

Hunting for the genetic legacy of Brian Boru in Irish historical sources.

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Having won an English chariot from an Italian gentleman at play, my uncle had our arms painted on the panels in a more splendid way than ever (surmounted, as we were descended from the ancient kings) with an Irish crown of the most splendid size and gilding. I had this crown in lieu of a coronet engraved on a large amethyst signet-ring worn on my forefinger; and I don't mind confessing that I used to say the jewel had been in my family for several thousand years, having originally belonged to my direct ancestor, his late Majesty, King Brian Boru or Barry. I warrant the legends of the Heralds' College are not more authentic than mine was.¹

In his travels in Ireland in 1842, Thackeray followed the course of the Shannon up river from Tarbert to Limerick and then travelled through Clare to Galway, visiting “a decent little library” in Ennis where he bought “six volumes of works strictly Irish”. As he describes them subsequently, “these yellow-covered books are prepared for the people chiefly” and included tales of a highwayman entitled *Adventures of Mr James Freeny*, legends in *Hibernian Tales*² and “the lamentable tragedy of the ‘Battle of Aughrim’ writ in the most doleful Anglo-Irish verse.” He does not refer explicitly in his *Irish Sketchbook* to Brian Boru but it seems fair to assume that his description of Barry Lyndon’s ancestry was based, at least in part, on stories he had heard when travelling through Thomond or, perhaps, even elsewhere in Ireland. Certainly his views on Irish pretensions to nobility, as expressed in the *Sketchbook*, can be scathing:

“There is no aristocracy in Dublin. Its magnates are tradesmen – Sir Fiat Haustus, Sir Blacker Dossy, Mr Sergeant Bluebag or Mr Counsellor O’Fee. Brass plates are their titles of honour and they live by their boluses or their briefs. What call have these worthy people to be dangling and grinning at Lord-Lieutenants’ levees and playing sham aristocracy before a sham sovereign? Oh, that old humbug of a Castle! It is the greatest sham of all the shams in Ireland.”³

Despite the slightly tiresome tone of derision which marks the *Sketchbook* throughout, there is no reason to believe that Thackeray was misrepresenting the realities of much Irish genealogical aspiration in his own day. Barry Lyndon’s claims to royal descent can be paralleled in real accounts of seventeenth and eighteenth century Irish seeking to establish themselves on the Continent⁴ and as early as 1561, Thomas Smyth, as an apothecary in Dublin, was pointing out that professional Irish pedigree writers were hawking their wares amongst a very wide section of Irish society:

“Their is in Irland four shepts in maner all Rimers.... The seconde sorte is the Shankee (*seanchaidh*), which is to saye in English, the petigrer. They have also great plainty of cattell, wherewithall they

¹ William M. Thackeray, *The luck of Barry Lyndon: a romance of the last century* (New York, 1853), p.214.

² This volume was subsequently identified by Séamus Ó Duilearga as a chap-book from before 1825 and was reprinted in *Béaloidéas*, 10 (1940), 148-203.

³ William Thackeray, *The Irish sketchbook, 1842, by Mr M.A. Titmouse*, (London 1857), p.362.

⁴ John Barry, *The study of Family History in Ireland* (O’Donnell Lectures Cork 1967), pp.13-18.

do sucker the rebels. They make the ignoraunt men of the country to belyve that they be discended of Alexander the Great or of Darius or of Caesar, or of some other notable prince, which makes the ignorant people to run madde and cerieth not what they do; the which is very hurtfull to the realme."⁵

In a colonial world marked by frequent reversal of personal fortunes, it was often hard to distinguish between new *arrivistes*, seeking to better themselves and old families, fallen on hard times. John O'Donovan gives a vivid description of one of the latter:

I had the very good luck to meet O'Flynn [sic] (Edmond son of Kellach) himself, who walked with me to the source of the Suck from the Esker over which he shewed me his ancient principality of which he now holds but a few townlands in fee-tail. He knows the names of every bush in the parish of Kiltullagh, the names of which he pronounced for me sitting on Eiscir Ui Mhaonagain over Bun-Suicin in the townland of Cul fearna, the parish of Annagh and county of Mayo, from which we had an extensive view of O'Flynn's country of Loch Ui Fhloinn, Sliabh Ui Fhloinn and of the parish of Kiltullagh. As soon as O'Flynn learned that I was one of the oulde stock, he commenced to give me a most curious account of his own family and of himself; the poor fellow is very much embarrassed and when I met him, was hiding from the sheriff who will arrest him for debt as soon as he can.⁶

In such a context, the popularity of an extensive collection of Munster genealogies, now entitled *Leabhar Muimneach*, in eighteenth-century Cork is worthy of note. Its modern editor, Tadhg Ó Donnchadha has identified thirteen manuscripts, most of which are excerpts with only two being complete. In one, MS 23 E 26, the scribe Richard Tiber states that the collection was put together by Domnall Uí Dhuinnín and Tadhg mac Dáire mac Bruaideadha. These were both members of traditional bardic families working for the Meic Carthaigh and the Uí Bhriain respectively and the individuals concerned can both be dated to the late sixteenth or early seventeenth centuries.⁷

Because the *Leabhar Muimneach* genealogies are written in the Irish language, there has, perhaps, been a tendency to assume that they have an ancient ancestral validity which belies their seventeenth-century authorship. However comparison of the *Leabhar Muimneach* statements on the Dál Cais with twelfth-century counterparts such as the genealogies published in *Corpus Genealogiarum Hiberniae* by M.A. O'Brien, makes it clear that, in some important respects, the nature of the records are very different. If one looks at the epical figure of Cas and his twelve sons, for example, the earlier records refer to descendants who are individuals or to kindred groups (often described by the Irish word *Uí*) who only rarely survive into the modern era. In *Leabhar Muimneach*, by contrast, Cas's sons have descendants who are described by the word *muintir* and are clearly linked to modern surnames. Thus *Leabhar Muimneach* has the O'Deas descending from Aonghus Cennnathrach (Oengus Snake Head) son of Cas, the Heffernans and the Naughtons from Aonghus Cennaitinn (Oengus Furze-head), the Hayes from Aodh and the Coughlans from Dealbhaoth.⁸ These statements are made in summary form, only occasionally backed up by lengthy father to son lines of descent. Similarly, descendants from Cas's eldest son Blód (ancestor of Brian Boru's line) and yet another brother Caisín can also be described in terms of modern surnames:

⁵ H.F. Hore, 'Irish bardism in 1561', *UJA*, 6 (1858), 165-67, p.166

⁶ Castlereagh, 5th July 1837 in M.O'Flanagan (ed.) *Letters containing information relative to the Antiquities of the County of Roscommon collected during the progress of the Ordnance Survey in 1837*, (2 vols Bray, 1927), quoted in C. Swift, 'John O'Donovan and the framing of early medieval Ireland in the nineteenth century', *Bullán* 1 (1994), 91-103.

⁷ *LM*, pp. xi-xv; Luke McInerney, "Lettermoylan of Clann Bhruaideadha" *NMAJ* 52 (2012), pp 93-9

⁸ *LM*, p. 237

Dearbhráthair don Bhíod so, Caisín, Ó dtangadar Síol Aodha .i. Clann Mhic Con Mara; agus is uatha sin tángadar Síol gClannchadha. Mac don Bhíod so fós, Bréanainn Bán ó dtáinig Muinnter Urthuile, Muinnter MhaolDomhnaigh, Muinnter Ghráda; agus Clann Chaisín.

“True brothers of that Blód are Caisín from whom come the Síol Aedha that is the Clann Mhic Con Mara (MACNAMARAS) and it is from those noble men come the Síol gClannchadha (CLANCYS). A son of that same Blód is Breanainn Bán from whom come the Muinnter Urthaile (HURLEYS), the Muinnter MhaolDomhnaigh (MULDOWNEYS), the Muinnter Ghráda (O’GRADYS) and the Clann Chaisín (CASHINS/KISSANES).”⁹

Other families are said to be descended from the grandsons and great grandsons of Blód, Cas’s eldest son and ancestor of Brian Boru’s own lineage:

Mic Aodha Caoimh, mic Conaill mic Eochach Bailldeirg; Dearbhráthair d’Eochaidh Bhailldeirg, Fearghal, ó dtangadar Muinnter Íceadha. Dearbhráthair eile d’Eochaidh Bhailldearg so, Aonghus, ó bhfuilid na sloinnte so síos: Muinnter Loingsigh, Muinnter Uaithnidhe, Muinnter Bhreachtgha, Muinnter Bhréanuinn; Muinnter Sheasnáin, Muinnter Riada; Muinnter Shamhradh; agus Muinnter Chormacáin.

“Sons of Aed Caoimh son of Conall son of Eochaidh Balldearg – a true brother of Eochaidh Balldearg is Fearghal from whom come the Muinnter Íceadha (HICKEYS). Another true brother of that Eochaidh Balldearg is Aonghus from whom are the following divisions – Muinnter Loingsigh (LYNCH) Muinnter Uaithnidhe (GREENE) Muinnter Bhreachtgha (?BRACKEN) Muinnter Bhréanuinn (BRENNAN), Muinnter Sheasnáin (SEXTON), Muinnter Riada (REIDY), Muinnter Shamhradh (SOMERS) and Muinnter Chormacáin (CORMICAN).¹⁰

(To put these claims in context, Eochaidh Balldearg was contemporaneous with St Patrick in medieval Irish tradition and so the authors are suggesting that these families originated in the fifth to seventh centuries, long before Irish surnames actually developed.)¹¹

Quite apart from prestigious families such as the MacNamaras (to whom there are frequent reference in the Irish annals as well as in other texts), many of these surnames can be traced in Thomond, using sources in both English and Irish (and occasionally Latin) from the later medieval period. Brian Hodkinson’s prosopography of medieval Limerick¹² lists an Adam Grene from 1300 and John and Philip Grene from 1311 as well as a Loghlyn Brak (of the *muinter Bhreachtgha*?) in 1313 and a William FitzRalph Brak hanged for burglary and murder in 1311. Perhaps most interesting of all, however is the account of the *muinter Sheasnáin* who is said to have been the first Irish mayor of Limerick in the 1530s:

“Edmund Sexten, alias Sesnan, sewer of the Chamber, Humphrey, Nicholas, George and Robert Sexten, alias Sesnan, all merchants of Limerick, making them and their posterity capable of bearing offices as mayors, sheriffs, bailiffs, constables etc in any part of Ireland, especially in Limerick”

the citizens of Limerick “beare him displeasure and, as they say, they moche abhorre him, because he is an Irishman by blode and he usethe him self according to his nature. Howbeit

⁹ LM p.237; translation and identification of English language equivalents of the Irish surnames are my own.

¹⁰ LM pp. 236-7.

¹¹ K. Mulchrone, *Bethu Phátraic* (Dublin 1939), p.123, ll.2415-20.

¹² Hod “Who”

he is made denizon and free by the King so as he hathe been Mayour there, contrary the Inglish statutes and there liberties.”¹³

Apart from the statement on the family's origins in *Leabhar Muimneach*, the *muintir Sheasnáin* is also listed as a branch of the Dál Cais in the mid seventeenth-century genealogical collection entitled *Leabhar Mór na nGenealach* by Dubhaltach Mac Fírbisigh.¹⁴ Here the family is further identified as the descendants of Aonghus (brother of Eochaidh Baldearg), through his grandson, Maol Caoch son of Ronan/Rongal son of Aonghus and, once again, they share this ancestry with the Muintir Breachtgha, the Muintir Bhrenanáin and the Muintir Riada. This version provides us with an even more convincing Hibernisation of the English word “Sexton” as *Seastnán* with medial t. On the basis of information about the Uí Rongáile (descendants of Rongal) in a rental of the McNamaras dating back to the fourteenth century, this text gives us the possibility of locating the family in the parishes of Killuran and Kilnoe in East Clare.¹⁵ On the other hand, this East Clare land is territory later associated with the Shanahans (Uí Shanacháin) rather than the Sextons (Uí Sheastnáin) and it might be worth considering instead the only instance of *Seastnan* as a personal name in *Leabhar Mór* which occurs rather further to the east in a genealogy of a family based in Uaithne Thíre, (the barony of Owny) on the eastern side of Lough Derg.¹⁶

The precise location of the landholdings of the Sesnan/Sexton family may thus be impossible to tie down definitively but the scarcity of the name in Irish language sources and its fairly clear derivation from English does suggest that, in the case of the seventeenth-century Irish sources, we are dealing with an assumed Dál Cais pedigree. The earliest ancestor identified in the Sexton papers in the National Library may be that of Simon Sastuane from 1437¹⁷ and this spelling suggests that the family may well have been Irish speaking at that date. The condemnation of the Elizabethan Edmund Sexton of Limerick as an Irishman, therefore, is rather more complicated than at first appears. Rather than being mere Gaelic interlopers in an isolated bastion of English settlement, it would seem instead that the family may have been a typical product of a colonial frontier, operating within two different language spheres and anxious to advance their interests by whatever means most suited the immediate cultural context. A claim to Dál Cais descent, expressed in Irish, certainly would seem to imply that they wished to be considered within the ranks of the *flaith* or lordly class of Irish-speaking Thomond as well as operating as the client and ally of Henry VII of England.

The case of the Sextons highlights the problems involved not only in linking owners of modern surnames to medieval pedigrees but also to the unexpressed assumptions which often underlie such exercises. While the modern scholarship on Irish families compiled by McLysaght, Quinn, De Bhulbh,

¹³ *Letters and Papers, Foreign and Domestic of Henry VIII 7*, p.443; *Calendar of State Papers, Henry VIII 3*, p.107. Discussed by Brian Hodkinson, “Edmund Sexton, the First Irish Mayor of Limerick” in D. Lee (ed.) *Remembering Limerick*, (Limerick 1997), 107-111; Clodagh Tait, “A trusty and well beloved servant : The career and disinterment of Edmund Sexton of Limerick d. 1554”, *Archivium Hibernicum*, 41 (2000), 51-64; C. Lennon, ‘Religious and social change in early modern Limerick: the testimony of the Sexton family papers’ in Liam Irwin and Gearóid Ó Tuathaigh (eds), *Limerick History and Society* (Dublin 2009), 113-127.

¹⁴ *LMG iv* 688 (§1341.2)

¹⁵ J. Hardiman (ed.), “Ancient Irish deeds and writings chiefly related to landed property from the twelfth to the seventeenth century” *TRIA xv* (1828), 3-96, p.48

¹⁶ ***LMG vol no. page no.i see also ii p. 392 (Eremhon m. Murthuile m. Seasnain m. Laigusain m. Liothaigh M. Temhnen m. Forbaite m. Seghene m. Enain: (Síol Ír) – ii 132 Seasnan m. Flannchadha m. Flaithim . Duib Da Máighe m. Uargusa m. Snéadghaile m. Co-Airge (Fir Músraige) 397.11***

¹⁷ Hod “Who” quoting NLI Ms. 41,673/4 ; Colm Lennon, ‘Religious and social change’, p.114 quotes G.O. MS 169, f.57 to suggest that the first enfranchised citizen of Limerick may have been a Morris Sexton, father of Edmund.

Grenham¹⁸ and others often repeat the seventeenth-century attributions of ancestors to Irish language surnames, they are rather more cautious when repeating the attributions in the same texts which refer to families bearing names originally coined in other languages. For example, another prominent merchant family in Limerick were the Arthurs who controlled the mayoralty of the city for much of the later middle ages and whose family history traces them back to a John Martin Arthur born c. 1350 who had three sons, Thomas, William and Richard.¹⁹ *Leabhar Muimneach*, on the other hand, derives the family from a brother of St Flannán of Killaloe and thus from the Dál Cais:

Mac oile don Toirdhealbhadh so Ailgeinén ó dtáinig Ó Meádhra. Agus mac Ailgeinén Eochaidh ó dtáinig Artúr (a quo Artúraigh); Artúr umorro, mac Braoin, mic Cearbhaill mic Sgannláin mic Eochach mic Ailgeinén.

‘Another son of that Toirdelbach is Ailgeinén from whom come the Ó Meara. And the son of Ailgeinén is Eochaidh from whom is Arthur from whence come the Arthurs – that is Arthur son of Braon son of Cearbhall son of Sgannlán son of Eochu son of Ailgeinén.’²⁰

This derivation is still known in the mid-West²¹ (though not ascribed to *Leabhar Muimneach*) but McLysaght identified the family as originally Norse and this is currently the most favoured origin locally.²² McLysaght’s view on the inherent unlikelihood of the *Leabhar Muimneach* ascription has, in turn, impacted on the use of Dál Cais genealogies in modern day genetic studies in which the Arthurs’ DNA have been investigated as part of an investigation of Viking period migration into Ireland.²³ The same group was also involved in a more detailed study of the genetics of the Dál Cais (to be considered further below) but the data they themselves had gathered on the Arthurs was not considered relevant to the latter. The conclusion of their study was that genetics indicated a very small likelihood of substantial Viking migration to Ireland; given the ambiguities of the genealogical evidence, one can speculate that the typical Irish genetic profile may, in fact, reveal an Arthur ancestor who chose to give himself a surname which was particularly prestigious in Welsh and Anglo-Norman cultures and who also turns up as an important figure in thirteenth-century Irish literary texts.²⁴

One of the problems involved in linking medieval genealogies to modern surnames is, of course, the unfortunate reality that many Irish surnames do not appear until relatively late in the chronological span of historical sources. Around the end of the first millennium AD, the Irish annals begin to describe a certain number of leading dynasties by reference to an apical ancestor and these “progenitors of various important native families” were originally tabulated by John O’Donovan in the mid nineteenth century.²⁵ Subsequent scholarship has attempted to decide at what point the annalists’ use of the word *ua* or grandson ceases to be a literal description of patrilineal descent and

¹⁸ MacL; Seán E. Quinn, *Surnames in Ireland* (Bray 2000); Sean De Bhulbh, *All Ireland surnames* (Dublin 2002), John Grenham, *Grenham’s Irish surnames* CD (Dublin 2003).

¹⁹ Hod “Who”, quoting the Arthur Manuscript; see also E.A. McLysaght & J.Ainsworth “The Arthur Manuscript” *NMAJ* 8.1 (1958), 2-19.

²⁰ *LM* 236

²¹ See <http://thearthurfamilyoflimerickandclare.com/chapter1historyarthurname.html>

²² MacL, p.204.

²³ Brian McEvoy, Claire Brady, Laoise T. Moore & Daniel Bradley, “The scale and nature of Viking settlement in Ireland from Y-chromosome admixture analysis”, *European Journal of Human Genetics* 14 (2006), 1288-1294.

²⁴ *SG* I, 94-232, pp. 99-100; Ann Dooley and Harry Roe (eds), *Tales of the Elders of Ireland*, (Oxford 1999), pp 8-9.

²⁵ *O’D Top*, pp.9-10

becomes instead a hereditary form leading ultimately to surnames beginning with Ó or O'.²⁶ This appears to have occurred in at least some cases by the surprisingly early date of the mid tenth century; the first so far identified include a Ua Cannanáin of 943 (referring to a great grandfather) and an Ua Clerig of 923. Surprisingly, because surnames in England and Normandy are said to begin in the post Conquest period where they are linked, not to patronymics but to land-holdings.²⁷ The history of surname development in Ireland is an under-researched field and the impetus which led Irish dynasties to develop their own hereditary system of surname nomenclature at approximately the same period remains to be determined.²⁸

Amongst the Dál Cais, the most prestigious ancestral figure was, of course, Brian Boru or Brian Boru although other ancestors were clearly also of interest to high medieval contemporaries. The *Annals of the Four Masters* refers to the district west of Killaloe as *Magh Ua t-Toirdhealbhaigh* in 1192, referring to Brian's ancestor Toirdelbach who is also the key figure in the contemporary life of St Flannan (identified as Toirdelbach's son). The obit of an office holder, *Cuan muire Clainne Tairdelbaig* is listed in the *Annals of Ulster* under 1054. The early thirteenth century account of St Patrick's encounters with the Fianna, *Acallamh na Senorach*, gives prominence to Cas himself whose grave is identified with a megalithic tomb at Duntryleague overlooking the peaks of the Galtees and at the southernmost edge of the lands claimed by the later Thomond kings.²⁹ In their accounts, the twelfth-century genealogies identify the wider kin group as *Dál Chais* or "progeny of Cas" and, while placing most emphasis on Brian's ancestry as the key figure of this grouping, do not yet identify his descendants as Uí Bhriain.

It has been suggested by Aubrey Gwynn that the *Annals of Inisfallen* were being compiled in Killaloe in the period in which Brian and his immediate descendants were ruling³⁰ and thus they provide our most accurate reflection of how the Uí Briain surname may have come to be used by the family themselves. In 1051 a murderous feud between Brian's grandsons identifies them as Diarmait and Murchad Ua Briain³¹; further grandsons were identified as Domnall Bán Ua Briain in 1052, Domnall Ruad Ua Briain in 1155, Murchad Ua Briain in 1068 while his most successful grandson, Toirdelbach Ua Briain, is normally identified by this title throughout his long career.³² In 1071, there is reference to *crech mór la U Briain* or a great raid by Ua Briain – but it is not clear whether this refers to Toirdelbach or to the family more generally. In 1072, Domnall Mac Máil na mBó is killed by Ua Mael Sechnaill and Ua Briain (presumably Toirdelbach, possibly in his role as leader of a troop) and in 1077, there is reference to *tech Uí Briain a Cind Chorad* or the house of Ua Briain at Kincora). Brian's great-grandson, Conchobor, is identified as Conchobar Ua Briain in 1078 while two other great-grandsons are termed *da maic Thoirdelbaig* in 1084 but in the latter entry, Muirchertach (who

²⁶ Ó Cuiv, *Aspects*, pp.32-6; Tomás G. Ó Canann, 'Aspects of an early Irish surname: Ua Cannanáin', *Studia Hibernica* 27 (1993), 113-144, pp. 113-4; Diarmuid Ó Murchadha, 'The formation of Gaelic surnames in Ireland; choosing an eponym' *Nomina* 22 (1999), 25-44.

²⁷ R.A. McKinley, *A history of British surnames* (Abingdon & New York, 2013)

²⁸ Works currently available generally describe the various formulae adopted and their chronological timespan but do not speculate as to the causes of their adoption (for the most interpretative, see F.J. Byrne 'A note on the emergence of Irish surnames' in *Byrne, Irish kings*, pp xxxi-xliii). O'D Top, 17-51; Pádraig de Woulfe, *Sloinnte Gaedhael is Gall: Irish names and surnames* (Dublin 1922); G.B. Adams, "Prolegama to a study of surnames in Ireland" *Nomina* 3 (1979), 81-94.

²⁹ Catherine Swift, 'Brian Boru's origins and the kingdom of north Munster', *History Ireland* 22.2 (2014), 18-22; see also entry in the *Annals of Four Masters* under 1054 which refers to the burning of Duntryleague by the Uí Briain.

³⁰ A. Gwynn, 'Were the 'Annals of Inisfallen' written at Killaloe?' *NMAJ* 8 (1958), 20-33

³¹ Diarmait son of Domnall son of Brian and Murchad son of Donnchad son of Brian.

³² See AI 1053, 1058, 1062, 1063, 1067, 1068, 1070, 1071, 1072, 1075, 1076, 1078, 1079 1081, 1086 versus entries where he is simply referred to as Tairdelbach in AI 1055, 1064, 1073, 1079 1080.

became ruler of Thomond) is also identified as Muirchertach Ua Briain mac Tairdelbach. The same entry finishes with a reference to “.u. h-Ui Briain ..im Chennetich h-Ua m-Briain & alii multi” or “five of the Ui Briain, around Cennétig Ua Briain and many others”. Thus Ua Briain/Uí Briain, as a surname formula, was used both of the ruling king and more widely of Brian’s descendants by the third quarter of the eleventh century and it may even have spread at this stage to refer to followers who were not genetically descended from Brian.

While the Uí Briain leadership are reasonably well attested as such in contemporary records for the later eleventh century, the same is not equally true of other, subsidiary families which have also been linked to the figure of Brian Boru. One such are the Uí Londgargáin, said to be descended from Brian Boru’s grandson Londgargáin, son of Donn Cuan who are attested as abbots at Terryglass.³³ Muirchertach mac Londgargáin of Terryglass who is listed in the genealogies c. the 1040s appears to be this man’s son while Annud Ua Londgargáin, also of Terryglass, listed in 1099 (in the *Annals of the Four Masters*) may well be his literal grandson. However, Londgargáin’s grandson, Carthach, was listed in 1045 and his great-grandson is identified as *Domnall h-Úa Lonngargan, aird-espoc Dal Cais* (pre-eminent bishop of the Dal Cais) in 1158 in the *Annals of Tigernach* and his brother Tadg as *Tadhg O Longargan espoc Tuadmuman* in 1161 in the same text. This section of the *Annals of Tigernach* survive in a transcript of what is taken to be a probable contemporary chronicle (put together by various annalists) from Clonmacnoise and study has shown that some genealogical and locational data was added to basic entries.³⁴ On balance, however, it seems reasonable to accept that the surname Uí Londgargáin was probably in usage by the mid twelfth century.

Another family of roughly the same era are the Uí Cennétig, descended from a Cennétig who was a brother of Londgargáin (and thus another grandson of Brian Boru). A man who may refer to a son of this man dies in 1054, according to the *Annals of the Four Masters* as *Aodh mac Cindéittigh, mic Duinn Cuan, muir & ordan Dal c-Cais* (Aodh, son of Cennétig, son of Donn Cuan, the love and glory of the Dál Cais), probably the same man who, as Aodh mac Cennétig, was killed in another entry under the same year in Thomond. Cennétig’s grandson, Céilechar Ua Cennétig of Terryglass died in 1081, according to the *Annals of the Four Masters* while his great great-grandson, Finn Ua Cennétig, also of Terryglass, died in 1152. However the *Annals of Inisfallen* list a Donn Cuan Ua Cennetich who died in 1123 while the *Annals of Tigernach* record *da hUa Cendeidigh* (two members of the Uí Chennétig) who died in a clash with the Connachta in 1117. Like their relatives, the Uí Longargáin, therefore, the evidence appears to be that this family surname was in existence by the first half of the twelfth century. By the second half of the twelfth century, if not before, they were rulers east of the Shannon with an obit for *Amlaim mac Gilla Chaemghen hUí Chendeidigh, rí Urmuman* (king of Ormond) in the *Annals of the Four Masters* under 1164.

A family with a slightly later ancestor was Consaidín Ua Briain who was bishop of Killaloe while his Ua Briain brothers, Muirchertach (died 1168) and Domnall (died 1194) were rulers of Thomond in the later twelfth century. Despite being a bishop, he is remembered as ancestor of the *Cland Chonsaidín* whose name survives in Clare as the surname Considine.³⁵ This family is of particular interest in that, by the time of Pender’s seventeenth-century *Census*, they are solely recorded in Clare where nine families of Considin existed in the barony of Bunratty on the north bank of the Shannon and a further nineteen (as Considin and MacConsidin) in the barony of Islands, around

³³ Ó C, “Dal Cais”, 56, 59.

³⁴ John [Eoin] MacNeill, ‘The structure and authorship of the *Annals of Tigernach*’, *Ériu* 7 (1913), 30-113, pp.95, 108; Kathryn Grabowski and David Dumville, *Chronicles and annals of medieval Ireland and Wales: the Clonmacnoise group of texts* (Woodbridge 1984), pp. 153-226; Nicholas Evans, *The present and the past in medieval Irish chronicles* (Cambridge 2010), pp. 45-66.

³⁵ *LM* pp. 325, 342.

Ennis.³⁶ This contrasts sharply with the Uí Chennetig who, under various spellings, were found scattered through the baronies of Connello, Coonagh (Co. Limerick) Slieveardagh, Lower & Upper Ormond, Kilnamanagh, Middle Third, Eliogarty & Ikerrin, Owey & Arra, Clanwilliam (Co. Tipperary) and Bunratty (Co. Clare). The Lonergans were listed in the baronies of Middle Third and Iffa & Offa in Tipperary while the O'Briens, again under various spellings, were found throughout the modern counties of Clare, Limerick and Tipperary.³⁷ The processes by which these surnames might have spread in the era between the twelfth century and the seventeenth and the chronological period at which it happened has still to be investigated by modern scholars. Nor is it clear why royal lines such as the O'Briens or the O'Kennedys might have been much more successful than others in doing so, though it is tempting to link such success to the known habit of Brian's dynasty in placing close relatives in charge of newly acquired territories.³⁸ As an interim, however, Hodkinson's prosopography for medieval Limerick indicates that MacBriens were linked to Aherlow in the 1280s and again in 1341 when they are burgesses there, to Esgren (possibly Carrigunnell) in 1306 and to Caherconlish in 1338 (when they are tenants) so some degree of spread appears to have occurred in this particular family from a royal line to a considerably larger and more dispersed grouping by the mid fourteenth century at the latest. (It is worth noting, here that *Leabhar Muimneach* links the family of the Mac Briain Ó gCuanach or Coonagh and Mac Briain Eatharla to the figure of Donnchadh, son of Brian Boru, suggesting perhaps that these families were established outside Clare as early as the eleventh century.)³⁹

When attempting to trace the genetic legacy of the O'Briens one has also to bear in mind that Brian Boru's fame meant that the personal name Brian, rare or indeed non-existent, before his reign,⁴⁰ became popular following his rise. In the *Annals of Inisfallen*, we find a Brian mac Máile Ruanaid of Uí Briúin Chonnacht (south Roscommon and north Galway) who died in 1004, a Brian Ua Dubthai (north Mayo) who died in 1025 and in the *Annals of Ulster*, we find two Brian Ua Chonchobair (of central Roscommon) who died in 1159 and 1184 respectively. The modern edition of *Leabhar Mór na nGenealach* in the mid seventeenth century, lists a total of 263 different individual Brians in its index. Given the extremely common practice of patrilineal surname formation in Ireland, this indicates that many modern O'Briens could well be descended from individuals other than Brian Boru himself.

Modern genetic studies of Brian's descendants began in 2008 with a study, not of the O'Briens as such but rather of the question whether Irish kingdom names such as Connacht reflected élite dynasties who ruled such territories or whether one could identify the population of a primeval "tribal" group who may have existed in the era prior to our historical documentation.⁴¹ An earlier study by the same group had identified a DNA haplotype which they identified with the ancestral figure of Niall Noigiallach of the fifth century⁴² and this formed the backdrop to the article: they

³⁶ Pender, *Census*, pp. 168, 179.

³⁷ Pender, *Census*, (O'Kennedys under various spellings), pp 168, 284, 288, 297, 302, 304, 309, 319, 322, 324, 328; (Lonergans), pp.309, 314; (O'Briens) pp 163-188, 269-291, 295-328.

³⁸ Anthony Candon, 'Tealach Óc and Emain Macha c.1100', *Emania* 15 (1996), 39-46; also K. Simms, 'Nomadry in medieval Ireland; the origins of the creaght or caoraigheacht', *Peritia* 5 (1986), 379-91; *Ibid.*, 'The origins of the creaght: farming system or social unit?' in *Agriculture and settlement in Ireland* ed. M. Murphy & M. Stout (Dublin 2015), 101-18; J. Ryan 'The O'Briens in Munster after Clontarf', *NMAJ* 2 (1941-2), 141-52; *NMAJ* 3 (1942), 1-52.

³⁹ *LM*, pp. 235, 354, 366-72.

⁴⁰ Kuno Meyer, 'Brian Borumha', *Ériu* 4 91910), 68-73.

⁴¹ McEvoy et al.

⁴² L.T. Moore, B. McEvoy, E. Cape, K. Simms and D.G. Bradley, 'A Y-chromosome signature of hegemony in Gaelic Ireland', *The American Journal of Human Genetics* 78 (2006), 334-8. Subsequent investigation, by citizen scientists and commercial groups, has indicated that this haplotype is as well attested in Lowland Scotland as it

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were seeking to establish whether the pattern which they had identified for Niall's descendants could be paralleled in Munster. The focus of the article was, therefore, not primarily on the families descended from Brian Boru identified from the later eleventh century but rather on attempting to establish the nature of the Dál Cais as a proto-historical grouping of families with a shared genetic inheritance.

The first stage in the study was to identify a group of 247 modern individuals from Munster whose surnames were divided into those names belonging to Eóganacht⁴³ descendants, Dál Cais descendants and a collection of random Munster surnames. (Because Y chromosome DNA mutates slowly, testing modern men is thought to reveal early genetic groupings – a theory which was first articulated in relation to the descendants of the thirteenth-century Mongolian war-leader, Genghis Khan.⁴⁴) The results from these individuals were separated from a control group of 184 Munster samples without surname data; this control group was termed the Munster geographic group.

The Dál Cais descendants consisted of 80 individuals who bore the surnames Cahill (10 samples), Clancy (8), Heffernan (7), Hickey (6), Kennedy (7), McGrath (6), McMahon (5), McNamara (4), O'Brien (14), O'Dea (6) and O'Grady (7). From the evidence outlined above, it can be seen that this list is ultimately derived from the seventeenth-century *Leabhar Muimneach* genealogies rather than from the earliest attested surnames within the O'Brien family tree.⁴⁵ Furthermore, in line with the objectives of the article, it includes names such as Clancy, Hickey, McGrath and McNamara who are descended from Casséne son of Cas rather than Brian's own lineage through Blód son of Cás. The Eóganacht descendants numbered 95 in total (distributed amongst 14 surnames) and the random Munster surnames were 72 (involving ten surnames).

The next stage of the 2008 study was to examine the Munster geographic group to see if a dominant Y chromosome signature could be identified in the region in the way which had been previously done in the north-west. This investigation, however, revealed considerably more diversity than in the north-west, suggesting that the population in Munster is less homogeneous than had been suggested for Donegal and north Connacht and the authors suggested that

“it is possible that greater migration to Munster relative to the Northwest over the past 1,000 years (associated with Norman and English conquest) may dilute such a signature in the Munster geographic sample.”⁴⁶

The surname data was then investigated for evidence of important founding lineages and two potential founding male signatures (frequent Y-chromosomes surrounded by subsidiary diversity) are apparent, centered on what were termed haplotypes A and B. However these two clusters of leading Y chromosome signatures were scattered between individuals of the three groups used e.g. Eóganacht, Dál Cais & random Munster surnames and thus could not be firmly identified with either a Dál Cais or an Eóganacht ancestor.

is in north-west Ireland; see <https://www.familytreedna.com/groups/r-1b-1c-7/about/background>. For discussion of the intersections between history and genetics in the Uí Néill study, see Catherine Swift, “Interlaced scholarship: genealogies and genetics in twenty-first century Ireland” in S. Duffy (ed.), *Princes, prelates and poets: in medieval Ireland: essays in honour of Katharine Simms* (Four Courts: 2013), 18-31.

⁴³ The Eóganacht were rulers of Cashel with sub-branches in Tipperary, north Cork, Limerick and Kerry in the era prior to the growth to power of the Brian Boru's immediate family in the mid tenth century and later; Byrne, *Irish kings*, pp 165-229.

⁴⁴ T. Zerjal et al., ‘The genetic legacy of the Mongols’, *American Journal of Human Genetics* 72 (2003), 717-721.

⁴⁵ The bibliography cites *LM, CGH and MaCl* as well as E. MacLysaght, *More Irish Families* (Dublin 1982).

⁴⁶ McEvoy et al., p. 411.

“It is none-the-less curious that haplotypes A and B, the joint second and third most common Y-chromosomes in the geographic Munster sample (at 2.2% and 1.6%, respectively), are enriched in the surname sample (Dal Cais, Eoganacht and Munster surnames) at 12.9% and 6.5%, respectively.”

The authors were unable to point to any precise argument to explain this but they suggested that since a very large percentage of Cluster A haplotypes had surnames indicating a paternal origin in south Munster while a considerably smaller majority of Cluster B surnames came from the north, it was possible that there was some geographic rationale for the distribution of haplotypes A and B.

Overall, they concluded that while

“our analysis cannot exclude the possibility that some level of patrilineal kinship underlaid the Munster Eóganacht and Dál Cais entities, it does seem that if any existed it was not comparable in extent to the widespread kinship in the contemporaneous Uí Néill grouping from the North of the Island, presumably the descendants of the ancestral eponym “Niall of the Nine Hostages” and his clan.

Their final statement reiterated the fact that they were primarily concerned with attempting to investigate proto-historical realities long predating the development of surnames in Irish families:

“Although the Uí Néill and Eóganacht are often thought of as major contemporary rivals from the North and South of the island respectively, genetic evidence combined with surname information suggest they were founded, established and perhaps led by different means and this may reflect wider differences in organization of Irish tribal societies.”⁴⁷

Despite their relative lack of interest in Dál Cais names, as such, this article suggests certain conclusions about the genetic evidence for the surnames studied. The most important is the argument that there is a historical reality linking surnames which *Leabhar Muimneach* claims were descended from two different sons of Cas. This is said to have no real genetic support. In the light of the case studies above, this does not appear particularly surprising; the *Leabhar Muimneach* claims are often summary in nature and it seems very clear that the prestige of Brian Bóroimhe led to a number of individuals who may have made genealogical claims which are now difficult to substantiate and which, in the case of Limerick merchant families such as the Sextons or the Arthurs, seem somewhat unlikely. The figure of Cás himself is depicted as a unifying one for the kingdom of Thomond in the early thirteenth-century *Accallamh na Senorach*; it is possible that he also played this role in the twelfth-century genealogies. It seems, at the very least, conceivable that the dynasty of Brian Boru may have deliberately emphasized this remote ancestor as a way of fostering a sense of community within the larger area of modern Clare in which they themselves had made important conquests only during the course of the tenth century.⁴⁸ Their expansion beyond modern Clare to Limerick was argued by John Ryan to have taken place in a context where an ancestor dating back to the time of St Patrick, Oengus, grandson of Blód, son of Cas, had established himself and his descendants on the south bank of the Shannon, many years prior to the conquest of Viking Limerick by Brian and his brother Mathgamain in 967 but there is little contemporary evidence to corroborate this.⁴⁹ Similarly, their expansion into northern Tipperary can clearly be documented (at least in

⁴⁷ McEvoy et al., p. 414.

⁴⁸ *AFM* 932; *AI* 983, 984. Donnchadh’s mac Briain’s sons were taking spoils from Corcomroe in *AI* 1054.

⁴⁹ John Ryan, “The Dalcassians”, *NMAJ* 3/4 (1943), 189–202, pp 195-7 where they are identified as Aes Cluana Findabar, however, he indicates that members of the family who ruled in the later *Topographical Poems*, the O Cétfada, are identified as Ua Cétfada who were cited as prestigious members of the Dál Chais in 1033,

relation to ecclesiastical sites such as Terryglass) in the period of Brian's own kingship⁵⁰; it is impossible to show that the dynasty or their ancestors were already extant on the eastern shores of Lough Derg long before that date. Thus the lack of genetic evidence for a Dál Cais grouping should, perhaps, be tied more closely to the possibility that the rapid rise to power of Brian Boru's family and his prestige throughout the late medieval period has resulted in the wholesale construction of a genealogical edifice which requires far more detailed investigation than it has received hitherto.

The genetic study of proto-historic kinships within Munster was part of a much wider attempt to identify the diagnostic DNA of the modern Irish population as a whole. For this exercise, some 1, 125 samples were collected from volunteers with surnames geographically distributed throughout Ireland with a further 795 as a general Irish population control group. This wider project found that the incidence of shared DNA between surnames could vary widely:

“the average probability of a man sharing an identical 17 STR Y-chromosome haplotype with another man of the same surname is 8.15%. This value is over 30 times greater than the background Irish population Y-chromosome match possibility of 0.2%. However, the extent of sharing differs widely between surnames. Amongst the most extensively sampled names (with a sample size of >50) it ranged from a 47-fold higher probability over background levels in Ryan to a more modest 4.5 fold increase in Kelly.”⁵¹

In other words, if a man has the surname Ryan, he is far more likely to share a genetic signature with other Ryans than if he had the surname Kelly. (From the point of view of the Irish surname historian, this is not particularly surprising as Brian Ó Cuiv has already made the point that there was a relatively small pool of Irish personal names in common use and some were considerably more popular than others; thus the statistical probability of having a Ceallach as a potential ancestor was far greater than that of Rian.)⁵² This Irish variation within surnames shows a different pattern from that observed in Britain where there appears to be a correlation between the relative rarity of a surname and the diversity of Y chromosomes found within it.⁵³ It has been suggested that this difference was linked to a greater ability of Irish lords to reproduce successfully but a simpler explanation may be that Irish surnames are mainly (though not exclusively) patrilineal in origin while the most common English surnames are either locational or occupational. It is also true, as originally pointed out by King and Jobling, that subsequent events such as the Famine has eliminated the genetic evidence for many medieval Irish families while the work of William Smyth and others have

1045 and 1084. He also cite an alternative genealogy for the family, stemming from the rather later figure of Toirdelbach, father of St Flannan which occurs in the Book of Ballymote and concludes with the statement “I suspect that..the Aes Cluana were not originally connected with the Uí Thoirdelbaig, save possibly in the very remote past... and that the ancestors of the Uí Cétfada and Uí Eanna families were introduced into that territory as overlords when the Uí Thoirdelbaig power had grown out of all proportion to what it had been in the old Déis Tuaiscirt or Dál Chais state.”

⁵⁰ Ó Corráin, “Dál Cais”, 56.

⁵¹ Brian McEvoy and Daniel Bradley, ‘Y-chromosomes and the extent of patrilineal ancestry in Irish surnames’ *Human Genetics* 119 (2006), 212–19.

⁵² Ó Cuiv, *Aspects* p. 8; B. Ó Cuiv, ‘Personal names as an indicator of relations between the native Irish and settlers in the Viking period’, in J. Bradley (ed.) *Settlement and society in medieval Ireland* (Kilkenny 1988), 79–88 p.79.

⁵³ T.E. King and M.A. Jobling, ‘What’s in a name? Y chromosomes, surnames, and the genetic genealogy revolution’, *Trends in Genetics* 25 (2009), 351-360 – subsequently revised by authors and available at <http://www.le.ac.uk/ge/maj4/KingJoblingRevisedWeb.pdf> (accessed 13th January 2017).

highlighted the geographic variability in subsequent birth rates among the surviving nineteenth century population.⁵⁴

It should be borne in mind that in much of the research described above, investigations were limited to 17 markers (entitled Short Tandem Repeats or STRs) or even less. Some of these markers can be commonly found; in one 2007 study, a sample of 1814 men carrying 164 names, the commonest 17-STR haplotype was shared across 16 different surnames.⁵⁵ The ongoing rise of commercial companies and the reduction in the costs involved has completely changed the basis on which such genetic studies are now carried out; investigation of 111 markers are now relatively common place. Furthermore it is now possible to test single nucleotide polymorphisms or SNPs which allows one to investigate at what point a branch (perhaps containing multiple STR signatures) left the parental genetic tree. (The SNP for the typical signature associated with the descendants of Niall Noígiallach, for example, has been identified and called M-222; it is now possible for Irishmen with this signature to be tested specifically to see not only how many SNPs they have in common with others within the group and thus how many potential lineages there might be but also to see whether they themselves belong to ancestral figures predating the chronological horizon of Niall himself.) Current investigations of the links between surnames and genetic signatures have largely been abandoned by the university sector and are now largely carried out by groups of interested citizens, coming together via the internet and facilitated by groups such as the International Society of Genetic Genealogy. The results of this research is increasingly found, not in the larger academic journals but on websites run by administrators for particular surname groups and in conference papers published as Youtube videos.⁵⁶

One of the most notable of such investigations has been the work published by Dennis M. Wright.⁵⁷ As a long term investigator of the DNA data-bases available publically, he was struck by the fact that three particular markers, which had been identified as a common variant of the signature termed the Irish Modal Haplotype⁵⁸, were not amongst those investigated in the 2008 study of Munster DNA. Using 25 markers (as opposed to 17), he identified a distinctive genetic profile to be found in the counties of Limerick, Clare and Limerick and he argued that 'Dalcassian surnames are more strongly represented with this signature [which he termed Irish type III] than other surnames.] By

⁵⁴ William J. Smyth, 'Mapping the people: the growth and distribution of the population'; *Ibid.*, 'Variations in vulnerability: understanding where and why people died'; *Ibid.*, 'Exodus from Ireland – patterns of emigration', in J. Crowley, W.J. Smyth and M. Murphy (eds.), *Atlas of the Great Irish famine* (Cork, 2012), 13 – 22, 180-198, 494-503; for a graphic depiction of relative birth rates in different parts of Ireland at the time of Matheson's survey of 1892, see Kenneth Field and Linda Beale, 'Geo-genealogy of Irish surnames', *Journal of Maps* ~~6.1~~^{Vol. 10} (2010), 651-56.

⁵⁵ T.E. King, *The relationship between British surnames and Y chromosomal haplotypes*. Ph.D. thesis, 2007 University of Leicester. A chromosome contains sequences of repeating nucleotides known as [short tandem repeats](#) (STRs). The number of repetitions varies from one person to another and a particular number of repetitions is known as an allele of the marker. When someone purchases a test, the STR markers are listed as DYS numbers and the figures given under each represent the specific alleles of that person. When two or more people share the same sequences of allele numbers for the same DYS numbers (or STRs), this is known as a signature.

⁵⁶ See, in particular, the website run by Maurice Gleeson: https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCHnW2NAfPIA2KUipZ_PiUlw

⁵⁷ Dennis M. Wright, 'A set of distinctive marker values defines a Y-STR signature for Gaelic Dalcassian families', *Journal of Genetic Genealogy* 5 (2007), 1-5; see also Wright's 2016 conference paper: 'The DNA of the Dál gCais & subclades discovered with Big-Y' at www.youtube.com/watch?v=loNNHRWIXQ0 and the project website <http://www.irishtype3dna.org/>.

⁵⁸ This was noted by Dennis Wright and Dr Kenneth Nordvedt working together and was emailed to the Rootsweb Genealogy-DNA List on the 6th April 2006: <http://archiver.rootsweb.ancestry.com/th/read/GENEALOGY-DNA/2006-04/1144414111>.

deploying public data bases and the information compiled by the commercial testing firms, he identified a group of 7 distinctive STR markers which were replicated in 105 haplotypes (with 191 haplotypes in total belonging to the cluster when those defined as being within a genetic distance of two (GD=2) were also included). Using a smaller number of tests which had examined up to 96 markers per individual, he was also able to identify 8 further markers which also belonged to this same distinctive group.

78 within the tested samples examined by Wright had identified the country of origin of their earliest known ancestor as Ireland with the next largest number being 13 from Scotland. Of the 78 who knew the county of origin of their ancestors within Ireland, 11 (26%) came from Clare, 10 (23%) came from Tipperary and 7 (16%) came from Clare, amounting to 65% from the area of Thomond. Using a list of surnames extracted from John Hart's 1892 *Irish Pedigrees*, Wright identified the following twenty-eight as Dalcassian:

MacArthur, O'Beollan/Boland, O'Brien, O'Casey, McConside, O'Cormacan, Cosgrave, MacCraith, O'Curry, Eustace, Glinn/Glynn, Hearne, O'Hogan, O'Hurley, O'Kelleher, O'Kennedy, Magan, Maglinn, MacMahon, O'Meara, Muldowney, O'Noonan, Power, Quirk, O'Regan, Scanlon, O'Seasain and Twomey.⁵⁹

When compared with the names in his data base of men with the distinctive group of markers, 24 of the latter were O'Briens, 12 were Caseys, 10 were McGrath/McCraith and 10, surprisingly, were Butlers. There were also 5 each of Hogans and Kennedys. (He suggests that the entry of this signature into the Butler lineage may have occurred when Murrough O'Brien of Ballyphilip, Co. Limerick married Eleanor Butler of Bansha in the 1690s and took her name.)

Checking these results against all entries in the data-base with these surnames (as opposed to those who had the distinctive genetic signature), he found that 24 of 68 O'Briens shared the Irish Type III signature; 12 of 20 O'Caseys; 10 of 21 McGrath/Mac Craith and 5 of 15 O'Hogan. The exception were the O'Kennedys who had a mere 5 Type III signatures from a total of 44 O'Kennedys tested.

Since the development of SNP testing, which allows the relationship of branches to each other and to the original genetic tree be identified, Wright's original work has been updated. Irish Type III is now thought to branch off from the larger Irish phylogenetic tree at a SNP which is called L226. Sir Conor O'Brien, the present Lord Inchiquin, (with a genealogical claim to be 32nd in descent from Brian Boru) has been tested and in a lecture delivered at the RDS in 2016, Denis Wright has summarised Sir Conor's ancestry as including the following sequence of SNPs:

L 226 > FGC5660 > Z17669 > ZZ 31_1 > FGC 5628
> FGC 5659 > ZZ 34_1 > DC 33 > DC 1 > YFS 231286 > FGC 1348.

On the basis of the very detailed tests now available (which the biggest company working on Irish genetic genealogy refer to as Big Y) which looks at literally thousands of markers and which were undertaken by 50 men sharing the Irish Type III signature, Wright is currently arguing that Brian Boru may perhaps have shared this list of SNPs from L226 to FGC 5628 with the other SNPs developing in the era after his reign.

⁵⁹ Some of these have already appeared above while others such as Power seem distinctly dubious and would merit more detailed investigation.

Wright's conclusions can be compared with those of Dennis O'Brien⁶⁰ with whom he often collaborates and who is administrator of the O'Brien surname project which currently has over 500 members of which 403 have had their Y chromosome tested. He states that of 305 "O'Brien related surnames" in the project, 52 share L226 and a further 18 share FGC 5659. This means that only 18 out of 287 men in his project apparently share the signature that Wright identifies as probably being that possessed by Brian Boru himself. In fact, the O'Brien project suggests considerable diversity within the O'Brien surname with 102/105 distinct haplogroups currently identified within it.⁶¹ Of particular interest in trying to trace the O'Briens who settled elsewhere in medieval Thomond is the genetic lineage which shares the SNP BY4092 which appears to be associated particularly with Abingdon and which the project currently identifies as having separated from the main family tree in the years 1300-1500⁶²; they also have lineages which they think may be that which was associated with the Viscount Clares. In addition, there are 41 individuals or 13.5% do not appear to belong to the typical Irish groups at all, having more in common with other Europeans such as Scandinavians.⁶³ This work is ongoing and the combination of STR and SNP results means that those involved expect that sooner rather than later, research will produce a genetic history which can be clearly linked to specific lineages within surnames. It is already clear, however, that because of the many incidents which can affect the progression of a particular surname through time, we are unlikely ever to end up with a single genetic ancestry for a particular surname.

A point stressed more than once by Dennis O'Brien in his 2016 lecture is the element of choice involved in declaring oneself to be a member of the clan of O'Brien. "There's the O'Brien as far as the name goes and then, there's the O'Brien as far as the DNA goes." The group does not require permission to join and fundamentally, if you self-identify as an O'Brien for whatever reason, the project is happy to accept you. Sometimes, following testing, the individual may find the DNA results do not agree with the accepted oral tradition within a family but that is seen as all being part of the historical investigation.

"A clan is a clan. We're quite happy to have people who believe they're members of the clan. The DNA is not to us that important. What we want to do is provide – so there's the O'Brien clan - and then on top of that, if you want to know a bit more and put yourself in a group and – you know – if you're not descended from Brian Boru - if you descend from another Irish significant figure or a Viking significant figure or something – well, that's alright, you're still an O'Brien."

Barry Lyndon and the Heralds' College would surely agree.

⁶⁰ [Dennis O'Brien, 'The DNA of Clan O'Brien', https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wp-1bfxaXYs \(accessed 20th November 2016\).](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wp-1bfxaXYs) Lecture –

⁶¹ The power-point slide accompanying the lecture has 102; orally, it was 105.

⁶² See footnote 39 above.

⁶³ In other words, these signatures do not belong to the typical R1b found in Ireland but instead to other haplogroups such as I which are linked to Germanic groups, especially Scandinavians.

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