The story of the rise, fall and spread of languages is one of power. Like the rings inside a tree or the shape of a mountain, an area’s language tells a story of destruction and growth, even when it isn’t doing so explicitly. This is especially true of names. People name things they own or control – their kids, their pets, their property, etc. When you join a school, a team or a military regiment, you get a nickname to show you truly belong, assuring you that you are different from those outside the group.

An exonym is a name for something, especially a place, given to it by outsiders. English people don’t describe themselves as ‘Poms’, Americans from states warmer than Alaska don’t describe their homeland as the ‘Lower 48’ and Dublin people certainly don’t refer to each other as ‘Jackeens’. Correspondingly, an endonym would be a word that people from within a shared space used for each other. ‘That’s our word.’ These boundaries between the exo and the endo can be blurry in a postcolonial, multilingual
society, especially when it comes to the act of naming a child.

Picking a name for a brand new human being is a tricky business and a grave responsibility, with many competing considerations. What impact will the name have on the thousands of first impressions that child will make in life? What tribal and class loyalties will be declared or concealed? There are parents who want to acknowledge their child’s Irish heritage with the name they pick, but only want to go so far. Traditional Irish names can be popular, but it’s worth being forewarned before inflicting such a moniker on an innocent, defenceless child. Other parents are searching for a name that’s unique – uniquely pretty, uniquely memorable, uniquely Irish.

For most of the inhabitants of the planet, Irish names are the only contact they’ll ever have with the Irish language, so names contribute to the language’s reputation as being beautiful but difficult. Some locations around Ireland (Clare, Kerry, Shannon, Tyrone and Derry) have become popular as given names, as has Erin, the name for Ireland itself. However, it is the names in the Irish language that the wider world is most likely to be familiar with, so I think they’re a good base from which to explain how we pronounce Irish words in general.

Rather than kowtowing to expectation by putting names in alphabetical order or gender groupings, I’ve decided to list them based on how likely they are to be mispronounced and why. Hopefully this will be a good way to show you how to pronounce the Irish words in the rest of the book.
Tutorial Mode: The Easiest Names

The following names are pronounced just the way they look.

Ronan (m)  This boy’s name is derived from little seal (rón). As with a lot of the most popular names, a version without the fadas that were present in the original Irish (Rónán) has become more widespread. More on those fadas and how they inform pronunciation below.

Finbarr (m)  The boy’s name Finbarr has its critics, but it shares the honour of being the least mispronounced Irish name ever, along with Fintan. Finbarr is the patron saint of Cork, and the name is particularly popular there.

Fintan (m)  Fintan rhymes with Tintin,* and many are the Fintans who endured this nickname in school. Just because your name is easy to pronounce doesn’t mean you’re out of the woods yet! It’s suggested that this name means fair-haired or white fire.

Colm (m)  Colm can mean a dove or a pigeon . . . or a scar. Yes, a scarred dove would be colm colmnach. Irish doesn’t use a K, so a C is always a hard C.

Nuala (f)  Nuala isn’t hard to pronounce; it’s often taken as the abbreviation of Fionnuala, which is itself the simplified spelling of Fionnghuala (fair-shouldered). This gives a clue as to why some people may choose to use a trickier spelling; fionn-ghuala is an accurate reflection of what the name truly means, while Nuala more closely

* As it is uttered in English; in Hergé’s original French it’d sound more like ‘Tantan’. Fintan does not rhyme with Tantan.
resembles Irish words with which it has no true etymological connection (like *nu*ua, new).

**Colin (m)** This has a hard C. The two most famous bearers of this name (at the time of writing) are former US Secretary of State Colin Powell and Dublin actor/former hellraiser Colin Farrell, both of whom use different pronunciations: *coe* (rhymes with oh!) *lin* and *coll* (rhymes with doll) *in*. The second version is the one used in Ireland. As for the first version, allowances need to be made for accents.

**Aidan (m)** This boy’s name has been common in Ireland for years but has become a lot more popular in the States and further afield since the ’00s, thanks to the character playing one of Carrie’s more likeable suitors in *Sex and the City.*

**Ciara (f)** Another hard C – *key-ra*. It never occurred to me that this was a hard one to get your tongue around, but ’00s singer Ciara pronounced it *see-are-ah*. The spelling used by English actress Kiera Knightly is very rare in Ireland, but may have been influenced by the divergent spellings of the male version of this name . . .

**Ciarán (m)** The male version of Ciara. I haven’t heard of a male R&B singer called *see-are-ahn* yet, but there’s still time. Some people prefer to spell this name Kieran, which illustrates the difference between the two A’s, with and without a *fada*.

**Conor (m)** Rhymes with honour, or ‘honor’ as they spell it in the United States (the English language is not innocent of heterogeneous pronunciation and divergent spelling).
**Aifric (f)** This girl’s name is pronounced like the continent Africa without the final A. The etymology of this name is shrouded in mystery. It’s been suggested that it’s derived from *aifreann* (Mass) or Africa (although why Africa would be considered as a subject for a name in Ireland at a time when foreign place names generally weren’t, would need to be explained). Either way, today it’s best known as the main character in TG4’s *Aifric*, a show for kids about a Dublin girl whose family move to the Gaeltacht.

**Ruairí (m)** There are more than a few Irish names with a multiplicity of spelling options. Generally, the spelling of boys’ names is a bit more stable than that of girls’ names, although Rory/Ruairí/Ruaidhrí co-exist peacefully. That name means red-haired king – *rua* and *ri*.

**Conall (m)** The Irish for Donegal is *Tír Conall* – Conall’s land. As with Conor, Ciaran, Ciara and Colm, it’s got a hard C.

**Lochlann (m)** *Lochlannach* means Viking, Scandinavian or pirate. This is the origin of the boy’s name Lochlann (and its variations). It should not be confused with *lachnach*, an adjective to describe a place with many ducks. One of the names in Irish for a pirate is *foghlai mara*, which translates literally as sea trespasser.†

† A *Dubh-Lochlannach* (dark Viking) is a Dane and a *Fionn-Lochlannach* (fair Viking) is a Norwegian.

‡ The Jolly Roger is an *brat dubh*, which translates literally as the black cloak/mantle/curtain.
Another Irish term for pirate is *uiging*, which comes from Danish (viking) and is the origin of the surname Higgins.

The *ch* in Lochlann is nothing to fear; it’s pronounced much the same as Christmas. This is also true in other names . . .

**Fiachra (m)** Fiachra sounds a lot like *fiacla*, the Irish word for teeth (and the name of a once-popular toothpaste brand) so ‘Teeth’ was a go-to nickname for lads with this first name. *Fiach* can mean a single tooth or a raven, and is also a popular boy’s name in its own right.

**Darach (m)** My own first name is still quite niche, but it doesn’t make unreasonable demands of the pronouncer. The first syllable rhymes with far, the second with Bach.*

However, when people see it and recognize it as an Irish name, they assume it mustn’t be pronounced the way that it looks – I’ve heard Daritch, Dalek, Darth and (most frequently) Dara. Darach means like an oak tree. Having an unusual name means you get very excited when anyone else with the same name turns up; imagine my glee when the evil wizard in the TV show *Teen Wolf* was also called Darach.

**Dara/Daire/Darragh (both)** These come from the Irish word for oak tree too. So why is it a different name you ask? The same reason that Iain, Euan, Owen, John, Jon and Nathan are all derived from Jonathan. Dara and Daire are increasingly popular as names for girls (I haven’t heard of a girl called Darragh yet).

* Catholic composer Johann Sebastian Bach, who was father to twenty-four children.
Fun with Fadas

Conán (m) Remember Ronan? Remember how easy that was to pronounce? Doesn’t Conán look like Ronan? Aye, but there’s a wee hat on that A. If you’re familiar with US TV host Conan O’Brien and you know how his name is pronounced, this is close, but that little hat on the A changes it a little. It’s called a fada, which means long in Irish. A fada on a vowel makes it long. So Conan is pronounced co-nawn. It’s a great name, meaning wolf.

Gráinne (f) This was a hugely popular name for girls born between the 1960s and early 1990s. Girls with this name would often be hilariously nicknamed granna (which means ugly), but I’m pleased to confirm that this is not the origin of the name – the fada makes that quite clear. Gráinne means a grain, and it’s been conjectured that the name might have its ultimate root in the name of a crop goddess; however, this is secondary to the name’s mythological resonance from the popular Tóraíocht Dhiarmada agus Ghráinne and the legendary pirate queen Gráinne Maol (bald Gráinne, on account of her shaved head). The Irish for hedgehog is gráinneog – young Gráinne or little grain. A person or entity with hedgehog-like qualities (defensive, adorable, spiky-haired or stressed by traffic) might be described as gráinneogach. There’s no word for this in English, although I’m told it’s igelqualitäten in German.

Éamonn/Éamon (m) If you have studied French, you’ll be comforted to know that an É in Irish behaves much like an É in French – enchanté, café, je suis desolé. So Éamon
rhymes with ‘hey, mon’. This was once a hugely popular boy’s name (possibly on account of Mr de Valera’) but has slid out of the charts in recent years (possibly on account of Mr de Valera).

Realtín (f) A lot of girl’s names end with -ín, much the same as female names in Romance languages end with an A. The suffix -ín is pronounced een, rhyming with clean, bean or tangerine. This gorgeous name means little star.

Cailín (f) This is the Irish word for a girl; it’s more popular as a name among families of Irish heritage abroad than it is in Ireland. Thus, it’s often spelled Colleen, which is a fair reflection of how it is uttered.

Ríona (f) This can be an abbreviation of Caitríona or Lasairiona, but also stands as a name in its own right and is derived from Ríon, a queen or noble lady. **Ree-uh-nah.**

Oscar/Óran (m) The Irish boy’s name Oscar is not pronounced like the award; it rhymes with busker. An accentless O is really more of an ‘uh’ sound, whereas Ó sounds like ‘oh’. The easy way to remember this is to think of every classic Irish surname – O’Reilly, O’Callaghan, O’Shea, etc. – and remember each O is really an Ó that’s been anglicized.

* Éamon de Valera (1882–1975), TD for Clare, second Taoiseach and third President of the Republic of Ireland, President of the League of Nations, American passport-holder and maths teacher.

† The go-to words for queen in Irish are banrí, or just rí if you prefer using a gender-neutral term for monarch.
Úna (f)  You may have seen the name Oona (or Oonagh, which combines the Anglicization of Ú with a silent gh for some reason). That Ú is indeed pronounced like an ooh.

Normal Names

Sometimes a celebrity or colleague has a baby and they give their child a name that shows a lack of self-awareness, a hint of pretension, a dearth of consideration . . . in other words, ‘notions’. While a blind eye can be turned to corruption, any hint of affectation in Ireland must be stamped out early and often. The following names, although they include a point of difference between English and Irish pronunciation, have been categorized as normal – their authenticity has been verified and they are sufficiently popular to avoid accusations of notions. Speaking of notions . . .

Aisling (f)  As well as meaning ‘vision in a dream’ and being a very popular girl’s name, Aisling has become slang for an overly-sensible young country woman with conservative tastes and a strong aversion to notions; the kind who works in Dublin and returns to her home village religiously every Friday evening. This usage has been promulgated in the cult Facebook group ‘Oh My God What a Complete Aisling’ (or OMGWACA as its members sometimes call it for short).

Aislingeach means dreamy, romantic or quixotic (although quixotic is a word reeking of notions). Aisfhreagra means backchat. This isn’t, to my knowledge, connected to the name Aisling (although notions may invoke aisfhreagraí).
Aisling is mostly compatible with the phonetic expectations of Anglophones, except for that s, which sounds more like an ‘sh’: *ash-ling*. This is normal in Irish, and you’ll find the following names all enjoy a ‘sh’ sound where you see an S/s:

**Sean (m)** You’re probably so used to this one that you can’t remember ever wondering how it was pronounced. Seáin is the true Irish spelling, as *sean* means old.

**Siobhán (f)** *Shove on*. More on that *bh* that sounds like a ‘v’ below.

**Oisín (m)** How would a Cockney bloke say hush? ‘*Ush*’, of course. *Ush-een*. This popular name means a fawn or young deer and is the name of the main character in one of the best-loved stories in Irish mythology.

**Sinéad (f)** *Shin-aid*. Even though this is the name of one of Ireland’s most famous singers, this still gets mispronounced.

**Siún (f)** *Shoe-in*. The Donegal version of Siobhán, recently increasing in popularity in the other thirty-one counties.

**Róisín (f)** *Roe-sheen*. Little rose.

**Eilís (f)** *Eye-leash*. This name is given as the translation of both Alice and Elizabeth.

**Siofra (f)** *She-frah*. Elf/fairy.
There are some that break the rule, of course (rules are usually simple, it’s the exceptions that make them hard).

**Sorcha (f)** *Circa* and *Sore-ha* are both widely-accepted pronunciations of this name, which is taken as the Irish translation of Sarah.

**Saoirse (f)** Freedom! Pronounced *Sir-shah*.

**Aonghus (m)** An *s* at the end of a word is pronounced much like an *s* in English. *Aon* (rhymes with lane) and *gus* (rhymes with bus).

**Seamus (m)** *Shame-us* – rhymes with famous. Like Aonghus, the final *s* is sibilant. The first *S* is treated like Seán, Sinéad and Siobhán.

**Órla (f)** This one has a variety of accepted spellings in common use – Orla, Órla, Órlaith, Órfhlaith, Orlagh and so on. Just one thing though: a squirt of vomit is *sconnóg orla* in Irish. That’s right, not only is Orla a girl’s name, it can also mean vomit. I should probably clarify that the girl’s name Orla is actually derived from Órfhlaith and means golden princess. Not vomit. *Brúcht, sceith* and especially *urlacan* are words for vomit that won’t annoy all the cool Orlas out there.

Two points about pronunciation here. As Órla and Orla have significantly different meanings (when used in Irish: the dropping of *fadás* with Irish names in English is an inevitable compromise), you’d reasonably expect them to sound different.

Second point – Órla is a simplified spelling of
Órfhlaith, because the fh is silent and the ith is more like an h in English. I discuss this in more detail later.

**Emer (f)** Like Órla, Emer (the name of Cúchulainn’s wife) is subject to a range of accepted spellings – Émer, Eimear, Eimer and so on. They are all pronounced e-mer (rhyming with screamer, steamer or schemer). Contemporary scholars now say that this name should have actually been pronounced ever all along, but I don’t see that catching on at this stage.

**Deirdre (f)** Deirdre of the Sorrows is a story from Irish mythology (popularized by Lady Gregory and J. M. Synge) that doesn’t end very well for anyone involved, as the name suggests. Speaking of not ending well, sometimes this fine name is spoken aloud as dear-dree, a sound that doesn’t obey English or Irish pronunciation rules; it’s actually more like dear-drah. That unaccented e at the end makes a short eh sound.

**Cait/Caitríona (f)** The it in Cait (and Caitríona too) is pronounced like the ch in charming or chunky. Readers of a certain age will remember that Cait was the narrator’s best friend in the beloved schoolbook Peig.† With its accented and unaccented i’s next to each other, Caitríona is a good reference point to use if you’re reading a new Irish word with an I and need to know how it sounds.

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* Cúchulainn is a major character in Irish mythology, who I’ll be discussing in more detail later.

† Peig’s unpopularity, so long a synecdoche for the failures of the Irish-language movement and state policy, has become a cliché in itself.
Invisible V Names

These names are still mainstream, but they have a ‘v’ sound without actually having the letter v. This causes confusion in other countries for some reasons. Why do so many letter combinations sound like v? Why can’t they just be replaced with a letter v? It’s not as if modern Irish has a zero-tolerance policy on the letter v anymore (tvúit, vótáil, de Valera).

The best analogy I can give here is a musical one. Take a perfectly tuned guitar and play a note on the sixth string. Go to the fifth string, press on the fifth fret; you’ll play the same note. Likewise, with the fourth string and the tenth fret, and so on. Bh and mh are like the same note played on different strings.

‘mh’

Caoimhe (f)  This name is sometimes anglicized as Keeva, which is a fair reflection of how it sounds (although Gaeltacht natives put a twirl in the -aoi that is hard to replicate).

Niamh (f)  This very popular moniker means bright/brightness and is the name of the girl who came from Tír na nÓg† to win young Oisín’s heart in the beloved tale. The popularity of this story might explain why the spelling of this name (and Oisín too) have not

† Tír means land or country, and poetically sounds a bit like the English word tear (liquid sadness, not damaged clothing). Tír na nÓg is the land of eternal youth in Irish mythology; it is not the afterlife but visitors are warned never to come back once they decide to leave. The enduring popularity of this story might be due to this resonant analogy with Irish emigration, as well as the Freudian fear of marriage changing a man and taking him away from his mammy/mates.
diverged as much as other Irish names whose pronunciation is incompatible with Anglo sensibilities.

‘bh’

**Ailbhe (f)**  This sounds a bit like Elva, and comes from an old word for white.

**Beibhín (f) Bay-veen.** This girl’s name means beautiful, blonde woman (*bé* and *fionn*); some say it originally referred to Viking women (which sounds plausible), but others point out that this was the name of notorious Viking-basher Brian Boru’s mother.

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**H is for Hush – the Silent Letters**

Sometimes a friend from overseas makes a valiant effort pronouncing an Irish name, only to find out that the string of consecutive consonants is actually skipped over completely. While this should be a relief – it’s easier than it looks – the reaction is often exasperation or bemusement. What’s the point of having letters you don’t say?

Personally, I have a sentimental weakness for silent letters; they remind us that there’s more to the world than the bits that are heard. Silent letters, if you’ll listen to them, will tell you a story of a word’s history, and give clues as to how a word will change in different grammatical circumstances. They don’t shout, but they point the way and nudge things forward.

Let’s talk about **gh, fh, dh, bh** and **aith**.
Seamus Heaney used the silent gh as a kind of shibboleth and a signifier for English confusion about the internal complexities of Ireland in his poem ‘Broagh’: ‘in Broagh/its low tattoo/among the windy boor trees/and rhubarb blades/ended almost/suddenly, like that last/gh the strang-ers found/difficult to manage’.

We’ve mentioned Órlagh and Fionnghuala. There’s also:

**Bronagh (f) Bro-na.** While this is most commonly spelled without a fada, it is derived from brón, meaning sad.

**Clodagh (f) Clow-da.** The original Clodagh was a river goddess.

**Oonagh (f) Oohl-na.** An alternative spelling of Úna.

**Caragh (f) Cah-rah**

**Muirgheal (f) ‘You’re terrible, Muriel!’**

**Ríoghnach (f) Ree-an-och.** This means royal or queen.

**Donagh (m)** Yes, the silent gh can haunt boys’ names too.

**Darragh (m)** Sounds just like Dara.

**Maghnus (m) Man-us.** This is my younger brother’s name and he’s suffered the indignity of being called Magnus by people with silent gh’s in their own names.

**‘fh’**

If you see an fh in Irish, it’s asleep . . . so just tiptoe past it.

**Lasairfhíona (f)** This gorgeous name, as a poetic metaphor for inspiration, means flame of wine: lasair is a flame, fíon
is wine. When you’re making a combined word form like this, the second noun is in the genitive case (**an fhíona** – the **h** silences the **f**). So this name would be pronounced *lah-sarhee-na*. The spelling Lasairiona is also popular (especially in my house, as it’s my daughter’s name).

**Caoilfhionn (f)** Sometimes this one gets anglicized as Keelin. No Caoilfhionn has ever walked out of a Starbucks with her name spelled correctly on her coffee cup. Like Lasairfhíona, Caoilfhionn is a compound form; *caol*, slim and *fionn*, fair.

**‘db’ and ‘dhbh’**

The **h**, as we’ve seen, sounds like a v. The **dh** is like a whispered **y** (*O mo Dhbia* – the Irish for ‘Oh my God’ – sounds like ‘O muh Ye-ah’). Therefore, a **dhbh** most closely resembled a ‘yy’ or ‘eve’ sound in English. In some names this will be presented as **db**; allow me to explain why.

**Medb (f)** Like Órla and Emer, this name (meaning she who intoxicates) presents itself with numerous canonical spelling options. The two most famous are Queen Medb (the intensely single-minded ruler from mythology, Cúchulainn’s worthy foe) and Maeve Binchy (the writer known for her cosy fiction, but also her mercilessly witty journalism). In addition to these two spellings, it also turns up as Medhbh, Méabh, Maedhbh, Maebh and so forth. This diversification gives an insight into changes in Irish spelling conventions over time.

Up until the ’50s, the **d** and **b** would’ve had an accent called a *ponc seimhithe* (represented by a little dot on top). Modern spelling conventions introduced along with the
1959 English-Irish dictionary replaced this handy grammatical feature with a letter h after the accented letter. Versions of names already in common use before this decision was made – like Medb and Sadb – have survived without the inclusion of the h. Names that spiked in popularity in the ’60s and ’70s weren’t affected by the conflict of

*Hidden Level*

**Aodh (m)** This one (often anglicized as Hugh) is a bit cheeky; the dh is silent so it sounds a bit like ‘eh’.

**Muireann (f)** In the extraordinary TV show *Catastrophe*, Sharon Horgan’s character names her daughter Muireann, to the horror of the British and American characters who can’t quite manage to pronounce it. There are no silent letters here, but there’s a little flourish to pronouncing the ’mui’; it’s almost like the exaggerated kissing sound that glamorous Hollywood women used to make – ‘mwah, mwah, dahling!’ So try pronouncing it ‘mweh-rehn’. The same ’mwu’ sound is present in names like Muiris and Muirchertach.

**Doireann (f)** Sometimes people ask me to spell out Irish words phonetically, and one of the reasons I’m reluctant to do so is that I see a name like Doireann and I struggle to think of how anyone could get it wrong. It just seems obvious to me that this rhymes with *stir-in*.
Contrary to what you might have expected, Irish language names were not very widespread in the first half of the twentieth century; the prevailing opinion in the Catholic Church was that saints’ names (in English) were preferable to pagan ones (in Irish) and this view was enforced at the baptismal font.* My dad, Domhnall, was christened Daniel because of such an insistence. Patrick, Mary, Mick, Bernadette, Carmel and Marian are examples of names entrenched in Irish communities, without an origin in the language, that flourished during this practice.

Irish names deemed worthy for a priest to ‘pour water on’ at the time often had a particular local resonance – like Sadhbh.

Sadb/Sadhbh (f) Which brings us to Sive – the John B. Keane play takes its name from the phonetic spelling of Sadb/Sadhbh. Historically, this was a particularly popular name in Kerry, where the town of Cahirsiveen (Cathair Saidhbhin – ‘little Sadb’s fort’) is to be found. This must be the Irish name that gets the most frequent incredulity from Americans, Australians and baristas; if not, it can’t be far from the top. Just as the mythological character Sadhbh changed from a doe to a beautiful woman, the spelling of the name has changed form into the guise of Saibh, Saeve and even Sabhbh.

* This was a widespread practice rather than an infallible doctrine, and some priests were stricter than others. It was especially prevalent in the early years of the Free State when the clergy were still antipathetic to Irish independence.
End-Level Boss Names

By now you’ve covered the biggest pronunciation pitfalls, problems and peccadillos that pop up in Irish. They weren’t as hard as you thought. But, like in an old arcade game, there’s always a big bad one, the kind you have to defeat before you get to the next level – the end-level boss.

These names are either intimidatingly spelled or counter-intuitively pronounced, but once you know how to beat them, they’ll never intimidate you again. When you were taught to drive, you learnt how to change gears, use the handbrake and reverse in different lessons, but as a qualified driver you use all three techniques together instinctively.

Conchubar (m) This is pronounced ‘Conor’ and I will concede that it doesn’t really look like that. This is the old Irish spelling used in the Táin† for the king of Ulster’s name, and the popularity of that text explains how this spelling has retained (some) popularity.‡

† The Táin is the centrepiece of Irish mythology, the epic poem which discusses events precipitated by an argument between Medb and her husband, King Ailill, over which one of them ‘married up’ (who was richer). Medb’s auditors conclude that she is poorer by one prize bull, and she undertakes to obtain a suitable animal. This brings her into conflict with Cúchulainn, the James Bond of the Iron Age. It doesn’t end well.

‡ A translation of the Táin by poet Thomas Kinsella, illustrated by Louis le Brocquy, was published in 1969, arriving at a moment when popular culture was open to mythology and mysticism, but also coinciding with the Civil Rights Movement in Northern Ireland. This translation (and its illustrations) became extremely popular and influential among creatives in many fields.
## A Fada Can Make All the Difference

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Word</th>
<th>Meaning</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Éire</td>
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<tr>
<td>Eire</td>
<td>a burden</td>
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<tr>
<td>Stáir</td>
<td>frenzy</td>
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<td>Stair</td>
<td>history</td>
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<td>kingdom</td>
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<td>disguise</td>
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<td>Cráic</td>
<td>anus</td>
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<tr>
<td>Craic</td>
<td>mirth or merriment</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ábhnann</td>
<td>tune or strain of music</td>
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<tr>
<td>Abhann</td>
<td>river</td>
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<tr>
<td>Fáil</td>
<td>destiny, capability</td>
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<tr>
<td>Fail</td>
<td>hiccup</td>
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<tr>
<td>Duán</td>
<td>fish hook</td>
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<tr>
<td>Duan</td>
<td>poem or song (of course a song could have a catchy hook ...)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Fán</td>
<td>straying/wandering</td>
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<tr>
<td>Fan</td>
<td>stay</td>
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<tr>
<td>Céad</td>
<td>100 or first</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cead</td>
<td>permission (as in ‘an bhfuil cead agam . . . ’) *</td>
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<td>Brícín</td>
<td>peat briquette</td>
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<td>Mórbhealch</td>
<td>main road</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* ‘May I have permission’ – the beginning of the most famous sentence in Irish, when children request leave from a teacher to use the bathroom.
This example applies to some of the other ‘harder’ names; some names achieved popularity at different stages of the language’s journey to standard spelling.†

**Muirchertach (m)** This was once a popular name (my grandfather bore it) but was routinely anglicized as Mortimer, even though there is no commonality of meaning. Mortimer comes from French and means dead (or still) sea, but Muirchertach (mwer-chur-tock-h) was the name of a high king of Ireland.

**Faoiltighearna (f)** This name was in *Irish Names and Surnames*, Reverend Patrick Wolfe’s 1923 collection of popular names in Ireland; Ciara, Síofra and Realtín weren’t. Where did all the Faoiltighearnas go? It’s a great name, meaning wolf lady (faol, wolf and tiarna, lord/lady). *F-whale-tear-nah.*

**Toirdhealbhach (m)** In the twelfth century, Muirchertach Muimhnech was a prince in Connaught, son of the wonderfully named Toirdhealbhach. This is generally simplified to Turlough these days, which gives a clue to how the original name is pronounced – with a silent dh (like Aodh). *Tur-alvach.*

**Flaithbertaigh (both)** Remember how I told you that Orla is derived from Órflaith? Come on, it was only ten pages ago. Well, the aith here sounds much the same. This name has been simplified to Flaherty over the years, and is now more popular as a surname. It has been suggested that this can either mean bright leader or scheming leader.

† The spellings Conchubhar and Medb owe their continued existence to the popularity of the Táin.
Chaoilfhiaclaigh (m)  By now, this should be no trouble to you. That quiet fh in the middle, just like Lasairfhiona or Caolfhionn. A ch at the beginning, just like Christmas, and a final aigh like a contented sigh. Chol-a-heek-lah. This name was very nearly given to my brother. It’s a compound form: caol (meaning slender or narrow, like Caolfhionn above) and fiacla (meaning teeth) – narrow teeth.

See? Not that hard at all.