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What's in a Name?

By Dónal Thompson



Felix and Brigid Cawley: My grandparents

What's in a name? I suppose that depends where you come from.

In Spain women don't change their names when they get married. Where I come from they do. And we never incorporate our mothers' maiden names into our surnames. Unless you are very posh like Helena Bonham-Carter. So I am only Dónal Thompson and not Dónal Thompson-Cawley.

I was pleasantly reminded of my mother's maiden name and of her entire family when I was contacted by my cousin Chris a couple of months ago.

He has been researching our family tree and has managed to trace Cawleys all the way back to the 1830s. He didn't find the blood of ancient Irish kings but he found no horse thieves either. We have a great-great-grandmother called Mary Crystal.

His e-mail was especially important to me because although my three brothers and I were born and raised in England, it's only me who considers himself Irish. I'm the only one with the Gaelic name and the Irish passport. John, Michael and Gerard could move effortlessly through the social maze and

be indistinguishable from their Anglo-Saxon and American colleagues. But me?

She: So, what's your name?

Me: Dónal

She: Donald?

Me: No. Dónal.

She: Dolan?

Me: No, Dónal

She: Ah! You mean..Dylan!

So my family tree is important to me because everytime I've met someone I've been reminded of my roots. "My name's Dónal. It's Irish"

Cousin Chris is organising the mother and father of all family reunions in August. When I was a child we didn't go on holidays. We always went 'home'. Home was Sligo on the west coast of Ireland. That's where my the family reunion will be.

Sadly, I can't be there. But I will send a video greeting and I'll remotely raise a Guinness or two on the day.

I'll remember travelling over the Ox Mountains, being terrified, as a city boy, of being bitten by sheep on my Auntie Eithne's farm and of being entranced by Uncle Louis' stories which always began with "*There was this man...*". I'll recall falling in love with the red-headed and green eyed Catriona Mahon, the year Elvis died. And I think I remember Gerry Molly's poteen (home-made whiskey).

Memory, they say, is the power to gather roses in winter. So you can expect a few thorns. I miss those who have gone. Auntie Eithne, Uncle Felix, Auntie Eva and my own dad. And I miss my Auntie Pat. She was a nun, a Sister of Mercy, and one of the most intelligent women I have ever met. She changed the course of my life with the gift of a book. But that's another story.

My brothers feel at home in England. I never did. My name provoked occasional racism and foolish jokes. I even hated my own name at one point. Now I sing with Irish music groups like Limerick and I look back almost 200 years to Mary Crystal and feel connected to home.

What's in a name? Sometimes, everything.