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## Placenames Policy and its Implementation

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*Dónall Mac Giolla Easpaig*

Placenames are an integral part of our everyday language and are an indispensable component in defining our relationship with our physical environment. Communication without placenames is almost inconceivable. Placenames also carry with them an important cultural resonance in that they are constant reminders of the dominance of the Irish language in the country over the last two millennia. Placenames are the products of language, formed from, and according to, the rules of the language of the community that creates them. Placenames are intelligible to the speakers of the language at the time of their formation. Once formed, however, a placename takes on a life of its own and its function as a name, denoting a particular place, becomes independent of its lexical meaning over a period of time. A name such as Milltown will be immediately intelligible to a speaker of English just as Baile an Mhuilinn is to a speaker of Irish, although neither speaker will be conscious of the lexical meaning every time he uses the respective name. A name such as Binn Éadair is as unintelligible to an Irish speaker as the name Howth is to his English-speaking counterpart. The opaqueness of these two examples does not diminish their function as names. It is this capacity to function independently of its original lexical meaning that allows a placename to survive for centuries, or over a millennium in the case of the last names mentioned. Just as importantly, it is this independence from its original lexical meaning that allows a name to be borrowed into languages other than that in which it was coined.

### ANGLICIZATION OF PLACENAMES

Ireland has been described as one of the most densely named countries in Europe. The country is divided into some 65,000 administrative units, in an historical hierarchical structure of four provinces, 32 counties, about 275 baronies, 2,400 civil parishes and some 62,000 townlands, all bearing their own names. The most common unit of civil

administration in use today, however, is the (district) electoral division, of which there are approximately 3,500 in the state. The latter unit is a nineteenth-century creation, consisting of clusters of townlands, which generally derives its name from a pre-existing placename. In addition to administrative names, the large-scale maps of the Ordnance Survey contain thousands of other placenames, including names of centres of population (towns, villages and districts), those of physical features (lakes, rivers, streams, bays, headlands, islands, mountains, hills), and of man-made features (ringforts, churches, monasteries, graveyards, bridges, crossroads). Of a somewhat different category from traditional placenames, and of much more recent origin, are the thousands of streetnames, at least 45,000 of them, in cities and towns throughout the country.

The great majority of the placenames of Ireland have their origin in the Irish language, particularly the names of the baronies, civil parishes, townlands and major geographical features. Most of the names were coined before the seventeenth century and a significant number are at least a thousand years older than that. All of these have come down to us in anglicized form and only a small proportion have been recorded in the Irish language, whether in the corpus of native sources in Irish and Latin, dating from the sixth century to the nineteenth, or in the traditional spoken language of the twentieth.

The process of phonetic adaptation of Irish-language placenames into neighbouring languages has a long history; there is evidence to show that the Roman Britons, Anglo-Saxons and Welsh all borrowed Irish placenames into their respective languages. The Scandinavian settlers in Ireland from the ninth century coined a small number of placenames in their own language some of which such as Lambay and Waterford have survived to this day. The evidence would suggest, however, that this group simply borrowed existing Irish placenames into Norse on a large scale; we have references for a small number of these in the Icelandic Sagas, notably Dyflyn (Dublin), and Hlymreks (Limerick).

The Anglo-Norman colonization of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries brought with it a wave of English-speaking settlers to most parts of the country, along with a highly efficient centralised administrative system. For the first time, we have documentary evidence for the wholesale anglicization of Irish-language placenames, a process that

was to continue down to the nineteenth century and, arguably, to the present day. By the late seventeenth century, the placenames of every part of the country were being written down according to the spelling conventions of the English language by all arms of the establishment, central and local civil administration, the Established Church, and by the newly-ascendant landowners. Although the original Irish-language versions of the placenames were still being used by the vast majority of the population at this time, official documents provide no evidence that this was the case.

#### THE ORDNANCE SURVEY AND THE STANDARDIZATION OF PLACENAME FORMS

By the early nineteenth century the spelling of the names of the principal towns of the country had become standardized. This was not true of townland and minor feature names, for which a variety of different versions were used by different bodies, notably, the Grand Jury, who were in charge of local government, landowners, the Established Church, the Catholic Church, and local inhabitants. This situation created a dilemma for the Ordnance Survey when it undertook its first large-scale survey of the country in 1824, as only one version of a name could appear on the map. In response to this, the officer in charge, Thomas Colby, issued instructions on the treatment of placenames in which it was stated that ‘Persons employed on the survey are to endeavour to obtain the correct orthography of the names of places diligently consulting best authorities within their reach.’ When it was realized that the British Army officers conducting the survey could not satisfactorily undertake this task, a team of Irish civilians, competent in the Irish language, was employed by the Survey to collect and examine the evidence in order to decide a standardized English-language spelling for each name. Foremost of this group was John O’Donovan, a native of County Kilkenny, who was later to achieve fame as the great Irish scholar, and who was to become the first Professor of Celtic in Queen’s College, Belfast (now Queen’s University). He was ably assisted by others, by Clare-born Eugene Curry in particular, another noted scholar who was to become Professor of Archaeology and Irish History in the Catholic University of Ireland (now University College, Dublin).

Captain Thomas Larcom, Colby’s second-in-command in Ireland, has left a concise description of the methodology followed by O’Donovan and his assistants in an official document published in 1844. He states:

In order to ascertain the correct names of places for the engravings, that they might become a standard of orthography as well as topography, numerous maps, records, and ancient documents were examined, and copious extracts made from them. In this manner a certain amount of antiquarian information has been collected relating to every place, parish, and townland in Ireland – more than 60,000; and various modes of spelling them at different times has (sic) been recorded. When these investigations were complete, it was usual to send a person thoroughly versed in the Irish language to ascertain from the old people who still speak the language, what was the original vernacular name, and we then adopted that one most consistent with the ancient orthography, not venturing to restore the original and often obsolete name, but approaching as near to correctness as was practicable.

During the course of his work, O'Donovan travelled throughout the country, from Donegal to Wexford, consulting with Irish-language speakers wherever he could, in order to ascertain 'the original vernacular name.' The Irish form of each name, with a translation, was added to the other forms in the Ordnance Survey Name Book. O'Donovan recommended a standardized English spelling of the name based on all the accrued evidence, including the Irish form and its meaning, and this form was then engraved on the Ordnance Survey's series of maps at the scale of six inches to one mile, or 1:10,560. The Ordnance Survey spelling of the placenames has served as the official standard spelling since.

Although it was never intended that they should be engraved on the maps, the Irish forms collected by O'Donovan and his colleagues constitute one of the most important sources of Irish-language placenames ever assembled. Most serious work on the placenames of the country has drawn on the Irish name-forms in the Ordnance Survey Name Books, including that of the leading authority on Irish placenames in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, Patrick Weston Joyce (1829-1914), author of the great series *Irish Names of Places*, I-III (1869-1913).

While the results of the toponymic work of the Ordnance Survey received a general welcome at the time, dissenting voices were heard. In a review of the work of the Ordnance Survey in *The Nation* in 1844, the Young Ireland leader, Thomas Davis, expressed the hope that 'Whenever those maps are re-engraved, the Irish words, will, we trust, be spelled in an Irish and civilised orthography, and not barbarously,

as at present.’ Almost fifty years later Douglas Hyde expressed much the same sentiment. In his famous lecture, ‘The Necessity for De-Anglicising Ireland,’ which he delivered in 1892, Hyde had the following to say about the placenames of the country:

On the whole, our place names have been treated with about the same respect as if they were the names of a savage tribe which had never before been reduced to writing, and with about the same intelligence and contempt as vulgar English squatters treat the topographical nomenclature of the Red Indians. .... I hope and trust a native Irish Government will be induced to provide for the restoration of our place-names on something like a rational basis.

By ‘a rational basis’ was meant that the placenames should be restored to their Irish-language forms. Hyde’s wish was partially fulfilled some years before the establishment of a native government. Twelve years after its founding by Hyde and others, the Gaelic League published *Post-Sheanchas Cuid I. – Sacsbhéarla-Gaedhilg* by the Irish scholar, Seosamh Laoide, in 1905. This book gave Irish-language forms for all the post-offices in the country, based on the author’s own researches. While remarkable for its time, *Post-Sheanchas* had many flaws, the most serious of which derived from Laoide’s rejection on ideological grounds of the foreign imposed county system, as he saw it, in favour of earlier native territorial divisions. This approach led to the creation of the many unhistorical placename forms in the publication, names such as Brí Cualann for Bray, County Wicklow, and Brí Uí Cheinnsealaigh for Bree, County Wexford, for which absolutely no evidence exists. Despite these defects, however, *Post-Sheanchas* was to have a lasting influence down to the present day.

#### THE PLACENAMES COMMISSION

Following the establishment of the Irish Free State in 1922 with a native government whose policy was to promote the use of Irish in various areas of public life, there was particular urgency for authoritative work on Irish placenames, since Irish forms of those names would be required for regular use by both government departments and the general public. The Department of Post and Telegraphs adopted most of the Irish-language forms of the post-offices that had been published in *Post-Sheanchas* and these were in turn used by other government departments in a semi-official capacity. Many scholars working in the placenames field disagreed with the forms that had been proposed

by Seosamh Laoide, in particular, Risteard Ó Foghludha ('Fiachra Éilgeach'), who published his own Irish versions of some 7,000 placenames in *Logainmneacha .i. Dictionary of Irish Placenames* in 1935.

The urgency for authoritative Irish-language names was increased with the coming into force of Bunreacht na hÉireann (The Constitution of Ireland) in 1937 which gave a special status to the Irish language as first official language. In 1945 the Taoiseach at the time, Éamon de Valera, recommended that a booklet giving the correct Irish form of the names of the post-offices be published. The following year, An Coimisiún Logainmneacha (The Placenames Commission) was established by warrant of the Minister for Finance and was composed of private scholars of toponymy and related disciplines under the chairmanship of the Irish scholar An Seanadóir Pádraig Ó Siochfhradha (An Seabhadh). The terms of reference of the Commission were:

1. To examine the placenames of Ireland ...and to search for the correct original Irish versions of those placenames insofar as they had Irish forms and those forms can be established.
2. To prepare for publication and for official use lists of those names, in their Irish forms.

For the purpose of the Commission's work, placenames were defined as names of 'townlands, parishes, baronies, districts and other geographical areas, postal towns, villages, towns and cities, and other principal denominations.'

In order to fulfil these aims, the members of the Commission were expected to undertake the necessary research, aided by a small number of researchers provided by the Civil Service. It was eventually recognized that the task of researching all the placenames was beyond the efforts of private individuals. Consequently, in 1955, the terms of reference of the Commission were amended making their duties that of advising the Government on Irish-language placename matters and the actual research was left to a permanent research staff, The Placenames Branch, which was attached to the Ordnance Survey in 1956.

#### AINMNEACHA GAELIGE NA MBAILTE POIST

The first research project undertaken by the Placenames Branch was the completion of the research of the names of the postal towns which had been initiated by the Commission. Despite the change of its terms

of reference, the Commission continued to involve itself directly in the determination of the Irish versions of the names based on the evidence collected by the professional researchers. The research approach of the Branch was based on the scientific methodology developed by the institute with responsibility for the study of Swedish placenames, now known as the Ortnamnsarkivet. This entailed collecting all the spellings of a name from historical sources and ascertaining its pronunciation in the local community. In determining the choice of the Irish form, the Placenames Commission gave precedence in most cases to the version used by the last speakers of Irish in the locality. Following widespread consultation with the public, the forms recommended by the Commission were published as the official Irish forms in *Ainmneacha Gaeilge na mBailte Poist* in 1969. These versions were given limited legal status under the provisions of the Placenames (Irish Forms) Act 1973 and were subsequently given equal legal status with their English equivalents under the terms of the Official Languages Act 2003.

#### THE PLACENAMES BRANCH

The Placenames Branch had been established as an integral part of the Ordnance Survey and, following the completion of work on the postal towns, the Branch became incorporated more into the Survey's mapping programme, while the Commission's role became strictly advisory. The Branch was closely involved in the production of the Irish version of the Ordnance Survey's general map of Ireland, *Éire 1:575,000*, which was published in 1970; the map included most of the names listed in *Ainmneacha Gaeilge na mBailte Poist*, along with a significant number of names of major geographical features that had been researched for the purpose. This map, now long out of date and out of print, remains the only official comprehensive Irish-language map of the whole country to be published since the foundation of the state.

From the 1970s the research work of the Placenames Branch was directed towards providing the Irish versions of placenames on the Ordnance Survey's large-scale metric rural maps at the scale of 1:2,500, which were to replace the original six-inch maps. These maps contained the names of townlands, baronies and electoral divisions, along with a limited number of names of geographical features. The placename research for the maps was undertaken on a county basis.

In the early 1990s, the Ordnance Survey began production of a new national tourist map series at the scale of 1:50,000, to be known as the Discovery Series. On the advice of the Placenames Commission, a decision was made that maps in the series would be bilingual as far as practicable. In actual practice, this meant that only the names of the postal towns and names of significant geographical and archaeological features would be included bilingually. For purposes of uniformity, the Irish versions of townland names were specifically excluded, even in the case of those counties for which they were available. A significant decision was made in relation to the placename forms in Gaeltacht areas, however, in that priority was to be given to Irish versions on the maps covering these; the Irish forms of the townland names that had been determined by the Placenames Branch were to be included, and where space did not allow the inclusion of the two forms of a name, the Irish form would take precedence over the English form.

In the late 1990s a decision was made to restructure the Ordnance Survey and to change its status from that of an office of the Department of Finance to that of a commercial state body to be known as Ordnance Survey Ireland. As part of that reorganization, responsibility for Irish-language placename policy was transferred from the Department for Finance to the Department of Arts, Heritage, Gaeltacht and the Islands which resulted in the Placenames Branch becoming part of the Irish Language Division of that department in 1999 and in responsibility for the Placenames Commission being transferred to the Minister of the Department in 2000. The Branch and the Commission were subsequently transferred to the newly-created Department of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs in 2002.

With its transfer from the Ordnance Survey, the Placenames Branch's direct input into the Survey's mapping programmes came to an end. Since its establishment, however, the Branch always had associations with outside bodies. Apart from its core work for the Ordnance Survey's various map programmes, the Placenames Branch researched and provided Irish versions of numerous placenames for a variety of bodies on request, including Rannóg an Aistriúcháin (the Government translation service), An Gúm, Coillte (the forestry body), and the Office of Public Works. The greatest demand for Irish placename forms came from Bord Fáilte, which had responsibility for road signage for



over thirty-five years. In the early 1990s, the Central Fisheries Board requested the Branch to supply the Irish versions for some five hundred river names for its river signage scheme. Following its transfer from the Ordnance Survey, the Placenames Branch researched and provided the Irish versions of all the electoral divisions in the state, about 3,500 names, at the request of the Central Statistics Office. In 2002, a townland signage scheme was devised by CLÁR, a division of the Department of Agriculture with responsibility for funding disadvantaged rural areas, now part of the Department of Community Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs. The scheme encouraged, and funded, local communities in these areas to display the names of their local townlands on stone signs. Since its initiation the Placenames Branch has researched hundreds of townland names in many areas covered by the scheme.

#### PUBLICATION

By the late 1980s the Placenames Branch had embarked on a programme of publishing the results of its research in book form in order to make them more accessible to those who had a need for Irish name-forms or those who had a general interest in placenames. The first of its publications, *Gasaitéar na hÉireann/Gazetteer of Ireland* (1989), contained 3,300 of the most widely used placenames in the country in their English and Irish forms along with a certain amount of geographical information. By this period, research had been completed on all administrative names for a number of counties and the names of several of these were published in bilingual list form in the series *Liostaí Logainmneacha*. The first volumes in the series, those for Limerick, Waterford and Louth, were published in 1991, followed by a further three volumes appearing shortly afterwards, Kilkenny (1993), Offaly (1994) and Monaghan (1996). Following a hiatus, the volume for Tipperary was published in 2004. It is intended to continue the series and volumes for Galway, Dublin, Wexford and Cork are planned for 2008-9.

*Logainmneacha na hÉireann Imleabhar I: Contae Luimnigh* (1990), by Art Ó Maolfabhail, was the first in a planned series of volumes designed to present all the historical evidence for the names along with explanations of their origins. Due to other priorities, the preparation of further volumes was deferred and the second volume, *Logainmneacha na hÉireann Imleabhar II: 'Cill' i logainmneacha Chontae Thiobraid*

*Árann*, by Pádraig Ó Cearbhaill, did not appear until 2007. Two other volumes, covering the placenames of County Wexford and those of an area in County Cork, are in preparation.

#### THE OFFICIAL LANGUAGES ACT, 2003

The Placenames (Irish Forms) Act 1973 allowed the Minister to declare by Order, having received and considered the advice of the Placenames Commission, that the equivalent in the Irish language of a placename specified in the Order was such words or words as might be specified in the Order. The Irish words then would have the same meaning and same force and effect as the placename. Only two Orders were made under the 1973 Act, one in 1975 to declare Irish-language versions of the names of postal towns as they had been published in *Ainmneacha Gaeilge na mBailte Poist*, and second in 2001 to amend one of the Irish forms in the 1975 Order.

There was an reluctance to make further Orders under the 1973 legislation which was due in part to the wording of the Placenames Act itself. The problem was that while the 1973 Act allowed definitive Irish-language versions of placenames to be made available for official use, it also meant in legal terms that the placename remained in the English language only. This situation was deemed unacceptable and during the passing of the Official Languages Bill through the Houses of the Oireachtas the Minister for Community, Rural and Gaeltacht decided to incorporate the provisions of the 1973 Act, with fundamental amendments, in the Official Languages Act 2003. Under Part 5 of the 2003 Act, the Minister may by Order declare the Irish-language version of a placename specified in the Order. Once such a statutory order is made in respect of any particular placename in any area outside the Gaeltacht, the effect of the new legislation is that the Irish and the English versions of the placename have the same status and the same legal force and effect.

Where the Minister makes an Order in respect of a Gaeltacht placename, the English version of that placename ceases to have any legal force and effect. While this is without prejudice to any private use and most public use of the English version, the Act provides that the English version may not be used in future in Acts of the Oireachtas or Statutory Instruments, or road and street signs or on Ordnance Survey Maps. The Minister's intention with regard to this amendment was to give equal

status to the Irish versions of the country's placenames.

Since 2003, the Minister has made ten Orders under Part 5 of the Act on the advice of the Placenames Commission. The Orders reflect research that has been completed and published on the advice of the Commission down through the years since its establishment in 1946. The orders declare the Irish forms of the names of the provinces and counties, the names of administrative units and other names in counties Limerick, Louth, Waterford, Kilkenny, Offaly, Monaghan and Tipperary, and the names of centres of population and districts in counties not covered by other Orders. The Order covering the names of administrative units and of centres of population and districts in Gaeltacht areas came into force in 2005. A further Order will be made in 2008 to give legal status to the Irish versions of the almost 6,000 non-administrative placenames in Gaeltacht areas shown on the Ordnance Survey maps at the scale of six inches to one mile. Following the making of these orders Irish versions only of Gaeltacht placenames will be used in the definitive large-scale series of maps of the country used by Ordnance Survey and the Land Registry. It is intended that these regulations will be extended in the future to include all maps produced by Ordnance Survey Ireland and other mapping bodies, including maps for tourists.

ON-LINE DATABASE OF PLACENAMES: [logainm.ie](http://logainm.ie)

The Official Languages Act of 2003 created other demands for authoritative Irish forms of geographical names. Under Part 5 of the Act, the Ordnance Survey Ireland Act 2001 was amended to require OSI 'to depict placenames and ancient features in the national mapping and related records and databases in the Irish language or in the English and Irish languages.' Up until then, all placenames in OSI's database of addresses, GeoDirectory, were in English only, including approximately 35,000 streetnames in cities and towns throughout the state. While the local authorities have responsibility for streetnames in their respective areas, few have reliable lists of the Irish versions of these names. OSI retained the Placenames Branch on contract to supply authoritative Irish versions for all streetnames within the state by the end of 2008, in cooperation with the respective local authorities.

The Act had further consequences in relation to the provision of Irish placename-forms, in that all public bodies are now required to publish certain documents, including annual reports, in Irish and in English,

or in Irish only. This means that all placenames occurring in these documents must have official Irish versions. This requirement has led to an exponential increase in the demand for Irish forms of placenames. Servicing this demand had negative ramifications for the core work of the Placenames Branch, the completion of the research of the administrative names on a county basis in particular.

Since its establishment in the Ordnance Survey over sixty years ago, the Placenames Branch has built up a large archive of placename material, including Irish-language versions of the names and the historical evidence for these. This material was held in a number of different formats, however, including handwritten index cards, typed A4 sheets and various types of electronic files, including a placenames database. In order to make this material readily available to those that required it, the Department of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs engaged the services of Fiontar in Dublin City University on contract to develop a web-based national database of placenames in cooperation with the Placenames Branch. Fiontar had already been responsible for the successful development of the on-line database of Irish-language terminology, Focal.ie, for An Coiste Téarmaíochta in Foras na Gaeilge. Work on the placenames project began in April 2007 and the database will be available on [www.logainm.ie](http://www.logainm.ie) before the end of 2008.

The first task for the developers was to redesign the Placenames Branch's existing database as a web-based application. This database contained the names of all administrative units in the country, approximately 68,000 names in total, including the names of all the townlands, parishes and baronies, and electoral divisions, along with related geographical information, including a national grid reference of each townland. The database already contained the Irish versions of approximately 18,000 placenames, including all of those covered by Placenames Orders made under the provisions of Official Languages Act 2003. The next step was to populate the database further with material from the Branch's archives, starting with all the Irish versions of placenames that had been recommended over the previous sixty years. Finally, the historical evidence for the names is being entered into the database, starting with that recorded on the handwritten index-cards and the manually typed A4 sheets. In order to facilitate the process, this material has been scanned electronically and the scanned images have

been linked to the appropriate placenames. Finally, all the historical evidence held digitally in Word and Excel files will be added through automated links. By the time it is made available on-line to the public in late 2008, the database will contain over 110,000 names, including 68,000 administrative names, about 6,000 non-administrative names and approximately 35,000 streetnames. The database will eventually include all the non-administrative names listed on the Ordnance Survey's six-inch map series, approximately 30,000 names in total.

Comprehensive historical evidence will be available for about 35,000 administrative names and a limited number of historical references will be available for the remaining administrative names, mainly that contained in the Ordnance Survey Name Books. New historical evidence will be added on a daily basis and it is estimated that by the time the research has been completed on all the townland names that the database will contain up to one million historical references. Explanatory notes on the names will also be included on an ongoing basis.

Over the next five years it is envisaged that the database will provide an audio guide to pronunciation of certain names, including the Irish and English versions of the names listed in *Gasaitéar na hÉireann / Gazetteer of Ireland*, and the Irish versions of placenames in Gaeltacht areas. This facility may be extended in future to include all the names in the database. The database will contain a number of powerful search tools, which will enable users to search for information by full name or part of a name, in both Irish and English forms.

Placenames will be ordered hierarchically according to county, barony, civil parish, electoral division and townland. Each townland and geographical feature name will be referenced according to the national grid and the Ordnance Survey's six-inch map series; the approximate position of these names will be indicated on an outline map of the country. Additional features will be added in future, including facilities to search for historical forms, and to create distribution maps of names according to their constituent elements.

The launch of the national placenames database will provide the Placenames Branch with a powerful tool to progress its research programme. It will also provide the general public and scholars with an

immense resource to explore the richness and complexity of Ireland's placenames, a resource unimaginable to the members of the Placenames Commission who set out on the tortuous journey 'to search for the original Irish versions' of our placenames over seventy years ago.