Summer newsletter

It is about six months since we set up the O’Shea Clan Society and it continues to build a community of O’Sheas across the world. The yDNA Surname Project is gaining momentum. Check it out on our website.

Articles in this newsletter include the report written on the Clans of Ireland AGM, held in Cork, Ireland in April 2005, a report on a sea rescue operation at Dursey Island, W. Cork. It was taken from the Irish Roots magazine (thanks to the author for permission to publish this article), written by Riobard O’Dwyer and submitted by James O’Shea. Also featured in this newsletter, is part of a work in progress on some O’Shea poets. This comprises excerpts from a book written in Irish featuring some O’Sheas connected with Béaloideas (word of mouth) literature. This translation is courtesy of Brian O’Shea. James O’Shea has put together some data on the distribution of Sheas/Shees and O’Sheas in Ireland and overseas over the centuries.

We hope you enjoy the newsletter. Perhaps, you will contribute something to the next one. We welcome all ideas relating to O’Sheas.

Editor,
Margaret (O’Shea) Jordan

How many O’Sheas/Sheas are there?

Civil records of births, marriages and deaths commenced in Ireland in 1864 when the General Registers Office (GRO) was given responsibility for the collection, compilation and production of records. In 1909 the then register general Robert E. Matheson, a barrister, published a book ‘Special Report on Surnames in Ireland.’ Included in this was a list of the 100 most common surnames in what was then the whole island of Ireland or what is also known these days as the ‘32 Counties.’

He based this list on the numbers of births registered in 1890 and by applying a multiplication factor arrived at an estimate of the total number of persons bearing a particular name. For instance most births were registered under Murphy with 1,386, which was multiplied by 44.73 to give a total of 62,000 said to bear the Murphy surname. ‘O’Shea’ (including ‘Shea’) is listed as No 49 with a population of 13,000.

This Matheson list appears to have been used exhaustively as the authoritative source to the present day although based on data 115 years old and on a country that was subsequently partitioned. Many genealogy websites still quote Matheson. Even Edward MacLysaght in his widely read ‘Irish Families’ reprinted as late as 1991, uses surnames rankings such as O’Leary, Kavanagh and Martin being 62nd, 53rd and 38th respectively that match Matheson exactly. These figures are patently incorrect for the present time and one has to conclude were taken from Matheson without considering updating the data. MacLysaght is not quite as specific for O’Shea stating “O’Shea is included in the list of fifty most numerous surnames in Ireland with an estimated number of nearly twelve thousand persons so called if we include
Shea, Shee and O’Shee (variants of the same name).” As this closely resembles Matheson it is probable that it also, is the source.

The Irish Central Statistics Office (CSO) does not release data on surnames based on official census counts. The US government in an effort to provide genealogy data did an exercise on the most popular surnames based on a large sample from the 1990 census (available on www.census.gov) In the UK a ‘Top 500’ list of surnames for England and Wales is available based on the National Health Service Register for 1991.

In an effort to arrive at the current number of O’Sheas in Ireland, I studied the entries in the 2004 phone books. This indicated that 0.319% of the entries were for O’Sheas suggesting that out of a population of 4 million there are 12,743 people bearing the O’Shea surname with virtually no other surname variants such as O’Shee or Shea. Furthermore the O’Shea surname was ranked 35th in the most popular list. The results are not significantly different to those in Matheson although the ranking appears to have reduced from 49 to 35. This was to be expected as the exclusion of the six counties on partition removed many ‘English’ surnames resulting in native Irish names moving up the popular rankings. However caution must be exercised as phone book entries give only an estimate and we will have to wait for a future census count to give definitive figures.

Table 1 summarises the findings and includes US figures for comparison. It would appear that Ireland is top of the league for ‘O’Sheas’ but the US has many more ‘Sheas.’ The 4:1 ratio in the US of ‘Sheas’ to ‘O’Sheas’ clearly demonstrates that the majority of emigrants from Ireland in the nineteenth century were Sheas. Subsequently in Ireland the ‘O’ was gradually restored until there are now only a handful of ‘Sheas’ remaining. The Sheas in America not subject to the same nationalist fervour commencing with the foundation of the Gaelic League in the 1890s, had not the same incentive to restore the ‘O’ and in the majority of cases obviously didn’t.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rank in list of most popular surnames</th>
<th>Estimate of numbers bearing the surname</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>O’Shea</td>
<td>Shea</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ireland: Matheson report based on 1890 births</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ireland: My figures based on 2004 phone directories for Ireland</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USA: US government analysis based on 1990 US Census</td>
<td>4,326</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 1: O’Shea / Shea rankings and numbers*
Can we estimate the total worldwide numerical strength of the clan from these figures? Ireland and the US with the highest number of O’Sheas with variants, total approximately 50,683. I have not been successful in obtaining numbers from the UK, Australia, Canada and other countries known to have been targets for Irish emigration, but based on the known figures as above one could conjecture that worldwide the number bearing the O’Shea or variant surname would be less than 90,000. To put this in context ‘Smith,’ possibly the most numerous of all Western surnames worldwide boasts numbers in the region of 3.2 million in the US, England and Wales alone and one shudders to think how many must carry the most popular Chinese surname!

Table 2 gives the geographical location of the approximate 12,743 O’Sheas within Ireland, again based on entries in the 2004 telephone books. Somewhat surprising Cork is seen to have overtaken Kerry as the main stronghold but between them they contain almost half of the national total, clear proof that descendents have not moved far from the ancestral base in southwest Kerry as is a common trait of many of the old Gaelic clans.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>County</th>
<th>Province</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Estimated Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cork</td>
<td>Munster</td>
<td>26.3</td>
<td>3,352</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kerry</td>
<td>Munster</td>
<td>24.1</td>
<td>3,071</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dublin</td>
<td>Leinster</td>
<td>14.6</td>
<td>1,860</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limerick</td>
<td>Munster</td>
<td>5.8</td>
<td>739</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Waterford</td>
<td>Munster</td>
<td>4.0</td>
<td>510</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kilkenny</td>
<td>Leinster</td>
<td>3.7</td>
<td>471</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tipperary</td>
<td>Munster</td>
<td>3.6</td>
<td>459</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clare</td>
<td>Munster</td>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>408</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kildare</td>
<td>Leinster</td>
<td>2.6</td>
<td>331</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wexford</td>
<td>Leinster</td>
<td>1.8</td>
<td>229</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carlow</td>
<td>Leinster</td>
<td>1.6</td>
<td>204</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wicklow</td>
<td>Leinster</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>166</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Galway</td>
<td>Connaught</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>153</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Westmeath</td>
<td>Leinster</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>153</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All others</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>637</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td></td>
<td>100</td>
<td>12,743</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 2: O’Shea dispersion within Ireland**

James O’Shea,  
Cork City,  
July 2005
The Clans of Ireland AGM 2005
An O’Shea Clan Perspective

The O’Shea Clan is in the process of building up its Clan Society and when we heard that the 2005 AGM was to be in Mallow, Co. Cork, we planned to arrive in force. In 2004, we had one representative go to the Dublin meeting, a bit like a scout as we did not know what to expect. Enthused by his experience, we were determined to go to the 2005 AGM.

On the day of the 2005 AGM, April 23rd 2005, four of us drove to Mallow where we initially met several of the Clans of Ireland committee members with whom we had been in email correspondence as we looked for help and advice on how to build up our O’Shea Clan society. It was great to put faces on those helpful committee members. The exhibitions by the various clans before the meeting started and the welcome coffee provided, allowed time to mingle and meet other folk from other clans. As a clan which is trying to build a clan society, we were taking note of what other clans were doing and were duly impressed with some of the information on show.

We enjoyed the talks given by the visiting speakers. As the O’Shea Clan has a yDNA Surname Project, we were very pleased to hear two speakers talking on the subject of DNA testing. Matthew Kaplan from Family tree DNA was enthralling in his presentation. We nabbed him later to discuss the R1b yDNA results and found him very amiable.

This was followed by an enlightening talk by Brian Donovan about the work Eneclann (www.eneclann.ie) is doing in digitizing genealogical information. Brian said they would shortly have both the 1901 & 1911 census available for free and that they were working on a range of other relevant work. This is a welcome relief, no doubt to the many Irish who are struggling to find their family connections. It gives us hope for the future!

The next speaker, Alistair Greenshields from DNA Heritage gave a detailed talk on the DNA testing done by his company. The demonstration of DNA extraction, was the high point in his presentation. Also, there was a little gentle rivalry between the representatives from the two DNA companies when the Family Tree DNA representative took a photo of the DNA Heritage speaker!

The emphasis on modern techniques throughout the presentations was stimulating and encouraging as were the questions and comments from the people present. The hand out presented later by Lorcan O’Flannery (Clans of Ireland) on managing an Irish DNA Project was also very welcome.

The AGM proper was the concluding part of the proceedings and the animated contributions from the committee and the floor gave us the feeling of being involved in a vibrant organization. It was pointed out that the Clans of Ireland Society can give assistance to clans planning a Clan Reunion but it was emphasised that advance notice of at least eighteen months was necessary.

It is anticipated that next year’s AGM would return to the Dublin area as there were some murmurings on the difficulty of travelling to the backwoods but hope Cork will feature again some time in the future.

Margaret (O’Shea) Jordan, Cork
SEINE BOAT RESCUE

I had an e-mail from a James O’Shea who read my article in Irish Roots No. 53 in which I mentioned, in passing, seine-boat captain Michael O’Shea of Dussey Island. James is involved with the O’Shea Clan Society and is collecting stories of interest to O’Sheas. The following is a full account of the epic rescue by Captain O’Shea and his Dussey Island crew of the keepers and workmen marooned on the Calf Rock lighthouse during the 1881 hurricane.

On the bleak night of Saturday 26 November 1881, three lightkeepers — principal keeper Thomas Francis Fortune from Wexford, assistant keeper John Young (an Englishman), and assistant keeper Johnny Harrington (Caskey) of Tulligdole, Dussey Island — and three workmen repairing the lighthouse were thrown into the raging depths below. John Byrne (a stone mason from Dunlaoghaire, Dublin), Mick Kelly of Ballaghbelea, Allihies, Beara, County Cork, and William Louden (or Loughney, who later emigrated to Butte, Montana, USA), also of Ballaghbelea — were on the Calf Rock lighthouse off Dussey Head when a 90 mile per hour hurricane broke from the north-west. Huge waves lashed the rock, and forked-lightning rent the thunder dark skies. Very early in the morning of Sunday 27, Fortune was on watch in a lower storeroom of the tower. With him were Louden and Byrne who had been unable to sleep because of the roaring gale and the terrible crashing of the waves. Suddenly there was another blinding flash of lightning.

In a higher storeroom of the tower Johnny Harrington (Caskey) and Young were asleep. It had been Young’s turn to take the watch at 1.00am, but Fortune had allowed him to sleep on, seeing little hope of sleep himself. There had been rough weather all week. After that last frightening flash, Fortune looked at his watch. It was 3.25 am. He decided to wake Young and get to bed himself up on the fourth storeroom.

About 10 minutes after he had got into bed there was an unmerciful crash as a huge wave washed over the tower. The top of the tower with the lantern and lighting apparatus were sent hurtling down into the raging depths below. The tower, which was of cast iron lined with brick, rose 150 feet above the Rock which was approximately 55 feet above the level of the water. At first, Fortune ordered a few panes of glass had been broken, and he called on the men to get storm-shutters.

Louden and Johnny Harrington came up and, with Fortune, went into the lantern room. But all they saw was the sky! Fortune ordered all doors to be locked. The three of them made for the ‘West House’. At half past eight the remainder of the tower fell. At that time the other three men (John Young, Mick Kelly, and John Byrne) were in the basement of the tower which filled with water up to their armpits. With considerable difficulty they made their way out over the debris to reach the ‘West House’. After waiting there for over an hour, they all decided that the kitchen, which had a vaulted roof, was the strongest place left. At last they reached it, and there they were to remain for 12 days while frantic efforts were being made to rescue them.

The tower and dwellings on the Calf Rock had been built in 1860 by Henry Cireoll of London. The lighthouse had been supplied by Chance Brothers of Birmingham, and the balcony and outer casing by William Turner of Osmanstown Foundry in Dublin.

The kitchen was 18 feet long and 10 feet wide. For most of the time they were marooned, the keepers and workmen had no fire, as the sea came down the chimney and in through the door and window. They had two tables and six chairs, and when the sea came in, they had to stand on the chairs until it subsided.

Occasionally they were able to make a fire in a coal box. Thomas Francis Fortune, married with five children, had spent a number of years on the Fastnet Rock and Youghal lighthouses before becoming Head Keeper on the Calf Rock. He was celebrating his thirty-sixth birthday on 27 November, the day that the sea ‘washed his lighthouse away’.

It was not until the morning of Monday 28, that the Dussey Islanders observed signals from the Rock. The British naval gunboat Salanis was sent from Castletownbere but, owing to the heavy seas, was unable to approach within a half a mile of the Calf Rock. She tried again on Tuesday and Wednesday, but the sea was too strong and had to turn back. On 2 December the Gunboat Seaborse and Amelia tried to make contact, but failed. On Thursday 8 December Seaborse made another unsuccessful attempt to get the men off.

On that day 53 year old seine-boat (used for fishing for mackerel by night) captain Michael O’Shea of Ballinacloda called together his six-man crew to take out his rowing-boat and make an all-out bid to rescue the men on the Calf. Together with the captain there were his 20 year old son Michael, the captain’s brother-in-law 45 year old Daniel Healy and his 23 year old son Denis Healy, the captain’s son-in-law 20 year old Tad Doolley, the captain’s 29 year old nephew Darby (or Jer) O’Sullivan (Brohul) and 37 year old Batt Lynch. The whole crew lived in the Dussey Island townland of Ballinacloda.

Despite the rough seas, O’Shea’s boat headed off towards the Calf Rock, and the captain divested himself of his lifesaving garments so that he might be in a better position to use all his agility. A lifebuoy was thrown from the rock with a line attached. This was picked up by the Captain who attached a rope to the line. The rope was hauled up the rock by the marooned men and made fast. One by one the men, wearing cork jackets and lifebuoys, and holding on to the rope, jumped into the mountainous sea. As each was hauled through the waves, he was dragged by willing hands into O’Shea’s boat, transferred to another boat, and then taken on board Seaborse.

Mick Kelly was the first to jump in, but the most exciting escape was that of Fortune. He was the last to leave the Calf Rock, but when he came out, the sea was so rough that he returned to the kitchen and put on extra clothing to protect himself if thrown back against the rock.

When he jumped, he was enveloped in a cloud of sea and spray but, to everyone’s surprise, he was picked up uninjured. All the men were in a weak state after their long ordeal on the wrecked lighthouse. Principal keeper Fortune said: ‘It is to Michael O’Shea and his crew from Dussey Island that we owe our lives’. Captain O’Shea and his crew were later honoured for their masterly seamanship and rescue.

During the storm, some clothes belonging to the keepers were lost. It is only fitting that the crew were presented with a boat by the Dussey Island people and a house at Mayo. The house was then presented to Captain O’Shea by the people of Mayo. The Captain’s son-in-law, the ‘drowned man’ walked in the door!

To his delight, Mick Kelly had the distinction of being the first man ever to smoke a clay pipe at his own wake! Instead of rebuilding the Calf Rock lighthouse, the Commissioners of Irish Lights put a temporary light on Dussey Head on 1 February 1882. A new lighthouse was built on the 292 feet high Bull Rock, and it came into operation on 26 June 1889.

Nowadays a helicopter lands on the Bull Rock — a big change from the days of the gallant Captain O’Shea and his six-seated seine boat.

by Riobard O’Dwyer
Poets in the South West of Ireland: O’Sheas

The following is a partial list of the O’Shea men and women who were torchbearers for their native culture through songs, poetry (Béaloideas or word of mouth) and later the written word. They sustained a "Mortas Cine" or Pride of Race through tough times during the Penal Laws, famines etc. For their dedication they deserve to be remembered and thanked. The excerpts are taken from: “Beathaisnéis”, a series of volumes compiled by Diarmuid Breathnach and Maire Ní Mhurchú.

**Diarmuid O’Sé** (c1755-1846) born at Tuatha O Siosta on the Kerry side of the Beara Peninsula. He was a seventh son and his father gave him part of his land tenancy at Droinge. Marrying a close O’Shea relative, he lived off the sea and as a merchant trader with Cork, out of Kilmonogue, he fell on hard times and died during the famine. For a time, his patron had been Mac Fínín Dubh O’Sullivan. Most of his poems were never written down.

**An t-Athair Micheál O’Séa**, OFM (1892-1958), born at Ballincollig, Co. Cork to James O’Shea, commercial traveller and Elizabeth O’Neill National Teacher, (from Dublin). His grandfather is supposed to have been a school teacher in Ballinhassig and was a native speaker of Irish. He died at the Bons Secours Hospital, Cork on the 9th of December 1958.

**Muircheatach (Murty) O’Séaghdha**, (1882-1970), born at Adrigole on the Beara Peninsula and lived at Gréasai O’Clocharan next to Lauragh, Co. Kerry. His father was Connor O’Shea and his mother was Kate O’Sullivan from Adrigole. He had three brothers and five sisters.

**Séamus O’Séaghdha**, (1870-1959), born in the townland of Dromore in Beara. His parents were Bartholemew (farmer) and Honoria; another O’Shea! He went to New York and returned, working as a travelling salesman among many of other jobs and contributed for 50 years to the Church of Ireland Gazette. He married Jane Armstrong and had five children. He died on the seventh of August 1959 at Phibsborough, Dublin, Ireland.

**Nora O’Shea**, (1905-1975), born at Baile an Mhórdhaigh, Ballyferriter, Dingle. Her parents were Thomas and Nora. She married Donal Healy of Kilgarvan, They had Pádraig and two daughters. “Leasuncail di athair an fhile Micheál Dainín O’Sé”.

**Pádraig O’Séaghdha**, (1855-1928), “Conán Maol”: pen name, born at Gort Breac between Neidin (Kenmare) and Killarney, father a farmer. While at Cardiff, Pádraig married Nora James. They had two children.

**Pádraig O’Séaghdha**, (1864-1955), “Gruagach an Tobair”: pen name, born at Crossaire Mór in Glengarriff, Co. Cork, father James, a farmer. Pádraig married Eileen O’Sullivan of Bunan, Co. Kerry. They had five children, one of whom became Fr Casáin OFM.

**Pádraig O’Séaghdha**, (1880-1921) “Pádraig na Léine”: pen name, born at Cuan an Caislean, Caherdaniel, Co. Kerry, parents Donal O’Shea post master and Abbey Sullivan. He founded and taught at a school in Caherdaniel, was a National School teacher, JP.
Seán O’Séaghdha, NT (circa 1873-1921), born in Adrigole, brother of Murty (above), parents Conar (farmer) and Kate O’Sullivan. Seán married Nora O’Sullivan of Bunan. They had five children.

Seán Pádraig O’Séaghdha, (1887-1971), born in Cork City, father James, printer, mother Minnie O’Brien. He was the eldest of five children. When his father died (before 1900) they went to Battersea, London to Daniel O’Shea, his brother in law. He married Kitty Kehilly in 1917, in “Dún Mánmhai” (Dunmanway), Co. Cork. She died in 1917. His son Martin was born in 1913 and his daughter was Nessa, born in 1916. He called his house at Dundrum, “Corca Duibhne” and married secondly, Maisie McKeefry in 1950.

Correction:
“Sean had 6 children my father been one of them his name Finbarr not Martin. My father had five sisters, Nessa, Roisin, Mairin, Nuala and Niamh.”
Our thanks to Meadbh Ní Shé for this correction in 2008.


Nessa Ní Séaghdha, (1916-1993), born in Dublin, father was Pádraig O’Séaghdha and her mother was Kitty Kehilly. Nessa married Dáibhí Doran in 1939. They had a son and three daughters.

Chormaic O’Sé (1853-1934), from “Churrach na nDamh” Ballinskelligs, Co. Kerry.

Brian O’Shea,
Cork.
July 2005