

The Origins of The Surname Neylon

The O'Neills of Thomond

Irish genealogy has several surname enigmas. One that has caused a lot of confusion is the surname "**O'Neill of Thomond**", or **Clare**, as it is known. The earliest known reference to their origins can be found in John Ferrars History of Limerick printed 1787. Unfortunately it is totally erroneous. He has, in this book, on page 365, two short biographies of Nihells. One was James Nihell b.1702 d.1759 and Laurence b. 1727. Laurence was still alive when the book was printed and the author seems to have known him personally. Laurence is named as catholic Bishop of Kilfenora and Kilmacduagh.

Ferrar states the following:

"This name (Nihell) was originally O'Neil. After the defeat of the O'Neil forces at Kingsale in 1601 (Kinsale) a party of this sept retreating to the north took possession of the district near Killaloe where they remained for several years being afterwards dispossessed they **settled in the west of Clare** and Limerick where they enjoyed considerable property and formed alliances with the respectable families. The slight change from O'Neil to Nihell was occasioned by the circumstances of the time unfavourable in the south to that name and partly by the different provincial accent."

This item in the History of Limerick was later picked up by O Hart in his book called Irish Pedigrees and then continued to be accepted to the present day. This family of Nihells has some land in Co. Clare c.1703 but it was sold to the Westropp family thereafter. The land is called in the sources "Fortanebeg, Arrud/Arried and Lismeehan". I was of the impression that this family were Protestant. Their genealogy is found in GO.MS 160 pp.83-5 and in no way does it ever allude to any 16th or 17th century O'Neill of Ulster connection to this family or Co. Clare. Their genealogy stems from David Nihell who married Eleonora Hacket and he died in 1685. He was the son of Edward, son of David, son of John, son of James and then the genealogy refers to Johannes Nihell and Niall (cognominatus Nihell vixit Dublini A.D 1166). This seems to imply that the name was vixed, or created, in Dublin in 1166. The Genealogy continues back in time to Lochlainn, grandson of Domhnall Ua Néill (a quo O'Neill of Ulster), King of Ireland, who died in A.D 980.

So dismissing all this as useless for evidence about those named O'Neill in Co. Clare we look further into the records. The only worthwhile records are the FIANTS, which cover most of the 16th century and the early part of the 17th century. There are a great many references to the O'Niallains of Clare (with their name anglicised) and the only references that could be referring to O'Neill in the Co. Clare area are the following:

John O'Nyhill 1585
Rob. O'Nihill 1601
Loughlin O'Nihill of Mullick 1592-3
John O'Nele of Glanogerrie, Co. Limerick 1598
Mahone O'Nihill, granted Tolls of the ferry at Killaloe. 1661.

It is obvious that four of the five references are referring to the local name of O'Neighill and only one could be O'Neill (but I suspect this name is also an anglicisation of O'Neighill).

The 1998 phone book covering Co. Clare and surrounds shows two pages of O'Neills. There are about 20 by the name Nihill and practically none called **O'Neylon** (or its various anglicisations). The next best record that covers all the names in Co. Clare (rather than just Protestant ones) is the Index to the Tithe Applotments and Griffiths Valuation (which you could say mostly covers 1820s-1850s). The surnames in this index which resemble the surnames we are interested in are :

Neal, Neale, Nehill, Neil, Neilan, Neill, **Nelan, Neyland, Neylan, Neylon**, Nihill, Nihile, Nilan, O'Neal, O'Neil, O'Neill, O'Neille, O'Nelly, etc, etc.

From this list you can see the three surnames, or is two (?), gradually getting confused. Six of these anglicisations seem to be O'Neighill, six are definitely **O' Niallain** and six could be O'Néill. The Freeholders Lists for the barony of Ibrickan, Co. Clare for example, c. 1800-1820, has mostly O'Neill surnames (John, James, Garret, Hugh, Michael, George and Thomas) while the name Nihell only has one person by that name (Patrick) and four persons by the name of **Neylan** (Daniel, Patrick, Mathew and Martin).

As can be seen the surname O'Neill is beginning to increase and the other similar names decrease. We can only presume that O'Neighill and O'Niallain were being anglicised into O'Neill overtime because they were so numerous during the 16th/17th centuries.

While it is certainly possible that O'Neills from somewhere else came into Co. Clare between 1650 and 1800 we would have to explain

why the O' Neighills and the O'Niallains have practically disappeared even though they were the most numerous in the county in the 16th century and probably the 17th century also. **The only sensible conclusion is that the name O'Neighill / Nihell / O'Nyhill, etc, and the name O'Niallain / O'Neylon / Nilan / O'Nealane,etc, gradually became corrupted into O'Neill and O'Neill.** It seems obvious that most O'Neills in Co. Clare got this name O'Neill by way of anglicisation. It is interesting to note that in the Book of Distribution and Forfeitures c.1641 Kilfenora Parish had a John, William (son of Daniel), Edward, Michael and another Michael all called **Neylan**. The only other possible early reference to O'Neill is O'Neall in Penders Census of Ireland 1659. But once again it seems to be O'Neighill because there is a much greater number called O'Nihill and O'Nealane (only surnames referred to).

But O'Neills of Uíbh Eoghain Fhinn (south Co. Tipperary and Co. Kilkenny), O'Neills of Magh dá chonn (Co. Carlow, Co. Wexford and Co. Wicklow) and O'Neills of Ulster got everywhere and there is reason to believe that some O'Neills of Tipperary did end up in Co. Clare. Hugh O'Neill of Ballyneale, Co. Tipperary, was transported into Connaught in 1653 and he is supposed to have travelled with a large caravan of 194 persons, 62 bu. corn, 177 garrons, 52 cows, 7 yearlings, 136 sheep, 10 goats and 23 swine. Hugh O'Neill was heading for Co. Galway and the Barony of "Leitrom" where he had been granted, or was forced onto, 514 acres. The story goes that his son, known as Feidhlim fionn or Felix, caused great problems for Cromwellians and he made a name for himself fighting them from within Co. Clare. In the known history of the O'Neill family of Cratloe, Co. Clare, there is a story about O'Neills of Ulster coming down to the Clare and Limerick area c.1690s. While this cannot be correct for many reasons it may be that O'Neills of Cratloe and other O'Neills in this area of Co. Clare (9 miles from Limerick City) are descended from some of that large group of 194 people (names unknown) who were transported with Hugh O'Neill from Tipperary to Co. Galway. This area called Ballyneill/Ballyneale in Co. Tipperary had been the home of the O'Neills of Uíbh Eoghain Fhinn since the 12th century when an Ulster O'Neill called Conn, son of the King of Cineál Eoghain in Ulster, was granted land there by O'Brien of Thomond in A.D. 1150.

The large group that travelled with Hugh O'Neill may have stopped off on the way as this group would almost certainly pass into Co. Clare or disperse into Co. Clare if they had no interest in travelling further. The only problem is that Hugh O'Neill and Felix, his son, never stayed in Co. Galway and eventually made their way home again. The O'Neills of Clare, if there is an O'Neill connection, could only be associated with those unnamed and unknown O'Neills that may have come that way with Hugh O'Neill c.1653-58.

This it seems to me is the answer to the riddle of the O'Neills of Clare or Thomond. They are a mixture of O'Neills of Tipperary transported (probably ?), O'Neighills who became O'Neill and O'Niallains who became O'Neylon/O'Neill and quite possibly other O'Neills who emigrated there from outside Co. Clare (origins as yet unknown).

People with the surname O'Neill searching for their roots in Co. Clare should always keep in mind the genealogy and history of the O'Neighills and O'Niallains as well as investigating the possibility of an O'Neill connection. And they should be very aware, unless they want to go astray, of the history of anglicisations of surnames and how various people, both foreign and domestic, forced illiterate people to accept variations of their surnames. These surnames varied so much from the original that care should be taken not to jump to conclusions as the names became to resemble other well known surnames. There was also the problem of rural people shortening surnames and knowing each other by nicknames which also alters surnames.

This short article is certainly not the last word on the O'Neill surname history in Co. Clare and it is possible at some stage more evidence will be discovered but for now the "O'Neill" name in Co. Clare has to be treated carefully for genealogical reasons and nobody should assume connections to O'Neills of Ulster, Tipperary or Carlow, without first making sure the name cannot be traced back to O'Neighill or O'Niallain.

ADDITIONAL NOTES

Voters Lists for Co. Clare dating from 1813 to 1824.

National Library of Ireland call number ILB 324.

These lists cover all the baronies in Co. Clare and should be checked by those looking for ancestors who emigrated from this county.

The O'NEÍLL, or those with a similar name, like the O'NEIGHILL or O'NIALLAIN, are fairly numerous in the Barony of Bunratty in the above manuscript. They seem to have similar anglicisations and just because someone is called O'Neill does not mean that they are actually O'Neills unless proven. Those dating between 1813 and 1819 who do not have the O attached to their surname follow:

Patrick Neille, Denis Nilon, John Neile, **John Neylan**, James Neal, Edmond Nihill, Mathew Nihill, Hugh Nihill, Martin Nihill, Thoms Nihill, Patrick Nihill, John Naill, Mathew Nail, John Nihill, **James Neilon**, John Nihill, **John Nealon**, John Neille and Patrick Neilon.

Those with the O attached to their names: Thomas, Michael, Timothy and Patrick O'Neill of Calluragh east: dated 3rd Sept. 1817
John and Owen O'Neill of Cranaher with land in Ballynacraggy
Michael O'Neill at Knocanoura

James Christopher Neylon (1911-1973) and Carla Wilhelmina Melander (1910-1994)

Thomas O'Neill of Gortanoul
Thomas O'Neill of Cappaghfian
Owen O'Neill of Attycole
Michael O'Neill of Craganeamona
Thomas O'Neill and James O'Neil of Calluragh east dated 22nd Oct. 1819.
Thomas and John O'Neill of Cappagfin dated 22nd Oct. 1819.
Daniel, Roger and John O'Neill of Calluragh east dated 12th Oct. 1818.
Michael O'Neill of Capanalaught
Michael O'Neill of Caheen.
Robert O'Neill of Cratloe and Knockbrack :dated 15th Oct. 1817.
John O'Neill junior of Cratloe :dated 12th July 1819.
Patrick, Simon, John and another John, all O'Neills,of Landire.
Simon O'Neill of Knocknaguoge.
James O'Neill of Ennis and Castletown : dated 22nd Jan. 1817. Lives (i.e next in line) James and Francis O'Neill. Landlord :
F.McNamara..
James O'Neill of Ballintlea. Landlord Neptune Blood. LIFE: MICHAEL McMAHON SENIOR. Dated. 9th Feb. 1813. Possible
ancestors of Michael O'Neill of Australia. This person has gone from the area by 1824.

There is a seperate list for 1824 for the Barony of Bunratty. Various months. Patrick Neill of Moothane

Denis **Neylon** of Knocknascabola
James Neal of Newmarket
Thomas Neal of Ballynacraggy.
Mathew Nihill of Rosslevin.
Thomas Nihill of Knockanicaragh
Patrick Neale of Brickhill
Hugh Nihill of Creggane
Patrick, Thomas , Mathew and Martin Nihill of Crogane.

Those with the O attached to their surname: Patrick O'Neal of Newmarket

Owen and Edward O'Neal of Ballinacraggy
Denis and Patrick O'Neil of Rathfoland
Michael O'Neil of Ballinacraggy.
Robert and John O'Neal of Knockbrack
Thomas and John O'Neill of Cappafean
Timothy , John D., John senior and John junior O'Neil / O'Neill / O'Neal of Callura / Calluragh east.
James O'Neil of Ennis and Castletown. Lives : James and Francis O'Neil : dated 14th July 1824.
Timothy, Daniel, Peter and James O'Neal of Scalpnagown. LIFE : James O'Neal : dated 17th Sept. 1824. Another possible ancestor of
Michael O'Neill of Australia .

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Edited and reformatted, James Christopher Neylon, June, 2002