

# What is an Irish clan?

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## Late 19<sup>th</sup>/early 20<sup>th</sup> C historians

G. H. Orpen *Ireland under the Normans* (Dublin 1911)<sup>1</sup>: “Ireland was still in a Tribal state. The allegiance of the free-born Irishman was given in the first place to the head of his family, kindred or sept (*fine*); and through the **family head (*cenn fine*) to the chief of the tribe** of which his family formed an element related by real or supposed remoter kinship and connected by common ownership of land. **The Irishman’s country was the *tuath* or territory belonging to the tribe.**”

# P.W. Joyce: working from Rolls edition of *Ancient Laws of Ireland*

P.W. Joyce, *A social history of ancient Ireland* (Dublin 1903), I 166: “The people were formed into groups of various sizes from the family upwards. The Family was the group consisting of the living parents and all their descendants. The Sept was a larger group descended from common parents long since dead; but this is an important word, brought into use in comparatively late times.

All the members of a Sept were nearly related and in later times bore the same surname. The Clan or house was still larger. Clann means children and the word therefore implied descent from one ancestor. The Tribe (*tuath*) was made up of several septs, clans or houses and usually claimed, like the subordinate groups, to be descended from a common ancestor.”

pp.166-167) the theory of common descent became a fiction except for the leading families, who preserved their descent pure and kept a careful record of their genealogy. Thus the tribe became a mere local association of people, occupying a definite district and bound together by common customs, by common interests, by living under one ruler and in some degree by the fiction of descent from one common ancestor.

Eoin Mac Neill: definitions are too vague

Eoin Mac Neill *Early Irish laws and institutions* (London 1935), 8:

**“Joyce does not tell us what Irish words corresponded to *sept* and *clan* though these are printed as technical terms in heavy type with capital initials.”**

MacNeill goes on to criticise other scholars for relying on fictional description of a Highland Clan by Sir Walter Scott in *Waverley*.

# 'Sept' originates in Anglo-Irish documentation of 16<sup>th</sup> C

“it appeared unto us that the countries of Beare and Bantry contain but three score quarters (=60 quarters) in demesne and service, every quarter containing three ploughlands, whereof doth belong to the Bishoprick of Cork 8 quarters

And to certain freeholders 33 quarters

**So that there is no more belonging to O'Swyllyvan and all of his Sept of demesne in Beare and Bantry but 19 quarters whereof O'Swyllyvan had in continued and settled estate but 5 quarters and the remaining 19 was wont to be divided between him and his Sept, whereof sometimes his part was less, and sometimes more as his Sept increased or decreased.”**

# 16<sup>th</sup> C Septs live interspersed with others of different surnames

“ the demesne lands belonging to O’Swylyvan, in the countrie of Beare within the bounds hereafter expressed, together with the rents, services, lawful duties and casualties whatsoever, due to O’Swylyvan, out of the freehold of the freeholders within the country of Beare, viz.,

Sleightffynnynduff

O’Linshighen

O’Hologhan

O’Donegan,

Leight Dowlinge

Sleight Swleagwill

Dermod O’Swylivan of Ballaghboy

And of all the other free-holders in Beare...

Given under our hands and seals at Moyallow, the 19<sup>th</sup> January, 1593

Point 1: Victorian writers have left us an inheritance of various English terms to describe Irish families and many of these have not been closely defined and, more worryingly, are often mutually inconsistent as available in published accounts.

# Glossary to *The Ancient Laws of Ireland* (1901), Vol

VI compiled by Robert Atkinson, President of the Royal Irish Academy

**Fine:** tribe; it is probably impossible to use any word in translation that will not be liable to a misconception; the translation renders it mostly by tribe but also by *family*. The elaborate subdivisions of IV, 22 seqq. makes the matter no clearer, for even Dr O'Donovan (see note 5 p. 290) states that "the commentator *reverses the numbers*" in an important detail. This number of *seventeen* persons (286, 10) seems to refer to the potential number of a man and his descendants to the great-great grandsons (286, 7) but as this would rarely happen so in nature, probably other relatives were taken in to fill up the gap; but as to *how* or *when*, and as to their action in family matters, there is very little definite knowledge.

In the text... mention is made of the **four *fine* (viz. *gel-fine, derb-fine, iar-fine and ind-fine*)** who bear the liabilities of their fellow-tribesmen that evade the law but this subdivision is not explained in the commentary...



# Other terms in Glossary of Ancient Laws

**Clan:** progeny, descendants

**Túath:** people of a country in reference to the king; laity as contrasted with clergy; the district itself; townland or territory generally

**Cenél:** race, generation, kind, genus V 216 x *cinel* [translated] tribe

**Ciniud:** generation, , birth, issue; *cindiu/cinud* translated “tribe”.

# Dictionary of Irish Language

**Clíathaire:** term applied to a **sept**, perhaps implying special obligations in supplying fighting-men

**Dál:** a division, a sept, tribe: the land inhabited by a tribe

**Fedan:** of a sept or tribe

**Fine:** a group of persons of the same family or kindred, as a technical term a group of male persons of common descent, the members of which were legally responsible for each other and had certain reciprocal obligations; the *fine* embraced four divisions, the ***gelfine*** (family proper, including 3 generations) ***derbfine***, ***iarfine*** and ***indfine*** (including 4, 5 and 6 generations respectively); each group extending to a remoter degree of kinship and the measure of common legal responsibility being proportionately diminished

b) in a wider sense, progeny, descendants, a clan, tribe, race.

**Muire:** As a technical term in legal tracts, it seems to denote a specific social grade, probably headman of a district or 'fine'. Some of the examples given.. suggest the sense of a military leader or officer in command of a division; ..occurs several times in the *Annals of Ulster* between the years 1159 and 1200 apparently to denote the head of a clan or sept.

**Officel:** the agent or representative of a sept, monastery or bishopric

**Tellach:** c) family, sept, often equated with *cenél, treb, tuath*

**Slondud:** act of naming, mentioning. C) patronymic, family name, **surname**, lineage. , "*Buchet a ainm, mac huí Blae a sloinniud*"; A.Conn 1256 "36 of them were killed on that field 7 ochtar dib-side ara rabi slonnad Muintiri Raigillig - 8 of whom were of the name of the O'Rahilly (household). Plural = *sloinnte*

**Úa:** In the formation of sept names, the plural of *úa* is found followed by the genitive of the eponym .e.g. Uí Néill, Uí Fidgente. According to Professor Mac Neill these belong to a later fashion of nomenclature than collective names (see Pop. Groups, p. 82 seqq). "In the genealogies but not in general usage, there is a partial revival of sept-names in Uí, probably in the eleventh century, perhaps due to professional familiarity with the early nomenclature. The eponym can be feminine.. Professor Mac Neill know no instance of a sept-name derived from a female ancestor within the documentary period. He thinks that the feminine sept-names had a religious, not a genealogical, import.

# MacNeill (1935): Eleventh and twelfth-century Uí names refer to overlords rather than population at large

“The sub-clans mentioned by Dr Butler all bear surnames of families which held rule over the territories where they dwelt; they are the descendants of some ruler of the tenth century or of later date. It is evident that a ‘clan’ of such recent origin could not have constituted the social community and could not even have formed the community of freeman, the body politic, which met in assemblies in their respective territories. At the most, they could have been no more than an aristocratic crust.” (29-30).

The case is still clearer when we come to the superior “clans” bearing the **surnames MacCarthy (MacCarthaigh) and O’Sullivan (Ua Suillobhain)**. **These were not even indigenous to Desmond. They are branches of an ancient dynastic sept of the overlords of Munster, the Eoghanacht of Cashel.**..their migration to south-western Munster cannot be precisely dated, but it was a sequel to the reign of Brian, who fell at Clontarf in 1014..Their position in Munster was determined in 1118 by the king of Ireland, Toirdhealbhach Ua Conchubair, who was also king of Connacht. .In order to break the power of the descendants of Brian, he divided Munster into two co-ordinate kingships, a partition which continued operative until the seventeenth century. The northern part of Munster, known later to Anglo-Norman writers as the kingdom of Limerick, he left to the descendants of Brian; the southern part, the kingdom of Cork in Anglo-Norman parlance, he gave to Tadhg MacCarthaigh, whose father, Muireadhach, had been king of the Eoghanacht of Cashel.

- **There is indeed a numerous kindred bearing the surname of the rulers, but it is an aristocratic upper stratum , rather a section of that stratum, and it is not connected by kinship, real or adoptive, with the community in general or with the freeman element of the indigenous population. (p.32)**

# *Finte na hÉireann* – Clans of Ireland

- *Finte* = pl. of *fintiu* identified by Rudolf Thurneysen “land which is the hereditary possession of a member of a *fine*.” This is definition used in *Dictionary*.
- In *Ancient Laws*, *fintiu* is glossed *dúthaig fine* and *dúthchas fine*, translated by editors as “tribe land” and “tribe property”.
- In *Early Irish Farming* (1997), Fergus Kelly describes *fintiu* as follows:

“Land comes under the control of individuals, families or larger groups in a variety of ways...The law-texts refer to different types of land-tenure and provide us with a good deal of information on factors which limit an individual’s control over his or her land. A distinction is made between a person’s inherited share of kin-land (*fintiu*) and land which he has acquired personally. As one would expect, a landowner has greater freedom to dispose of personal land than kin-land but the kin-group is nonetheless entitled to a proportion of personal land if it is sold or bequeathed.”

Point 2: There are a large number of terms in Irish , far more than exist in English. There has been relatively little interest to date amongst scholars of the earlier phases of the Irish language in defining these in detail.

# Highland Scottish clan structure – a case study of the Clan MacPherson

- Based on a written genealogy put together, apparently from traditional accounts kept by local *seanchaí* at a time of pressure on traditional Scottish society in later 17<sup>th</sup> C.
- Genealogy was based on three sons of a man who died c. 1350 and who is given a title in text which had evolved after his own lifetime. Descendants of each son given for 12 generations with highest number of individuals – 2 mentioned in writer's own generation (10<sup>th</sup>). It ends c. 1704
- **Genealogy lists approx. 1000 individual MacPhersons (male and female) + 'some two hundred non-MacPherson marriage partners'. Figures are 'about 750 males' & 'just over 200' are female; there are 'over 300' marriages recorded.** Author suggests that approx. ¼ of the actual clan numbers c. 1700 are not recorded.

Alan G. MacPherson, 'An old Highland genealogy and the evolution of a Scottish clan',  
*Scottish Studies* 10 (1966), 1-42



- ‘Rather more than one-third of the recorded marriages’ took place within the clan and of 119 marriages within the clan, 40 are within the descendants of one **sliochd** (the line of descent of each brother).
- Because of intermarriage, many clansmen of the 10th generation could trace their descent back to not one but all three of the original brothers.
- **Chiefs tended to marry outside the clan as did a lot of the men who made marriage alliances with Highland neighbours; it was the MacPherson females who most frequently married within the clan.** This pattern may have been to facilitate keeping land within the extended family.
- ‘Of a force of two hundred clansmen representing virtually the full fighting strength of the clan at the end of the seventeenth century, no fewer than thirty-six men were killed in Jacobite wars.
- Lands of subordinate clansmen were originally held by **dúthchas** if they had occupied a farm or township for three generations and thereafter tenancy could be inherited by patrilineal succession. By 17th C this was being replaced by new forms of land-holding as chiefs and landlords needed cash and had to give increased rights to those tenants willing to lend them money.



*Sliocht* also used in Ireland: primary meaning is “mark, track, trace” but also “offspring, family line, posterity”

The progeny (sliocht) of Lochlainn Ó Donnabháin

- Donnchadh son of Diarmuid son of Cathal son of Donnchadh of Loch Crot son of Lochlainn from whom are the Clann Lochlainn son of An Crom.
- The three sons of An Crom: Cathal, Ainéislis and Lochlainn.
- Cathal had two sons: Tadhg and An Giolla Riabhach and they both held the chieftaincy (*taoisighiocht*).
- Ainéislis son of An Crom had four sons: Donnchadh Mór, Riocard, Baltar and Ragnall. Clann Raghnaill is from that Ragnall. Clann Bhaltair from that Baltar and Clann Riocaird from that Riocaird from that Riocard.

*Leabhar Mór na nGenelach: Great Book of Genealogies*

**NB!**

- note that *clann* here is used of descendants of Walter and Richard (both Anglo-Norman personal names) and of Ragnall (originally Norse but also Irish form used for Reginald).

# Women poorly recorded in Irish pedigrees so intra-clan marriage difficult to trace

*Domhnall cele Shíle inghean Shir Diarmada Uí Sheachnusaigh* (the husband of Síle, daughter of Sir Diarmuid O'Shaughnessy) and Donnchadh, the two sons of Tadhg son of Domhnall son of Sir Toirdhealbhach son of Domhnall Cléireach son of Conchubhar Ó Briain son of Toirdhealbhach, at whom converge this progeny and the baron of Inchiquin and the earl of Thomond.

*Leabhar Mór na nGenealach*

Toirdhealbach the dark-skinned had one son that is Murchad. Síle Fanning was the mother of this Murchad son of Toirdhealbhach Odhair.

*Leabhar Muimneach*

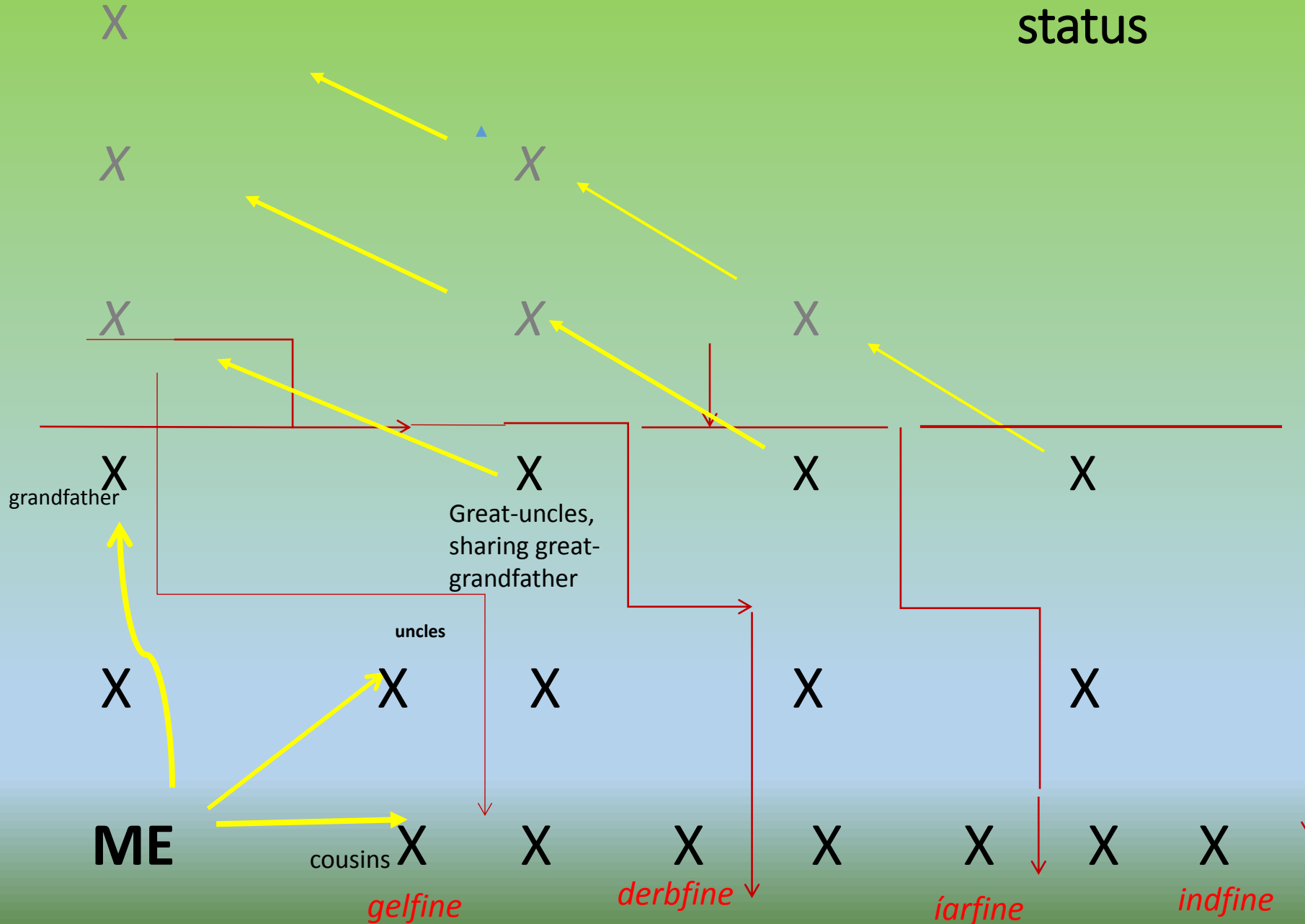
# Pedigrees descended from multiple brothers are very common and traditional formula

“Please tell me your name and the name of your father and of your territory and of your lands (*et agri tui et campi tui*) and where your house is. He answered “I am Énde son of Amolngid son of Fíachrae son of Echu from the western district (*ab occidentalis plagis*), Mag Domnon and the Wood of Fochloth.”..Six sons of Amolngid came before Loíguire for judgement and opposing them, Énde alone and his small son and Patrick before them and they examined the case of their inheritance and Loíguire and Patrick passed judgement that they should divide **their inheritance into seven parts.** ..Patrick and the sons of Amolngid, with their army of laymen and holy bishops concluded a treaty with Loíguire son of Níall as guarantor, pledging to travel together to *Mons Agli* (Croaghpatrick)..

Tirechán's *Collectanea* AD 680s/690s

Point 3: the analysis of a 17<sup>th</sup> C Highland Clan shows some features which are traditional in Irish literature (common Gaelic language culture) but also some features which cannot be easily replicated in earlier Irish pedigrees (though they are beginning to appear in later works originating in the 17<sup>th</sup> C)

# Fine KINDREDS from the point of view of legal status



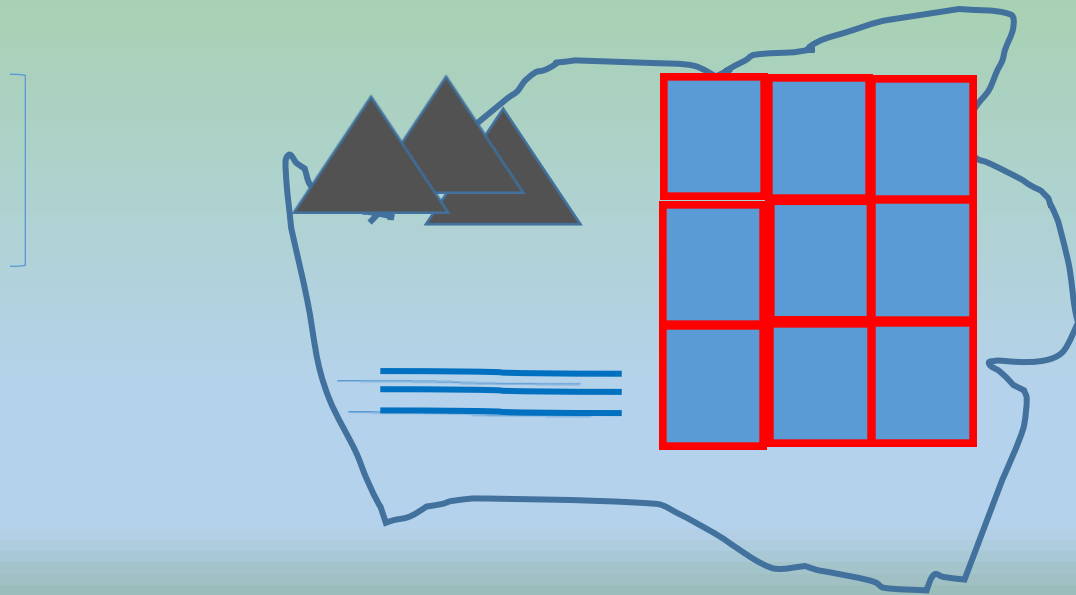
Unlikely to have more than 3 generations alive as adults at any one time

*Gelfine co cóicúr,  
derbfine co naonúr,  
íarfine co trí feraib déc,  
indfine co secht feraib déc*

# *Gelfine, derbfine, íarfine, indfine* – as they are used in Brehon law

- **Derbfine** = kindred unit used when co-operating in agricultural processes.

Cormac's glossary: 'neighbours do not guard their holdings with partitions of pillar-stones''



Schematic depiction of cultivated & non-cultivated land shared by groups of *derbfine* kinsmen (areas of mountain pasture & rough grazing owned in common by group as a whole)

Common townland name formula: *Baile Uí Cheallaigh* or Ballykelly – settlement of the O'Kellys

- **Derbfine** also used for calculating royal taxes (*cáin*) – each *derbfine* would appoint a guarantor (*aitire*) to guarantee the kindred's payment.
- Also: “the liabilities of land then in defence and guard against wolves and pirates and obligation to the túath including hosting and billeting and defence. The liabilities of a road i.e. fencing along your own portion and cutting (bushes) and cleaning it out and scouring its swampy part at the guesting season and of the annual *óenach* assembly.”
- Also: responsibility in case of feud or legal liability: “Every kinsman jointly bears liability for an offence; the *derbfine* jointly bears it. Every *fine* is suable, every *fine* is liable to pay as a result of the default of the offender. If there be no *derbfine*, the *íarfine* pays for the offence and sustains the obligations of the lord, king and his rule.
- In case of inheritance: if the *gelfine* was extinct, 3/4 to the *derbfine*, 3/16 to the *íarfine* and 1/16 to the *indfine*.
- If the *derbfine* is extinct, 3/4 to the *íarfine* and 1/4 to the *indfine*

# *Fodlai Fine* “the divisions of the kindred” edited by Thomas Charles-Edwards (1993), 515-16

- How many divisions of the kindred are there in Irish law? The following are the kinsmen of each lord: his *fuidirs* (unfree), his offspring, his branches which serve him; thus a name for them all is lord's kin.
- What is the number of kin of the *túath* and in what are they distinguished? The following are the kin of every *túath*: *gelfine*, *derbfine*, *íarfine*, red-kinsman, dark kinsman, kinsman of invitation, grey kinsman..
- The red kinsman is the one who sheds blood. No property is left at death by him. He does not share kin-lands but he pays for the offences of close kinsmen.
- The dark kinsman is the one whom a proof by oath brings in..he does not share kin-lands until a proof by cauldron or by the casting of lots brings him in. He then takes a quarter share from the *índfine*.
- The kinsman of invitation whom verbal contracts brings into adoption. He does not share kin-lands except for anything which contracts support.
- The grey-kinsman is the son of a woman of your kindred whom she bears to a Briton. He only gets the inheritance of a sister's son or of a free gift to one separated from kindred.



# *Ciniud* in early 12<sup>th</sup> C *Cogadh Gaedhel re Gallaibh* ed. J.H. Todd (1867)

“This is a *ciniud* – [the Dál Cais] from whom it was never lawful to levy rent or tribute or pledge or hostage or fostership fee by any one in the world ever so long as Ireland was not theirs but they were bound to give recognition of enemies and to punish plundering and supply numerous forces to maintain the *sairdechta* [free nature] of Cashel against Leth Cuinn.”

**ie. the *ciniud* of Dál Cais do not pay rent or submit hostages to overlords but they do supply military forces to Cashel when there is fighting against northern half of Ireland**

[***Oenchiniud*** = literally a single member of *ciniud* but defined by Charles-Edwards as a class of freemen? See also description in romance tale *Táin Bó Flidais*:

“thereupon the Ulster *óenchiniuds* arose stark naked and launched a strong, vigorous attack with wrath and enormous fury so that they brought the lintel down upon them (the enemy) until it was in the centre of the *lios*”  
]

**Scots Gaelic equivalent**, *cinneadh*, is defined in *Dwelly's Gaelic Dictionary* as being “clan, tribe, surname, relations, kin, kindred” with a *fear-cinnidh* being translated as “clansman”.

# *Cené*l in early 12<sup>th</sup> C *Cogadh Gaedhel re Gallaibh* ed. J.H. Todd (1867)

- Then they [the Dál Cais] all answered, both old and young, that they preferred meeting death and destruction and annihilation and violence in defending the freedom (*saire*) of their patrimony (*anatar*da) and of their *cené*l rather than submit to the tyranny and oppression of the pirates nor abandon their country and their lands to them.

**The word *cené*l seems to be used here specifically in relationship to land ownership.**

# Katharine Simms “Nomadry in medieval Ireland: the origins of the creaght or *caoraigheacht*” *Peritia* 5 (1986)

“The Irish word *caoraigheacht*, Hiberno-English ‘creaght’ signified a herd of miscellaneous livestock with its attendants, grazing or passing through other people’s lands, with or without the landowners’ permission. The term has not been noted as occurring earlier than the later fourteenth century and from this period onwards the leaders of such herds could be members of either the Irish or the Anglo-Irish aristocracy. A creaght could be formed by the settled population of a district temporarily displaced in time of war, moving as a train of refugees or aggressive migrants, under the leadership of their own chief. There were also certain classes within society – landless nobles, wandering poets or mercenary soldiers – who were accustomed to migrate from one landlord to another, with their band of followers and livestock. It is suggested that an increase in this class of landless noblemen and the warfare associated with the Tudor reconquest combined with an existing pattern of transhumance to bring about the situation in 1610 where society in mid-Ulster was perceived as being organised in creaghts or ‘herds’ rather than into villages.”

# Alternating kingship of Uí Fidgeinte, between Uí Cairpre (central/eastern Limerick) and Uí Chonaill Gabra (west Limerick)

Conall of Uí Chonaill Gabra  
(his brother) Aed Dub + 715

Flann son of Erc +755

Scanlan son of Fland +781

Murchad +802

Bruadar + 809

Dunadach + 834

Eoghan of Uí Chairpre + AT 667

Dub da Boireann +AT 750

Cendfaelad + 767

Niall son of Cendfaelad + 844

Cathal

Uainigh

Cathal Uainidh +964

**Donnuban +978**

**Killer of Brian Boru's brother, Mathgamain and ally of Ímar, Viking chief of Limerick; marries daughter of Ímar and marries his own daughter to Viking leadership in Waterford; tradition that after Brian killed him in revenge for Mathgamain, his son Cathal submitted to Brian at battle of Belach Lechta and fought with him at Clontarf**

# O'Donovans move to Carbery in West Cork between 1177-1250

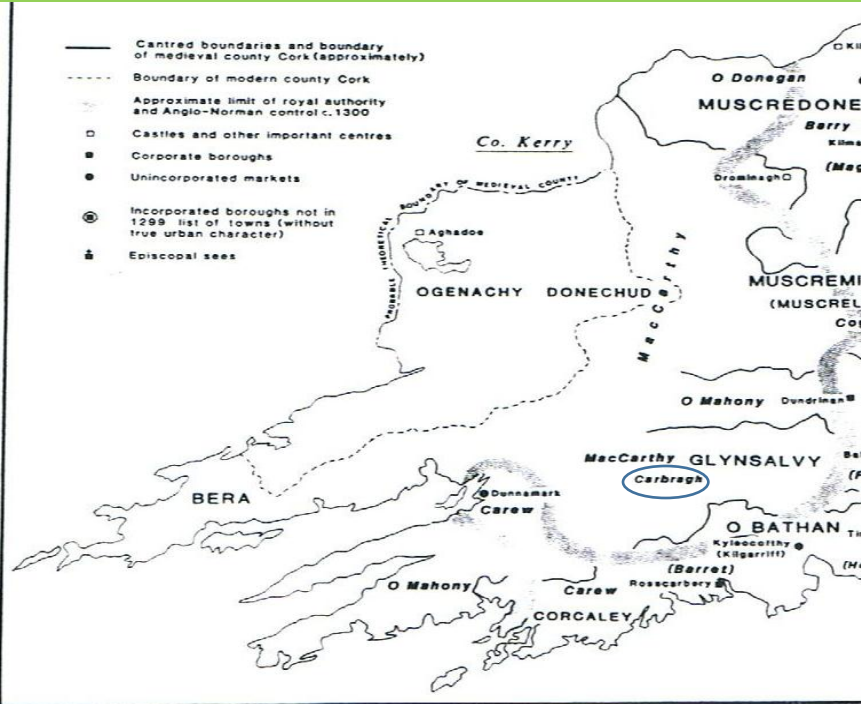
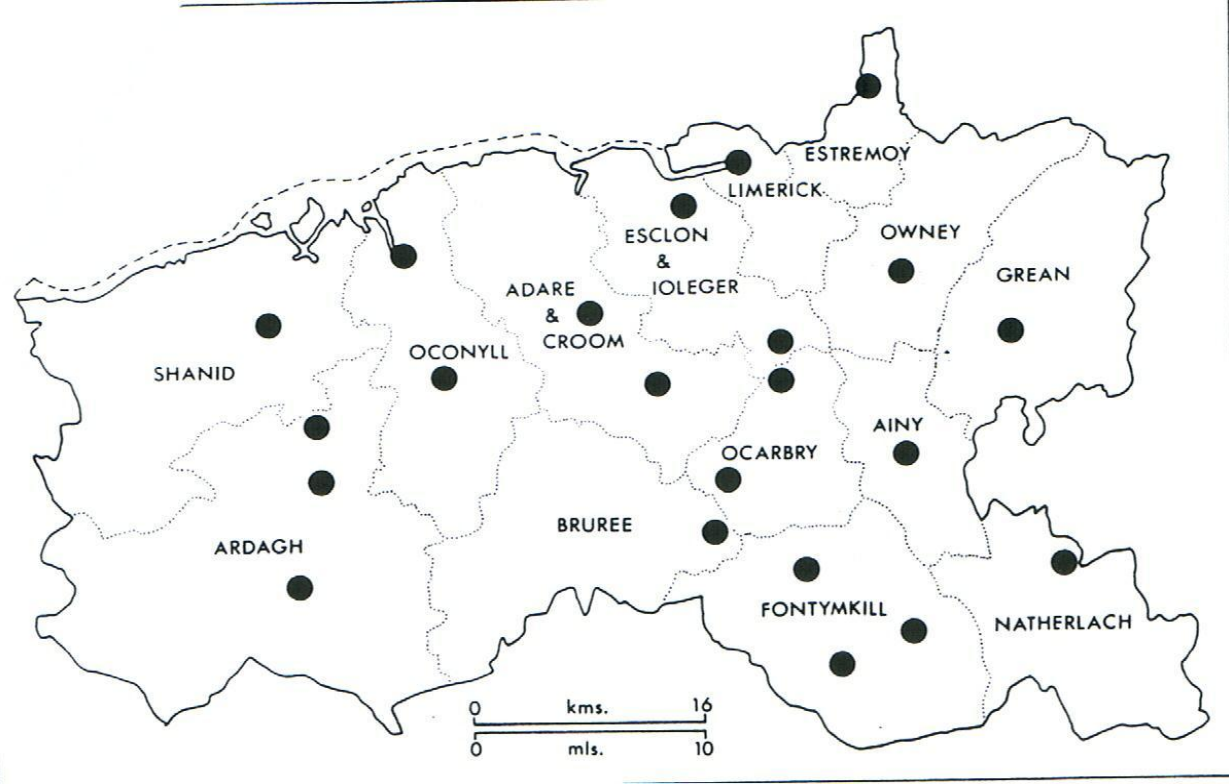


Figure 6.1 The county of Cork, c. 1300.

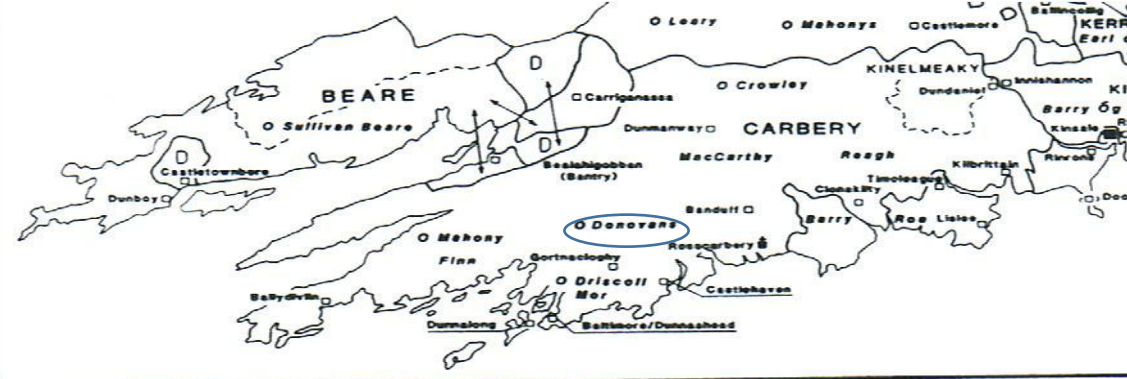


Figure 6.2 The lordships of county Cork, c. 1570.

# Conclusions: the nature of an Irish clan

- We need to research the different Irish terms used in medieval Irish documentation in considerably more depth. Relying on Victorian translations of Irish sources into English is not a productive approach to defining the specifics of clan membership, ownership of land and legal responsibilities.
- The Anglo-Irish term SEPT requires far more research in its original 16<sup>th</sup> C context before it can be used with some degree of precision by modern writers.
- The key word for the interpretation of communal and family ownership of land in early Ireland appears to be *fine* which can be subdivided into smaller and larger circles of kinship depending on the nature of the responsibility involved.
- *Clann* is not used widely in an early medieval Irish context. The Elizabethan commentators used terms such as “Captain of their nation” which also requires further investigation to determine their exact meaning.
- We need to bear in mind that the nature of both Irish and Scottish clans evolves through time in reaction to the political imperatives of the day.
- **Overall, we need considerably more research in this area but there is no evidence as yet that at any stage in the documentary period, that large tracts of Irish land were occupied by individuals sharing a single surname. Furthermore the relationship of Irish terms such as *fine*, *cenél*, *sliocht*, *ciniud*, *túath* to particular surnames or *sloinnte* is very unclear.**