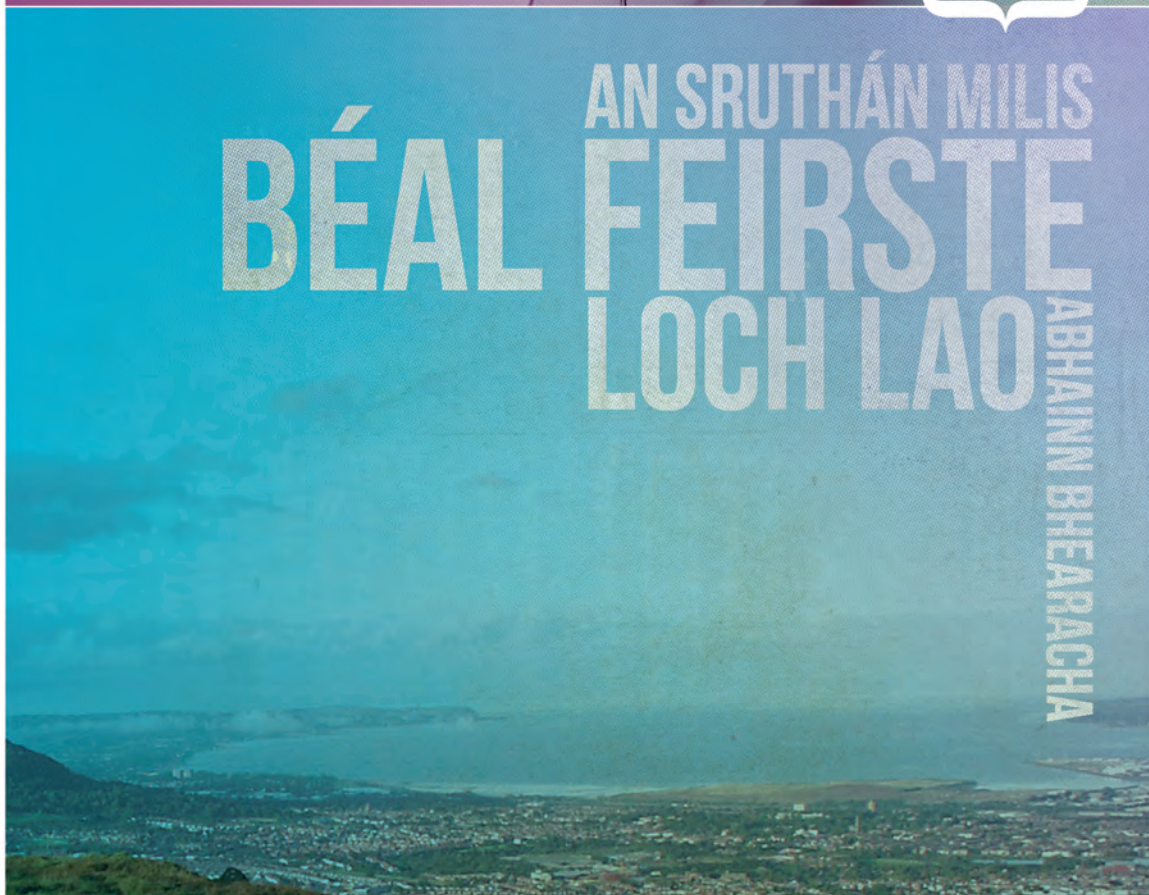# The Gaelic Placenames of Belfast

AN SRUTHÁN MILIS

BÉAL FEIRSTE

LOCH LAO

ABHAINN BHEARACHA

The Gaelic Placenames of Belfast

The Gaelic placenames of Belfast provide us with a direct link to the oldest strata of our history. They shed light on one and a half millennia of our city's past before the small village of Belfast was granted to Arthur Chichester in 1603. They speak to us of pagan traditions, the Christianity of the Dark Ages and medieval times, and of the region's early inhabitants, Gaels, Picts and Normans. Some placenames evoke the physical features of our landscape, its hills, rivers and loughs. Others identify places where oak, willow and holly once thrived, showing us where the land had been cleared, or where it was marshy, rocky or fertile.

The map of the Greek geographer Ptolemy, who lived in the second century AD, is one of the earliest sources of information on peoples and placenames in early Ireland. It shows the river *Logia*, or the Lagan, entering Belfast Lough.

The map also identifies the tribal name *Voluntii* in the area. Scholars agree that this is probably a mis-spelling of the word *Uluti,* an earlier form of the word *Ulaidh,* the ancient people from whom the province of Ulster was named. The *Ulaidh* were the subject of the sagas of Cú Chulainn and other heroes of the Ulster Cycle, the most significant body of mythological literature in western Europe.

Int én bec
The wee bird

Ro léic feit
has let out a whistle

Do rinn guip
from the point of a beak

glanbuidi
bright yellow

Fo-cheird faíd
it sends out a call

ós Loch Laíg
above Loch Laig

lon do chraíb
a blackbird from a branch

charnbuidi
yellow-heaped

The Blackbird at Belfast Lough, **9th Century**
Source: *An Leabhar Mór, The Great Book of Gaelic*

Belfast Lough | Loch Lao

Lagan | An Lagán

This ancient name *Logia* survives in the Irish name for Belfast Lough. *Loch Lao (Loch Lóeg* in the older form) meaning 'the lough of the calf'. The name may allude to a time when ancient peoples worshipped bovine deities. Both the Boyne and the Bush rivers are named from cattle and relate to river goddesses.

Some scholars have argued that, in spite of the similarity of the two names, there is no connection between *logia* and the river Lagan. The Irish word *lagán* means 'low-lying land in a hollow,' which accurately describes the marshy swamp around the lower reaches of the river. If this interpretation is correct, the river was named from the valley through which it flows, and not from its old pagan name.

An t-ádhbhar fá ttáinig bás Láoghaire Bhuadhaig

The Death of Lóegaire the Victorious

Aed slept with Mugain of the furzy hair, the wife of King Conchobar. Aed was one of Conchobar's poets. They were found out.

The poet was taken prisoner and he asked that his death might be by drowning. Conchobar agreed. Aed was brought to every lake in Ireland to be drowned; but he chanted a spell upon the water so that it ebbed away leaving not a drop. No river or lake in Ireland would drown him until they came to *Loch Lao* in front of Lóegaire's house. Aed could not work his spell upon the lough.

Lóegaire's steward came out. 'Alas, Lóegaire!' he cried, 'they could not find in all Ireland a place to drown the poet till they came here.' Lóegaire rose and took his sword in his hand. As he leapt from the house he struck the crown of his head against the lintel of the door, so that it knocked off the back part of his skull, and his brains were scattered over his cloak. He slew thirty of the drowners, and Aed escaped. Then Lóegaire died.

Source: Kuno Meyer, *Death-Tales of the Ulster Heroes*

Béal Feirste

Belfast

A small stream which fed the river Lagan created a sand-bank which provided a river-crossing at low tide. The Old Irish word *fertas* (modern Irish *fearsaid*), sand-bank, came to mean a ford across a river, and the Farset river took its name from the ford.

The exact meaning of *Béal Feirste* requires some explanation. The word *béal* means a mouth, and the name could be understood as 'the mouth of the Farset (river)'. However, *béal* is also common in names relating to fords, and it is generally agreed nowadays that *Béal Feirste* means 'the approach to the sand-bank ford'.

RIVERS

An Sruthán Milis

Stranmillis

The stretch of the Lagan at Stranmillis was another ford in bygone days. The sand-bank, or mud-bank in this case, was formed when the river current met the incoming tidal waters of Belfast Lough. Stranmillis was where the salt water reached its highest point and the river ceased to be tidal. Above that, in the distant past anyway, the water was fresh and drinkable. Hence the name *An Sruthán Milis* 'the sweet stream'.

Abhainn Bhearacha

Owenvarragh or Blackstaff River

Old maps of Belfast call the stream which meets the Lagan a short distance upstream from the Farset the 'Owenvarragh or Blackstaff River'.

The English name is a semi-translation of the Irish *Abhainn Bhearacha* 'the river of the stakes'. A 'staff' is a pole or length of wood, but the Irish word *bearacha*, the plural form of the word *'bior'*, shows that these staffs were pointed stakes. They were probably driven into the mud to support a bridge or causeway somewhere near the mouth of the river, which at one time stretched all the way from what is now the Victoria Centre to Joy Street. The stakes were made of oak, which turns black in water.
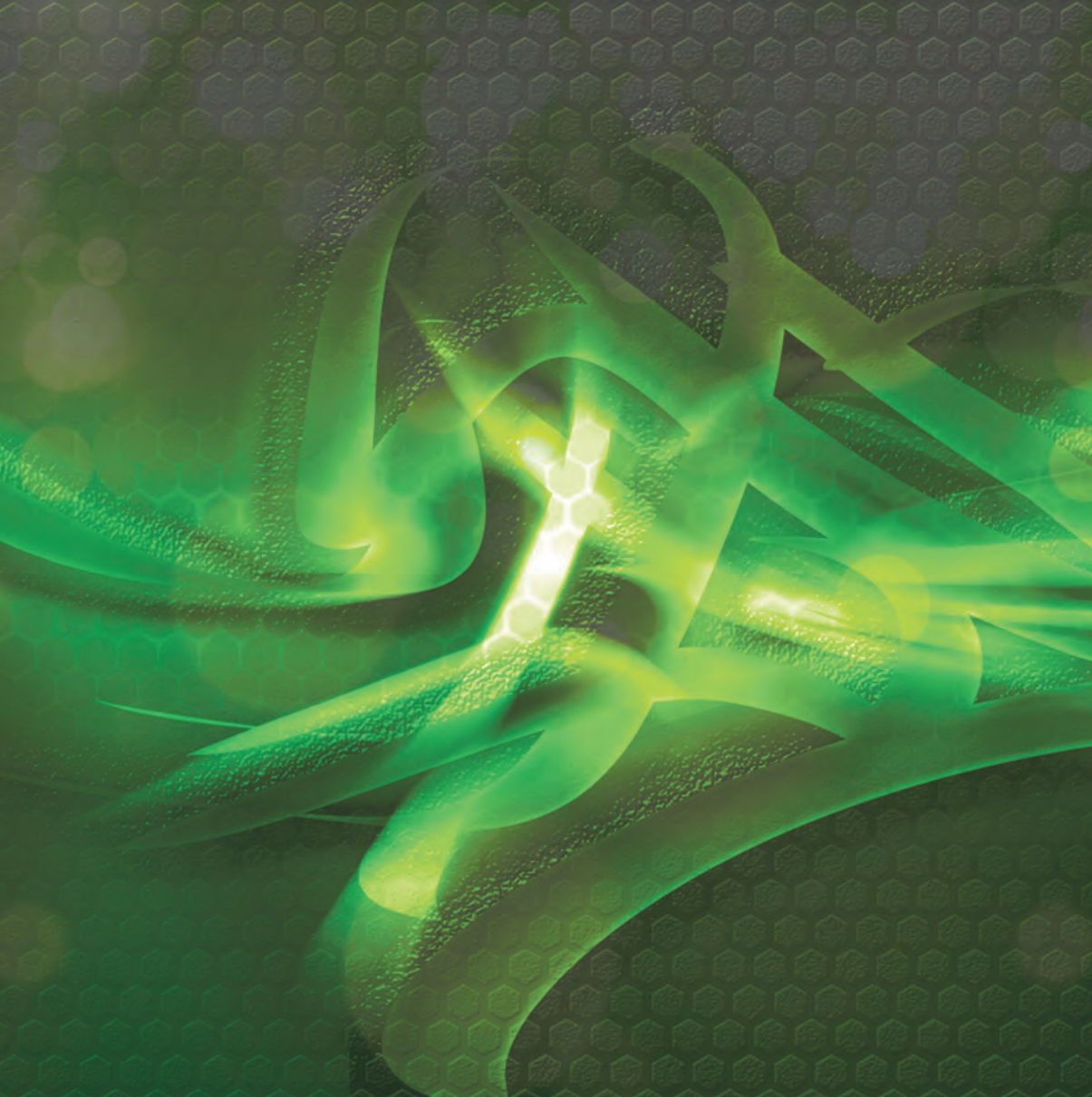
BAILTE FEARAINN

TOWNLANDS

Townlands are unique to Ireland, which has more than 60,000 of these traditional Gaelic land divisions. They predate the Norman invasion of the 12th century, and cover the entire island in an often invisible network of placenames. They have survived in popular memory, particularly in rural areas, but also because they were adopted as units of administration, and to identify land-grants, by the Normans and English. Some townlands have been forgotten, some survive only on property deeds, and others have given their names to entire estates, districts, electoral wards, or even towns and villages.

The Irish for townland is *baile fearainn.* The first element *baile* gives us 'bally' one of the most common elements in placenames today. Originally it seems to have meant a piece of land belonging to an individual, family or group, but gradually took on wider meanings; land-measure, homestead, home, abode, town, village, place. The second element, *fearann*, means 'land'.

TRIBES AND TERRITORIES

Annála Ríochta Éireann

Aois Críost, ré chéd seascat acúicc.
Cath Feimtri etir Ultu 7 Cruithne,
du in ro marbhadh Cathurach,
mac Laircine.

The earliest reference to Belfast is in the context of a territorial struggle

665 AD, the Battle of Farset between the Ulaidh and the Cruithin where Cathasach, son of Laircine, was slain.
(Annals of the Four Masters)

The *Ulaidh,* 'people of Ulster', had ruled most of Ulster from their power-base in Armagh until they were driven out in the 5th century, retreating to a much smaller territory in part of what is now County Down. It was from here that they began to attack the *Dál nAraidh,* a *Cruithin* (Pictish) confederation, whose territory, *Trian Congail* 'the third of Congal', which encompassed territory on both sides of the Lagan, corresponds more or less to Clandeboy. Congal was a Dál nAraidh king who was killed in battle in 637, and Cathasach was his grandson.

In 750 AD, Fiachna of the black bridges, king of the *Ulaidh,* built a bridge known as *Droichead na Feirsi* 'the bridge of the Farset', which may have crossed the Lagan. It is clear that the Ulaidh were continuing to expand into Cruithin land.

Cruithin Placenames

Taughmonagh | Tuath Monach
Taughmonagh, now the name of a housing estate, was once one of the townlands of Malone. The most likely explanation for the name is *Tuath Monach* 'the tribe of Monaigh', a Cruithin people driven from Leinster in the early Christian period. They settled mainly in what are now counties Fermanagh and Monaghan, in which their name has been preserved (Fermanagh '*Fear Manach*'; Monaghan '*Muineachán*'), but some of them settled in Down and Antrim.

Breda | An Bhréadach
The *Bréadach* are described as one of the four chief tribes of the Monaigh. A Gaelic poem in the 11th century *Book of Rights* records that their annual tribute to the Ulaidh was a hundred cows, sheep, cloaks and pigs, showing that by then they were a subject people.

Newtownbreda is sited in the townland of Breda, and Knockbreda is a comparatively new placename, arising when the parish of Breda was combined with that of Knock in 1658.

Ulaidh Placenames

Cave Hill | Ben Madigan | Beann Mhadagáin
Placenames show that the Ulaidh were firmly established on the Antrim side of the Lagan by the 9th century. The older name for Cave Hill was *Benn Matudáin* which give us the modern *Beann Mhadagáin*, Benmadigan. Mac Art's Fort was also know as Dún Matudáin. It is likely that the hill and fort were named after Matudán, an Ulaidh king who died in 857 AD. He was the son of the *Muireadhach* who gave his name to Dunmurray, *Dún Muireadhaigh*, modern Irish *Dún Muirígh*, 'the fort of Muireadhach'.
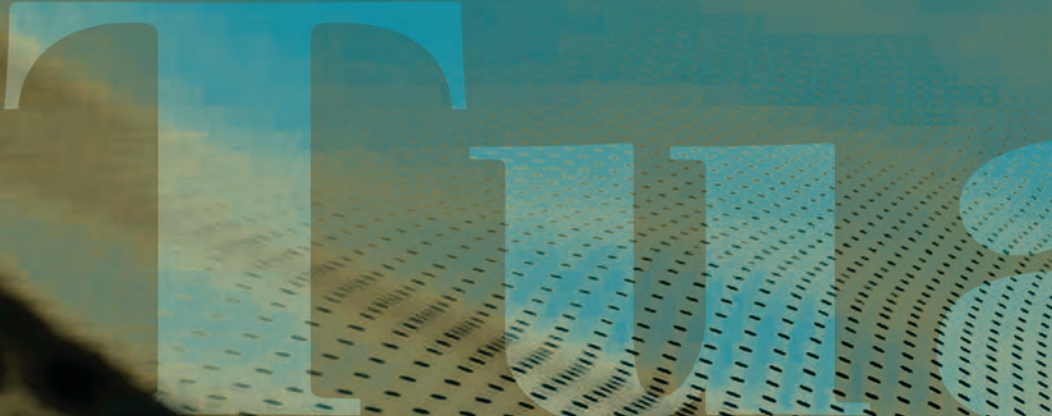
Clann Gormlaithe 'the descendants of Gormlaith' also traced their pedigree to Muireadhach. Gormlaith is normally a female name which means 'splendid sovereignty'. The word *clann* (family, children), was later corrupted to *gleann* ('valley) giving us the modern Glengormley.

The name Cave Hill is itself a translation of a Gaelic name *Beann Uamha* 'the cliff of the cave', at which a battle was recorded in 1468.

The Tuaths of Malone and Falls

The word *tuath* originally meant a small population group (as in *Tuath Monach*), then a petty kingdom, and later came to mean a territory.

Falls | Tuath na bhFál

Tuath na bhFál means 'the territory of the enclosures'. The name survives in the name Falls Road, although, confusingly, the Falls Road itself does not enter *Tuath na bhFál* until it reaches Beechmount.

Malone | Tuath Mhaigh Lón

Maigh means 'a plain'. The *lón* element may refer to a personal name *Luan* (from which the surname O'Loan derives). It may also mean 'a haunch or flank' referring to the distinct physical feature now known as the Malone Ridge, or may be a variant of the Scottish Gaelic word *lón* 'meadow'.

Two other tuaths appear in the records, 'Tuath Cinament' (the northern part of the old parish of Shankill) and 'Tuath Derryvolgie'. Cinament appears to be a Norman word also meaning 'territory'.

ECCLESIASTICAL NAMES

Shankill | Seanchill

This large medieval parish extended from Carnmoney almost as far as Dunmurray, and is bounded by the Belfast Mountains on one side and the Lagan on the other. It includes the tuaths of the Falls, Malone, Cinament and Derryvolgie, 29 townlands in all. The name *seanchill* means 'old church'. There may have been a church or monastery on the site of the old cemetery on the Shankill Road as far back as the 8th or 9th century. No records of the church exist until 1306, when it is identified as *Ecclesia Alba* – white church, which may have meant that it was a stone, rather than a wooden building. A later record indicates that it was dedicated to St Patrick. The other main church in the parish was the Chapel of the Ford, on the site of St George's Church in High Street.

Friars' Bush | Baile na mBráthar

This is a semi-translation of the name *Baile na mBráthar* 'the townland of the Friars', one of the townlands incorporated into Malone. In 1603 it was recorded as 'Ballwallynymrahare'. A church or small monastery may have existed at this site, now an old graveyard on the Stranmillis Road beside the Ulster Museum. A church, *Cill Pádraig,* Kilpatrick 'the church of St Patrick' was recorded in the area in 1605.

Knock | An Cnoc

Belfast did not extend to the Co Down side of the Lagan until 1853, when it took in part of the parish of Knockbreda, formed in the 17th century from the parishes of Knock and Breda. Knock derives from the word *cnoc,* which means 'a hill', a fairly common placename. However, the traditional name for the parish of Knock was *Cnoc Cholm Chille* 'the hill of St Colmcille' (often referred to in English as Columba). It was named after the famous exile credited with the conversion of much of Scotland.

In 1644 Father Edmund McCana described the Parish church as "a church dedicated to St Columba, which Niall O'Neill, Chief of Tren-Congall, endowed with valuable lands and many privileges." Niall Mór Ó Néill was chief of Clandeboy circa 1500. The site of the original church was in Knock Burial Ground in Knockmount Park.

NORMAN-INSPIRED NAMES

English	Irish	Description
Gallwally	Gallbhaile	'The townland of the foreigners'. The word 'gall' was used in turn for Vikings, Normans and English. In this case it probably refers to the Normans.
Skegoneil	Sceitheog an Iarla	'the whitethorn bush of the Earl'. Granted to Chichester as Balliskeigheog-Inerla (with an intrusive 'bally'). It probably refers to the Norman Earl of Ulster, William de Burgo, who was killed by his own followers in 1333.

English	Irish	Description
Ballymacarret	Baile Mhic Gearóid	'the townland of the son of Gerard'. This is the most likely derivation of this name, but *Baile Mhic Airt* 'the townland of the son of Art' has also been suggested. The Christian name Gerard was introduced by the Normans. It is possible that the name comes from a rare Gaelic surname *Mac Gearóid*, 'McGarrett'.
Knocknagoney	Cnoc na gCoiníní	'The hill of the rabbits'. Rabbits were introduced to Ireland by the Normans, who bred them in warrens for meat.

THE O'NEILLS OF CLANDEBOY

A branch of the O'Neills of Tyrone took advantage of the power vacuum left by the death of the Norman Earl of Ulster in 1333 to develop a new power base in east Ulster. Their territory came to be called Clandeboy, *Clann Aodha Bhuidhe*, the descendants of *Aodh Buí* 'Hugh the sallow-skinned'. The territory was divided at the end of the 16th century between Upper (southern) and Lower (northern) Clandeboy.

These territories are referred to by Father Edmund McCana in 1644. The original work was in Latin:

"We now pass into Lower Clandeboy. The 'Lake of the Calf', or Loch Lao in Irish, flows between, and forms the border of both Clandeboys. Its head, when the tide is out, may be crossed on foot by a ford which is called Beall-ferst. Beside it formerly stood the castle of the lords of these territories, in the navel, as it were, and central point, of the two regions. ... From the ford of which I have just spoken it takes the name of Beall-ferst, where the river empties itself which is called the River of the Laggan, or of the valley, yielding a plentiful supply of salmon ..."

Castlereagh | An Caisleán Riabhach

An Caisleán Riabhach 'the grey castle', about four miles from the centre of Belfast, was the seat of the O'Neills of Upper (southern) Clandeboy, In 1616 the castle was sold to Sir Moses Hill by Sir Conn O'Neill, who gave his name to the Connswater river. The Castlereagh Hills were named after the castle.

Ballyaghagan | Baile Uí Eachagáin
This townland runs from Cave Hill to St Patrick's Barnageeha on the Antrim Road. It is probably named after the Ó hEachagáin family, who until the 17th century were bardic poets to the O'Neills of Clandeboy. Some of their poems are preserved in the 17th century *Leabhar Cloinne Aodha Buidhe* ' The Book of Clandeboy'. The modern form of the name is Ó hEacháin, 'Haughian', 'Haughen', and sometimes O'Hagan in English. The treasure of the 18th century rapparee Ness O'Haughian is said to be hidden on Cave Hill.

NAMING PHYSICAL FEATURES

English	Irish	Description
Ballyhackamore	Baile an Chacamair	'townland of the slobland or mudflat'. This townland formerly bordered on Belfast Lough but due to land reclamation is now inland.
Ballynafeigh	Baile na Faiche	The townland name is spelt Ballynafoy, but both mean 'the townland of the green or lawn'.
Ballysillan	Baile na Sailéan	'the townland of the willow groves' (sallys).
Cregagh	An Chreagaigh	'the rocky place'. There is a Rocky Road within this townland.
Cromac	Cromóg	Once known as Ballicromoge, this is one of the lost townlands of Malone, but has survived in the name of Cromac Street in the Markets area. It refers to, and is largely contained in, a bend in the Lagan. Hence the word *Cromóg* 'a bend'.

English	Irish	Description
Divis	An Dubhais	'the black ridge'. This refers to the basalt rocks which are exposed on the slopes of Divis
Cullingtree	Cuileanntraigh	'a place abounding in holly'. This was once a townland in the Tuath of Malone and survived as a street name in the Pound Loney area of the Lower Falls.
Finaghy	An Fionnachadh	'the white field'. In the townland of Ballyfinaghy, *Baile an Fhionnachaidh*, 'the townland of the white field'.
Legoniel	Lag an Aoil	'the hollow of the limestone'. This refers to an outcrop of limestone below the basalt cap of the Belfast mountains.

PLACES NAMED AFTER PEOPLE

English	Irish	Description
Ardoyne	Ard Eoghain	'The height of Eoghan' (usually anglicised Owen or Eugene). This is recorded as a townland in 1603, and as a half-townland in 1605. It comprises part of the townland of Edenderry, *Éadan an Doire* 'the hill-brow of the oak wood'.
Ballygomartin	Baile Gharraí Mháirtín	'The townland of Martin's enclosed field or garden'.
Ballymurphy	Baile Uí Mhurchú	'Murphy's townland'.

CHALLENGES OF INTERPRETATION

Ballydownfine

This placename may have a number of interpretations: it could mean either *Baile Dhún Fionn* 'the townland of the white fort' or *Baile Dhún Finn* 'the townland of the fort of Fionn (Mac Cumhaill) or *Baile Dhún Fine* 'the townland of the fort of the tribe'.

Braniel

The meaning of this placename is also uncertain but most interpretations appear to be linked to a particular physical feature: there is a conspicuous hill in the middle of the townland. They include: *Bruach Uí Néill* 'O'Neill's slope or steep bank'; *Braighidh Uí Néill* 'the high place of O'Neill or the steep slope of O'Neill'; *Brágha Uí Néill* 'O'Neill's pass'; and *Broinngheal* 'bright fronted (place)'.

MORE RIVERS

Colin River, Colin Glen, Colin Mountain,
Popularly believed to be derived from *cuileann* 'holly'. It has been argued that the names derive from the mountain, *An Colann,* a word that appears to mean 'high ground'. In penal times the name was used as a code-word to direct parishioners to one of two mass-rocks in the area, in Colin Glen and on Bohill. One is similar to the east Ulster pronunciation of *cailín,* a girl, the other to *buachaill,* a boy.

Clowney Water
In the townland of Ballymurphy in former times was the townland of Ballycloney, the second element of which derives from *cluain,* a meadow. The Forth River runs through this townland and is known locally as the Clowney Water (from which Clowney Street is named) before it crosses the Falls Road.

Owen O'Cork
The present Owen O'Cork Mill on the Beersbridge Road was built in 1873, replacing a water-driven corn mill from the mid-17th century. This is not the name of a person, but is based on the similar-sounding *Abhainn an Choirce* 'the river of the oats', indicating that an earlier corn-mill stood there when the area was still Irish-speaking.

OTHER BELFAST TOWNLANDS

English	Irish	Meaning
Altigarron	*Alt na nGearrán*	'the hillock of the horses'
Ballybought	*An Baile Bocht*	'the poor townland'
Ballycarn	*Baile Carn*	'the townland of the carns'
Ballycloghan	*Baile Clochán*	'the townland of the old stone buildings'
Ballycullo	*Baile Cúile Eo*	'the townland of the yews' or *Baile Mhic Cú Uladh* 'the townland of McCullough' (son of the hound of Ulster)'
Ballygammon	*Baile Uí gComáin*	'the townland of the Ó Comáin (Cummings / Hurley) family'
Ballygoland	*Baile an Ghabhláin*	'the townland of the fork (a physical feature)'
Ballymaconaghy	*Baile Mhic Dhonnchaidh*	'McDonaghy's (McConaghy's) townland'
Ballymagarry	*Baile an Gharraí*	'the townland of the enclosed field'
Ballymaghan	*Baile Uí Mhiacháin*	'Meehan's townland'
Ballymiscaw	*Baile Lios na Scáth*	'the townland of the fort of the spectres'
Ballymisert	*Baile Machaire*	'the townland of the plain'
Ballymoney	*Baile Maighe Muine*	'the townland of the plain of the thicket'
Ballyrushboy	*Baile Rois Bhuí*	'the townland of the yellow woods'
Ballyutoag	*Baile Uchtóg*	'the townland of the slopes'
Ballyvaston	*Baile an Bhastúnaigh*	'Weston's townland'
Ballywonard	*Baile Mhuine Ard*	'the townland of the high thicket'
Carnamuck	*Ceathrú na Muc*	'the quarterland of the pigs'
Collinward	*Gorán an Bhaird*	'the bard's grove'
Dromnagrough	*Droim na gCruach*	'the ridge of the stacks'
Gilnahirk	*Éadan Ghiolla na hAdhairce*	'the hill-face of the horn-bearer'
Killeen	*An Coillín*	'the little wood'
Lisnasharragh	*Lios na Searrach*	'the fort of the foals'
Multihogy	*Muilte Seoighe*	'Joy's (or Joyce's) mills'
Tullycarnet	*Tulaigh Charnáin*	'hillock of the little cairn'

AN SRUTHÁN MILIS

BÉAL FEIRSTE

LOCH LAO

ABHAINN BHEARACHA