

The History of Donegal Names

Letterkenny:

The fame of the O' Cannon kings of Tir Connel has become a permanent part in Irish history through the survival of a number of place names and antiquities such as Letterkenny the largest town in Donegal and derives its name from the Gaelic "Leitir Canannain" meaning "hillside of the Cannons"

Cannon comes from the ancestral name Ui Canannain and Tir Connel (all of Co. Donegal and part of Co. Derry) was the "Land of the Cannons"

The Cannons are descended from two of Ireland's most renowned Kings: Conn of the Hundred Battles and Niall of the Nine Hostages. Their 350-year dynasty in Tir Connel ended around 1250.

In the mid-thirteenth century Rory O' Cannon and his son Niall became the power point for Gaelic resurgence. This contained the seeds of Irish nationalism which prevented the English expansion into Tir Connel.

By the early 1660's the name of Ui Canannain had been anglicised to O' Cannon. Further anglicisation took place during the Penal Laws in the late 1700's and early 1800's and the name of Co. Donegal became Cannon.

However in the east of the county and in the neighbouring counties of Derry and Tyrone the name, being spelt phonetically, became Canning.

O'Cannon, Cannon, Cannan, Canon and Canning are anglicised versions of the name Ui Canannain.

.In the early 1880's there were 200 families bearing the Cannon surname living in Co. Donegal. These were mainly small tenant farmers barely subsisting on a meagre potato patch allotted to them. In 1845 the great potato famine culminated in widespread poverty and starvation and a great exodus from Ireland began.

In the early 1900's there were little more than 20 families with the Cannon surname. In 1841 the total population of Donegal was 296,000-this declined rapidly after 1884 to a low of around 110,000 in the early 1900's.