native culture. In Irish, the language is called *Gaeilge*. 'As *Gaeilge*' means 'in Irish'. 'What is your name *as Gaeilge*?' is not an uncommon question to be asked of an Irish person by an Irish person. The traditional alphabet in Irish has 18 letters: a b c d e f g h i l m n o p r s t u. The five vowels may be accented ('*síneadh fada*' or '*fada*'): á é í ó ú. The convention regarding the alphabetization of vowels with a *síneadh fada* is to alphabetize that letter after the same vowel without the *síneadh fada*.

The 2002 census claims that almost 1.7 million inhabitants from a population of 3.6 million are 'Irish speakers'. The teaching of the language in all government-funded schools has been compulsory since the founding of the Free State in 1922. Knowledge of Irish was a requirement for civil servants and the police, and with a few exceptions, for admission to university. It is one of 23 'official and working languages' of the European Union. Today all Irish speakers also speak fluent English, and therefore the language is not widely used as a working language, with the exception of a few *Gaeltacht* areas. *Gaeltachts* are designated geographical areas where the spoken language is strong.

### Not just an Irish problem

Matheson's *Surnames of Ireland* refers to 'Mc' and 'O' as 'Celtic Names' (1909: 15). Scottish, Welsh, Breton and Cornish names are usually placed in the same category, and present many of the same issues as do Irish names, the

Scottish use of 'Mac' being of particular relevance in the context of this article.

Irish is not the only language to have surnames with prefixes (sometimes attached, sometimes not). For example, Welsh surnames are sometimes prefixed with 'ab' or 'ap'; Arabic surnames sometimes use 'ibn', 'al', 'bin'; the Dutch have surnames containing 'van' and 'de', the French have 'de', the Germans 'von', the Spanish 'de'. And some share the Irish phenomenon of changes to the form of names depending on gender. [*The problems these can present are explored in various Indexer articles including Moore (1986 and 1990) (on Welsh place and personal names, reprinted in this Centrepiece) and other Centrepiece articles to be found at <http://www.tinyurls.indexercentrepieces.Ed>]*

### Variations on a name

The following names all use a variation of the same name (Loingseach) but it is unlikely they would be found next to each other in an alphabetized list:

Labhraidh Loingseach  
Leathlobhar mac Loingseach  
Lynch  
McLynch  
Mhic Loinsigh  
Ní Loingsigh  
Nic Loinsigh  
Ó Loingsigh  
Uí Loinsigh

The list includes a name with an epithet, a patronymic, surnames in the English language, and surnames in the Irish language for men, wives and daughters.

## Prefixes in Irish surnames

The use of surnames in Ireland dates back to the 10th century (De Bhulbh, 1997: 4). MacLysaght writes in *The surnames of Ireland* that ‘Ireland was one of the earliest countries to evolve a system of hereditary surname’ (1985: ix), and that Mac and O are the most common prefixes, O being somewhat more numerous in Ireland than Mac. ‘[Mac] was taken from the name of the father and [Ó] from that of the grandfather of the first person who bore that surname’ (Woulfe, 1923: 15)

- Mac/Mc/Mc – prefix to father’s Christian name or occupation
- Ó/O’ – prefix to grandfather or earlier ancestor’s name

The prefix ‘mac’ sometimes appears with a lower case initial ‘m’. Names in this format predate the use of surnames and should be entered in the index under the forename:

Fergus mac Léti  
Leathlobhar mac Loingseach

The ‘mac’ denotes the literal ‘son of’ the person whose name follows. For once there is a clear, easy rule for deciding on the appropriate form for a pre-modern personal name

Here are some other prefixes used in Irish surnames:

- De – Gaelicization of Norman surnames (e.g. Burke/De Búrca; Woulfe/De Bhulbh)
- Fitz – Norman ‘filius’ or ‘fils’ (Latin and French respectively for ‘son’); usually attached to succeeding word; the succeeding word is sometimes, but not always, capitalized, depending on the family preference (e.g. FitzPatrick or Fitzpatrick)
- Mac Giolla + saint’s name – *giolla*: lad or fellow, i.e. servant or devotee; son of the devotee of that saint (e.g. Mac Giolla Phádraig)
- Mag (and Mhig, Nig) – used in place of Mac where appropriate for the pronunciation of the succeeding word (e.g. Mag Shamhráin)
- Mhac (Máire Mhac an tSaoi)
- Ua – form of Ó.

MacLysaght noted the practice of dropping and resuming the Mac and O prefixes from birth registration and voters’ lists between 1866 and 1944. Daniel O’Connell’s father was Morgen Connell, Edward MacLysaght’s father was Lysaght.

- O’Connell/Connell
- O’Sullivan/Sullivan
- MacLysaght/Lysaght.

Not all Irish language surnames have prefixes, for example those formed from epithets (*sloinnte aidiachta*).

- Breathnach/Walsh – meaning Breton/Welsh
- Caomhánach/Kavanagh – relating to a devotee of St Kevin (Naomh Caoimhín)
- Loinseach (or Loingseach)/Lynch – mariner.

## Irish or English or both?

Surnames in Ireland have been affected by alternating Gaelicization and Anglicization. The appearance of a name changes during different periods of history.

In the introduction to his book, *Sloinnte na hÉireann: the surnames of Ireland*, Seán de Bhulbh wrote that ‘The process of Anglicization properly commenced in the 16th Century, when the Tudor civil servants were active in Ireland recording surnames and placenames . . . all Irish surnames were turned into gibberish’<sup>1</sup> (De Bhulbh, 1997: 4, translated by RNC). The play *Translations* by Brian Friel, set in 1833, portrayed a debate between a character from the Royal Engineers and a local man about the most fitting translations for placenames during cartographical research; should, for example, Bun na hAbhann become Banowen, Binhone, Owenmore or Burnfoot (Friel, 1984: 410)? Similar to the work done on placenames, surnames were transcribed in many different ways. The following are some transcriptions of the Irish/Gaelic surname Mac Craith:

M<sup>c</sup>Grath, Magrath, MacGrath

Most people in Ireland will have been provided with an Irish-language version of their name in primary school. Some people like to use the Irish and English-language versions of their surnames interchangeably, depending on the occasion. For example when Edward MacLysaght wrote in English, he used that form of his name; in his Irish writings he used Éamonn Mac Giolla Iasachta.

- MacLysaght/Mac Giolla Iasachta
- O’Sullivan/Ó Súilleabháin
- Doyle/Ó Dúill
- Magennis/Mac Aonghasa.

In 1936, the British Museum recommended that, for the purposes of cataloguing printed material ‘where a writer has written under both the Gaelic and the English forms of a name, the English form is generally adopted’ (British Museum, 1936: 51). Transliteration was recommended according to the following rules:

prefix Ó is substituted for Ua, Uí, Ní; Mac for Mag, Mic, Oc, Nic; De for A and also Ni where name is Anglo-Norman; aspirate is ignored after Ui, Mic, Ni, Nic; small h before and after Ó or Mac is treated as an ordinary part of the surname; accents are retained.

(British Museum, 1936: 50–1)

## Spelling it right, or at least consistently

In modern-day use, variations in the spelling of a surname should not present a problem because recent generations of families will all use the same spelling (and can be quite particular about it). The advent of email and the practice of spelling out surnames that are contained in an email address helps to correct misspellings – the most obvious name to gain advantage from this practice is Smyth/Smith

but it also applies to Mc/Mac names and others mentioned in this article.

Irish-language spellings of surnames (but not the English version) typically include a space between the prefix and the succeeding word. The prefix changes for surnames of females. Feminine variants in surnames occur in Slavic languages too. For example, the Russian Tatyana Tolstaya is a relative of Leo Tolstoy; the variation occurs at the end of the surname.

As a guide for registration officers and the public for searching the indexes of births, deaths and marriage records, Robert Matheson of the General Register's Office published two pamphlets in Dublin in 1901 and 1909. No reference was made in the pamphlets to feminine variants, although there was a paragraph entitled 'Note on the irregular use of Maiden surnames' which related that widowed women may revert to using their maiden surname (Matheson, 1901: 25).

The feminine prefixes in Irish stem from the abbreviation for 'wife of' or 'daughter of':

- Bean – wife/woman/Mrs
- Iníon – daughter/Miss.

Sons' and fathers' names do not change because surnames are always patriarchal (see Table 1).

Table 1

Male	Wife	Daughter
Mac	Mhic	Nic
Ó	Uí	Ní

Female surnames in the Irish language, as well as having different prefixes, may cause an alteration in the main or succeeding word. The following are some examples of the masculine and feminine variations of the same surnames:

- Ó hÓgáin/Uí Ógáin/Ní Ógáin
- Ó Máille/Uí Mháille/Ní Mháille
- Mac Donncha/Mhic Dhonncha/Nic Dhonncha
- Breathnach/Bhreachnach

Note the 'h' before a vowel in the masculine form but not in the feminine variant (e.g. Ó hÓgáin). Note also, the insertion of an 'h' after the first letter of the main word in the feminine variant which was not present in the masculine form: this is a lenition, called séimhiú (e.g. Mháille, Dhonncha, Bhreachnach). Phonetically,<sup>2</sup> the sound changes thus:

- M > Mh (Máille): /m<sup>y</sup>/ becomes /w/
- D > Dh (Donncha): /d<sup>y</sup>/ becomes /ʃ/
- B > Bh (Breathnach): /b<sup>j</sup>/ becomes /v<sup>j</sup>/

In the Gaelic script, a dot over the letter signifies a séimhiú; the word appears the same but a reader is aware of a pronunciation difference. This practice has ceased because the Roman alphabet has now superseded the Gaelic one.

- Ó Sé/Uí Shé/Ní Shé > Ó sé / Uí sé / Ní sé
- Ó Murchú/Uí Mhurchú/Ní Mhurchú > Ó Murchú / Uí Murchú / Ní Murchú
- Mac Tomás/Mhic Thomáis/Nic Thomáis > Mac Tomás / Mhic Čomáir / Nic Čhomáir

Not all names require an initial mutation:

- Ó Riain/Uí Riain/Ní Riain
- Mac Cóil/Mhic Cóil/Nic Cóil

Mc is an abbreviation of Mac. An issue with Mc/Mac surnames is whether or not the user or searcher knows how the name is spelled. For example, the phonebook contains a note under 'M' regarding the ordering of Mc/Mac (Eircom, 2011: 272). As the ordering of the phonebook is letter by letter, this also applies to Irish-language surnames which mostly include a space after the prefix:

How to find a name starting with Mac, MAC or Mc.- Names such as Macey, Machines, Macken, Macrooom etc. appear in order of the fourth letter of the name. The prefixes Mac and Mc are both treated as Mac and the position of the entry is determined by the next letter in the name.

An Oxford University Press publication, *A dictionary of surnames* (Hanks and Flavia, 1989), went further than simply providing an explanatory note; none of the surnames are spelt Mac, all have been entered as Mc.

**Mac-** For Scots and Irish names beginning thus, see Mc-

The *Chicago manual of style* (2003) suggested:

- 18.71 Mac or Mc: alphabetized letter-by-letter as they appear.
- 18.72 O': as if the apostrophe were missing.
- 18.74 Arabic names beginning with *Abu*, *Abd*, and *ibn*, elements as integral to the names as Mc or Fitz, are alphabetized under those elements.

Nancy Mulvany wrote 'In regard to the abbreviated forms of 'Mac' and 'Saint' . . . the primary reason one might wish to sort these names as if they were spelled out is to gather these similar names together in one place' (1993: 159–60). She advised that 'readers will be guided to alternative spellings of homophonous names by use of cross-referencing, otherwise most people . . . expect an index to be arranged in alphabetical order'. She suggested following the guidelines in *Anglo-American cataloguing rules* (AACR2).

AACR2 stated:

- 22.5E1 If the prefix is regularly or occasionally hyphenated or combined with the surname, enter the name under the prefix. As required, refer from the part of the name following the prefix  
FitzGerald, David  
MacDonald, William

(AACR2, 1998: 400)

The 2011 published telephone directory for the Dublin area is poorly produced (Eircom, 2011). The use of apostrophes, accents and capitalization is inconsistent and cannot be trusted. It has been compiled from the listing held by the National Directory Information Unit, which is generated from listings from the various telephone companies operating in Ireland; it demonstrates the disregard in Ireland for native surnames, and how and why they are formed. Feminine variants of surnames are entered under the appropriate prefix: Nic, Ní, Mhic, Uí. Needless to say there are very few entries under Mhic and Uí as these are the married forms, and typically the phone number is entered under the husband's surname.

Wellisch wrote on behalf of the indexer that 'probably no other detail of personal names generates as many headaches as the treatment of names with prefixes – an article, a preposition, a combination of both, or a word indicating filial or paternal relationship'. He recommended referring to AACR2 and the IFLA manual *Names of persons: national usages for entry in catalogues*, and claimed that 'biographical dictionaries are notoriously unreliable' (Wellisch, 1991: 362–3).

The variations in language and spelling can cause bureaucratic complications, particularly when service providers are not familiar with them.<sup>3</sup> As a consequence, some people have made changes to their names to simplify the format. For example, the space between the prefix and the succeeding word is ignored and the two words combined while otherwise retaining the Irish language version of the name:

- Mac Cárthaigh > MacCárthaigh

Women may choose to retain the feminine prefix but not to change the surname grammatically, in order for their surname to appear less different from that of their husband:

- Mhic Shuibhne (married to Mac Suibhne) > Mhic Suibhne

Or they may choose to use the masculine form of the surname:

- Mhic Aodha/Nic Aodha > Mac Aodha
- Uí Dheirg/Ní Dheirg > Ó Deirg

The *síneadh fada* is sometimes omitted by preference, creating a new form of the surname:

- Ó Deirg > O'Deirg

Historical and genealogical surname reference books, for example De Bhulbh, Hanks and Hodges, MacLysaght, Matheson, and Woulfe, list names under the masculine form and contain no entries under the feminine prefixes. Ideally, they would at least contain a reference from the generic form of the feminine prefixes so that future researchers could make sense of such surnames.

*The surnames of Ireland* (MacLysaght, 1985) is a source

widely used by genealogists. The prefixes are ignored and surnames are alphabetized under the English version of the main word:

- **Dunny.** A variant of Downey in the midland counties.  
(Mac) **Dunphy** *Mac Donnchaidh*. Cognate with MacDonagh. This is quite distinct from (O) Dunphy.
- **(O) Dunphy, Dunfy** *Ó Donnchaidh*. A small Ossory Sept: though of the same name in Irish, unrelated to the O'Donoghues elsewhere.

One Irish language speaker saved the contacts on his mobile phone by surname, saying 'they'd all be under Mac or Ó if I chose to alphabetize by prefix'. His chosen method was to enter the names by the main part of the surname with the prefix after the forename:

- Aodha, Cáit Nic
- Dónaill, Éamonn Mac
- Súilleabháin, Pól Ó

Conventions and an acceptance of basic principles are required. According to the British Museum 'the preponderance of O and Mac prefixes tends to render the catalogue unwieldy' (Glynn, 1930).

Library catalogues are electronic nowadays, and therefore the alphabetic ordering need not be detectable. Electronic database records can be sorted by any chosen field. Wild-cards can usually be used when searching, e.g. M\*c\*Ilwaine; \*úilleabháin.

## Cataloguing of Irish surnames

Articles on the subject of the arrangement of Irish surnames have been published in the journal of the Library Association of Ireland, *An Leabharlann*, since the first volume was published in 1930.

Mary J. Hogan (or Máire Uí Ógáin), compiled the results of a questionnaire from the International Conference on Cataloguing Principles in 1961 which was returned to the library of University College Dublin by nine other libraries in Ireland. Regarding their practice for cataloguing Irish surnames, six of the libraries stated that surnames bearing prefixes were entered under the prefix, one library entered surnames under the part of the name following the prefix, and two other libraries suggested that the alternative might be considered although their practice was to enter under the prefix (see Table 2). She concluded that the most common habit in Ireland is to give alphabetical recognition to all prefixes and complicated changes that occur in women's surnames (Hogan, 1964).

**Table 2**

<b>Number of libraries queried</b>	<b>9</b>
Surnames catalogued under prefix	6
Surnames catalogued under 'main word'	1
Practice is to enter under prefix but the alternative might be considered	2

In response to Mary Hogan's article, Michael Durkan wrote in the same journal later that year that 'the proposal for entry under the part of the name following the prefix . . . has little to recommend it . . . [it] is merely a practical device with the sole merit of redistributing the large accumulation of entries under Mac and O' (1964: 100). Regarding the cataloguing of the names of female authors, he suggested cross-referencing, from either the masculine or the feminine form of the name.

The use of cross-references for the surnames of females is the method recommended by P. J. Quigg in his article on 'The entering and systematic arrangement of Irish Names in catalogues, indexes and directories' (1967).

In the index to their magnum opus, *Beatháisnéis*, Máire Ní Mhurchú and Diarmuid Breathnach entered the surname under the masculine form with a generic cross-reference from each particular feminine prefix. *Beatháisnéis* is the dictionary of biographies of Irish-speaking personalities who died between 1882 and 1982. The cross-referencing, however, is applied inconsistently. There is no entry under Mhic, and there are two different texts used in the notes: 'see' and 'see under masculine form of the surname', the former being useful as a reader may not be familiar with 'the masculine form' (Ní Mhurchú and Breathnach, 1997):

Ní: see under masculine form of the surname  
 Nic: see under masculine form of the surname  
 Ua see Ó  
 Uí see Ó

For females, although the surname is entered under the masculine form, a note is provided in brackets after the name. The note contains the grammatical change necessary to form the correct surname for that particular person:

Mac Néill, Seosaimhín [Mhic N.]  
 Ó Maoileoin, Eibhlín [Ní Mh.]

Pat Booth offers advice which is very relevant to this discussion: 'It must be remembered that the bearer of a name may have an individual preference for its form of entry; this should always be followed if it can be ascertained' (2001: 89). In an index, the entry refers to a specific woman and therefore it could be argued that it is more appropriate for the entry to be under the form of her surname that she herself used than to cross-refer to the masculine form of her surname or to provide a generic cross-reference from the feminine prefix(es).

Íosold O'Deirg (she was also known as Ó Deirg and Ní Dheirg) wrote an article in *An Leabharlann* in 1981 to reopen discussion about an official code of practice for the ordering of Irish surnames. O'Deirg agreed with the opinions of others regarding the most appropriate method for entering women's surnames. The widely recommended solution was that 'the main entry should be made under the masculine prefix and form, with a reference from the feminine form' (1981: 14–15):

Ní Shúilleabháin, Siobhán See Ó Súilleabháin, Siobhán

She noted that the practice of entering Irish surnames under the prefix is 'compatible with existing English practice' (O'Deirg, 1981: 15):

Ó Súilleabháin, Seán  
 O'Sullivan, Seán

She also discussed the alternative: to ignore the prefix and enter under 'the surname proper'. O'Deirg devised a method for laying out a book index which alphabetized according to the main word in an entry and avoided inversions in all cases except for forenames. The words were alphabetized in a column, with prefixes and preceding letters and words indented to the left. This method was used in some publications, as per this extract from *As an nGéibheann* (Ó Cadhain, 1973: 211):

Mac Laghmainn, Riobard  
 Ó Laoghaire, an tAth. Peadar  
*Laoithe na Féinne*  
 Mac Laverty, Michael  
 Le Fanu  
 The Leader  
*Life and Letters*  
 Ó Lochlainn, Colm  
*Lúb na Cailighe*  
 Luxemburg, Rosa

This is an innovative method for alphabetizing and ordering a back-of-the-book index which indexing software would have no difficulty in handling. However it is not widely used in Ireland.

## Indexing software

The difficulty is to decide on what conventions to follow, not how to achieve the desired result – this is something indexing software programs are well equipped to do. The default setting on Macrex recognizes the Mc/Mac debate and interfiles the words with these prefixes, but the indexer can use hidden text or a command in the background to override all settings. Sky software has the option of a tickbox for 'treat as Name index' thus giving the option of interfiling Mac/Mc. Sky does not recognize the character Ó automatically, and orders words with this initial letter under 'unspecified' at the head of the index. Cindex sorts Mac and Mc separately in the default settings.

## Conclusion

[S]urnames are heirlooms – not mere words.  
 (MacLysaght, 1985: 307)

It is important to show respect for names, and for the indexer to develop and maintain appropriate conventions and provide familiar and consistent methods for users. For this, the role of the human, learned, cognisant indexer counts for much, as does an understanding of the reasons and the history behind all these names.

## Notes

- 1 ‘Tiontaíodh gach sloinne Gaelach ina ghibris gan aird.’
- 2 International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA)
- 3 For examples of the problems because of a lack of familiarity with the conventions relating to the definite article in Irish, see Flynn (2006) and O’Leary (2006).

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Róisín Nic Cóil has recently indexed *An Chláirseach agus an Choróin* (The harp and the crown), an impressionistic diary based on the seven symphonies of the Anglo-Irish composer, Charles Villiers Stanford, by Liam Mac Cóil. Róisín lives in Dublin and was reared bilingually with Irish and English. She is a member of the Society of Indexers (Irish Branch).  
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Alphabetical lists of Irish Names and meanings and Celtic Names and meanings. Visit the website [www.Irishwishes.com](http://www.Irishwishes.com). This list of Irish-language given names shows Irish language (as Gaeilge) given names and Anglicized or Latinized forms, with English equivalents. Some English-language names derive directly from the Irish "Kathleen = Caitlín, Owen = Eoghan. Some Irish-language names derive or are adapted from the English-language "Edmond or Edward. Alphabetization in APA Style. by Chelsea Lee.

Alphabetization"did you know there was anything more than A, B, C? Those author names might have all sorts of interesting characters in them, from accent marks, hyphens, and apostrophes to spaces, punctuation, and nontraditional capitalization. With all those characters in the mix, putting your reference list into alphabetical order for APA Style can seem difficult, but it's not. Whether those prefixes are considered part of the full surname will differ depending on the name's language of origin (and sometimes on common usage). For example, consider the composer Ludwig van Beethoven and the former U.S. president Martin Van Buren. In the text you'd talk about Beethoven's piano sonatas and Van Buren's political achievements.

2. Choose an Irish name that sounds similar as an equivalent. this has been done in reverse for hundreds of years, where native Irish names became "translated" as names the English could pronounce more easily, even though the names are not etymologically connected. Some names that would work for Darlene would be: Dairine (DAWR in yeh), Daimhín (DAHV een), or perhaps Doireann (DAHR an). Irish orthography has evolved over many centuries, since Old Irish was first written down in the Latin alphabet in about the 8th century AD. Prior to that, Primitive Irish was written in Ogham. Irish orthography is mainly based on etymological considerations, although a spelling reform in the mid-20th century simplified the relationship between spelling and pronunciation somewhat. A recent publication is 'Irish prefixes and the alphabetization of personal names'. Skills and Expertise. Creativity and Innovation. 'Mac's and 'O's abound, but 'Fitz's and other prefixes as well. Surnames vary for men and women bearing the same family name; the prefix changes to Mhic, Nic, Uí or Ní. Further complications are created by transliteration and translation from View. Current institution. Dundalk Institute of Technology. Department of Civil and Environmental Engineering. Dundalk, Ireland. Advertisement. Join ResearchGate to find the people and research you need to help your work. 17+ million members. 135+ million publications.