

Case Study of Irish Naming Custom: Thomas Neill Family, 1650—1900

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Irish naming custom did not explain the use of first names in the case of the Thomas Neill family for the period of 1650 to 1900. A better quantitative explanation was the family used common Quaker names, many of which were also common around Belfast. The approach to the study is defined in Part 1 and results are given in Part 2. Competing cultural influences of Quaker and local customs are quantified in Parts 3 and 4. The conclusion is presented in Part 5, along with a concise model showing evidence of multiple periods of varying cultural influences over the use of names in this family.

Part 1

The case study uses quasi-experimental techniques of predicting and evaluating results. The subject is the Thomas Neill family in Ireland, of which the earliest record is the birth of his son John in Fermanagh circa 1675. Thomas, born circa 1650, and his sons variously used the surname O'Neill and Neill, but thereafter Neill in association with their Quaker identity. The sample comprises 30 men over seven lineal generations who were his descendants. Two sons are included in the sample from the second generation.

Afterwards, no further lineal descendants in Ireland have been identified for inclusion in the sample. The seven generations resided in County Fermanagh, County Armagh, County Down, Belfast in County Antrim, and in the seventh generation both Belfast and New York City. The sample did not include known data from the third generation whose children were all born in a Scots Irish community in Virginia in the 1700s, considered outside the range of Irish custom.

For purposes of this study, it assumes the family genealogy is correct. It is also noted that the Y-DNA result indicates the family was Irish. Religious affiliation within the sample was predominantly Quaker, although various individuals were Catholic or Protestant from the Church of Ireland, Presbyterian, Congregational and Lutheran traditions, and not uncommon for individuals to have been both Catholic and Protestant during the course of

their lifetime. Three factors were considered to explain the use of first names: Irish custom, Quaker names, local custom of Belfast.

The Irish naming custom is defined by the following parameters:¹

- First born son named after his father's father
- Second born son named after his mother's father
- Third born son named after his father
- Fourth born son named after his father's oldest brother
- Fifth born son named after his father's 2nd oldest brother or his mother's oldest brother

Elaboration of exceptions based on practical matters, such as the death of infants:

- Naming patterns are sometimes obscured by deaths in infancy. However, where a specific name was considered important within the family, the name would usually be given to the next-born infant. Thus you can sometimes find two or more children of the same name, baptised within the same family. Each baptism of this name, usually indicates the death of the older child of this name, but also tells us that the parents wanted to keep this name alive within the family.
- Another instance in which this naming pattern can be thrown out is when a child was stillborn or born sickly or dying. The child might then be baptised using a family name, but the name of the paternal grandfather might be 'reserved' for a live birth, or for a child expected to live. This is based entirely on anecdotal evidence, and refers to a number of known cases in all four provinces, which occurred over the last century.
- A similar pattern existed for naming the oldest daughters in a family. It was not as strictly adhered to.

Part 2

Names were predicted based on the known family records, in Table 1. The practical matter of infant deaths was encountered in some generations, and in others this data was known. See column for 'infant names.' Another practical matters encountered was the lack of mother's father's name or her oldest brother's name.

Other practical problems were encountered in completing the predicted names:

- In the first generation, names from the prior generations were unknown.
- In the fourth generation, the father had no brothers.
- In the seventh generation, the father was twice married, complicating the sequence.

¹ Dwayne O'Neill, personal correspondence, August 13, 2025.

Table 1. Predicted names based on Irish custom

PREDICTED NAMES				1st	2nd	3rd	4th	5th
Gen. #	father	mother's father	infant names	father's father	mother's father	father	father's bro1	father's bro2, mother's bro1
G1	Thomas	unknown	unknown	unknown	unknown	Thomas	unknown	unknown
G2	John	Lewis	known	Thomas	Lewis	John	James	Thomas, Lewis
G2	James	John	unknown	Thomas	unknown	James	John	Thomas, James
G3	John	Samuel	known	James	Samuel	John	John	Thomas, Joel
G4	Samuel	William	known	John	William	Samuel	n/a	n/a, unknown
G5	Samuel	unknown	unknown	Samuel	unknown	Samuel	Joseph	Thomas, unknown
G6	Samuel	unknown	unknown	Samuel	unknown	Samuel	William	n/a, unknown
G7	John m1	James	known	Samuel	James	John	James	Thomas, William
G7	John m2	Michael	known	Samuel	Michael	John	James	Thomas, unknown

The predicted names were evaluated for fit to actual names used, with this key, and the results provided in Table 2.

Fit Model	Out of Sequence	Unknown	Miss
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The results in Table 2 applied the key to actual sons' names, by generation. While some names did fit the model, others were out of sequence (example, in G2, Lewis should have been second son, not fourth), a few were of unknown fit, and others were misses with unexplained names.

Table 2. Actual names fit to Irish custom

ACTUAL NAMES FIT TO IRISH NAMES MODEL				1st	2nd	3rd	4th	5th	6th
Gen. #	father	mother's father	infant names	father's father	mother's father	father	father's bro1	father's bro2, mother's bro1	n/a
G1	Thomas	unknown	unknown	John	James	Thomas			
G2	John	Lewis	infants known	Thomas	Samuel	John	Lewis	Joseph	William
	James	John	unknown	John					
G3	John	Samuel	infants known	James	John	Samuel	William	Joseph	
G4	Samuel	William	infants known	Joseph	Thomas	Samuel	William		
G5	Samuel	unknown	unknown	Samuel	William				
G6	Samuel	unknown	unknown	James	John	Thomas			
G7	John m1	James	infants known	William John					
	John m2	Michael	infants known		Michael	John Thomas	Samuel Joseph	James John	Alexander

Overall, the model did not perform well, accurately predicting 31% of the names. If we are more lenient because it is a custom, and include predicted names used out of predicted sequence, there is a better result of 58% by including those out of sequence.

Still, 15% was unknown, so the best possible result could be 73%, which is consistent with the 27% of names that were unpredicted by the parameters of the custom. In the mother's father's column, this name was observed in five of six instances where it was known, but only once in the predicted sequence. The individual with the best fit to the model was in the seventh generation.

Table 3. *Evaluation of results based on Irish custom*

Generation	father	Fit Model	Out of Sequence	Unknown	Miss	Subtotal	N/A	Total
G1	Thomas	1	0	2	0	3	0	3
G2	John	2	1	0	2	5	1	6
	James	0	1	0	0	1	0	1
G3	John	1	2	0	0	3	2	5
G4	Samuel	1	1	0	2	4	0	4
G5	Samuel	1	0	1	0	2	0	2
G6	Samuel	0	0	1	2	3	0	3
G7	John	2	2	0	1	5	1	6
TOTAL	Total	8	7	4	7	26	4	30
	Percentage	31%	27%	15%	27%			

Part 3

An alternate explanation was explored that this family’s naming convention was driven by their affiliation with Quaker society. Rather than five sons named based on a customary sequence, this parameter used is the five most common Quaker names. To identify these five names, a ChatGPT prompt was used:²

“In 18th-century Ireland, Quaker naming patterns closely followed those of English Friends, with a strong preference for simple, biblical, and virtue-inspired names. Surviving meeting records from Quaker communities in Dublin, Cork, Carlow, and Ulster show that the most common first names were:

For men:

- John – by far the most frequent male name in the minutes and marriage registers.
- William – second only to John in prevalence, appearing in nearly every meeting’s records.
- Thomas – another staple biblical name.
- Joseph – common in both Irish and English Quaker families.
- Samuel – widely used, especially in Ulster meetings.
- George – somewhat less biblical, but popular due to influential Friends like George Fox.

For women:

- Mary – dominant among female names, reflecting its general popularity in Ireland.
- Elizabeth – nearly as frequent as Mary.
- Sarah – a major favourite in both Ireland and England.

² ChatGPT prompt, August 14, 2025, “What were the most common Quaker first names in Ireland in the 1700s”.

- Hannah – widely chosen, particularly in Cork and Ulster records.
- Anne / Ann – often spelled without the ‘e’ in meeting minutes.
- Margaret – frequent, though slightly less than the above.

Quakers in Ireland avoided saints’ names associated with Catholic veneration, extravagant ‘fashionable’ names, or anything that hinted at vanity. They also largely resisted Irish-language given names in this period, sticking instead to plain biblical or traditional English ones.”

Using the five most common Quaker names as the predictive parameter, the results were 77%, and an improvement over the Irish custom result. This result, shown in Table 4 indicates being Quaker was a stronger influence on the family’s naming custom than their Irish identity.

Table 4. *Evaluation of results based on Quaker names*

Rank	Name	Name	
		Uses	Percent
1	John	6	20%
2	William	5	17%
3	Thomas	4	13%
4	Joseph	3	10%
5	Samuel	5	17%
	Subtotal	23	77%
	James	4	13%
	Lewis	1	3%
	Michael	1	3%
	Alexander	1	3%
	Total	30	100%

Part 4

A second, alternate explanation evaluated was that names are explained by local custom. This parameter was the five most common names used by Neill families in Belfast, as identified by a study of city directories for the years 1805 to 1890.³

At 67%, the local custom model performed better than the Irish custom (31%, with possible best case outcome of 73%), but not as well as the Quaker model result of 77%. The noticeable difference between Quaker names and Belfast names is the lack of the name *Robert* in the family.

³ Jon Patraic Neill, August 2025, *Samuel Neill of Belfast and Ballymacarrett in PRONI Directories: Evidence from 1805—1890*, Table 3.

Table 5. *Evaluation of results based on Belfast names*

Rank	Name	Name	
		Uses	Percent
1	James	4	13%
2	John	6	20%
3	Robert	0	0%
4	William	5	17%
5	Samuel	5	17%
	Subtotal	20	67%
	Thomas	4	13%
	Joseph	3	10%
	Lewis	1	3%
	Michael	1	3%
	Alexander	1	3%
	Total	30	100%

Part 5

Conclusion.

The Irish custom naming model did not explain the use of names in the Thomas Neill family. Strictly determined, it explained 31% of the names, compared with 27% of names not predicted in any sequence. If all unknown data landed properly, the result could be as high as 73% fit, which is still short of what could be expected from a strong custom. Overall, including the results of unknown and out-of-sequence categories, the distribution of the data looks nearly random. The explanation that the family used names found customarily in the population around Belfast was possibly a better explanation at 67%. The better explanation, explaining 77% of names, was the family used customarily Quaker names.

The results of this study indicate it cannot be generalized. Another such study with a sample more concentrated in fewer generations and from a family with a different faith tradition could yield a different conclusion about the Irish naming custom. Yet, the take away from the conclusion is that cultural influences did impact the use of first names in the family, even as these cultural influences changed over time.

In Table 6, the cultural influences on the Thomas Neill family are shown in four periods, showing when specific first names were introduced. In Period 1, the three names of Thomas, John and James, have nearly identical phonetic equivalents in the Irish and English languages. The Irish naming custom would have been strongest in this generation, which provides the useful insight that Thomas Neill's father could have been John. In Period 2, the Quaker influence is seen with the introduction of names Samuel and Joseph, whose use was otherwise not predicted by the Irish naming custom model. Period 3 is noteworthy in that no new names were introduced over a three-generation span, indicating stasis in

which the family used names of its own custom, whether from Irish or Quaker origin. This changes in Period 4, with the influence of the Irish in America as Irish names are reintroduced in the family.

Table 6. *Cultural influences on the use of first names in the Thomas Neill family*

Period	Century	Generation	First Use of Name	Introduction	Influence
1	1600's	G1, G2	Thomas	first generation	Irish equivalent, Tomás
			John	second generation	Irish equivalent, Seán (Shane), Séan
			James	second generation	Irish equivalent, Séamus
2	1700's	G3	Samuel	Quaker	Quaker influence
			Joseph	Quaker	
			Lewis	Mother's father	
			William	undetermined	
3		G4	[none]	[none]	customary use
		G5	[none]	[none]	
		G6	[none]	[none]	
4	1800s	G7	Michael	Mother's father	Irish in America influence
			Alexander	undetermined	

In Table 7, the reintroduction of Irish names is seen with the first birth in New York City, Michael, named for his mother's father from Waterford, Ireland. Yet, the father, John Neill in the seventh generation, used Quaker names in nine instances for his other five sons, when considering first and middle names as separate instances. John also deviated from custom by using middle names. His constraint was that the few names of customary use was quickly exhausted, so he used John three times and introduced Alexander, used by his Quaker ancestors and perhaps other near relatives.

Table 7. *Sons of John Neill born in Belfast and New York City, with ten names from six sons*

Item	Name Instance	Full Name	Generation introduced	Influence
1	William	William John	3rd generation	Quaker
2	John	William John	2nd generation	Irish & Quaker
3	Michael	Michael	7th generation	Irish
4	John	John Thomas	2nd generation	Irish & Quaker
5	Thomas	John Thomas	1st generation	Irish & Quaker
6	Samuel	Samuel Joseph	3rd generation	Quaker
7	Joseph	Samuel Joseph	3rd generation	Quaker
8	James	James John	2nd generation	Irish & Quaker
9	John	James John	2nd generation	Irish & Quaker
10	Alexander	Alexander	7th generation	Quaker

In Table 8, beyond the range of the study, the Irish in America period continued in the Neill line with the alternate and mixed use of Quaker and Irish names, even as the wives did not identify as Irish and none identified as Quaker. This is perhaps the best indicator of culture

and custom, as we participate in ways of doing things without necessarily the awareness of how and why.

Table 8. *Period 4, continuation of Irish in America influence*

Century	Century	Generation	Name	Sons' names	Influence
4	1900s	G8	William	William	Quaker
				Donald	Irish
		G9	Donald	John Peter	Quaker, Irish
		G10	John	Jon Patraic	Quaker, Irish
		G11	Jon Patraic	Alexander	Quaker
				Connor	Irish
	2000s	G12	Alexander	[private]	Quaker, Irish

The author is highlighted in the eleventh generation. Not evident from the tables is despite six sons, John Neill had just two grandsons named Neill and two great-grandsons.