

The Mighty Mahers

Tara Dougherty traces the history of this fine Irish clan.

The Irish surname Maher, appearing also as O'Meagher, Meagher, O'Maher and Mahir, originated in County Tipperary. The name stems from the surname O'Meachair, a derivation of the word "meachar" meaning hospitable.

Over fifty percent of Mahers can trace their family history back to County Tipperary, where the ancient clan held control of the territory near Roscrea at the foot of Devil's Bit Mountain for centuries. Ui Cairin, modernized as Ikerrin, was a barony in the north of Tipperary and was a division of the ancient kingdom of Ely. The Mahers held control of Ikerrin, even against Norman invaders in the 10th century. It was not until the Cromwellian period that many Mahers would disperse from north Tipperary to southern baronies and further afield to France and Spain with the Irish Brigades.



Among the most famous of this clan was **Thomas Francis Meagher** (1823-1867). This Irish nationalist was a prominent leader in the Young Ireland Party. His speech advocating the use of force to liberate Ireland from British occupation earned him the nickname "Meagher of the Sword." He was part of the Young Ireland Rebellion of 1848 and was arrested and sentenced to life in prison. Meagher escaped and eventually made his way to America, where he would later become an American Civil War general as leader of the Irish Brigade in the Federal Army. A gravestone was unveiled in Meagher's honor at a ceremony held at the Green-Wood cemetery in Brooklyn this April.

Another clan member who is a rebel in his own right is subject of this issue's cover story, **Bill Maher**, who has become a household name due to his work in television. The native New Yorker began working as a stand-up comic while attending Cornell University. He became a regular on *The Tonight Show Starring Johnny Carson*, which ignited his television career. Maher later developed his own round-table current affairs talk show called *Politically Incorrect*, for which he received 11 Emmy nominations. He now hosts *Real Time with Bill Maher*, a similar discussion program on HBO.

Australian actor **Ray Meagher** secured a place in the Guinness Book of Records for being one of the longest-serving actors on an Australian drama. He is best known for his role as Alf Stewart on long-running Australian soap opera *Home and Away*. In 1987, he was selected by his peers as the recipient of a Penguin Award for Best Lead Actor in a Drama for his performance in the tele-movie *Male Order Bride*. During his 25 years working in show business, Meagher has been featured in over 60 television

productions, 29 films and 20 theatre productions.

Sharing in his kinsmen's love of the stage, **Joseph Maher** (1933-1998) was a Broadway character actor best known for his work in Joe Orton's plays often as absurd, off-beat characters. Maher was nominated three times for a Tony Award for the Best Actor in a Featured Role. He did not limit himself to stage work, however, crossing over into both film and television, guest starring on Seinfeld and playing memorable film roles in Heaven Can Wait and Sister Act. Born in Westport, County Mayo, Maher became a naturalized American citizen before he succumbed to a brain tumor in 1998.

The Maher family name is recognized in the world of horse breeding thanks to **JJ Maher's** contribution around the turn of the 20th century. His family of thoroughbred mares from Ireland would produce two Grand National winners.

Among the most well known athletes in America at the end of the 19th century was Irish-American **Peter Maher**, who won Heavyweight Championship of the World in 1895 when he beat Steve O'Donnell. The world champion was born in Galway and raised in Dublin where he began boxing. His biography, *The Irish Champion Peter Maher*, written by Matt Donnellon, chronicles his career and looks into his high-society social circle, which included the likes of Teddy Roosevelt, William McKinley and Wyatt Earp.

Continuing the Maher legacy in sport, **Kevin Maher** is a London-born Irish soccer player. He began his career with the Tottenham Hotspurs, training with the team for nearly three years. After he was released from Spurs, he was club captain of Southend United for six years before joining Oldham Athletic in the summer of 2008.

In the world of music, **Brent Maher** is among the most acclaimed country music producers and songwriters in Nashville. Maher discovered the talents of Naomi and Wynonna Judd and has produced all of the duo's records, and co-wrote many of their hits including "Why Not Me." Now that the Judds have retired from music, the Grammy award-winning producer has founded his own independent production company called Moraine Music Group. Moraine Music has worked with Garth Brooks, Dixie Chicks, Tim McGraw and countless other country music names.