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O Meagher, Meagher and Maher — and their dispersal in Tipperary

By William J. Hayes

The good relationship which the O Meaghers, the *Ui Meachair*, established and maintained with the Earls of Ormond and other major Butler houses contributed to their ability to retain and control much of their ancestral *tuath* of *Ui Cairin* in the north-east of Tipperary right up to the Cromwellian period. *Ui Cairin*, which emerged as the barony of Ikerrin in the Anglo-Norman period, was a division of the ancient kingdom of Éile, which stretched over southern Offaly and most of north Tipperary, and which was ruled over by the O Carrolls, the traditional overlords of the O Meaghers.

The Civil Survey of 1654, which identifies land proprietorship as it prevailed in 1640, reveals that the O Meaghers were at that date still in possession of approximately 50 per cent of their ancient hearthlands, stretching from the southern slopes of the Devil's Bit to the eastern frontiers of Tipperary. Most of the remainder of Ikerrin was then owned by the Countess of Ormond, Butler Viscount Ikerrin, and the Butlers of Ballinakill.¹

The Civil Survey also records that in some of the parts of Ikerrin which they owned the O Meaghers continued to practise the ancestral Gaelic form of land tenure, that is, holding land in common without partition. In the former parish of Killea in the southern part of Ikerrin, for instance, no less than fourteen O Meaghers shared in the ownership of the whole parish, with the exception of the townland of Killmoccuddy, the proprietor of which was Colly McSweeney. These fourteen O Meaghers are described in the Survey as "being all descended out of the house of O Meagher whose title they clayme by fee from their ancestors."²

Clonakilly — Principal Stronghold

One of the fourteen was John O Meagher, who occupied the tower house of Clonakenny, the principal O Meagher stronghold in Ikerrin. Besides his share of the lands in Killea, he individually owned some 3,500 acres, mainly in the former parish of Bourney. He also owned the lands and tower house of Rathnaveoge, and held the lands of Knockballymeagher "moitively" with the Earl of Ormond.³ He was one of the largest Gaelic landholders in Tipperary.

Only two O Meagher landholders in Co. Tipperary outside of Ikerrin are recorded in the Civil Survey. They were William Meagher of Higginstown in the former parish of Peppardstown,⁴ now in Fethard parish, and Teig Meagher of Ballindrummeen in Clonoulty parish.⁵

The O Meagher relationship with Ikerrin was to change profoundly through the Cromwellian settlement. John O Meagher lost his Clonakenny stronghold and all its lands, as did the other O Meagher landholders their bastions and hearthlands in Bawnmadrum, Boolabawn, Cloneen (or Clonan), and Killea.

The only O Meagher landholders who appear to have escaped the Cromwellian confiscations were Anthony Meagher of Park in Killea and Conor O Meagher of Burney. These are the only O Meagher names that appear as *titulados* or persons of standing in the entire county of Tipperary in Petty's Census of 1659.⁶



Petty's Census, regarded by historians as a 1660 Poll Tax, enumerates all adults over the age of 15. It provides precious insights into the social situation that prevailed in the country in the immediate aftermath of the Cromwellian settlement. The Census shows that while there were no landholding O Meaghers left in Ikerrin in 1660 (with the possible exception of the two mentioned above), there were 169 adults of the name still living in the barony.⁷

The O Meaghers had finally yielded their landowning status to a new elite of planted stock. However, beneath the landowning layer of the old society, the O Meagher clan not only substantially survived in its old *tuath*, but remained by far the most common surname in Ikerrin, which at that period had a population of something between 800 and 1,000 adults.

The dispersal of the population which the Cromwellian settlement caused affected the landowning Gaelic and Anglo-Irish catholic stock, while the middle and lower levels of the old society survived and endured in their old localities, maintaining a continuity which is still ongoing. This is very well exemplified in Ikerrin. The O Meagher landholders of 1640 were dispossessed, but the clan remained strong in its old *tuath*.

Forms of the Surname

The Civil Survey of 1659, embarked on with a view to the Cromwellian confiscations and settlement, had among its aims the standardising into current English not only of the Irish townland names but the family names as well. The name Meagher is rendered as Magher in the Survey, which was obviously the closest phonetic rendering of the Gaelic name which the particular scribe came up with. The 1659 Census, however, records the name as Meagher, without the O prefix.⁸

MacLysaght (in his *Irish Families, their Names, Arms and Origins*) emphasises that the name is originally a genuine Gaelic O name. This is borne out by the Papal registers, the Annals, the fiants and other medieval records, where the name is generally given as Meagher or an approximation thereof and with its O prefix.

It is also the version of the name found on the earliest Meagher tomb inscriptions, two of the oldest of which are in the Augustinian friary in Fethard and have Latin inscriptions. The earliest of the two, however, which is dated 1540, does not have the O prefix. This tombstone is in the ruined side-chapel and is for Thaddeus Owns Meagher and his wife, Honora Keeghan.⁹ The second tombstone in the Lady Chapel is for Thadeus Donill O Meagher of Balidin¹⁰ (Ballydine or perhaps Ballyvadin?) and is dated 1600.

There are other O Meagher tomb inscriptions in nearby Kiltinan and Drangan. The one in Kiltinan is dated 1623 and records Katherine Meagher, wife of James Britton of Killosty.¹¹ The Drangan tomb, which is dated 1627, is for Thadeus Geankagh O Meagher, who was probably related to the William O Meagher of Higginstown mentioned in the Civil Survey.¹²

In the army lists of King James II, and in the Irish regiments in the service of France, Spain and Poland-Saxony, the surname is given either as O Meagher or de Meagher, the Latin form. The prominent members of the clan, such as those who went into military service and joined the Wild Geese, and also the descendants of the old Ikerrin landholders, used the prefix O up to at least the end of the 17th century. These were, of course, the only ones who were in a position to record their names for posterity. The O prefix appears to have been dropped towards the end of that century.

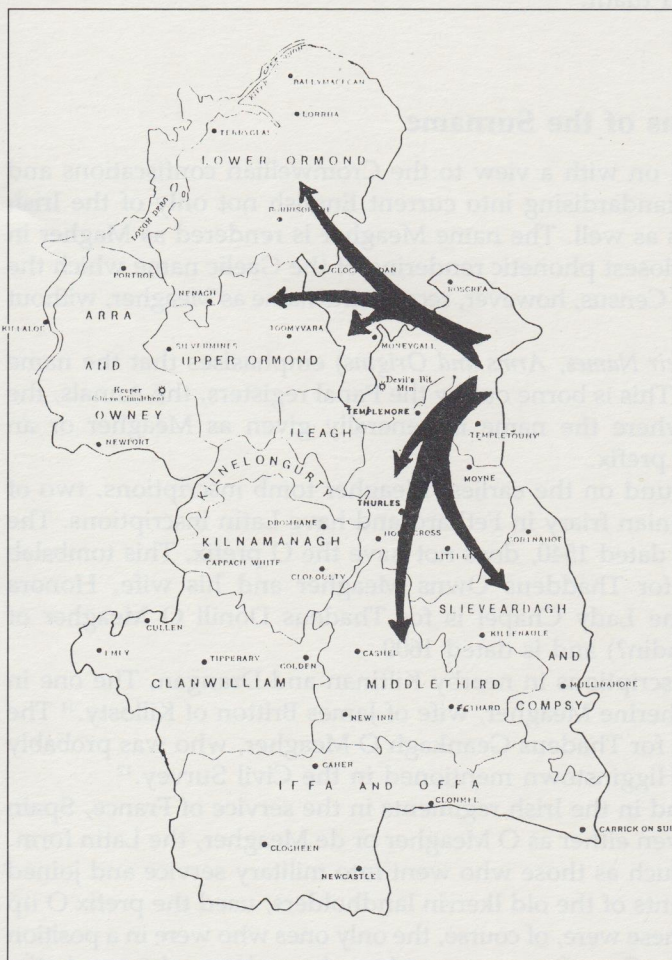
The quaint phrase that the Civil Survey uses about the O Meaghers of Killea "being descended out of the house of O Meagher" has a ring of family and clan pride about it. The effort of the



Civil Survey scribe to anglicise the original Irish form of the name, *Uí Meachair*, i.e. descendant of Meachair (*cineal Meachair*), probably gave rise to the English version Meagher, the only version of the name that remained in vogue up to at least the beginning of the 18th century. The simpler version of the name, Maher, was to emerge around the early 18th century.

The Irish Form

According to MacLysaght, *Meachair* is derived from an Irish word meaning hospitable. This word is now obsolete, leaving one to wonder if it came from the root word *maith*, good.¹³ The 1659 Census, which records the already wide dispersal of the clan by that date, also bears out that Meagher was the form of the name in general use. This is supported by the Hearth Money Records of 1667-69.



The main dispersal of the O Meaghers in the post-Cromwellian period.

The Census records that while the Meaghers were still the most numerous surname in Ikerrin, the home barony, there was a dispersal of the clan not only into different parts of Tipperary, but also into Offaly, Laois, Clare, Waterford and Carlow. As far as Tipperary is concerned, the main dispersal from Ikerrin was southwards into the baronies of Eliogarty, Slieveardagh and Middlethird. (See Figure 1.)

After Ikerrin the largest concentration of the Meaghers (all non-landholding) was in the barony of Middlethird, which had Cashel and Fethard as its principal centres of population. By 1659/60 there were 72 adults named Meagher living in that heavily colonised and densely populated barony.¹⁴ At that date Meagher was the next numerous family name after Ryan in Middlethird.

The next largest concentration of the Meaghers by 1659/60 was in the barony of Slieveardagh, where the Census enumerates 46 adults of the name.¹⁵ The main centres of population in that barony are Killenaule and Mullinahone. The barony of Iffra and Offa, which has Clonmel, Cahir and Clogheen as its centres, had 26 adults named

Meagher, while Clanwilliam, which has Tipperary town and Emly as its centres, had 14.

Outside of Tipperary the biggest drift of the Meaghers was into the barony of Clonlisk in south Offaly, which borders the barony of Ikerrin. There were 26 Meagher adults settled there by 1659/60.¹⁶ The dispersal of the Meaghers recorded by the Census of 1659 is probably linked mainly to the dispossession and disappearance of the old landowning and prominent members of the clan from Ikerrin through the Cromwellian confiscations.

There may, however, have been some dispersal of Meagher tenants even before the Cromwellian period, particularly into areas owned by one or other of the Butler houses, with whom the Meaghers had long-standing good relations and marriage alliances. The main dispersal of the Meaghers southwards into Slieveardagh and Middlethird baronies may be linked to some extent to the fact that Viscount Ikerrin and other Butler houses held great quantities of land in those baronies, where the Meaghers were in time to become numerous tenant farmers.

18th – 19th Century Records

The earliest surviving parish baptismal register in the diocese of Cashel is that for Killenaule. This starts in 1742 and gives ample evidence of the widespread settlement of the Meaghers in that parish (which is at the heart of Slieveardagh barony) by the early 18th century.¹⁷ The Title Applotment Books for Tipperary parishes, which cover the period 1815 to 1834, and Griffith's Valuation Records,¹⁸ which provide details of occupiers of houses and lands in the middle of the 19th century, confirm the main trends of the Meagher dispersal in Tipperary, already apparent in the 1659 Census and the Hearth Money Rolls.

The Killenaule parish register, which is a unique and highly important local census as far as the 18th century is concerned, also reveals that the surname was being spelled with a notable variety — Magher, Megher, Meigher, Meagher and Maher. This freedom with the spelling of the surname, which is by no means unique to this particular surname, shows its widest range of variety from 1742 up to around 1816, when the simpler spelling form, Maher, became more usual.

This spelling variety was due in large measure, no doubt, to the version which the officiating priest or the parish clerk settled for as he made the entry in the register.¹⁹ As the great majority of people were still illiterate,²⁰ especially before the National School system was set up in 1831, the spelling of surnames was mainly a matter for the particular notary making the ecclesiastical or civil documentary entry.

The freedom taken with surname spelling in the case of the Killenaule register is most notable when the same person's name is spelled differently from one entry to another. The Daniel Meagher of Ballinure who had a child baptised in 1815 has his name spelled as Daniel Maher in 1817 when his next child is baptised. Likewise Roger Maher of Lismortagh, who had a child baptised in 1816, is entered as Rody Meigher in 1820. This freedom with the surname spelling went on up to the 1890s, although not with the frequency evident in earlier decades. The Thomas Maher of Lismortagh who had a child baptised in 1886 is entered as Thomas Meagher in 1891.²¹

The other source material referred to, namely the Tithe Applotment Books and the Griffith Valuation Records, show that the simpler version of the surname, Maher, was the one almost completely adopted for recording the bearers of the surname in Ikerrin, the home barony of the clan in the period 1815-1850. As in the case of the baptismal registers, the version of the surname recorded in these documents depended on the clergyman or other official who drew up the final drafts. For the different parishes in the barony of Ikerrin the version Maher is used



for 252 occupiers of the surname, while the other version, Meagher, is used for only one occupier, a family in the former parish of Killoskehan.²²

The extent to which these documents, especially the baptismal registers and the Valuation Records, influenced the spelling of the surname eventually adopted by the different families is a debatable one. That some influence was brought to bear would appear to be borne out in the case of Ikerrin, where the version Maher became the most widely adopted version of the surname — and remains so today.

As far as the Tithe Applotment Books and Griffiths Valuation Records go, the version Maher was also the most widely adopted version of the name in the baronies of Slieveardagh and Eliogarty, where the greatest concentration of the bearers of the surname was to be found outside of Ikerrin. It is notable also that Maher was the version of the name to be found in the Tithe Applotment Books and the Valuation Records for the barony of Upper Ormond, which borders Ikerrin on its north-west side.

On the other hand, the version Meagher was the one that established itself strongly in the southern part of the county, from around Cashel southwards to the Tipperary/Waterford border. Cloneen parish, where Meagher is today the more common version of the name, is particularly notable. The Tithe Applotment Book and Griffith record that there were 14 Meagher occupiers, but only one Maher, in that parish in the period covered by those records.

“Meagher of the Sword”

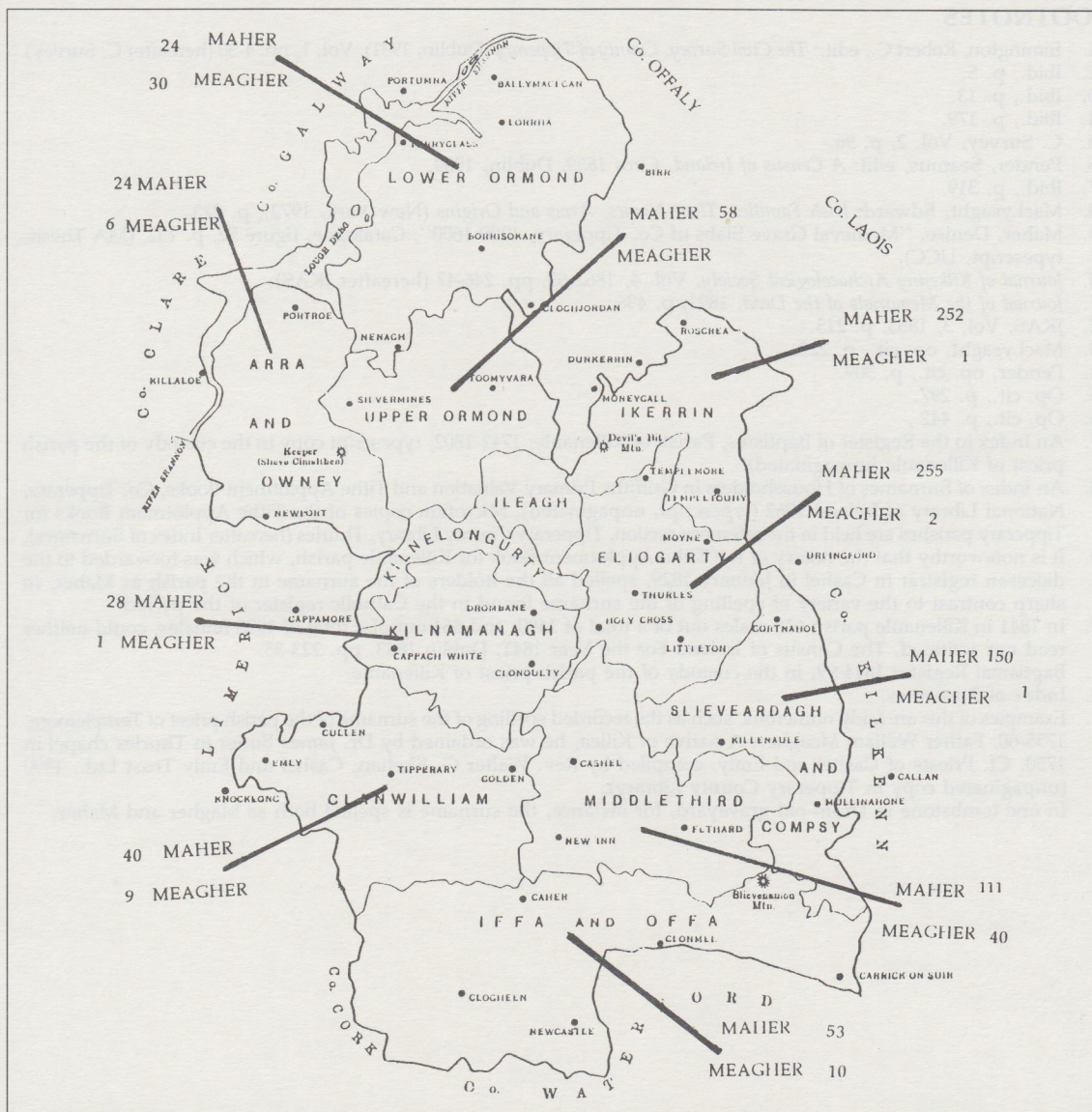
In Carrick-on-Suir the version Meagher was also well represented, and it was the more popular version of the surname among the representatives of the clan that settled in the Waterford region. It was the version inherited by Thomas Francis Meagher, “Meagher of the Sword”, the best known of all the bearers of the surname. There is a tradition that the Young Irelander’s grandfather came from Toor, a townland just above Kilcash village on the south-eastern slopes of Slievenamon.

The families that retained the older version of the surname, Meagher, would appear to have been mainly descendants of members of the clan who settled outside the O Meagher *tuath* of Ikerrin before the Cromwellian confiscations. This is borne out by the Fethard, Kiltinan and Drangan tombs, which predate the Cromwellian period and indicate people of status and education in the society of the time.

Those descendants would have been more in touch through family deeds and records with the written form of the old surname, anglicised as Meagher in the 17th century, and would have had a clan loyalty and pride. The oldest of the Fethard tomb inscriptions, dated 1540, includes, for instance, the O Meagher heraldic shield. Descendants of such people would have been in a position to have some say as to how their names were recorded in contemporary records.²³

On the other hand, the descendants of the clan who remained in Ikerrin, and also the descendants of those who moved to the neighbouring baronies after the Cromwellian settlement, eventually adopted the simple version of the name, influenced (to some extent at least) by the versions of the spelling of their surnames in 18th and 19th century records. The overall pattern of the two versions of the surname adopted by the Tithe Applotment Books and Griffith Valuations is set out in Figure 2.

Tombstone inscriptions also testify to the fairly widespread freedoms taken with surname spelling in the 18th and 19th centuries. There are instances where the versions Meagher and Maher are found on the same headstone.²⁴



The distribution of Maher and Meagher householders in the County in the 1818-1850 period, as recorded in the Tithe Applotment Books and Griffith Valuations.

The mass emigrations of the 19th and 20th centuries and modern mobility have greatly widened the diaspora of the Meaghers and Mahers. Despite that, the descendants of the Ikerrin clan are still most numerous in Tipperary, where some 50 per cent of the 8,000 who bear the name in Ireland live. Moreover, it still remains the most common name in Ikerrin, the ancient heartland of *Cinel Meachair*.

Whether the ancient Tipperary surname is spelled Meagher or Maher, the two versions of the name that finally crystallised, all the bearers of the name can claim descent from *Cinel Meachair*, genuine old Tipperary stock, and can boast of belonging to one of the county's oldest families.

FOOTNOTES

1. Simington, Robert C., edit.: *The Civil Survey, County of Tipperary* (Dublin, 1931), Vol. 1, pp. 4-30 (hereafter C. Survey).
2. *Ibid.*, p. 5.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 13.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 179.
5. C. Survey, Vol. 2, p. 96.
6. Pender, Seamus, edit: *A Census of Ireland, Circa 1659*. Dublin, 1939.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 319.
8. MacLysaght, Edward: *Irish Families, Their Names, Arms and Origins* (New York, 1972), p. 223.
9. Maher, Denise, "Medieval Grave Slabs of Co. Tipperary, 1200-1600", Catalogue, figure 52, p. 132, (MA Thesis, typescript, UCC).
10. *Journal of Kilkenny Archaeological Society*, Vol. 4, 1862-63, pp. 246-47 (hereafter JKAS).
11. *Journal of the Memorials of the Dead*, 1891, p. 496.
12. JKAS, Vol. 3, 1855, p. 215.
13. MacLysaght, op. cit., p. 223.
14. Pender, op. cit., p. 309.
15. Op. cit., p. 297.
16. Op. cit., p. 442.
17. An Index to the Register of Baptisms, Parish of Killenaule, 1742-1802, typescript copy in the custody of the parish priest of Killenaule (unpaginated).
18. An Index of Surnames of Householders in Griffiths Primary Valuation and Tithe Applotment Books, Co. Tipperary, National Library of Ireland 1962 (typescript, unpaginated). Microfilm copies of the Tithe Applotment Books for Tipperary parishes are held in the reference section, Tipperary County Library, Thurles (hereafter Index of Surnames).
19. It is noteworthy that the notary of the Tithe Applotment Book for Killenaule parish, which was forwarded to the diocesan registrar in Cashel in January 1829, spelled all the holders of the surname in the parish as Maher, in sharp contrast to the variety of spelling of the surname found in the Catholic register of the period.
20. In 1841 in Killenaule parish 618 males out of a total of 1490, and 864 out of a total of 1938 females, could neither read nor write: cf. *The Census of Ireland For the Year 1841*, Dublin 1843, pp. 223-35.
21. Baptismal Register 1814-99, in the custody of the parish priest of Killenaule.
22. Index of Surnames.
23. Examples of this are fairly numerous, such as the recorded spelling of the surname of the parish priest of Templemore, 1755-60, Father William Meagher. A native of Killea, he was ordained by Dr. James Butler in Thurles chapel in 1750. Cf. *Priests of Cashel and Emly*, compiled by Rev. Walter G. Skehan, Cashel and Emly Trust Ltd., 1990 (unpaginated copy in Tipperary County Library).
24. In one tombstone in Drom old graveyard, for instance, the surname is spelled both as Magher and Maher.

