

Gene-Ealogy and the new era of Irish surname, clan, and kindred research

Editorial

Mike Fitzpatrick PhD^{1*} ✉ and Esther Fitzpatrick PhD² ✉

¹Independent Scholar, Auckland 0604, New Zealand

²Faculty of Education, University of Auckland, Auckland 1010, New Zealand

*Author to whom correspondence should be addressed.

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A recent FTDNA blog, ‘Y-DNA Sheds New Light on the Medieval Genealogies of the Uí Briúin Dynasty of Northwest Ireland’¹, which stemmed from an article by DePew, Gleeson, and Jaski², is ground-breaking. The topic is familiar to those interested in Irish surnames, addressing the often-asked question, ‘can Y-DNA be aligned with medieval Irish genealogies?’ The approach the authors used to investigate the Uí Briúin is by no means new, involving a comparison of Y-DNA-associated surname trees with clan-associated surname trees – the neatly coined DASTs versus CASTs.

FTDNA’s wonderful block tree, inspired by Alex Williamson, is a DAST, and many of FTDNA’s surname project administrators publish their own DASTs. What constantly impresses is the attention to detail, the incorporation of both SNP and STR data, and the clever estimates of branch ages; as expected from scholars, DePew, Gleeson, and Jaski’s DASTs are all of that.

But, it is the cognizance of Irish surname complexities that takes their research to a higher level³. Not satisfied with tackling a single surname and trying to prove a point by linking it to the surnames of a few well-known patrilineal cousins, the authors took on a puzzle of dynastic proportions – literally. This is praiseworthy because CASTs that focus on only small circles of historically connected Irish surnames can be fraught since they may fail to recognise that it is not uncommon to find parallel surname connections among different Irish lineages, which further might be expected to have quite different Y-haplotypes.

As the authors say, “Sometimes the same surname arose independently in several branches”. This happens more often than imagined, yet may be obscured from sight. For example, the magnetism of a ‘big clan’ surname and the allure of having a notable ancestor versus a less attractive ‘small clan’ alternative can leave genetic genealogy hounds barking up the wrong tree.

Such ‘dominant narratives’ can greatly hinder or even utterly blind⁴. Catherine Nash writes, “Diasporic genealogy is as much about enacting distinction as it is about making connections

¹ <https://blog.familytreedna.com/y-dna-medieval-genealogies-ui-briuin-dynasty>,
<https://blog.familytreedna.com/y-dna-medieval-genealogies-ui-briuin-dynasty-part-2/>

² DePew K, Gleeson M, & Jaski B (2023). Peritia 34: 9-45.

³ There are also unpublished examples, such as ‘Domnall son of Larien, son of Eochaidh Binneach and the Binnigh of the Bann’, by Edward Kane and Dwayne O’Neill, see <https://www.familytreedna.com/groups/cenel-eoghainy-dnaproject/about/results>

⁴ Fitzpatrick, E & Fitzpatrick, M (2020). When everything changes: using critical family history to deconstruct Keesing and Fitzpatrick surnames. Genealogy 4: 25. <https://doi.org/10.3390/genealogy4010025>.

... the public culture of Irish-American genealogy is dominated by references to ancient Gaelic kings and clans”⁵. DePew, Gleeson, and Jaski gain our applause for having none of that; with them, there is no cherry-picking. Yes, while on the one hand they identify Y-haplotypes that “match very well” some Uí Briúin lines, such as the Ó Conchabhair Donn (O’Connor Don), they found others “do not fit into any of the genealogical schemes”.

And the authors’ approach signals a new era has dawned on Irish surname, clan and kindred research, what we have elsewhere referred to in a recent publication as working the hyphen of ‘Gene-Ealogy’⁶ – and it’s a moment of celebration. The dominant narrative era, in which the big heroic and anti-heroic narratives popularised in some Irish history books and pedigrees, is passing, and we are entering a phase of much deeper scholarly interrogation and understanding of Irish clans and kindred groups and their surnames.

Now, some may squeal ‘revisionist’ and squirm at the upheaval and trauma that is being brought to bear on long-held surname identity beliefs. For others, revised positions are long overdue, part of a reversion to pre-colonial understandings of surnames, clans, and kindred. And while there needs to be sensitivity and respect for what has gone before us, because some of it will remain accurate, there has come a deep desire to understand the occurrence of Y-DNA discovered Irish surname clusters that are possibly indicative of ‘lost’ clans and kindred groups.

Finte na hÉireann (Clans of Ireland) is the independent permanent authority established to register Irish clans and historical families. Cathaoirleach (Chairperson), Gearóid Ó Ceallaigh, has recently emphasized the importance of accurate differentiation within Irish surname groups and that clans and kindred be identified with their correct names and associated ‘geographic areas in history’. Further, he passionately stressed that Irish clans and kindred groups claim their identities,

“Without feeling a sense that we are too small, we were not a great clan like the O’Kelly clan. The fact is that the Ó Ceallaigh Uí Mháine (O’Kelly Hy Many) was a great clan, but the Ó Ceallaigh Dál gCais (O’Kelly Dal Cais) was a small kindred group and there are a dozen other separate unrelated O’Kelly kindreds. Clans of Ireland is for the great clans and the small kindred groups. I cannot stress forcefully enough how important this is and I hope that it will become one of, if not the greatest legacy of Clans of Ireland.”

So we come to, how, then, do we ‘do’ robust research that explores the associations between Irish surnames and Y-haplotypes? The DAST bit looks very well covered, being in the good hands of project administrators, many so capable as mathematicians they could send their Irish clan flag attached to a can of Guinness up to the moon. The CAST bit is not easy, but we would do well to follow DePew, Gleeson, and Jaski.

When it comes to Irish genealogies, many CAST endeavours tend to default to John O’Hart’s ‘Irish pedigrees’. While DePew, Gleeson, and Jaski do make reference to O’Hart, it is with a

⁵ Nash, C (2008). *Of Irish Descent: Origin Stories, Genealogy, and the Politics of Belonging*. New York: Syracuse University Press.

⁶ Fitzpatrick, E & Fitzpatrick, M. Decolonising an Irish Surname by Working the Hyphen of Gene-Ealogy. *Genealogy*. 2023; 7(3):58. <https://doi.org/10.3390/genealogy7030058>

degree of caution. They note that O'Hart's pedigrees are included in their research because they are a frequently consulted online resource. O'Hart's pedigrees currently hold sway in many circles, but relying on them for advanced genetic genealogy is akin to pouring poitín into the gas tank of a Lamborghini.

Please pause for reflection. From the outset, reviewers received O'Hart generously, yet bluntly: "In a future edition we trust to find it quite up to modern notions of accuracy"⁷. Present-day Irish surname expert John Grenham pulls no punches, "Every Gaelic Irish family is shown to descend from a single forebear, but only by constant jumbling of sources, unacknowledged guesswork and judicious omissions". And Grenham's final words on the topic are, "approach with caution"⁸.

And here lies the 'not easy' aspect of DePew, Gleeson, and Jaski's CAST method. We recognize that not only does one of the authors bring virtually unrivaled Irish genealogical scholarship, but the team also has access to sources many find out of reach. Yet, the difference between O'Hart and the other Irish genealogical sources that the trio references is so stark, as the following summary attests, that it becomes crucial for forward-looking genetic genealogists to get access to those sources. The strength of engaging with Gene-Eaological research, which draws on DAST methods coupled with robust archival research, will bring needed rigor to Irish clan, kindred, and surname research, hopefully leading the hounds to bark up the 'right' tree.

It is Leabhar Mór na nGenealach (Great Book of Irish Genealogies, hereafter GBIG) that serious researchers need to find a way to access. GBIG is not inaccessible, although only available in a few libraries and only purchasable at a 'price'. However, for some context, one BigY costs about two-thirds of the beautiful shamrock green bound, five-volume set available from de Búrca books⁹. Also, (affording some Irish wit) the online version, exemplified in Figure 1, is free to view¹⁰ ...

Comparing O'Hart with GBIG is like comparing a skateboard with a spaceship. GBIG is the work of Dubhaltach Óg Mac Fhirbisigh (Duald Mac Firis), a seventeenth-century Irish scribe, translator, and the 'last great exponent' of Irish genealogies¹¹. While a nineteenth-century review of Mac Fhirbisigh's genealogies by Professor Eugene O'Curry¹² was hyperbolic in its assessment – "perhaps the greatest genealogical collection in the world" – Eoin MacNeill (1921) realistically called it "by far the largest and fullest body of Irish genealogical lore"¹³. A review of Ó Muraíle's edition of GBIG declares it, alongside O'Donovan's edition of the Annals of the Four Masters, one of the "two greatest works that any modern Irish scholars ever accomplished"¹⁴.

⁷ Review (1880): Irish Pedigrees; or, the Origin and Stem of the Irish Nation by John O'Hart. The Irish Monthly, 8, 224-225.

⁸ <https://www.johngrenham.com/blog/2016/07/11/john-ohart-hero-and-villain>

⁹ <https://www.deburcarebooks.com/product/books/history/genealogies>

¹⁰ https://www.isos.dias.ie/UCD/UCD_MS_14.html

¹¹ Ó Muraíle, N (2004). The Great Book of Irish Genealogies. Dublin: de Búrca.

¹² O'Curry, E (1861). Lectures on the Manuscript Materials of Ancient Irish History. Dublin, James Duffy.

¹³ MacNeill, E (1921). Celtic Ireland. Dublin: Martin Lester.

¹⁴ Ó Canann, T (2002). The Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland, 132, 127-137.

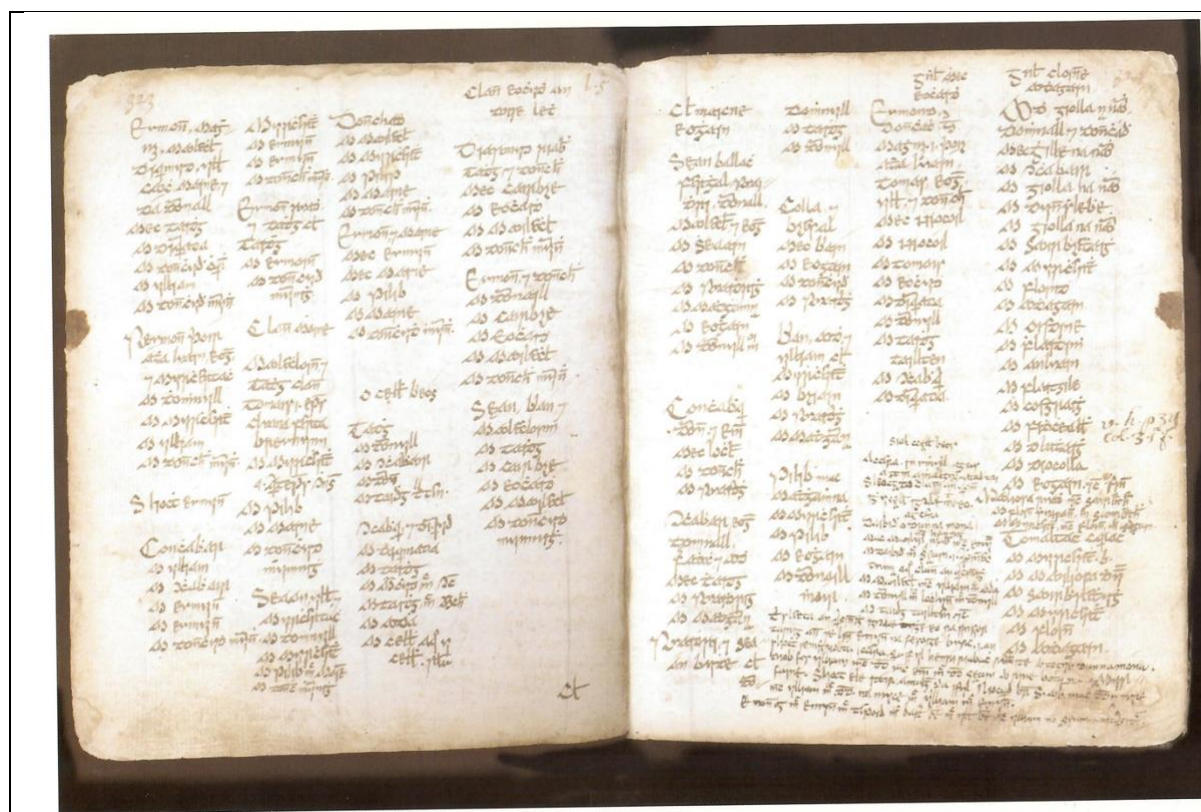


Figure 1: Showing text from GBIG pages 323-324, which Ó Muraíle's says are "fairly typical pages of genealogical material attractively laid out in columnar format".

What can GBIG bring? By way of example, DePew, Gleeson, and Jaski mention O'Connor clans. O'Hart gives us eight O'Connor pedigrees, much trimmed down, starting with "O'Connor (No. 1) Kings of Connacht", which feeds the dominant narrative, and even those brilliant of mind can be seduced. In contrast to O'Hart, GBIG provides at least seventeen Conchabhair (Connor) surname genealogies across ten different population groups for a total of 375 individuals with the patronym. And that's not to mention 300+ distinct occurrences of the given name Conchabhair, the fifth most numerous in GBIG, via which a patronym, perhaps scarcely recorded, had a chance to have arisen (refer Figure 2).

GBIG also brings perspectives to surname adoption, much in the way DePew, Gleeson, and Jaski highlight the factors that can influence 'the precarious evolution of Irish surnames'. For example, in his genealogy of the seed or progeny of Conall Clogach, i.e., the folk of Maol Moichéirghe¹⁵, Mac Fhirbisigh noted, "perhaps someone would examine this since other texts generally say Conall Clogach, son of Aodh ... the reader should understand that it is possible, and even a custom, to refer to a person's fosterson as his son ... and therefore one can, without contradicting this, call Conall Clogach 'son of Aodh' ... even though he be, according to this tract, Conall Clogach, son of Faolchú"¹⁶. That is, Mac Fhirbisigh considered

¹⁵ Anglicised Mulmohery, Moghery, and Early, a branch of the Cinéal Eóghain, i.e., the kindred or tribe of Eóghan (Owen), son of Niall Naoighhiallach, an Uí Néill branch originally centred at Ailech on Inis Eóghain (Inisowen, i.e., Eoghan's Peninsula) in Dún na nGall (Donegal).

¹⁶ GBIG 146.5-6.

that the difference in Conall Clogach's genealogies probably came about because he was fostered.

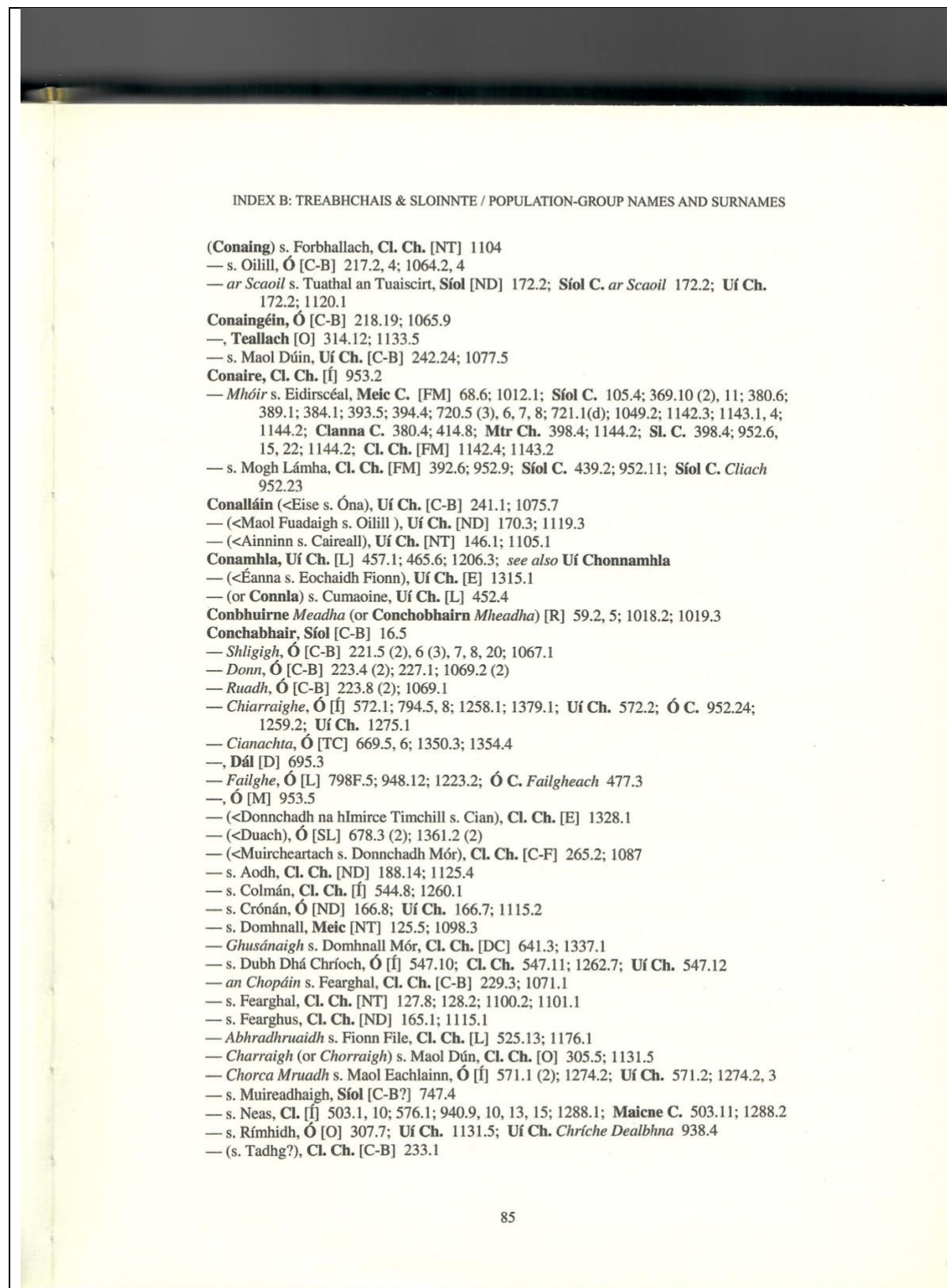


Figure 2: An extract from Ó Muraíle's GBIG population-group names and surnames index, showing some occurrences of Conchabhair.

Other easily accessible and essential yet largely underutilized genealogies deserve mention. Although unable to match GBIG, *Corpus Genealogiarum Hiberniae* (hereafter, CGH) contains “pre-Norman Irish and related tracts from the twelfth century”; those manuscripts are ‘Rawlinson B.502’ and ‘The Book of Leinster’, “with variants and some additions from parallel material” in ‘The Book of Lecan’ and the ‘Book of Ballymote’¹⁷. CGH is available from the Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies and can also be accessed online, as can other vital works such as the Ó Cléirigh book of genealogies¹⁸.

But the rewards of GBIG are by far the richest. Here, we recount some findings from the Fitzpatrick surname project. The dominant Fitzpatrick narrative once was that all surname bearers originated from the Mac Giolla Phádraig dynasts of Ossory, the most notable branch being the Barons of Upper Ossory, who were the first to take the anglicized surname form, by decree of Henry VIII. Hence, the early years of the Fitzpatrick surname project saw the ‘collaborative aim’ of preparing a “genealogical register of the male descendants of the 1st Baron of Upper Ossory in order to ultimately identify The Fitzpatrick, chief of his name”¹⁹.

No second thought was given to other ways the Fitzpatrick surname may have arisen, yet it did in several different circumstances, Van Morrison-like, “from Bantry Bay up to Derry Quay and from Galway to Dublin town”. Finte na hÉireann now recognize five clans whose modern-day members all go by Fitzpatrick: Mac Giolla Phádraig Dál gCais, Mac Giolla Phádraig Laighean, Mac Giolla Phádraig Ulaidh, Fitzpatrick of Upper Ossory, and Ó Maol Phádraig Bréifne.

Clan Ó Maol Phádraig Bréifne (O’Mulpatrick of Breffny) is celebrated as an example of what Y-DNA can do when interrogated alongside GBIG, which then, hand-in-hand with Y-DNA, provides a springboard to other sources. The surname Ó Maol Phádraig, which arose from the given name Máel Pátraic, is now extinct, having succumbed to what MacLysaght called the ‘corruption’ of Irish surnames²⁰, part of a colonial practice that served to weaken Gaelic Irish culture, history, and identity. Of the O’Mulpatrick, O’Hart said nothing – the dominant narrative holding sway in his mind when he wrote that the Fitzpatrick of Bréifne was a clan originally of the Fitzpatrick of Ossory.

Although GBIG makes a record of just one Ó Maol Phádraig clan, of the Conmhaicne Fhinnir²¹, who came to have branches in Bréifne, this provides an important starting position for constructing CAST-DAST relationships for Bréifne Fitzpatricks. The Ó Maol Phádraig Bréifne DASTs versus CASTs are a work in progress²², but there are indeed Y-DNA associations that match well with other Conmhaicne Fhinnir surnames, which, by the way,

¹⁷ O’Brien, M (1976). *Corpus Genealogiarum Hiberniae*, Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies.

¹⁸ Pender, S (1951). *The O’Clery Book of Genealogies*. *Analecta Hibernica* 18: x-xxxiii, 1-198.

¹⁹ Zalewski S & Fitzpatrick, R (2002). *Descendants of Bryan Fitzpatrick Lord and First Baron of Upper Ossory*. Dublin: Zalewski & Fitzpatrick.

²⁰ MacLysaght, E (1985). *Irish Families: Their Names, Arms and Origins*. Dublin, Irish Academic Press.

²¹ The Conmhaicne were said to be the descendants of the mythical demi-god, Conmhac who were spread across Connaught, as well as having an “east to west distribution ... across the centre of Ireland”. See Byrne, F (1973). *Irish Kings and High Kings*. London: BT Batsford Ltd.

²² Fitzpatrick, I & Fitzpatrick, M (2023). Ó Maol Phádraig: the name, the people, and the clans. Part I. *The Journal of the Fitzpatrick Clan Society* 4, 1-10. [doi:10.48151/fitzpatrickclansociety01223](https://doi.org/10.48151/fitzpatrickclansociety01223).

are not just the few that you might find listed on Wikipedia – GBIG reveals they number more than one hundred.

Crucially, GBIG also has twenty-four discreet occurrences of the precursor given name, Máel Pátraic. While ‘re-discovering’ the Ó Maol Phádraig Bréifne was a defining moment for Fitzpatricks, the casting off of a dominant Fitzpatrick narrative opened the eyes to even more possibilities and the headspace to imagine and ask ‘were Ó Maol Phádraig clans, who were descendants of a Máel Pátraic individual, once more widespread?’

The answer came definitively, in GBIG-assisted fashion, by other sets of genealogical records that are the equivalent of unfathomable treasure hidden in plain sight – many thousands of Irish men and women, often named alongside close kin and clan associates, along with placenames and occupations, telephone book-like for those old enough to remember the White Pages; scarcely yet ever utilized, these records will also serve the new era well.

GBIG provided a lead: the occurrence of Máel Pátraic among the Eóghanachta, a ruling dynasty of Munster. Y-DNA set the heart-racing a little faster – two sizeable groups of Fitzpatricks with the Eóghanachta Y-haplotype, R-CTS4466, having surname-specific shared ancestry from the thirteenth-century, and deeper common ancestry with the great clan Ó Súilleabháin (O’Sullivan) et al. Whence, there came the courage to tackle the Irish late-medieval ‘telephone books’, those being the Fiants of Ireland²³, where from the late-sixteenth to early-seventeenth centuries are recorded several ‘O Mullpatrick’ scattered among the pardons granted to Eóghanachta leadership, the most notable being Donal MacCarthy Reagh, 17th Prince of Carbery, and their associates (refer Figure 3). Moreover, the fiants record some Ó Maol Phádraig Eóghanachta were associated with a place that bore their patronym, Ballymulpatrik; that old townland name is now extinct, like the surname.

We consider there is a world of untouched data for those trying to make sense of Irish CASTs and DASTs, and the thrill of discovery awaits, yet there is a caveat – tread carefully. Consider what your discoveries might mean for both individual and clan identities. Indeed, could anything offset the resurrection of a ‘lost clan’? Well, what about putting to death an existing one? Eóghanachta Fitzpatricks have lived for the past three hundred years and more, going by their ‘corrupted’ surname. Their identity is bound to Fitzpatrick and whatever narratives, accurate or not, of how they adopted their surname.

To date, Co. Cork Fitzpatricks have reacted with lukewarm enthusiasm when learning they could descend from seventeenth-century Ó Maol Phádraig ‘rebels’, rather than Mac Giolla Phádraig nobility. And fair enough. Identity politics has traumatized Ireland for hundreds of years. How people are ascribed or choose to identify themselves is an ongoing struggle, especially in colonised spaces. Further, identities have economic and social consequences and impact individual and group wellbeing⁶.

²³ Fitzpatrick, M (2021). Pátraic surnames in the Fiants and Patent Rolls of Ireland: Part I: a method of approach to mega-data, and a Mac Caisín case study. The Journal of the Fitzpatrick Clan Society 2, 66-92. [doi:10.48151/fitzpatrickclansociety00621](https://doi.org/10.48151/fitzpatrickclansociety00621).

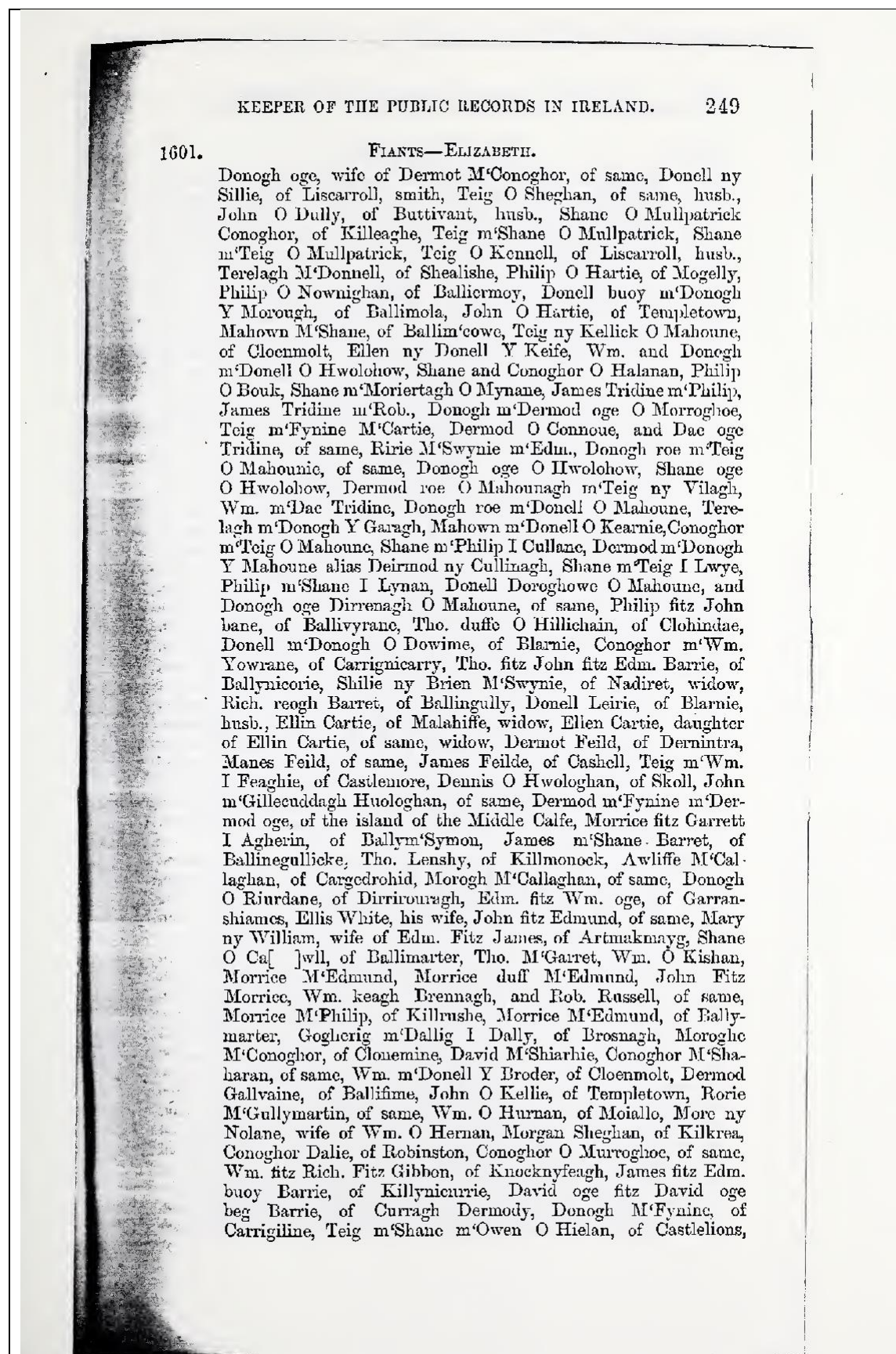


Figure 3: Part of Fiant 6539 from the reign of Elizabeth I, dated 1601, recording O'Mulpatricks of Co. Cork.

Indeed, some Fitzpatricks may wish the pages of GBIG were never opened. O'Hart attached the pedigree of the Fitzpatrick barons to the Mac Giolla Phádraig of Ossory and said their close kin were another Osraige clan, the O'Braonáin Uí Dhuach (O'Branan of Idough), the two said to share common ancestry at Cearbhall, King of Ossory (843-888 AD). A simplistic CAST-DAST comparison seems to bring confirmation to O'Hart, since many Fitzpatricks and many of Branan-like surnames (i.e., Brennan, Branham, etc.) share ancestry at R-FGC5494 ... A1506, an interesting haplotype, which is dated to the medieval. Yet, GBIG places the O'Braonáin Uí Dhuach among the Uí Failghe, well detached from any Osraige line. Hence, GBIG's disruption of a dominant narrative has led to an alternative, highly disruptive theory for the pre-twelfth century origins of R-1506 'Branans' and Fitzpatricks²⁴.

It can be guaranteed there will be similar narrative twists for some who follow the lead of DePew, Gleeson, and Jaski, no longer satisfied with swimming on the surface and desirous of a plunge into GBIG and wherever that great book leads. That paper genealogy deeper dive is not unlike taking a Y-DNA test in the first place – and if you don't want to be surprised by GBIG findings that might disrupt a dominant surname, clan, or kindred narrative, don't go looking!

²⁴ Fitzpatrick, M., Fitzpatrick, I. (2021). The Similar-Sounding Surnames of Haplogroup R-BY140757. The Journal of the Fitzpatrick Clan Society 2, 1-41. [doi:10.48151/fitzpatrickclansociety00421](https://doi.org/10.48151/fitzpatrickclansociety00421).