

Your Family Tree Series: 24



A Simple Guide to Ireland

To the majority of people, Ireland is just a small island on the outlying fringes of Europe. Most visitors come to Ireland not for its scenery (which can be breathtaking), nor for its culture, despite its richness and variety: they come, rather, to trace their ancestors, for there are many American, Canadian and Australian families who can boast of an Irish ancestor somewhere in their line. Ireland, however, can be just a little confusing for those unaware of the finer points of the island's *modus vivendi*. This leaflet is intended to guide the unwary past the most obvious pitfalls.

Historically, Ireland has been divided into four provinces: Ulster, Munster, Leinster and Connacht. These in turn, are sub-divided into thirty-two counties: nine counties in Ulster, twelve in Leinster, six in Munster, and five in Connacht. Within counties (and occasionally overlapping) are parishes which are further sub-divided into townlands.

In 1801 Ireland officially joined with England, Scotland and Wales to become part of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland.

In 1921, after years of unrest, the island of Ireland was divided in two. All of Munster, Leinster and Connacht, and three of the nine counties of Ulster, became the Irish Free State, later the Republic of Ireland. This part of the island is also known as 'Eire', 'The Republic', the 'Twenty-six Counties', and 'The South'.

The remaining six counties of Ulster continued to be part of the United Kingdom and became known, officially, as Northern Ireland. However, the area is often referred to as 'Ulster', sometimes as the 'Six Counties', and sometimes as 'The North'. To confuse things further, geographically, the most northerly county in Ireland (Donegal) is part of 'The South' although it is one of the counties of Ulster.

There are some other peculiarities, which tend to confuse visitors but, briefly, Londonderry and Derry are one and the same place, although the former is the official name of the city. Belfast is the capital city of Northern Ireland; Dublin the capital city of the Republic. Although those who are native to Northern Ireland may be regarded as both Irish and British, in the same way as a Yorkshireman is both English and British, there are sections of the population who prefer to think of themselves as Irish, while others would see themselves as Northern Irish and British. To others, however, the population of Northern Ireland is simply British. Loyalists/Unionists are in favour of maintaining the Union with Great Britain and are predominately of the Protestant persuasion; Nationalists/Republicans, by tradition mainly Roman Catholic, aspire to a united Ireland under an Irish government.

The inhabitants of Ireland, both North and South, are mainly Christian, with the majority of the population of the Republic of Ireland professing to be Roman Catholic.

A word of warning: it is bad form to ask a person's religious persuasion.

Another problem which can be encountered in Ireland (North or South) is that of language. Although everyone on the island speaks English, there are those who also speak Irish. Certain place names have changed over the years from Irish to English and vice versa. For example, County Leix (also spelt Laoise and pronounced 'Leash') was, prior to 1921, known as Queen's County, while King's County became Offaly. Many personal names have become anglicised over the years and suffixes to surnames, such as Mc and O, have been dropped. Conversely, an upsurge in nationalist feelings can mean the reversion of an anglicised name to its Irish roots - not always correctly translated.

The most common surnames in Ireland, according to a survey undertaken by the Registrar General in 1890, were: Murphy, Kelly, Sullivan, Walsh, Smith, O'Brien, Byrne, Ryan, Connor and O'Neill. Included in his reckoning were all the variants of the surname, for example, Smith, Smyth, Smithe and Smythe. In what is now Northern Ireland the most common names in 1890 were: Smith, Johnston, Stewart, Wilson, Campbell and Doherty. Certain names, however, are very common to a particular locality; for example, the most common surname in Co. Tyrone is Quinn.

While the Public Record Office of Northern Ireland welcomes visitors who are trying to trace their ancestral roots, it should be borne in mind that the majority of the records held in PRONI relate, in the main, to Northern Ireland, although there are some which also relate to the rest of Ireland and, indeed, to even further a field. Our collections of emigrant letters, for example, come from all over the world. A guide to our holdings can be found on our web-site and in our offices in Balmoral Avenue, Belfast.

The National Archives and the National Library, both located in Dublin, are the national repositories for those records relating primarily to the South of Ireland. From the 1860s to the 1920s all the public records for the entire island were held at the Four Courts, Dublin. A fire in 1922 destroyed almost all the public records held at the Four Courts, including most of the 19th century census returns. In fact, the earliest complete census extant for Ireland is that of 1901, although PRONI holds only that part which relates to what is now Northern Ireland.

Despite a few idiosyncrasies, the people of Northern Ireland are a warm and friendly lot and, if you avoid the pitfalls, they will give you the traditional 'hundred thousand welcomes'. Enjoy your visit.

Alphabetical list of the counties of Ireland

Antrim*	Dublin	Limerick	Roscommon
Armagh*	Fermanagh*	Londonderry*	Sligo
Carlow	Galway	Longford	Tipperary
Cavan	Kerry	Louth	Tyrone*
Clare	Kildare	Mayo	Waterford
Cork	Kilkenny	Meath	Wexford
Donegal	Leitrim	Monaghan	Wicklow
Down*	Leix (Laoise)	Offaly	Westmeath

(* Counties in Northern Ireland)

The counties of Ireland by Province

Ulster	Munster	Leinster	Connacht
Antrim	Clare	Carlow	Galway
Armagh	Cork	Dublin	Leitrim
Cavan†	Kerry	Kildare	Mayo
Donegal†	Limerick	Kilkenny	Roscommon
Down	Tipperary	Leix	Sligo
Fermanagh	Waterford	Longford	
Londonderry		Louth	
Monaghan†		Meath	
Tyrone		Offaly	
		Westmeath	
		Wexford	
		Wicklow	

(† Ulster counties in the Republic of Ireland.)

