Impact case study (REF3)

Institution: Queen's University Belfast	

Unit of Assessment: 26 Modern Languages and Linguistics

Title of case study: Know Your Place: Discovering the Origins of Place-Names in Northern Ireland

Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: 2000-20

Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:

Name(s):	Role(s) (e.g. job title):	Periods employed by submitting HEI:
Mícheál B. Ó Mainnín (Prof.)	Director of the Northern Ireland Place-Name Project [NIPNP] (2009-)	1987-1993; 1994-
Dónall P. Ó Baoill (Prof.)	Director, NIPNP (2003-09)	1999-2011
Nollaig Ó Muraíle (Dr)	Director, NIPNP (2000-03)	1996-2003
Kay Muhr (Dr)	Senior Research Fellow, NIPNP (2000-10)	1987-2010
Frances Kane (Dr)	Research Fellow, NIPNP (2017-)	2017-2021
Pat McKay (Dr)	Research Fellow, NIPNP (2000-2010)	1994-2010
Paul Tempan (Dr)	Research Fellow, NIPNP (2005-07; 2012-13)	2005-2007; 2012-2013
Ciarán Dunbar	Research Assistant (2005-07)	2005-2007

Period when the claimed impact occurred: October 2016 – December 2020

Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? No

1. Summary of the impact

Place-names preserve a record of past environments and constitute a significant strand of intangible cultural heritage. The Northern Ireland Place-Name Project has established itself as a centre of excellence in place-name studies and its database of over 30,000 names is freely available for consultation online. It provides expert advice to government bodies and voluntary organisations and has promoted understanding of a multilingual heritage in a divided society through its database, social media, and a weekly newspaper column. Impact arising from its research falls into two main categories: impact on government, and impact on public understanding.

2. Underpinning research

The place-names of Ireland span two millennia of history and derive from a variety of languages spoken there over the centuries: Irish (Gaelic) in the main, but also Norse, French, English, and Scots. The fact that most Gaelic names have not been preserved in the original Irish but were first recorded in anglicised form in the aftermath of English colonisation is a major research challenge. The Northern Ireland Place-Name Project (NIPNP) team, currently Ó Mainnín and Kane (but previously involving others listed above), have built an extensive database (**3.1**) of historical spellings of names which form the foundation for the interpretation process. Key historical sources, including census and taxation records, surveys and maps, have been combed to provide a detailed chronological profile for each name. This is now an unparalleled corpus and the only publicly available resource of its type in the UK. The resulting collection is invaluable also for historical linguists, historians and historical geographers as it systematically identifies names in earlier sources and locates them geographically.

NIPNP's methodology involves an interrogation of historical attestations of each individual name in the context of both historical circumstances and dialectal variation, as well as language contact between Gaelic, English, and Scots. The research conducted since 2000 accounts for approximately 90% of the NIPNP's body of 10,000 historical administrative names. It has been funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council, Foras na Gaeilge, and by government. The current phase of the project (October 2017-December 2020) has been supported primarily by the Northern Ireland Department of Finance (£212,035; Ó

Mainnín (PI)), but work on place-names and legislation (July 2016-June 2020) was funded under the AHRC Open World Research Initiative (£192,845; Ó Mainnín (CI)).

NIPNP, under PI Ó Baoill, also produced a database of Gaelic versions of road names in several council areas in Northern Ireland: the *Road Names Project* (**3.2**). Drawing in part on the Project's main database, the *Road Names Project* also involved research into historical personages from whom streets in urban areas were named.

Ó Mainnín has interrogated methodological issues of central relevance to place-names research and their significance. He has shown (**3.3**), for example, that anglicised spellings are not inherently unsystematic (a view previously taken by some historians, most notably Nicholls 2004) but that there are regular patterns in their transmission. This article also refutes the common misconception that the British Army was responsible for anglicising Gaelic-language names during the mapping of the island by the Ordnance Survey in the 1830s.

In addition, Ó Mainnín has conducted an extensive examination of specific place-names resulting in a series of articles tackling vexed methodological questions which relate to how to locate places of prominence in early medieval sources. These studies uniquely combine a detailed knowledge of Gaelic sources and language with an extensive analysis of Latin and later English-language sources which has enabled Ó Mainnín to map the names from Gaelic sources more precisely and uncover lost names in the landscape (**3.4-3.5**).

3. References to the research

1. M.B. Ó Mainnín et al. Placenamesni.org. Land & Property Services, Department of Finance, Northern Ireland Executive. (Published on a rolling basis since 2000)
2. C. Dunbar and Paul Tempan, 'Road Names' (2007-08). Funded by Foras na Gaeilge. https://www.ulsterplacename.org/street-names-project.
3. M.B. Ó Mainnín, *Annexing Irish Names to the English Tongue: Language Contact and the Anglicisation of Irish Place-Names* (NUI Maynooth: School of Celtic Studies, 2017), 38 pp. (Paul Walsh Memorial Lecture; vol. 2). ISBN-13: 978-1547040124.
4. M.B. Ó Mainnín, 'Locating Mag Itir Dā Glais: A Church Site in Machae', *Celtica* 26 (2010), pp. 111-121.
5. M.B. Ó Mainnín, '"Saig in Machai Fothúaid": On the Application and Extent of "the Macha" in North-West Armagh', *Ériu* 60 (2010), pp. 111-129.

4. Details of the impact

Impact arising from place-names research at Queen's falls into two main categories, namely, impact on government and public understanding. There has been a sustained demand for Irish-language name forms for mapping and signage which the Northern Ireland Placenames Project (NIPNP) has sought to address. The provision of Irish-language forms of names is seen as important for the official recognition of the value of the language as part of a collective heritage in a society divided along cultural, as well as religious and political, lines. The NIPNP's database (**3.1**), which is freely available online, is a unique resource for the history of the countryside, its people and its names. The *Road Names Project* database (**3.2**) supplements and draws on it to provide Irish-language versions of street names in council areas in Northern Ireland.

Impact on government
NIPNP facilitates demand from government agencies for bilingual names. Its database is a key resource; the Northern Ireland Minister for Finance, Máirtín Ó Muilleoir, described it in 2016 as an 'invaluable historical tool' (**5.1**) and his Department awarded the Project a three-year grant (2017-2020) to research the names of townlands (small territorial divisions). In 2020, the Minister for Finance, Conor Murphy, extended the grant with a view to establishing

NIPNP as the expert body to serve the increasing demand for accurate and authoritative bilingual road signage.

The *Road Names Project* database (**3.2**) allows councils and interested individuals to access Irish language forms of street and road names in various council areas. Together with NIPNP's main database, it is routinely consulted by district councils wishing to determine Gaelic forms of street names (Belfast City; Derry and Strabane; Mid-Ulster; Newry, Mourne and Down; Causeway Coast and Glens). Ó Mainnín has acted as consultant to Belfast City Council which has calculated that NIPNP facilitated over 70 requests to provide names for use in dual language street signs between 2014 and December 2020 (**5.2**). The Council's Irish Language Officer has further commented:

> The in-depth research carried out into local street and place names in Belfast adds significant value to this process [of providing dual language street signs] and provides quality assurance to Council officers. (**5.2**)

Impact on public understanding

In addition to offering a resource for government and councils, NIPNP's database has been widely used by the public interested in heritage, place-names and the Irish language. In May 2019, the Department of Finance began monitoring traffic for the *Placenamesni.org* website. Between then and December 2020, the website received 113,453 users and 594,385 page views. While 68% of users originated from the United Kingdom and the Irish Republic, 32% came from elsewhere including the United States (22% of overall visitors), Australia and Canada (**5.3**).

The degree of public engagement with the website is further evidenced by the fact that an optional survey of website users, which ran during 2020, received 603 responses (**5.4**). 85% of respondents described themselves as being either members of the public (64%), or in a category other than current or retired academic. The benefit of the website for higher education students is evidenced by the fact that nearly one in ten (9%) respondents said they were undergraduate or postgraduate students. A further 6% of respondents were school teachers.

While most (83%) were already interested in the subject before visiting the website, 17% said that they had had little or no interest before their visit. Yet, only 3 respondents described the website as being uninteresting, with the great majority describing it as either 'very interesting' (84%) or 'quite interesting' (15%) (**5.4**)

The survey indicated that the website had a significant impact on the knowledge and understanding of those who visited it:

- 81% of respondents said they had learned something new from the website
- 81% said that, following their visit, they now knew more about Northern Ireland place-names
- 51% said they had a better understanding of historical administrative structures and boundaries in Northern Ireland
- 45% said they now looked at Northern Ireland place-names in a different light (**5.4**)

Comments from respondents included the following:
> I have found the website to be really easy to use, and a mine of useful information… This has been fascinating for us as a family... It's an incredible link to our past, and has helped me see… place names in a new light. (Survey response 230)

> I am learning Irish and the place names have been really effective in helping me see Irish in everyday life as part of our culture and language. (Survey response 185)

Many said that they intended to learn more or to use what they had learned in some way. 70% of respondents said they would like to find out more about Northern Ireland place-names, while more than one in five (22%) said that they intended to use information gained from the website in their work. Impact on professional practice is illustrated by the following comments:

> I teach in Dublin and am from Wicklow, but the site is one of my favourites and one I recommend to students in teacher training via my part-time lecturing in Geography Education in [a higher education institution in Dublin]. I have learned a huge amount and hope this continues! (Survey response 51)

> This resource is invaluable to me as a heritage practitioner delivering a wide range of local history projects. There are few projects where placenames are not relevant and the origins and history of placenames so often add significant nuance to our understanding of ourselves. Keep up the great work! (Survey response 206) (**5.4**)

The survey also indicates a profound impact on people's sense of identity and belonging. Numerous respondents commended the cross-community aspect of the work and its contribution to 'shared cultural heritage' in the free comment sections. For many from a unionist background, the website has provided a neutral space in which to engage with heritage and language, 'giving Ulster people their history back' as one respondent observed. Another respondent, 'the child of a NI mixed marriage', stated that the site 'helped me embrace my family history and feel closer to my (Northern) Irish identity'. This sense of integration was also experienced by migrants; one observed that 'making sense of… names and history was difficult' after moving to Northern Ireland but that the website 'really helped me with my lack of cultural and historical knowledge…, [to] feel more integrated… '.

Impact on shared cultural heritage is also evidenced more widely. For example, the Turas project, hosted by the East Belfast Mission, aims to reconnect people from loyalist communities to Irish based on the premise that the language belongs to all and can be a mechanism for reconciliation. It provides workshops and talks (including a programme for schools) on a range of topics related to language and culture and they frequently feature place-names and the NIPNP database as a means of demonstrating a shared Gaelic heritage (**5.5**).

The impact of the research on public understanding is further evidenced by the extent of engagement with it via both mainstream and social media. Its posts focused on drawing attention to the variety of languages preserved in Irish place-names, common elements and their meaning, and connections between names in different places. By December 2020, NIPNP's Twitter account had 5,691 followers (**5.6**).

In June 2020, after his attention was drawn to the Project's Twitter account, the Irish Language Editor for the *Irish News* (daily print circulation 31,613) invited NIPNP to contribute a weekly column on placenames, drawing on the NIPNP's research. The column formed part of the newspaper's popular weekly 'Bluffer's Guide to Irish' (**5.7a**). Commenting on the success of the collaboration, the newspaper's Irish Language Editor stated:

> The ['Bluffer's Guide'] page itself is aimed at Irish learners and has received universally positive feedback from … ex-Republican prisoners and members of the loyal orders, as well as ordinary members of the public. …

> I used to write the place-name section myself but was never sure that I had got it right and so having it provided by the staff at NIPNP added the scholarship and authority that it might have lacked … The material I get from NIPNP is informative [and] erudite, but at the same time enjoyable to read and is a great addition to the page. (**5.7b**)

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

1. Department of Finance, Northern Ireland Executive, Press release 'Place-Name project is invaluable historical tool – Ó Muilleoir', 26 October 2016.
2. Testimonial, dated 20th January 2021, from Irish Language Officer, Belfast City Council.
3. Google Analytics, website traffic overview for *placenamesni.org*, 1st May 2019 – 31st December 2020.
4. Online survey by SurveyMonkey. Download of results and comments available. All percentages quoted are rounded up or down to the nearest whole number.
5. Testimonial from Irish Language Education Officer, Turas, East Belfast Mission, Belfast. Publications by Turas employing NIPNP material include: Gordon McCoy, *A Gaelic History of Belfast* (2019) and *A Gaelic Map of Belfast* (2020).
6. Twitter: @placenamesni. Screenshot available of followers on 28 December 2020.
7. a) 'Dinnseanchas', weekly column in Irish News; b) testimonial from Irish Language Editor, Irish News, who can corroborate the circulation figure.