

# THE FITZPATRICKS OF DOWN

By Geoff Fitzpatrick

## INTRODUCTION

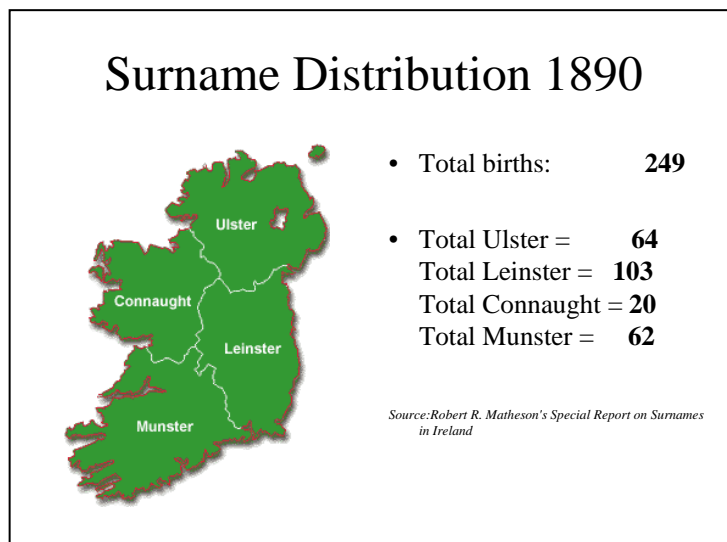
The Fitzpatrick DNA study identified a group of Fitzpatricks who share a similar DNA signature and who can trace their roots back to County Down in Northern Ireland. These Fitzpatricks (known as the County Down Group) live as far apart as can be imagined, being found in California, Florida, Australia, New Zealand and England, but so far no common family links have been established between them.

The path and timetable of Fitzpatrick migration to County Down is a mystery as is their relationship to the main Fitzpatrick line. This paper examines the clues provided by the distribution of Fitzpatricks in County Down and the geography and history of the area. It also identifies further lines of enquiry that may help resolve the mystery.

## SURNAME DISTRIBUTION

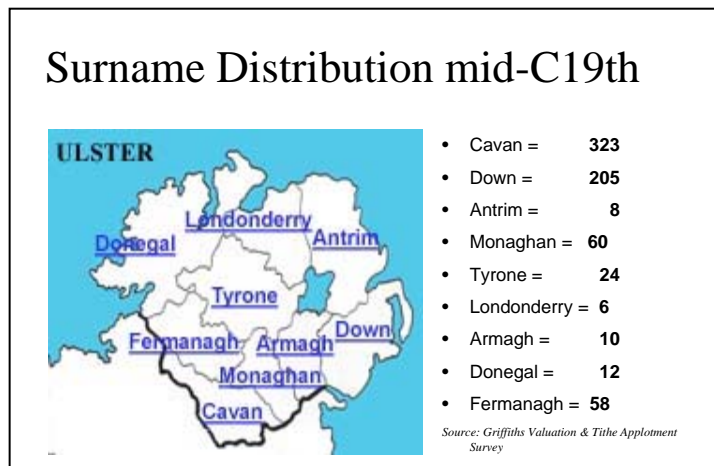
### Matheson's Report

In 1890 Robert Matheson recorded all the births in Ireland that year and his report gives an idea of the frequency and distribution of specific surnames at that time. The results show that Fitzpatrick was the 61<sup>st</sup> most common surname in Ireland and that half of all Fitzpatricks born that year were in Leinster, with about 25% being born in Ulster.



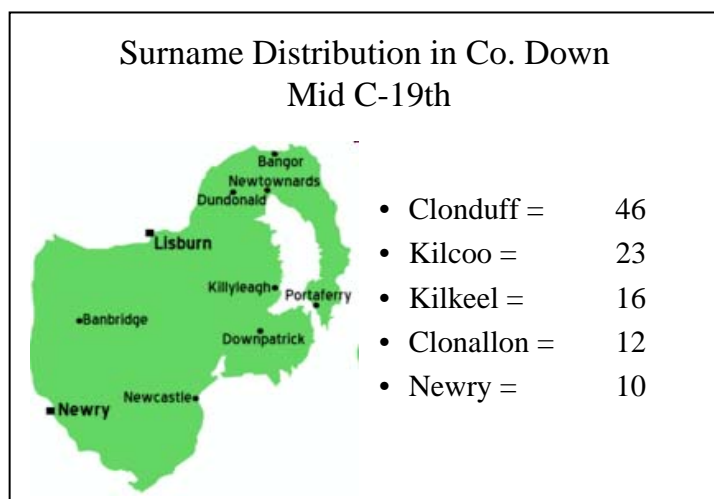
## Surname Distribution in Ulster

In order to get an idea of the spread of Fitzpatricks through Ulster it is necessary to turn to the Tithe Applotment Books of 1834 and the 1863/4 Griffiths Valuation Survey. This shows that by far the greatest concentration of Fitzpatricks was in County Cavan (45%) and the second largest concentration was in County Down (nearly 30%).



## Surname Distribution in Co. Down

From this very unscientific survey it seems that the Fitzpatricks of County Down make up about 7% of the Fitzpatrick family. However the examination of surname distribution becomes really interesting when the distribution of Fitzpatricks in County Down is examined. According to the Tithe Applotment Books and the Griffiths Survey there were 205 Fitzpatricks identified as living in the county. Over half of these were to be found in just five neighbouring parishes – Newry, Clonallan, Clonduff, Kilcoo and Kilkeel – all in the Mountains of Mourne area in the south of the county. It is reasonable to assume that the first Fitzpatricks in County Down settled in this area, probably in the parishes of Clonduff or Kilcoo, and, over time, spread out to other parishes.



## **MOUNTAINS OF MOURNE**

How did Fitzpatrick's come to be attracted to the Mountains of Mourne? Is there anything special about the area? The geography and history of the region provide some clues.

### **Geography**

The Mourne Mountains rise to about 2,500 feet, cutting off south Down and acting as a barrier to trade and communication. Until the 1800's, the area's only connection with the outside world was by sea, and along the coast to Newcastle and Newry. Even with the construction of a road through the mountains, the coastal lowlands remained isolated until comparatively recently.

The upland areas of Mourne are composed of hard, acidic granite and have a poor soil base. High rainfall leaches out nutrients faster than they can be replaced making the soil progressively more acid and less fertile. Peat bogs have formed in the flatter parts of the hills where the soil is constantly waterlogged. The surrounding countryside is covered with a diversity of soils, ranging from deep acid sands on the coastal plain to shallower, more fertile land on the northern foothills of the mountains.

### **History**

The area was sparsely populated until the 17<sup>th</sup> century when there was an influx of families. This was because the native Irish were being driven from the fertile lands they occupied by English and Scottish colonists and forced on to less productive land, such as the slopes of the Mountains of Mourne. As one local historian has put it, the Mountains of Mourne at this time "... became a refuge for the dispossessed Irish...." The only alternative was emigration.

During the 18<sup>th</sup> century families living in the area were able to survive by growing potatoes and through the spinning and weaving on flax. Those who turned over part of their land to the growing of flax were rewarded with one or more spinning wheels, or a loom, depending on how much land they turned over. (In 1796 there were 24 Fitzpatrick's in the area recorded on the Flax Growers List). It has been estimated that families needed about 12 acres to survive, however, the average holding was about 10 acres although some were as little as three acres. Life wasn't easy and there were events that were to make it considerably more difficult.

The population of Ireland doubled during the C18th and scarcity of land became a major problem. This led to attempts to cultivate the less profitable upland areas and family farms were divided into even smaller and more uneconomical units. The American War of Independence and the Napoleonic Wars were preceded by an economic slump. For a time emigration was not possible because of blockades on shipping. Also, during this period, landowners discovered that grazing livestock were more profitable than people and the number of evictions increased. Then from the 1830s there was a gradual decline in the cottage spinning and weaving industry because of the introduction of new technology. Persistent civil strife throughout the period only added to the hardships suffered. Finally, in the 1840s came the Famine.

Some textbooks suggest that Co. Down avoided the extreme effects of the Great Famine – this was not the case. There were pockets of severe distress, most particularly the area between Newcastle & Newry – an area that takes in four of the main parishes where Fitzpatrick's are found. In January 1847, for example, about 23% of the population around Newry were reported to be in a state of destitution – that is 7 – 800 families.

Today the Mountains of Mourne are one of the most beautiful and peaceful places on earth you could wish to find but it is not difficult to see from this very brief history why so many people in the past sought to emigrate.

## **FURTHER LINES OF ENQUIRY**

### **Kilpatrick link**

A number of books on the origin of surnames suggest a link between the names Fitzpatrick and Kilpatrick and one goes so far as to suggest that the Fitzpatricks of Ulster are actually Kilpatricks and originate from Scotland not Ireland. It is not clear where this theory comes from but so far comparison between the DNA of the Down Group and DNA of Kilpatricks has not revealed any close matches. Furthermore, there does not seem to be a consistent pattern to the Kilpatrick DNA. However, it must be stressed that this study has only been carried out on the small number of Kilpatrick DNA test results found on the internet. There is clearly a belief from a number of authoritative sources that there is a link between the two families and this is something that would repay further investigation.

### **Shera/Sheridan connection**

MacLysaght mentions a Fitzpatrick changing his name to Shera in honour of his uncle Jeffery (Shera being the Irish for Jeffrey). Furthermore, the surname Sheridan (Shera-dan) might be a derivative of Shera. The results of the Fitzpatrick DNA study have the Down Group sitting quite close to the Shera Group. As yet the two groups are not connected but it is possible that a “missing link” might one-day turn up that would establish a connection between the two groups. Again, this is another line of enquiry worth pursuing.

### **Down/Leinster link**

In this book – *An Historical Account of the Diocese of Down & Connor* published originally in 1878 James O'Laverty refers to long standing links between the people of Mourne and the people of Leix (Laois). As evidence he quotes the following story:

Mrs M'Cartan, who was born in 1760, related to Mr J. W. Hanna the following tradition: - “During the wars in Ireland, all the people in this part of the country went to the south of Ireland and the Rev. Neal McAvoy who was parish priest of Kilcoo went along with them to Ossory, to the Earl of Ossory – that was his title, but his name was Fitzpatrick – he stopped with the Earl of Ossory till the peace was made, when he came back, he got his parish and his house; and he was buried himself and his uncle in Kilcoo.”

The wars referred to were the Williamite wars. This means the people of Kilcoo would have set out in 1689. It is thought they did not return until 1704 as it was in that year that McAvoy reappears on the list of parish priests for Down and Connor.

Documents in British archives from this period refer to Barnabas Fitzpatrick, Baron of Ossory and his 'safe haven for papists'; believed to be the castle in Borris in Ossory, County Laois.

This intriguing story suggests that perhaps strong links existed between the Fitzpatricks of Down and the County Laois Fitzpatricks in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. More research needs to be carried out into the history of his period to see if a link between the two can be established.

Currently the earliest recorded Fitzpatrick does not appear in official records until 1730 when

## **CONCLUSION**

The circumstantial evidence points to one or more Fitzpatrick families arriving in County Down in the 17<sup>th</sup> century having been evicted from the land they farmed. Where they came from is not yet known but what does seem certain is that, once in County Down, they suffered many hardships over a long period and this may be the reason why so many sought a better life away from Ireland and why, in the present day, they are so widely dispersed.

## **BIBLIOGRAPHY**

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MacLysaght, Edward, (1957) *Irish Families, their names, arms and origins*, Hodges Figgis, Dublin

O'Laverty, The Rev. James (1878) *An Historical Account of the Diocese of Down and Connor*, James Duffy & Sons, Dublin

Proudfoot, Lindsay (ed), 1997 *Down History & Society*, Geography Publications, Dublin

## **USEFUL WEBSITES FOR PEOPLE RESEARCHING THEIR COUNTY DOWN ROOTS**

Ireland Genealogy Projects County Down website - <http://www.rootsweb.com/~nirdow2/index.htm>

Ros Davies' Co. Down Genealogy Research Site - <http://freepages.genealogy.rootsweb.com/~rosdavies/>

Ramond's County Down Website - <http://www.raymondscountydownwebsite.com/>