

## **What's in a Name? The underlying narrative behind contemporary names for small businesses in Belfast, and their use of forms common in oral tradition**

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In the past shops were known and referred to by the family names of their owners. In recent times, however, it has become the trend for some small businesses to divert from this tradition. My paper explores and reveals some of the underlying narrative and some of the unwritten rules that naming follows in the strive to achieve social communication. There are few official regulations regarding the naming of shops. Businesses simply have to be registered with Companies House.

My focus of study is small, privately-owned businesses on one of the main roads leading from Belfast's city boundary towards its centre, the Ormeau Road. The names of such premises are governed by the local, in contrast to those of chain stores which are superimposed on an area. The road in question takes its name from what was once a private estate, the Ormeau estate, which was laid out along the River Lagan in 1807 by the aristocrat owner of most of Belfast, the 2nd Marquis of Donegall. Then the road at the west of the estate, the one under examination, was less important than the one east of it. However, this changed when a bridge, supplementing a ferry, was constructed to link it across the river, the present bridge dating to 1863. The district became residential and the road edged by houses. However, this altered over time and as of 2013 we find shops, and businesses of other kinds there, with houses on all the side streets off it. There is a more transitory population in the area north of the bridge, the city side, where many houses are rented to university students and economic migrants. Of the little residential accommodation that there still is on the Ormeau Road itself we find a mixture of a few old, privately-owned houses north of the bridge and new social housing, and some new apartments, both privately-owned and rented, on the south side. In 1880 the bulk of the private Donegall estate became Belfast's first public park, Ormeau Park. The estate had been laid out in the Ballynafeigh district of South Belfast, and constitutes only part of that district. However, it is its imported name, "Ormeau" (said to be from the French for "elm beside the water") which has been favoured by businesses, rather than the older name derived from Irish "Ballynafeigh".

While through fieldwork I was enquiring about the names currently on the Ormeau Road, I was also seeing how these have changed over the last forty years or so by using the last street directory published for Belfast, that of 1996, one from the 1980s (1987), and one from the 1970s (1975).

Despite the fact that many of the businesses are family-owned and run, only the men's names are traditionally used – their family name and initials. However, there are certain businesses which may be owned, and are certainly run by, women. Three sorts, home bakeries, ladies' hairdressers', and wool shops, are or, in the case of the last, were, represented on the Ormeau Road, and with them we can see a divergence from the usual tradition. Instead of men's names the women's names were used. However, instead of their

family name, it was usually just their first name. While in 2013 there was no longer a wool shop on the Ormeau Road, the 1975 and 1987 street directories record **Jean's Wool Shop** (at 287a); this business, trading under the same name, was later located nearby, on another arterial road into the city.

The second sort of business which tends to be owned and run by women and, in recent times, at least, often carries a woman's name is the home bakery. For example, in 1996 there was **Jayne's Cake Shop** (at number 373). In 2013 there were two home bakeries on the road. One (at number 162), when taken over in 1998, was renamed "**Helen's Home Bakery**" by the new owner, Helen being her own name.

The third sort of business which tended in the past to carry women's names was ladies' hairdressers'. We can see from the street directory of 1975 that all eight listed followed this pattern, with seven being simply under a first name, more than likely the owner's: so we find **Marie, Donna's, Kathy's, Joy's, Sonia, Doreen's, and Frances**, a gender distinction in ownership being consciously communicated. By 1987 only one with this type of name – **Doreen's** – remained and today there is a new trend in naming.

Some names which appear to be genuine personal names are not. A hairdresser's opened on the Ormeau Road in 2012 under the name "**De Cano** Unisex Hair Studio". This sounds like an Italian name and, indeed, there are many people of Italian descent in Belfast. However, the owner's real name is "Deacon". Her father gave the family name the Italian-sounding pronunciation "De Cano" to her as a joke nickname when she was a child, to make it sound glamorous.

Butchers' shops nearly always have traditional, straightforward names, with simply the owner's name, communicating staunch family values. Thus on the Ormeau Road we find **Thomas McCreery** (at 439) and also **Graham Brothers** (at 355). The latter has recently, in the 2010s, become **MAKS MEATS** [sic]. I asked the assistant, who turned out to be the owner's father, about this more informal name. He indicated the owner and said:

"Well, it's his name, you know, [nodding to the owner] he took it on [the business]. [He's] McCormack."

So I assumed that he had just shortened his name to "Mak" until I spoke to the owner of the shop next door. His story was that Mr. McCormack, the son, had three Alsatians and that "M", "A", and "K" were the initials of their names. On a second visit to the butcher's to question this I spoke to Mr McCormack, Senior, again. He said, "Oh, yes, the dogs, there's three dogs – Mak, Ayesha and Kaia", but he also referred again to the "Mc" of their own name.

In a similar way there was a hidden personal narrative behind the name of the newest business on the road, one which only opened on April 26th, 2013. It was a beauty salon called **Not So Plain Jane**. When I enquired about it the young co-owner told me:

“Well, me and my sisters thought it up. It spells our initials and my granny’s called Jean ... Jordan, Andrea, Natalie and Emma, and my granny’s called Jean. And my wee niece is Eva Jane.”

The last name which cloaks its origin is one for a hairdresser’s, formerly at number 164. I was in **Helen’s** Home Bakery next door at 162 and asked the person serving:

*FCW: Are you Helen?*

Co-owner: No, it was my Mummy. She died four years ago in September. She set it up. We [her daughters] had a hairdresser’s next door, [called] **Jade**. She left us to carry on.

*FCW: I’m sure it’s hard work.*

Co-owner: It’s hard work but we finish earlier.

*FCW: When did your mother set up the bakery?*

Co-owner: Fifteen years ago.

*FCW: And where did [the name] “**Jade**” [come from] ...?*

Co-owner: It was me Mummy’s dog – a wee bijou – and jade was her favourite gemstone ...

The significance behind such names is obviously lost on the customers but is very important to the proprietors and possibly acts like a talisman.

In 1975 only two Chinese businesses, the **Tung Sun Chinese Cafe** and a Chinese food bar, are listed (at 61a and 138 respectively). As of 2013 there were several, as well as other Asian food outlets. Their names all follow patterns which are different from the western-owned businesses. Notably, none included an owner’s name. In the case of Chinese businesses, the name is often something that it is considered will bring good fortune. Steve, the owner of the **Tung Sun**, now a takeaway relocated further south on the road (at number 287), explained that when his parents set up the business just over forty four years ago, they chose a name that meant something solid – “tung” is “mountain”. A mountain is something good and solid that would be a good foundation for their venture, “sun” is eastern, so “Eastern Mountain”. A Chinese friend, HW, commented:

“ ‘Mountain’ in China equates to reliability and stableness, as well as benevolence. Wealth will stay since mountain is still [static].”

The same idea is evident in another Chinese takeaway in a street off the Ormeau Road – **Lucky House** in Sunnyside Street, which opened in 2012.

I asked Mr Wong, Junior, of the long-established (1973 in Portadown, 1982 in Belfast) **Welcome Chinese Restaurant** in an adjacent area of South Belfast, Stranmillis, about naming. For many years his father was the chairperson of the Chinese Welfare Association, initially a sort of Chamber of Commerce:

*FCW I'm interested in the name of your restaurant [because] it's not your family name.*

Mr Wong: No, Wong. "Welcome" is auspicious. Everyone knows it. We got the name from a fish and chip shop here [in the area] but they couldn't sue us for copyright [because] they closed soon after.

Another on the Ormeau Road was called "**Sunshine**", considered a name of good fortune, and possibly linking in to nearby Sunnyside Street (**SUNSHINE CHINESE HOT FOOD BAR, SZECHUAN SPECIALISTS** at number 282). I was told in it that customers always said it was the oldest such business on the road. It has been there since 1980. When the present owner took over in about 2008 he kept the name. A third is called **Together**, which is a name of good fortune too, besides neatly conveying that it sells both Eastern and Western food.

Other outlets selling non-European food incorporate the type of cuisine in their name. For instance, we find the longstanding restaurant, the **Bengal Brasserie, The Original Istanbul** selling kebabs (and pizza) as of 2013, the **Bangla Bazar**, a shop selling Asian food (and African food), and the **New China** takeaway. The names of Indian-owned takeaways are often more specific in the kind of food that is on offer. For instance, we can find **Zeera**, (or "jeera"), which is the spice cumin, and **Tikka Tikka**. The third Asian takeaway, however, was not named after a foodstuff. The owner told me:

"**Ruchi**" [the name] means "appetiser" in our language.

*FCW: And what is that?*

Owner: Bangladeshi. It's a small [short] name but it means a lot.

People have no difficulty in accepting all these names in different languages and using them in everyday communication. The **Namaste Yoga Centre and Clinic**, which opened in May 2009, adds to the mix. About its name the co-owner from Nepal commented:

"Most people who do yoga know what 'Namaste' means. It's a greeting in Nepal. It means the Buddha in me salutes the Buddha in you ... It's something unusual, special." (February 28th, 2013)

Despite the variety of languages used in the names and, although, since 1996, there has been an Irish-medium school called **An Droichead** "The Bridge", adjacent to the road, and the fact that several of the sidestreets have their street signs in both Irish and English, in 2013 there was no business which had an Irish-language name.

The names of some businesses make reference to their location. A large section of the Ormeau Road is flanked by the former gasworks. Opposite, a cafe took its name from the works, being called the **Gas Light Coffee Shop** (number 117, 1996) with, beside it, the **Lamplight Women's Information Group Drop In Centre** (number 115, 1996), both linked, and part of a community enterprise.

The river features in others – for instance, **Riverside Print** (here until 2012) and the **Lagan Palace**, a Chinese takeaway. We can tell that this was a Chinese food outlet because the element “palace” often occurs in the names of such businesses. In fact, in the 1980s and 1990s, there was a Chinese restaurant called the **Golden Palace** (at 451) on the Ormeau Road. The name, **Lagan Palace**, aptly links the business to its locality, while remaining exotic in essence, as does the punning **Thai tanic**, a (Thai) noodle bar, elsewhere in South Belfast, while a cafe links into the French origin of the name Ormeau, calling itself **Café le Petit Ormeau** (established c2009).

During the recent conflict, the first ceasefire of which was in 1995, different ends of the Ormeau Road came to reflect different political loyalties and were differentiated unofficially by using the terms “Upper Ormeau” on the south side of the bridge and “Lower Ormeau” on the north side. A cafe which opened in March 2012 picks up on this. It was situated in the part of the road unofficially referred to as the “Lower Ormeau” and was called **The Lower Crust Pizzeria**, linking it not only to its locality but to a wellknown phrase, “upper crust”, a metaphor taken from food meaning “superior”. While this reflects the new reality of how the two parts of the road are unofficially defined, it is not a blatant conflict-related name like the one for a fish and chip shop in East Belfast, “**For Cod and Ulster!**”, which is a pun on a paramilitary organisation’s motto.

Two businesses, rather than referring to the district in which they are located, refer to the owner’s place of origin. One is a pub now called the **Errigle Inn**. I asked the young bartender about the name:

Young Bartender: “It’s a mountain in Galway or Donegal or somewhere. It was started by the manager’s grandfather. I’ll see if he’s busy.”

She went off to see and on her return said:

“Well, it’s in Donegal. The McGurrans [the owners] came from there. The family came from Donegal.”

When first established, in 1935, it simply went under the owner’s name – Thomas James McGurran. Errigal is the highest mountain in Donegal and it is no doubt this that people imagine when they hear the pub’s name. According to some customers of long standing, the pub’s name just sounds like the mountain’s name and actually refers to the district where the family originated (however, another suggestion is that the spelling reflects pronunciation). In any case, having a placename makes it stand out from the usual names for pubs. Another business which was named after its owner’s place of origin was the restaurant **Macau**, from an island which is much less wellknown than its neighbour, Hong Kong, but of which the owner was very proud and wished to extol.

The Ormeau Road offers scope for looking at naming as part of the process of how more recent incomers to the city help to establish their fragile enterprises. Within the last few years migrants from Eastern Europe have set up efficient car washes in vacant lots. These are just in the open air with no actual premises. There were three on the Ormeau Road and one

on an adjacent sidestreet. Usually such small businesses have no names, just a signboard giving prices, and one of those on the Ormeau Road was like this. However, the others had just adopted names. One was called “**Stephi Ltd Hand Car Wash**”. When I went there I asked *Are you the owner? Are you Stephi?* and got an affirmative nod. Using the owner’s name fits in with the tradition of naming here. However, businesses to do with cars usually use the more formal second name, thus we have **Brown Brothers, Motor Accessories**, and **W. H. Alexander, Motor Engineers**, and so on. The other car wash, although operating for about a year without a name, since 2013 has had “**A1 Car Valeting**” on its signboard, while the one on the adjacent side road has been called “**Soapy Bubble**” since 2013 too. Attaching a name allows customers to identify one place from another in what is, no doubt, a very competitive and possibly even a transitory business venture.

The trend nowadays is for certain types of business to use appealing catchy names which draw on oral tradition in both content and form, rather than the owner’s name, but behind which is sometimes a personal narrative. In December 2012 a home baker’s and cafe called **Bread and Banjo** opened (at number 353). The owners were a couple with E, the husband, being local and J, his wife, being from the United States. When I asked E about the name and how they came to choose it he said that it was from a festival in the US called “Bread and Puppets” where he and his wife had baked. When they opened their business in Belfast they thought about calling it the Ormo Bakery: there had been a commercial bakery of that name a few doors away. However, they decided against it, because they wanted their name to show that their business was different. E plays the banjo, and when they got established, they hoped to have music sessions in their cafe. He suggested the name “Bread and Banjo” as a joke and J liked it so they traded under that. The name, while unique, takes the form of a binomial and begins with “bread and” like the traditional “bread and butter” and maintains the same alliteration, no doubt aiding its memorability. Another business, a cafe only, which closed in 2012, used a proverbial phrase without any transformation except to use the pun literally and was called “**A piece of cake**” (at number 117).

Apart from cafes, the other kind of business that draws on familiar current oral tradition for names is unisex hairdressers’. In 2013 the Ormeau Road had eight, one of which opened in May 2012. Only one carries a straightforward personal name. It is a special case because, unlike the others, it was run by Marie, a lady of African heritage who seems to be a newcomer to the city. Her shop had been open for a year when I spoke to her but had never had a name displayed. Marie told me in 2013 that she had a name in mind: **Marie’s Hair Braiding and Extensions**. Her name would therefore be in keeping with what was once the general trend. She did not appear to have been influenced by the contemporary names of the surrounding hairdressers’. The others included puns on everyday phrases: **WAYAHEAD**, **SHEAR BLISS HAIR STUDIO**, **KURL UP & DYE** and **STREAKS AHEAD**. The fashion for this began longer ago than might be expected. **STREAKS AHEAD** was established and run by a brother and his two sisters. Despite the seemingly contemporary name they called it this in 1983, when they first started. When I asked about the name one sister played it down as being “just a pun on ‘streets ahead’.” She did say that their parents had called their hairdressing business in the city centre, not by their family name, but after a

musical popular at the time, *My Fair Lady*. The owner of **KURL UP & DYE**, established in 1981, said that her sister saw this name on hairdressers' in the US and suggested it for hers. This name has proved popular with other hairdressers'; there is an unrelated one in Dublin and others elsewhere. Like *My Fair Lady*, its usage as a hair salon's name is surely bolstered by popular culture, from the American musical comedy film of 1988, *Earth Girls are Easy*, in which there is a hair salon called CURL UP & DYE. A third Ormeau Road hairdresser's – **SHEAR BLISS HAIR STUDIO**, established in 2000 – also depends on a pun for effect. The owner told me that she just: "Picked it over a bottle of wine one night. I don't know where it came from. It just came to me. And then," she said, "I checked the directory to see there was no other one". Like the cafes, some names, as well as reflecting phrases common in oral tradition, flag up a personal narrative. I was told that the owner of **The Final Cut**, a hairdresser's in a neighbouring road, "is really into Pink Floyd – he'll get his guitar down [in the shop] and play for you" (recorded from AM, May 7th, 2013), "The Final Cut" being a song and album title by Pink Floyd.

In contrast to the women's hairdressers', the two men's hairdressing shops used plain, straightforward names, communicating that they were down to earth. One was simply called **BARBER SHOP**, while right beside it was a smaller one called **SONNY'S**, with the cheeky strapline "**NEVER MIND THE BARBER'S HERE'S SONNY'S**". It is the tradition for the oldest son to have the same name as his father and in order to distinguish between the two it was a tradition that the son would often be referred to as "Sonny", with or without his second name. The choice of the old-fashioned name "Sonny's" may be a bid to attract an older clientele.

To sum up, the naming of small, privately-owned businesses in the area studied is diverse but follows certain patterns which extend back over a much longer period than expected. The family concerned has a great part in the choice of name. Most names encapsulate a personal narrative, some using phrases common in oral tradition to articulate this, and some involving humour to communicate. From my observation, and examples that others have given me, the same trends occur throughout Belfast and beyond.

As a postscript, in 2013, Belfast City Council embarked on a programme of improving the look of shop fronts on arterial roads, giving businesses the option of changing their names. By March 2014 few appeared to have done so, apart from the **Tung Sun** which had dropped the Chinese characters and simply had the name in a Roman alphabet transliteration, **Bread and Banjo** was now more explicit, being **Bread and Banjo Bakery**, and Marie's hairdressers' had a name displayed, albeit differing from the one that she had had in mind – **Marie's Afro Caribbean Hair Salon**.

The fieldwork noted above was carried out in 2013 and a paper on it presented that September at The Queen's University of Belfast "New Crops, Old Fields: (Re) Imagining Irish Folklore" conference, 5th-7th September, 2013.

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