

An Examination of Some Accounts of the Surname *Desmond*  
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The Meaning of a Name and Its Origin

The surname *Desmond* is unusual, as Irish surnames go, in that it is, apparently, derived from a place name. Irish surnames derived from place names were rare in medieval Ireland and occurred almost exclusively among Anglo-Norman families.<sup>1</sup> In its Gaelic-Irish form, the word *Desmond* is *Deasmhumhain* and was the name of an ancient territorial division in Ireland. *Mhumhain*, the southernmost of the four provinces of Ireland was divided into *Tuadmhumhain*, *Eirmhumhain*, and *Deasmhumhain*, Anglicized as Thomond, Ormond, and Desmond, meaning “north Munster,” “east Munster,” and “south Munster” respectively. It is, perhaps, tempting to suppose that the name originated when some indigenous south Munster sept adopted *Desmond* as a surname, but before considering what the origin of the name might be, it is important to distinguish giving an account of the *meaning* of a name from giving an account of its *origin*, for they are not at all the same thing.

Accounts of the *meanings* of names are often simply trite, as, for instance, when someone says, “*Peterson* means descendants or sons of Peter.” At worst, they are misleading when they are accepted in place of an account of the actual origin of the surname. There is a sense in which personal names have no meanings at all. That is, they might be said to have *reference* but not *sense*, inasmuch as they refer to objects, or groups of objects, but are not, in general, descriptive of them. Even among names that actually originate as descriptions of some quality possessed by their referents, this is soon forgotten as the name is passed down and adopted by others. Even supposing that the name had a meaning at some point and that one knew what it was, would that mean that one knew the origin of the name?

To say that *Desmond* is derived from the Irish word for south Munster tells us nothing about its origin. It could be that someone’s life was saved by a friend from south Munster, and so he adopted the name in remembrance of him. There could be a virtually endless number of reasons why someone would adopt the name. The point is that we can’t just look at names and “read off” their origins. To learn the origin of a surname, we have to find concrete examples of people who used the name, trace the name back as far as we can, and try to draw conclusions about why the name was adopted and when. That’s why giving an account of the *meaning* of a name is not the same as giving an account of its *origin*, although the former can sometimes provide a clue to the latter. For instance, with the Irish surname *Desmond*, it would make sense to start looking for its origin in south Munster. An account of the *origin* of a surname, in contradistinction to what might be called a mere *etymological* or *semantical* account, is an account of when, where, by whom, and why a particular surname was adopted and ought to include an account of present-day bearers of the surname, their distribution, and relationship to the originators.

Two Confused Accounts

Accounts that confuse giving the meaning of the surname *Desmond* with giving an account of its origin abound, both in print and on the Internet.<sup>2</sup> This has resulted in a great deal of confusion concerning the actual origin of the name. As an example of this, consider the following article, clipped from the genealogy column of a newspaper:

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<sup>1</sup> Edward MacLysaght, *More Irish Families* (Galway: O’Gorman Ltd., 1960), p. 12.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. *Surname Database*: <http://www.surnamedb.com/Surname/desmond> and *Desmond Family Crest and Name History* <http://www.houseofnames.com/desmond-family-crest>

The Desmond surname belongs to the Patronymic [sic] classification of surnames and stems from the Gaelic O Deasmhumhnaigh meaning “Son of Desmondman.” Desmondman was the identification applied to a native of Desmond, the old name for Munster (deas-south; Mumhan-Munster). The majority of Irish surnames are patronymics and ordinarily identified the individual according to the name of the chieftain of his sect or clan. The prefixes “O” and “Mac” indicated descent (either blood or clan) and preceded names of the clan chief. During the period of Gaelic submergence, these prefixes were, for the most part, discontinued but, in recent years, many persons have restored the prefixes in their surnames. As a result, we now find examples of the same name in both prefixed and unprefixed form.

Desmond would have been an identification of one who came from southwest Munster. It might have been adopted as a personal name or used as a nickname. It is only natural to assume that his descendants would be described as sons of Desmond. In this manner, the name came to be an hereditary surname. Desmond, or Munster, comprises the counties of Clare, Cork, Kerry, Limerick, Tipperary and Waterford. The Fitzgerald[s] were Earls of Desmond dating back as early as the 14<sup>th</sup> century. Shaw Desmond (1877 to 1960) the noted Irish novelist, poet, and journalist was the founder of the International Institute of Psychical Research. An old record describes an interesting lady named Catherine Fitzgerald Desmond who was the wife of James XIV, Earl of Desmond. She was born in the county of Waterford and was presented at the court of King Edward IV, danced with his brother, Richard III, and lived through five subsequent reigns. It is said that she reached the age of one hundred and forty and died after the accession of James I in 1603. The Desmond name is well known in County Cork, but is also quite common in all parts of Ireland at the present time.<sup>3</sup>

I have included the full text of this article because it exemplifies so well the confusion referred to above. The author begins by claiming that the surname Desmond is “patronymic” and “stems from” the Irish *O Deasmhumhnaigh*. But, where is the evidence to support this? In the case of the *Irish* origin of the surname, there are no known examples of anyone named Desmond who ever adopted or was called by that name because he was from south Munster, or was the son of someone from south Munster. Neither of the two examples of the use of the surname mentioned in the article can be considered as instances of the adoption of the name by descendants of “the Desmondman.” Catherine FitzGerald Desmond adopted the surname because she was married to Thomas, the eleventh Earl of Desmond, not James, the fourteenth, and Shaw Desmond, whose real name was Charles Shaw, used the name as a *nom de plume*. All of the evidence that exists—that is, all the examples of persons *who actually used the name* before 1600—indicates that in Ireland the surname Desmond was adopted by members of the families of the Earls of Desmond in about the middle of the fourteenth century. The name was taken from a *title* not a place name and is, therefore, only indirectly derived from the Irish word *Deasmhumhain*, which means “south Munster.”

There are many other problems with the account, but I shall mention only two of these here: First, the author claims that the surname Desmond was originally patronymic, but in the earliest example of the name that is actually found, that of John Dessemond, the fourth Earl of Desmond, who died in 1399, the name is not patronymic.<sup>4</sup> It appears that some members of the families of the Earls of Desmond occasionally used the name in patronymic form in the sixteenth century. For instance Thomas fitz James the son of the thirteenth Earl, James fitz John Desmond, was knighted on 2 September 1569 at Limerick by Lord Deputy Sidney as “Thomas FitzGerald, alias O’Desmond,” and the sons and grandsons of Maurice fitz John, brother of the thirteenth Earl, are referred to as “O’Desmond” in the State Papers.<sup>5</sup> The surname is found as

<sup>3</sup>“Desmond,” *The Portsmouth Herald*, (Portsmouth, N.H.), 30 September 1968, p. 6.

<sup>4</sup> “Close Roll 18, Richard II,” 59, [1395], *CIRCLE, A Calendar of Irish Chancery Letters c. 1244 - 1509*, <http://chancery.tcd.ie/document/close/18-richard-ii/59>).

<sup>5</sup> George E. Cockayne, *The Complete Peerage of England, Scotland, Ireland, Great Britain and the United Kingdom, Extant, Extinct, or Dormant*, 6 vols., 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, 1910-1929, reprint 1984 (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1984, vol.4, p. 255).

“McDesmond” in the Irish census published in 1659, and so when it does occur in patronymic form it is not exclusively an “O” name, as claimed by some.<sup>6</sup> After 1659, it is found with both the *O* and *Mc* prefixes, but these are quite rare. Second, what is by far the main problem with the article is that in the space of three sentences the author goes from claiming that the name *might* have been adopted as a personal name or used as a nickname to *assuming* that the descendants of the person who adopted the name became described as “sons of the Desmondman” to *concluding* that, “In this manner, the name came to be an hereditary surname.” And to make matters worse, all of this takes place of without a single example of anyone named Desmond who ever adopted or was called by that name because he was from south Munster, which is to say *without any evidence whatsoever*.

The same sort of confused accounts are found on the Internet. Here is an example from a popular website:

**Desmond** is a given name and surname of [sic], derived from the Irish place-name *Desmond*, an anglicization of Gaelic *Deas Mhumhna* “South Munster”. The Irish peerages of Ormonde [sic], Desmond, and Thomond represented the old sub-kingdoms of East, South and North Munster, respectively. South Munster existed as an independent territory between 1118 and 1543. The title of Earl of Desmond (fourth creation) in the Peerage of Ireland originates in 1628; it is currently held by Alexander Feilding, 12<sup>th</sup> Earl of Denbigh (b. 1970). Desmond is found as a surname in the 19th century, apparently taken by some Irish immigrants to the United States, but as a given name only rose to limited popularity in the 20<sup>th</sup>. [The article concludes by giving a long list of assorted people with the given or surname *Desmond*.]<sup>7</sup>

It is not clear what relevance, if any, the reference to Alexander Fielding, who is English, has to the Irish surname *Desmond* and the statement that the surname *Desmond* “is found as a surname in the nineteenth century, apparently taken by some Irish immigrants to the United States” is equivocal and is false in both senses in which it can be understood. If it means that the surname was *first adopted* by some Irish immigrants to the United States in the nineteenth century, it is clearly false because, as has been mentioned, the earliest example of the use of the surname in Ireland was in the fourteenth century. On the other hand, if it is understood to mean that the surname is *first found in the United States* in the nineteenth century, it is false, as well. The earliest record of the surname in the United States appears to be that of Dennis Desmond, who was born to John and Martha Desmond in Charles Town, South Carolina on August 17, 1755.<sup>8</sup>

There are hundreds, if not thousands, of such accounts of the surname on the Internet. A search of the words *Desmond*, *surname*, and *origin* retrieves about 139,000 results. All of these are much the same as the two we have examined—based upon unsupported assumptions derived from the *meaning* of the word Desmond and rife with irrelevant examples of the use of the name and incorrect statements concerning its origin. What is to be feared most is that these will become accepted as true by the number of times they are repeated. This is the danger warned of earlier that occurs when accounts of the meanings of surnames are accepted in place of an account of their actual origins.

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<sup>6</sup> In 1659, Sir William Petty compiled a list of persons with title to land in Ireland. Sometimes called “Pender’s Census,” it was published in 1939 (Irish Manuscripts Commission, *A Census of Ireland, circa 1659, with Supplementary Material from the Poll Money Ordinances 1660-1611*, Seamus Pender, ed., Dublin: Stationary Office, 1939). Petty also recorded the total numbers of Irish and English inhabitants in each townland and the principal Irish names in each barony. In order to be considered a principal name, there had to be a minimum of ten families with the name residing within the barony. The surname *Desmond* appears in only one barony. It is listed as principal surname in the barony of Kinalea in County Cork as “McDesmond” Thus, according to Petty’s survey there were at least ten families with the surname MacDesmond residing in the barony of Kinalea in 1659. We have no way of knowing how many Desmonds or “McDesmonds” might have been residing in the other baronies of County Cork.

<sup>7</sup> “Desmond (Name),” *Wikipedia*, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Desmond\\_\(name\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Desmond_(name))

<sup>8</sup> “South Carolina, Charles Town, St. Philips Parish, Births, Marriages, and Burials from the Register of 1720-1758” in Michael J. O’Brien, *Irish Settlers In America* (Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing Co., 1979), 2 vols., vol. 1, p. 74.

Accounts of the origin of the Desmond surname by the compilers of Irish surname dictionaries can hardly be said to be much better than those found in newspapers and on the Internet, and to make matters worse, this is virtually all that has been written on the subject.

### The Surname Dictionaries

#### Father Patrick Woulfe *Sloinnte Gaedhal is Gall*

Father Patrick Woulfe (1872-1933), or as he preferred to be called, An tAthair Pádraig de Bhulbh, was born in Cratloe, County Clare, the son of Seamus Woulfe, a farmer.<sup>9</sup> He was the author of the *Sloinnte Gaedhal is Gall* (Irish Names and Surnames), which was published in 1923. The history of the publication of this work is rather confusing. Father Woulfe began “collecting” Irish surnames in the 1890s and, in 1906, published an early version of *Sloinnte Gaedhal is Gall* in the form of a list of Irish names with their English equivalents.<sup>10</sup> In the preface to this book, Father Woulfe says that his purpose in compiling it was to provide members of the Gaelic League with the Irish forms of their names and surnames.<sup>11</sup> A new edition was published in 1922, apparently in both Irish-English and English-Irish versions. The content of these was still, basically, a list of names with their corresponding equivalents, although they contained introductory chapters with a great deal of technical information on Irish given names and surnames. These were followed, in 1923, by the now famous version of *Sloinnte Gaedhal is Gall* which gives a more detailed account of Irish names and surnames. However, Father Woulfe, apparently, never intended any of the versions of his book to be a comprehensive account of the *origins* of Irish names and surnames, although he does provide an account of what he believes to be the origin of some of the names.

His account of the surname *Desmond* consists of definitions of the Irish words *Ó Deasmumhnaigh* and *Deasmhumnach* and cannot, therefore, be considered an account of the origin of the name. He does, however provide a list of what he regards as alternative versions of the name and remarks that it is “a Cork surname.” His account is as follows:

DEASMUMHNACH, *genitive* -aigh, Desmond; an old Irish name or designation, meaning native of, or belonging to, Desmond or South Munster. Latin—Desmundus.<sup>12</sup>

Ó DEASMUMHNAIGH... *O Dassuny, O Dasshowne, O Deason, O Desmonde*, Desmond; “descendant of the Desmonian” (Irish *Deasmhumnach*, native of Desmond or South Munster); a Cork surname.<sup>13</sup>

Father Woulfe says that Desmond is “an old Irish name or designation,” but does not provide an example of anyone who ever used the name in its Irish form or how the names he claims are alternative versions are known to be so. Father Woulfe was the first in a line of writers Irish surnames who have not felt it necessary to provide the sources for the statements that they make. Our next writer continues this tradition.

<sup>9</sup> Cratloe is a village in County Clare between Limerick and Shannon.

<sup>10</sup> Patrick Woulfe, *Sloinnte Gaedhal is Gall*, (Dublin: M. H. Gill & Son, 1906). Subsequent editions are all by the same publisher.

<sup>11</sup> *Conradh na Gaeilge*, the Gaelic League, is an organization founded by Douglas Hyde to promote the Irish language. Many of its members assumed the original Gaelic forms of their Anglicized Gaelic names. In the case of the surname *Desmond*, this would be erroneous since it was never a Gaelic-Irish surname.

<sup>12</sup> Patrick Woulfe, *Sloinnte Gaedhal is Gall*, (Dublin: M. H. Gill & Son, 1923), p. 180.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 503.

Dr. Edward MacLysaght, *More Irish Families* and *The Surnames of Ireland*

Dr. Edward MacLysaght (1887-1986) was born at Flax Bourton, England and studied law before turning to heraldry and genealogy. He wrote several books on Irish surnames and Irish family history and for many years served as Chief Heraldry and Genealogical Officer of the Irish Office of Arms and Chairman of the Irish Manuscripts Commission. In his book *More Irish Families*, Dr. MacLysaght has this to say about the Desmond surname:

(O) DESMOND

*Desmond* is an O name, though the prefix has long been dropped and has not been resumed. It is *O Deasmhumhnaigh* in Irish, denoting descendant of the Desmondman, i.e. native of Desmond, the old name of south-west Munster (*deas*, south; *Mumha*, gen. *Mumhan*, Munster). The early anglicized form *O'Dassuny* was a phonetic approximation to the Irish form given above. *O'Deason* was another early form in English. It has always been closely associated with Co. Cork and seldom found outside that county. It was presumably acquired by migrants from Desmond to the northern and eastern parts of Co. Cork, the country around Mallow being its main habitat. Kingwilliamstown, in the Newmarket district of Co. Cork, has of late years been renamed Ballydesmond. The name is a recent invention: the old name of the place is *Tooreenkeogh*.

The surname appears in 1659 as *MacDesmond* in the list of principal Irish surnames in the barony of Kinalea, Co. Cork. This no doubt is one of the many examples of confusion on the part of Petty's enumerators between the prefixes Mac and O. Possibly Mac an Deasmhumhnaigh (on the analogy of *Mac an Déisigh*) may have been occasionally used in Irish, but I have met no instance of it.

*Desmond*, when used as a title not as a surname, is one of the most prominent names in Irish history on account of the leading position of the southern branch of the Fitzgeralds, of whom between 1329 and 1583 fifteen were Earls of Desmond.<sup>14</sup>

Dr. MacLysaght begins by giving a definition of the Irish phrase *O Deasmhumhnaigh* and what might appear to be an account of the origin of the surname when he says, "It was, presumably, acquired by migrants from Desmond to the northern and eastern parts of Co. Cork," but, he makes no definite pronouncement concerning its origin. The word *presumably* here means that there is no evidence, but that this is *assumed* to be the case, perhaps, because of the meaning of the words of which the name is composed. No direct evidence is given for the origin of the surname, and what might be considered the single bit that is mentioned—the families with the surname *MacDesmond* in Kinalea in 1659—is dismissed by Dr. MacLysaght.<sup>15</sup> On the other hand, he seems ready to accept uncritically the connection between the so-called "early Anglicized

<sup>14</sup> MacLysaght, *More Irish Families*, pp. 86-7. The name is actually listed as "McDesmond" in the 1659 census to which Dr. MacLysaght refers, not "MacDesmond." Kinalea is a barony in County Cork that formerly belonged to the Earls of Desmond.

<sup>15</sup> In 1659, Sir William Petty compiled a list of persons with title to land in Ireland, Irish Manuscripts Commission, *A Census of Ireland, circa 1659, with Supplementary Material from the Poll Money Ordinances 1660-1611*, Seamus Pinder, ed. (Dublin: Stationery Office, 1939). He also recorded the total numbers of Irish and English inhabitants in each townland and the principal Irish names in each barony. In order to be considered a principal name, there had to be a minimum of ten families or more with the name residing within the barony. Thus, according to Petty's survey there were at least ten families with the surname *McDesmond* residing in the barony of Kinalea in 1659. *Desmond* does not appear as a principal Irish surname in any other barony.

Dr. MacLysaght dismisses this, apparently because he doesn't believe that the surname was ever prefixed *Mac* or *Mc*. However, the following examples show that the surname Desmond could still be found with the prefix in the 19<sup>th</sup> century: (1) Daniel McDesmond, who was born in 1819 in Ireland and immigrated at New York City on July 28, 1849; (2) John McDesmond, who was born about 1820 in Ireland and resided in Boston, Massachusetts in 1850; (3) William McDesmond, who was born in 1822 and served in the British Navy; (4) James McDesmond, who was born in Ireland about 1835; (5) Michael McDesmond, who was born in Ireland about 1839; (6) Margaret McDesmond, who was born in Ireland about 1842 and died on July 11, 1870 at Waltham, Massachusetts. Sources: (1) "United States Famine Irish Passenger Index, 1846-1851," index, *FamilySearch*, <https://familysearch.org>; (2) "United States Census, 1850," index and images, *FamilySearch* (<https://familysearch.org>); (3) "United Kingdom, Merchant Navy Seamen Records, 1835-1941," index,

forms" *O'Dassuny* and *O'Deason* and the Gaelic *O Deasmhumhnaigh*—names that, as we have seen, were listed by Father Woulfe as alternative forms. But, does Dr. MacLysaght really intend to make the claim that these are forms of *O Deasmhumhnaigh*? Examine his language carefully. Is he merely saying that the names *O'Dassuny*, *O'Deason*, and *O Deasmhumhnaigh* sound alike?—or is he making the much stronger claim that the first two were ephemeral forms of the latter? If it is the stronger claim that he is making, he offers no evidence to support it. The mere fact that there is a homonymic similarity between two names says nothing about any etymological relationship between them, nor about any familial relationship between their referents. Take, for example, the Chinese surname *Li* and the English surname *Lee*. They sound alike, but that tells us nothing about any etymological relationship between them. On the other hand, sometimes a homonymic similarity between names can be a clue that there is such a relationship between the two—as might be the case between the English surnames *Lee* and *Leigh*; but, a mere homonymic similarity does nothing to establish such a relationship. Additional evidence is needed. The fact that *Lee* and *Leigh* sound alike and that both are English surnames might be a clue that there may be an etymological connection between the two, but in itself does nothing to establish such a connection. Historical evidence connecting the two, such as that the names were used interchangeably by certain persons at certain times, would be needed for that.

In the case of the surname *Desmond*, there is not a single documented instance of anyone with the surname *O Deasmhumhnaigh* who lived prior to or during the period when the Earls of Desmond and their families adopted the surname *Desmond* or *Dessemond*. If such a person could be found and connected with bearers of the surnames *O'Dassuny* and *O'Deason*, so much the better. This would, at least, be a step towards providing some support. Dr. MacLysaght, however, fails to take this step.

One final remark regarding Dr. MacLysaght's brief account of the origin of the surname is in order. His last sentence, which runs: "*Desmond*, when used as a title not as a surname, is one of the most prominent names in Irish history on account of the leading position of the southern branch of the Fitzgeralds, of whom between 1329 and 1583 fifteen were Earls of Desmond," is contradictory. If the word *Desmond* is used as a *title*, then it is not a *surname* and cannot be "one of the most prominent names in Irish history." Dr. MacLysaght just adds to the confusion here. Perhaps, he is aware that many of the Earls and members of their families signed their names "Thomas Desmond," "James Desmond," "Gerot Desmond," "Eleanor Desmond," and so on, but doesn't mention it because it doesn't fit in with his account.

In 1969, another book by Dr. MacLysaght, *Surnames in Ireland*, was published, in which, to his credit, he seems to have modified his views concerning the origin of the Desmond surname. The entry for Desmond is as follows:

(O) Desmond, O Deasmhumhnaigh (descendant of the Desmond man - deas, south - Mumhan, Munster). This sept migrated from west to east Cork. It is now very numerous throughout the county and the great majority of families so named are of that origin. *It is possible that some may be descended from a junior branch of the Fitzgeralds of Desmond.*<sup>16</sup>

Unfortunately, Dr. MacLysaght does not cite his sources, so there is no way of knowing on what information he bases his statement about some Desmonds being "descended from a junior branch of the Fitzgeralds of Desmond."

Dr. Diarmuid Ó Murchadha, *Family Names of County Cork*

Dr. Diarmuid Ó Murchadha (1928-2011) was the editor of the *Journal of the Cork Historical and Archaeological Society* and the author of *Family Names of County Cork*.<sup>17</sup> Of the Desmond surname Dr. Ó Murchadha says:

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*FamilySearch*, <https://familysearch.org>; (4) "United States Census, 1870," index and images, *FamilySearch*, <https://familysearch.org>; (5) "United States Census, 1870," index and images, *FamilySearch*, <https://familysearch.org>; (6) "Massachusetts, Deaths, 1841-1915," index and images, *FamilySearch*, <https://familysearch.org>

<sup>16</sup> Edward MacLysaght, *The Surnames of Ireland* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1969), p. 80. Italics added.

Despite its anglicized form, there is no connection between this family name and the Earls of Desmond (Fitzgeralds), except in rare cases. There was, for example, a Desmond family in Co. Tipperary in the 1540s, with Christian names such as Maurice and John—an indication of Norman descent. A similar name is that of Maurice fitz James Dessemond who was appointed Archdeacon of Cloyne in 1550.

Generally speaking, however, the Desmonds of Co. Cork were originally Ui Dheasmhumhnaigh, a family of whose origin and history very little is known. We do know that they were in west Cork in the fourteenth century, since as in the case of many other families—Duan Cathain claims them as part of the Ui Eachach hegemony though it may be of some significance that the ancestor provided—Maonach son of Airtniadh—is not derived from the Ui Eacach themselves but said to have come "from the north": "I gerich Fhloinn agus Luighdech Do goireadh de Deasmhuimhneach buan a mheasumhla re a mheas uadh I Dheasmhumhna is díleas." (In the territory of Flann and Luighdech [i.e. south Munster] he was called "Desmhuimhneach"; long has he been esteemed; from him are sprung the Ui Dheasmhumhna.)<sup>18</sup>

Dr. Ó Murchadha's first sentence seems to be constructed in negative form in order to downplay the connection between the surname *Desmond* and the Earls of Desmond. Might he not have said, "Despite its anglicized form there is a connection between this family name and the Earls of Desmond only in rare cases"? He goes on to give two obscure examples of the use of the surname by persons who might be "of Norman descent." Continuing in the tradition of Woulfe and MacLysaght, Dr. Ó Murchadha does not cite his sources, so it is impossible to verify what he says or to find additional information. Why he ignores the abundant evidence in the State Papers and elsewhere that the Earls used the surname Desmond remains a mystery. If there *is* a connection between the surname *Desmond* and the Earls of Desmond, shouldn't an account of the surname say exactly what that connection is? All of that aside, here, at least, we have some evidence for the claim that there was a Gaelic-Irish sept called *Ui Deasmhumhnaigh*.

The *Duan Cathain* is a long genealogical poem composed by Cathan, son of Nial Ua Duinnin, in the 14th century. It contains the only known reference to the Ui Deasmhumhnaigh in all of Celtic literature. The poem was later incorporated into an even longer work entitled *An Leabhar Muimhneach* ("The Book of Munster"), an obscure manuscript that purportedly preserves the genealogies of many of the families of Munster. There are, however, two problems with Ó Murchadha's use of the *Duan Cathan* here. The first is that Ó Murchadha says that the *Duan Cathan* makes "Maonach, son of Airtnaidh" the ancestor of the Ui Deasmhumhnaigh. The relevant passage from the *Book of Munster* (an English translation) reads as follows:

When Maonach came from Lann Leine to South Munster he brought Airtniadh with him. The son of Airtniadh was called the Deasmhuimhneach ["South Munsterman"] from whom was the Ui Dheasmhumhna family (Desmonds).<sup>19</sup>

Thus, it is the son of Airtniadh, not Maonach as Ó Murchadha claims, who is the alleged ancestor of the Desmonds. This is a major error on the part of Ó Murchadha. So, now it turns out that according to the *Duan Cathan*, the Desmonds are descended from an ancestor whose name is not even known and about whom we do not know even so much as when he is alleged to have lived. Yet Ó Murchadha says that we *know* the Ui Deasmhumhnaigh "were in west Cork in the fourteenth century, since as in the case of many other families—Duan Cathain claims them as part of the Ui Eachach hegemony." However, it does not mention "west Cork" in the *Duan Cathan* but "South Munster," and we don't *know* that they were

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<sup>17</sup> Diarmuid Ó Murchada, *Family Names of County Cork* (Cork, Ireland: *The Collins Press*, 1996. The entry for the surname *Desmond* is on pp. 121-3.

<sup>18</sup> Ó Murchada, p. 121.

<sup>19</sup> This translation is online at <http://www.iol.ie/~kevnise/eoghantx.html>

there *just because the Duan Cathain says it's so*. This leads us to the second problem, which is that the account given in the Duan Cathain of the origin of the sept called the Ui Deasmhumhnaigh cannot be verified because this sept is not mentioned anywhere else. We don't even know when to start looking for them because no dates are given in the Duan Cathain. With other Irish septs, one can at least be assured of their existence by the fact that they are mentioned in multiple sources.

In an attempt to circumvent this problem, Ó Murchadha gives a list of people, mostly from the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, with names that he considers to be early forms of the surname *Desmond*.<sup>20</sup> These include *O'Deason, Iyassony, Dashowne, Dasshowne, Dassuny, Dassunughe, Dassanie, and Dassunie*, among others. However, he, like Dr. MacLysaght, ignores the fact that the surname in its present form was already in use by the Earls of Desmond by the mid to late 14<sup>th</sup> century. Ó Murchadha, himself, gives examples of the surname in its present form in the 1540s and 1550s (see above) and is, apparently, unaware that the examples he gives are of the use of the surname by members of the families of the Earls of Desmond. What is the point of giving examples of people with alleged homonymic approximations of the name if the name in its present form was already in use?

The following are some examples of early use of the surname in its present form: Thomas Desmond, who died in 1591 at Finglas, County Dublin, Ireland;<sup>21</sup> John Desmond, who left a will in 1679 at Cork, Ireland;<sup>22</sup> Daniel Desmond, who left a will at Kanturk, County Cork, Ireland in 1688;<sup>23</sup> Daniel Desmond, an immigrant, who landed at Germantown, Pennsylvania in 1708;<sup>24</sup> Cornelius Desmond, who left a will at Dunisky, Co. Cork Ireland in 1731;<sup>25</sup> Danniell [*sic*] Desmond, who was born about 1666, died February 27, 1746, and was buried in Wallingstown Cemetery (Saint Lappins Graveyard), Little Island Roads, County Cork, Ireland;<sup>26</sup> and Danell [*sic*] Desmond, who was born about 1679, died August 2, 1739, and was buried in Knockavilla Graveyard, Kill, Crossbarry, County Cork, Ireland.<sup>27</sup> I have not cited the many examples earlier than these because they are all examples of use of the surname by members of the families of the Earls of Desmond. I might, however, also mention the rebel, Dr. Desmond, who is referred to by Bennet in his *History of Bandon*.<sup>28</sup> He is mentioned briefly by Ó Murchada and then forgotten.<sup>29</sup> This Dr. Desmond lived outside the city walls of Bandon in 1641, and was born, perhaps, between 1610 and 1620.

How can I fail to mention, as well, the Irish monks named Desmond that Ó Murchada himself says were ordained at the College of Bordeaux in France in 1620, and gives no indication from whence this information comes or what its significance is?<sup>30</sup> Actually, there were *four* Irish monks named Desmond, not two as Ó Murchada says, who landed in France in 1600. The reference for this is an article by Rev. Dennis O'Donoghue, " published in *The Irish Ecclesiastical Record*.<sup>31</sup> In a note appended to the article, Dr. Matthew Kelly states:

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<sup>20</sup> Ó Murchada, pp. 121-2.

<sup>21</sup> "Dublin, Ireland, Probate Record and Marriage Licence Index, 1270-1858." <http://www.ancestry.com>

<sup>22</sup> J and J Limited Company, "Index to Irish Wills," 2 vols., Salt Lake City, UT, USA, <http://www.ancestry.com>

<sup>23</sup> Calendars of Diocesan and Prerogative Wills, 1596-1858," The National Archives of Ireland, <http://www.nationalarchives.ie>

<sup>24</sup> P. William Filby and Mary K. Meyer, *Passenger and Immigration Lists Index: A Guide to Published Arrival Records of about 500,000 Passengers Who Came to the United States and Canada in the Seventeenth, Eighteenth, and Nineteenth Centuries*, Vol. 3, (Detroit: Gale Research, 1981) p. 456.

<sup>25</sup> Index to Wills from W. P. W. Phillimore, and Gertrude Thrift, eds., *Indexes to Irish Wills*, 5 vols. (Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing Co., 1970).

<sup>26</sup> <http://www.findagrave.com/cgi-bin/fg.cgi?page=gsr&GSIn=Crowhill&GSIman=1&GSid=2544549>

<sup>27</sup> <http://www.findagrave.com/cgi-bin/fg.cgi?page=gr&GSid=2544549&GRid=131554392>

<sup>28</sup> George Bennett, *The History of Bandon and the Principal Towns in the West Riding of County Cork*, Enlarged ed. (Cork: Francis Guy, 1869), p. 180. This Dr. Desmond is, undoubtedly, the "Daniel Desmond, doctor of laws, Bandon-bridge," who is mentioned by Bennett as being indebted to George Fenton, merchant of Bandon-bridge, for damages suffered in the Rebellion of 1641 in the first edition of his history (Cork: Francis Guy, 1862, p. 98).

<sup>29</sup> Ó Murchada, p. 122.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> Denis O'Donoghue, "The Congregation of Irish Priests in Bordeaux, A.D. 1602-1617," *The Irish Ecclesiastical Record*, 4:5 (1899), pp. 507-20.



Forty Irish priests landed at Bordeaux about the year 1600. They gave an account of the state of Ireland to Florimond Raymond, which he published in his *History of the Heresies of the Sixteenth Century*. They had no regular college at Bordeaux, until Anne of Austria established one by letters patent in 1654. Previously to that time they had the Church of St. Eutropius, and casual revenues sufficient for the support of forty priests or students, who did not, however, live in community....<sup>32</sup>

The College was founded by Father Dermot MacCarthy of Muskerry, under the patronage of Cardinal de Sourdis, Archbishop of Bordeaux. In 1619, Father MacCarthy published a brochure in which he listed the names and places of origin of the priests of the congregation from 1602 to 1617, and this list is reproduced in O'Donoghue's article. Among the 215 names in the list, which is in French, are P. Tadée Desmond, Augustinian Reformé, F. Tadée Desmond, Corcagen, F. Daniel Desmond, Corcagen, and F. Daniel Desmond, Corcagen.

Finally, must we not count the ten families with the surname *McDesmond* residing in the barony of Kinalea mentioned in the Census of 1659 as an instance of the surname in its present form? This is an example of ten *families* with the surname, not ten *individuals*. The total number of individuals with the surname residing in Kinalea must, therefore, have been much higher. Also, we must not forget that only baronies with ten or more families with a given surname are mentioned. There could have been many other baronies in which the surname occurred, but which were not mentioned because there were less than ten families.

### Conclusion

The significance of all of this is that the surname *Desmond* was in use in its present form at least by the first half of the sixteenth century. Since the examples of people with the alleged earlier forms of the name given by Ó Murchadha are all from this same time period or later, how can they be *earlier* forms of the name? And how, for that matter, do we know that the people with these so-called earlier forms of the name shared any familial relationship with the people with the name in its present form? It is all well and good to cite examples of persons with names that sound like *Desmond*, but how can one really know that one name is an earlier form of another?

The only way such a thing could be known is if there were actual examples of successive related generations adopting a different spelling or pronunciation of a name. For instance, we know that some of the Gaelic Irish dropped the *O'* and *Mac* prefixes from their names. The name *O'Malley*, a very Irish surname, may serve as an example of this. There are many *O'Malley* families today, but there are also some *Malleys* who are just as Irish. However, the only way to tell whether the name *Malley* is a later form of *O'Malley* is to trace some *Malley* families back generation by generation until you reach the *O'Malleys* in their ancestry. But, in the case of the names Drs. MacLysaght and Ó Murchadha claim to be later forms of *Ui Deasmumhnaigh*, (or earlier forms of *Desmond*), neither of them does this because they can't. There are no *Ui Deasmumhnaigh* to be found. *In all the Irish annals and records no sept or person called Ui Deasmumhnaigh is ever mentioned.* Tracing *Desmond* back to *Deason*, *O'Dassuny*, or any of the other alleged examples of earlier forms of *Desmond* that are mentioned is impossible because there are virtually no records before 1750. How can one keep from concluding that Dr. Ó Murchadha is relying on the same fallacious homonymic argument I mentioned earlier that Dr. MacLysaght might be adopting—of claiming that one name is an earlier version of another simply because they *sound alike*?

Dr. Ó Murchadha does mention an example of one person with recognizable form of the name *Ui Deasmumhnaigh*. According to him, "In the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, Seághan Ó Deasmhúmhna was a schoolmaster to whose school in Innishannon Mícháel óg Ó Longáin sent his son."<sup>33</sup> No reference is given for this, so it cannot be verified, but it matters not; for, in the 1766 "Religious Census," the returns of which are very incomplete,

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<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 511-12.

<sup>33</sup> Ó Murchada, p. 122.

there are twenty-one families listed in County Cork with the surname Desmond in its present form. As Ó Murchadha himself mentions, by 1852 there were about 304 families with the surname *Desmond* in County Cork. *Ó Deasmhúmhna*, in the example given is not an earlier or ephemeral form of *Desmond* since it occurs after the name in its present form was already in widespread use.

This, then, is the evidence for the claim that the surname Desmond originated with a Gaelic-Irish sept that called itself “Ui Deasmhumhnaigh”—“the descendants of the Desmondman.” It is a road leading from nothing to nowhere. Its sum total is this: an obscure Irish text that mentions a sept called the “Ui Deasmumhnaigh” that is not mentioned anywhere else in all of the Irish annals and records and a poet-schoolmaster by the name of Seághan Ó Deasmhúmhna, who lived in Innishannon in the early eighteenth century. How can such a claim be taken seriously by anyone? That the Earls of Desmond used the surname *Desmond*, and that some present-day Desmonds are descended from them is a matter that is not really open to question. Drs. MacLysaght and Ó Murchadha both recognize this. The real question is not whether the Earls used the surname, but how early they began doing so and whether all, or just some, present-day Desmonds are their descendants.