

Family Name



nolanfamilies.org/index.php/history/family-name

“Yes, I would agree. Like you, I do not know the etiology of your Anglicized surname, but we



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know that most of the Anglicized surnames have multiple origins. Additionally, that phrase, “when in Rome do as the Romans,” is very pertinent to migration. Migrants moving into new territory are more likely to assimilate particularly if fitting in with the new social and cultural order eases discrimination (for lack of a better term). I think (name removed) also mentioned this in a recent post when he suggested that many that migrated

into Ireland Irishified (sic) offering examples. We have had discussions regarding this before in regard to name changes.

The original patrimony of the O’Nolans was centred in the barony of Forth in the County of Carlow, which is so called in Grace’s Annals and other Anglo – Irish records.

There are townlands of Ballynolan in the barony of Idrone West, in the County of Carlow, in the barony of Cranagh in the County of Kilkenny and in the barony of Kenry in the County of Limerick. There is a townland of Ballynowlan near Stradbally, barony of Maryborough East in the Queen’s County, and a considerable territory embracing, among others, the townlands of Clooadyonoran, Kylbry, Tlyawer, Clonegowne, Clowlenemone, Clonenagh, Ballyfin, Cloughclone and Clonanne in the barony of Maryborough West in the Queen’s County, which is defined in the Fiants of James 1 as “parcel of the Lordship of Farren O’Nolan”.

From these it is evident that the influence and ramifications of the O’Nolans extended far beyond the confines of the parent barony of Forth O’Nolan.

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Sometime around the 9th century our Irish forefathers adopted a Gaelic family name, Ó Nualláin, Ó hUllacháin or ni hUllacháin. With the arrival of the Normans in the 12th century the aforementioned three Irish Gaelic family names began to be rendered in English in various forms. The Ó Nualláin family name was predominantly rendered as O’Nolan and some with the Gaelic family names Ó hUllacháin and ni hUllacháin also began using O’Nolan as a surname.

Surname and Variants

Current known variations of the Nolan family name, found around the world, include:

Ó Nualláin, O’Nolan, Nolan, Noland, Nolen, Nolin, Nowland, Nowlan, Nowling, Newland, Knowland, Knowlan, Knowling, Knollin, ...

It is hard to determine with any degree of certainty when the most ancient form of the Nolan family name, i.e. Ó Nualláin, was first used. However, based upon Irish royal genealogies we do know that, around the year 1000, Mael Mórda O'Domnall, a son of the then king of Leinster, Donnchad macDomnall, married Luanmaisi Ingen Ceile O'Nualláin, a great-great-grand-daughter of Murchad MacNuallain, thus establishing that the family name was being used as early as the end of the 9th century.

The most common explanation for the Nolan family name is that it is derived from the Gaelic word “nuall” meaning shout/howl and the suffix “áin” meaning “one who”. Thus Nualláin would mean one who howls or shouts. A simple explanation for this derivation is that the shouting or howling refers to the eerie blood-curdling war-cry which was such an integral part of early celtic warfare. Circumstantial evidence suggesting that this explanation may be the right one is to be found in early Nolan family history. Indeed, if we are right in our earlier assumption that Eochaidh, the ancestor of the Carlow Nolans, was the leader

of the Fianna during his father's reign, he would, in the natural course of his duties, have been called upon to lead the armies of the high king into battle, exhorting them with shouts and howls.

According to the Annals of Ireland, after the establishment of surnames the chief family of Fotharta Fea or Fotharta Osnadhaigh, one of the *seven Fothartas*, took the surname O'Nualláin.

Over time, Fotharta Osnadhaigh became known as Fotharta O'Nualláin and eventually, by its English rendering, as Forth O'Nolan. Also, in historical writings Cill Osnadha is identified as Kellistown suggesting that early residences for the Nolan chiefs would have been in that general area.

After the arrival of the Normans in the 12th century and the building, very early on, of a castle at Castlemore, near Tullow, the center of Nolan activity is believed to have shifted further south. The loss of Nolan lands in the Tullow area would also have been a motivating factor. Given the prominent role that Templepeter and its church



played in later Nolan life, it is assumed that it became the new center possibly sometime around the mid 13th century.

Today the Nolan name is largely associated with descendants of the Gaelic sept Ó Nualláin which, at the arrival of the Normans in the 12th century, was mainly concentrated in County Carlow and neighbouring counties. Anglicized forms of the Ó Nualláin family name include O’Nolan, O’Nolane, O’Noulane, Nowland, Nowlan, Nolan and possibly other forms.

After the arrival of the Anglo-Normans in 1169 and the subsequent gradual increase in the use of the English language, Gaelic family names became more and more anglicized, especially in official records. In an attempt to make Gaelic family names more pronounceable or recordable, they were, most often, simplified.

By the mid 1500s, O’Nolan seems to have been the most common English rendering of Ó Nualláin but it should also be noted that, at the same time, a few descendants of two other septs, the Ó hUllacháins and the Ó hUltacháins, also started to use O’Nolan or something close to it as the English rendering of their family name. In essence, the original Gaelic form for “of the Holohans” (i.e. “ni hUllacháin”) and for “of the Ultachans” (i.e. “ni hUllacháin”) sounded very much like “Nualláin” to the untrained ear and hence those people were registered in English records as Nolans.

The ancestral lands of the Ó hUllacháins, a sept of Clan Colgan (O’Dempsey, O’Holohan, O’Hennessey and O’Madden), were in the old

Kingdom of Thomond which included Clare, Limerick, North Tipperary and part of Offaly; in later centuries, branches of this sept settled in neighbouring counties or were transplanted to remote parts of Ireland; although not related by blood to the Ó Nualláin sept, the Ó hUallacháins share a common history with them going back to the 2nd century when their ancestor, Cathair Mor, then High King of Ireland (120-123 AD), lost his life and kingship at the hands of Conn of the Hundred Battles, Eochaidh Fionn's brother; in the ensuing turmoil, Cathair Mor's descendants (the Ó hUallacháins, and other septs) and Eochaidh Fionn's descendants (the Ó Nualláins) joined forces and did battle for many years against Conn's son Art (High King: 166-196 AD) and also his grandson Cormac (High King: 227-267 AD). Today the most common rendering for the Ó hUallacháin family name is Holohan. Other forms include O'Holohan, Mulholland, Highland, Hylan, Hoolohan, Houlihan, Hooligan, Oulighan, Oulihan, Oulahen, Whoolahan and Whelton.

The ancestral lands of the Ó hUltacháins, a small sept, are believed to have been in County Fermanagh. Today the most common rendering for the Ó hUltacháin family name is Hultaghan.

Once the original Gaelic family names (Ó Nualláin, Ó hUallacháin and Ó hUltacháin) had been anglicized further variations came about as a result of social and political influences. For example, the Nowland spelling seems to have originated in the mid 1650s, in the aftermath of widespread confiscations, at a time when having land was a sign of status and social respectability. Similarly, Noland may have referred to the plight of a landless Nolan family banished to Connacht or America.

An example of social influence might be a particular family's desire to distance itself from a less desirable, less educated or infamous branch of the family, or again the desire to not appear to be Irish by dropping the "O" part of the name.

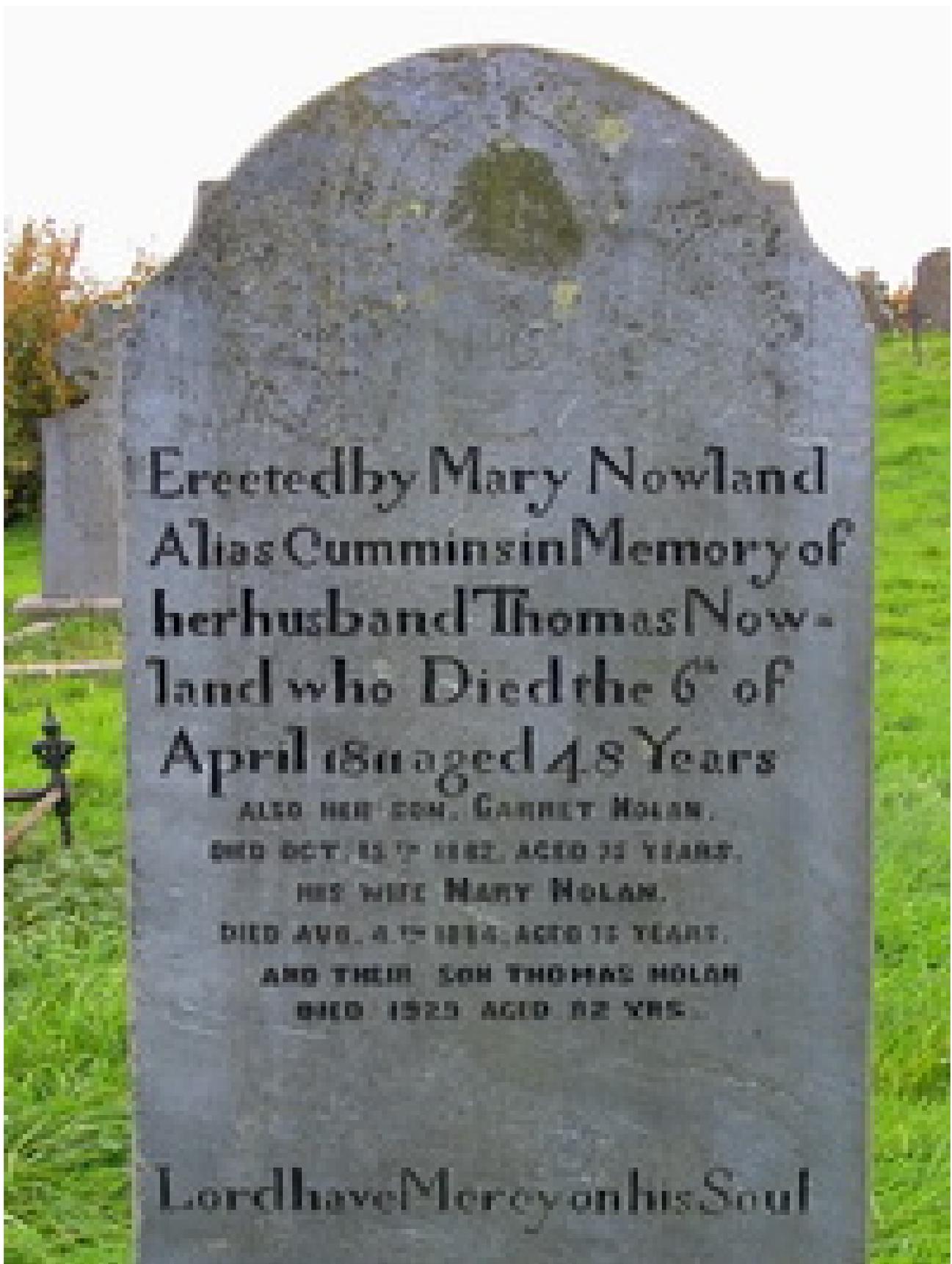
Another major influence on the evolution of the Nolan family name was emigration, starting perhaps as early as the 12th century and the

Crusades. Different cultures and pronunciations in the areas settled inevitably produced local variations in the Nolan name such as Nowlin, Nolen, Nolin, Knowlan, and perhaps even Nollent.

It is also true that, with emigration, the rate at which a particular family's name evolved also changed. For example, in the early 1800s, whereas family members in Ireland using the "Nowland" or "Nowlan" spellings quickly switched over to using the "Nolan" spelling as attested by the tombstone at left (in old Ballon cemetery, Co. Carlow), their emigrant relatives generally preferred to retain the original spelling.

This Irish phenomenon did not occur in lands settled by Nolan emigrants or at least not as quickly. This explains why, for example, Nowland families are still found in the state of Michigan (US) and Nowlan families in Australia and Atlantic Canada.

In Ireland today, "Nolan" is by far the most widely used spelling and it ranks 40th in popularity for all of Ireland. In County Carlow, it ranks 4th, in County Kildare 5th and in County Wicklow 6th .



Very few families remain who still use the Nowland or Nowlan spelling. There however

seems to be a trend developing towards re-adopting the original Gaelic spelling of the family name, for example O'Nualláin.

Given that Gaelic was common to many of the early founding peoples of the British Isles, it is quite conceivable that other Gaelic family names, outside of Ireland, ultimately were also rendered in English as Nolan or something close to it. This may be the explanation for the Knolling/Knollin family of Exeter and Devon, an area of England which shares a common history with Leinster going back some 2000 years. At the time, the Laigain tribes from Armorica in northwestern France, then known as the "Veneti", fled to southwestern England and southeastern Ireland to escape Roman domination.

Much history and many wanderings have occurred since the 2nd century when Nolan forebearers were mainly concentrated in Leinster and the origins of some modern-day branches of Nolans are still unclear. Hopefully further historical research and the application of modern-day research techniques will help to clarify the early

history of the the many branches of the modern-day Nolan clan. Some variants of the Nolan name (e.g. Nolin, Knollin, Nollent and Newland) may also have their origins in other countries.

Roger Nowlan, webmaster ()

and Nolan Clan member since 1997

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