

Throwing light on
our MacEwan family origins story



Iain MacEwan

Combining sources of information to throw light on our MacEwan family origins story

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Abstract

This paper documents a study that explored whether Iain MacEwan's Y-DNA signature can be linked to figures or groups or places in history - to throw light on our family origins. The amateur study was conducted both for our own family and Clan MacEwen Society members with the aims of:

- applying the latest Y-DNA research conclusions that identify Inner Hebridean haplotypes, and
- making sense of them by linking them to historical genealogical narratives, and
- identifying potential patrilineal figures
- looking for links to Clan MacEwen of Otter
- encouraging men to take a Big Y DNA test, so that we can grow this knowledge base.

Iain MacEwan's Y-DNA signature goes back about 1500 years and indicates unbroken Inner Hebridean ancestry throughout that time. To add flesh to this skeletal timeline, to help make sense of the genetic signposts, and to look for what drove families to migrate, both within Scotland and internationally to the colonies, we accessed the ancient genealogies for clans, and literature tracing 1500 years of history.

We specifically surveyed the ancient history of the Inner Hebrides and the mainland coastal areas of Cowal, Knapdale and Kintyre trying to throw light on each of two MacEwan/MacEwen enigmas: firstly, how long had 'our' MacEwan family lived on the Isle of Islay, and where were they before moving to Islay? Secondly, after the loss of the Barony lands in the mid-late fifteenth century did some of the Clan MacEwan of Otter families migrate westwards to the Inner Hebrides as 'men' of the Argyll Campbells?

This study deepened our understanding of the key political, economic and social factors that took place in this small corner of the world over the last 1500 years.

Our study found basis for an assumption that some Clan MacEwen of Otter families did relocate to the Isle of Islay, and what may be relevant for Society members information that during the late seventeenth through to the nineteenth centuries the Inner Hebrides was a departure point for many emigrants to the colonies. We also found a connection between 'our' MacEwan family story and Clan MacEwen of Otter - a link that needs ongoing research.

More lines of enquiry have emerged during the study, and we have become aware of scholarly interest in challenging and validating the ancient genealogies for the Hebridean clans, and in determining whether some of the named patrilineal figures were historical or mythical. Contacts with several researchers both in this historical genealogical field, and in the separate, but linked field of Y-DNA research, will help to focus our 'watch party' for future developments.

This paper may be of interest to people wanting to identify whereabouts in Scotland their ancestors lived prior to emigrating, and people who are thinking of submitting a kit for Y-DNA analysis.

Combining sources of information to throw light on our MacEwan family origins story

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Section A provides the study report.

Section B provides the historical context for the study’s lines of enquiry, presented in heavily summarised form.

1. Background

Iain MacEwan (the author's husband) was born in Scotland and emigrated to New Zealand with his parents in the 1950s. Iain can trace his MacEwan ancestry back six generations on Islay - but who are his ancient ancestors, who did he come from? Since getting the results of a Y-DNA test kit six years ago, flickering lights from across the last one and a half millennia have sparked insights into his origins story. To elaborate on the '*who from*' question, it was also necessary to look at '*where*' Iain comes from, starting from his father's home place on the Isle of Islay.

In the fifteenth century Clan MacEwen families are known to have lived in the Barony of Otter on the Cowal peninsula, in and near Kilfinan, and on the opposite Loch Fyne coast, around the Glassary area. We believe that after the mid-late fifteenth century death of Swene (the last Clan Chief) and the loss of the Otter Barony to Campbells of Argyll, there was an exodus of many of these families to other localities. Where did the Barony of Otter MacEwens relocate to?

There are known settlements of MacEwen families across Scotland; in places close to the Cowal peninsula such as Arrochar, Lennox, Glenboig, and parts of Dumbartonshire; and a little further away in Stirlingshire, Renfrew and Perthshire, and further away still in Galloway. Of less focus from historians, MacEwens may also have (re)settled westward into the Inner Hebrides, near the adjacent Argyll mainland coast¹.

In the sixteenth-eighteenth centuries, due to issues such as impoverishment, land use changes, and socially tense environments, many thousands of Scots emigrated in waves from the West Highland and Islands, initially internally within Scotland, and then out to the colonies, mainly to the Americas. We assume that some of those migrants were Clan MacEwen families who were relocating from their former Barony lands or from one of the districts where they had settled in the intervening years.

Using the developing technology for Y-DNA research, which reveals genetic history going back 1000-1500 years, MacEwen families can be identified as distinct branches – and which ones are, and which are not, genetically related to Clan MacEwen of Otter. Not only can Y-DNA data distinguish between family branches it may also genetically link branches with settlement locations – *if* enough MacEwens submit samples for testing.

Intended as a companion document for a short call-to-action to MacEwen men to submit samples for Y-DNA testing, this paper offers an example of what can be learned by combining Y-DNA results with ancient historiological genealogy literature together with family and civil records to help focus the study. We studied civil records, ancient genealogical and history texts, and Y-DNA research notes, looking to throw light on Iain MacEwan's family's location in the sixteenth-seventeenth centuries.

When we accessed the **ancient history** of the Inner Hebrides, we included Cowal, Knapdale and Kintyre in the focus area, but with particular focus on Islay, given the usual overlap for ruling dynasties, looking for hints to the migratory history of 'our' MacEwens. The **ancient genealogical texts** that refer to Clan MacEwen and other Hebridean clans were checked for indicators linking potential patrilineal ancestors with Y-DNA SNP² markers. Lastly, **emerging Y-DNA research** was explored for links to the history and genealogy of both 'our' MacEwan family and Clan MacEwen of Otter, for insights into their (re)settlements.

¹ R.S.T. MacEwen p29 found a 1715 report of 150 MacEwens in Skye

² SNPs are genetic mutations that define haplogroups. Y-DNA haplogroups are defined by the presence of particular SNPs (single-nucleotide polymorphisms), genetic markers that form a 'genetic signature'.



Our interest for engaging with this topic relates to curiosity about our own origins and Clan MacEwen history, as well as an affection and fascination with the history of the West Highland and Islands. As it is unlikely that more documentary evidence will be found to further enlighten this research; we are left with loose, unverifiable, ‘circumstantial’ data on which to make assumptions about our family story.

However, one way to throw more light on the subject is for greater numbers of people, who could be kindred, to submit samples for Y-DNA testing. With greater numbers of testers, assumptions can be made with greater confidence – more about that below.

We realise that Clan members have a range of Clan-related areas of interest: some may be interested in Clan Heraldry, some Clan culture and heritage, others might want to know from where in Scotland their own family originated. We endorse the inclusive values of the Clan MacEwen Society that encompass everyone with an interest or sense of connection to the Clan. While we believe that Y-DNA research can help us and others to learn about the Clan, we recognise that it is only one area of interest for Clan MacEwen Society members.

Iain’s Y-DNA shows ancestral links in the Inner Hebrides as far back as the sixth century. He shares certain Y-DNA markers with Clan Lamont, MacGilchrist, MacKinnon, MacQuarrie, MacPherson,

suggesting a very long-ago common progenitor. Our research task is to bridge the 1500-year gap in time between the sixth century and the civil records that show this family's life on the Isle of Islay six generations back.

This article briefly examined some of the political and cultural contexts of Inner Hebridean social life from the sixth to the nineteenth centuries to throw light on the questions:

1. How long were our McEwans/MacEwans on Islay, when did they migrate to Islay? where were they settled prior to that?
2. Did some of the Clan MacEwan of Otter families migrate westwards to the Inner Hebrides, as 'men' of the Argyll Campbells, after the fall of their last chief loss of the Barony lands in the mid-late fifteenth century?
3. Does Iain share Y-DNA with any other Clan MacEwen society members?
4. To what extent can we bridge the 1500 year 'genealogy gap'?

In documenting where we're at with our search we hope this may help other MacEwen researchers, as well as complementing the call to action - to encourage members of the Clan MacEwen Society to submit test kits for Y-DNA testing so that all of us can learn more about our origins.

2. Introduction to Y-DNA³ and clan research

The DNA we carry can show us not only our recent ancestry, but also our deep, deep ancestry, back thousands of years.

For human genetics, the haplogroups studied are the Y-DNA and mt-DNA, both of which help to define different genetic populations and their migration patterns. Y-DNA is passed on solely through the patrilineal line and mt-DNA is passed on solely through the matrilineal line. It is Y-DNA that is helpful in surname projects.

In the Clan system, names often went under a Sept or a Clan and were interchangeable, using the Clan name when it suited them, or not. Names were also written down by census takers when people didn't speak or understand the language – so names and spellings were often changed. The patronymic naming system only became popular in the mid-1500s, so often we will find DNA matches outside of our surname.

Men inherit Y-DNA from their father and pass on their Y-DNA to their sons; only the males who have passed down their DNA unbroken from father to son will carry their DNA. Y-DNA can help you determine whether two different families with the same surname are closely related, and how far back you might find a common ancestor.

There are several DNA testing companies with varying prices and offerings. Note that you get what you pay for in DNA testing. Family Tree DNA (FTDNA) offers the most comprehensive testing, along with your own personal webpage and the choice of several Projects to join.

FTDNA offers the option of joining multiple surname and/or geographical projects. Relevant for this paper's audience, FTDNA has a Clans Eoghann surname project, an Isles of the Hebrides geographical project and a L1335 (Dal Riata) SNP project. Many large Scottish clans have their own Y-DNA project groups. In 2019, Dr Jim Wilson, University of Edinburgh, from 'The Scottish DNA Project' discovered that people in Scotland belong to one of six DNA clusters, with people from the Inner Hebrides included

³ <http://www.colonsay.info/text/Isles> of the Hebrides DNA Project by Linda Heron, accessed online 3/10/2024

SNP	Time since MRCA ⁴	Believed to indicate:
R-L1335	1300 B.C.	L1335 & its son L1065 are found in NW Ireland and Scotland
R-L1065	1350 B.C.	Native to Scotland
R-Z16325	400 A.D.	Dal Riata, Fergus Mor? (BM)
R-S744	400 A.D.	
R-Y16858	450 A.D.	Cenēl Gabhrain - Cowal/Glassary, possibly Kintyre origins (BM) ⁵
R-Y17075	550 A.D.	Siol Alpein ⁶ origins
PF5236	650 A.D.	Inner Hebridean origins
FT219046	950 A.D.	Matches MacDougall from Mull
FT75946	1550 A.D.	Matches Hews/MacEoghan from Glassary

4. A window on where MacEwens lived in 1901

The ‘maps’ below are inserted for your interest; they show the distributions of the most common spellings of the surname MacEwen using 1901 census data⁷. If, as ‘The Scottish DNA Project’ discovered, people have tended to remain in place over many generations, might the distributions in these maps have also been typical over the previous centuries?

Incidence of surname clusters (retrieved 2014)

Place	MacEwen	McEwen	MacEwan	McEwan	McCuin
United States	822	10,444	523	4162	1190
Canada	748	4,235	288	2060	
England	78	1855	165	4310	16
Scotland	60	836	237	5410	
New Zealand	19	679	107	965	1
Australia	5	2049	42	3839	

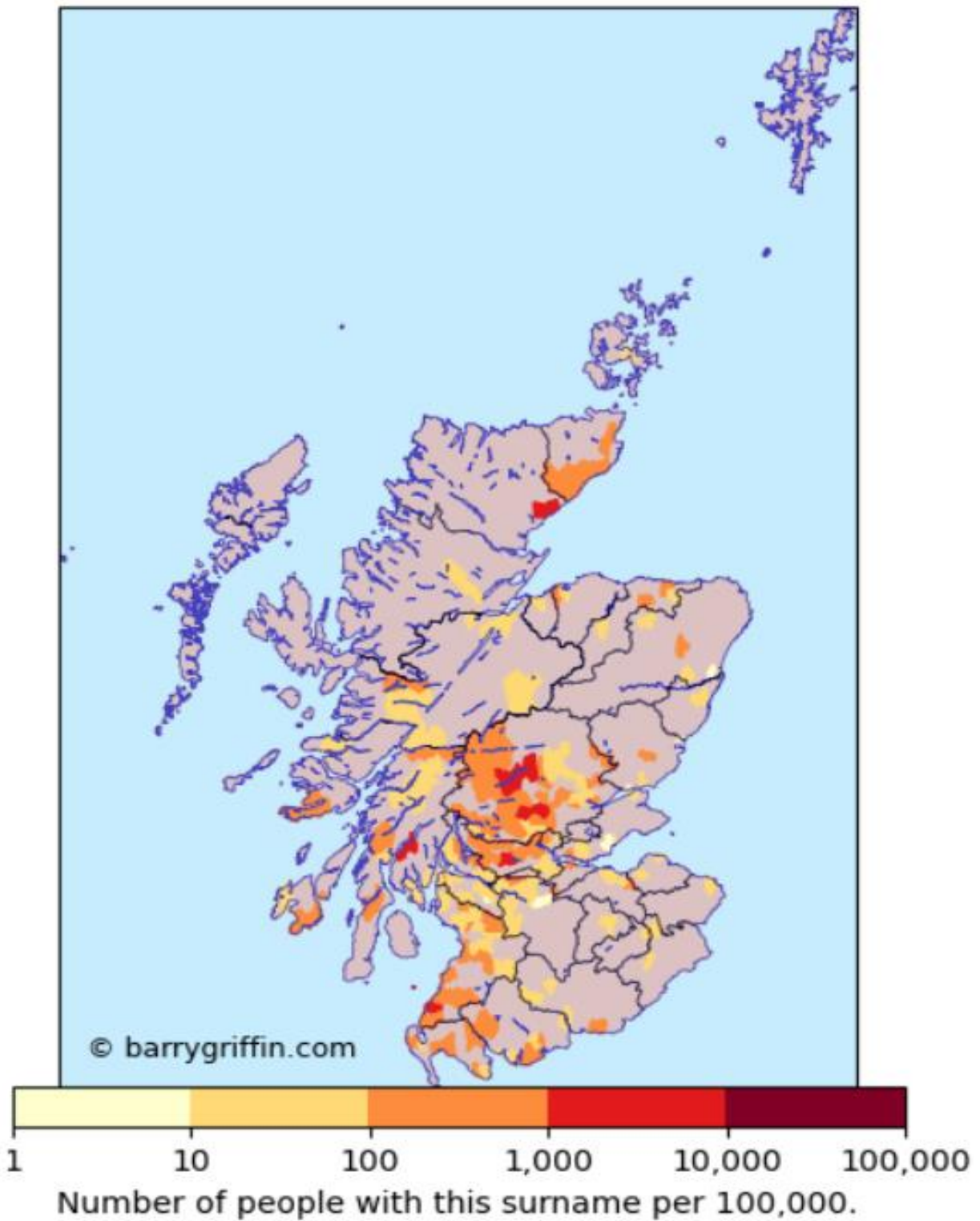
⁴ TMRCA is time to most recent common ancestor

⁵ Matches to Gilchrist, MacQuarrie, MacKinnon, Lamond/Young.

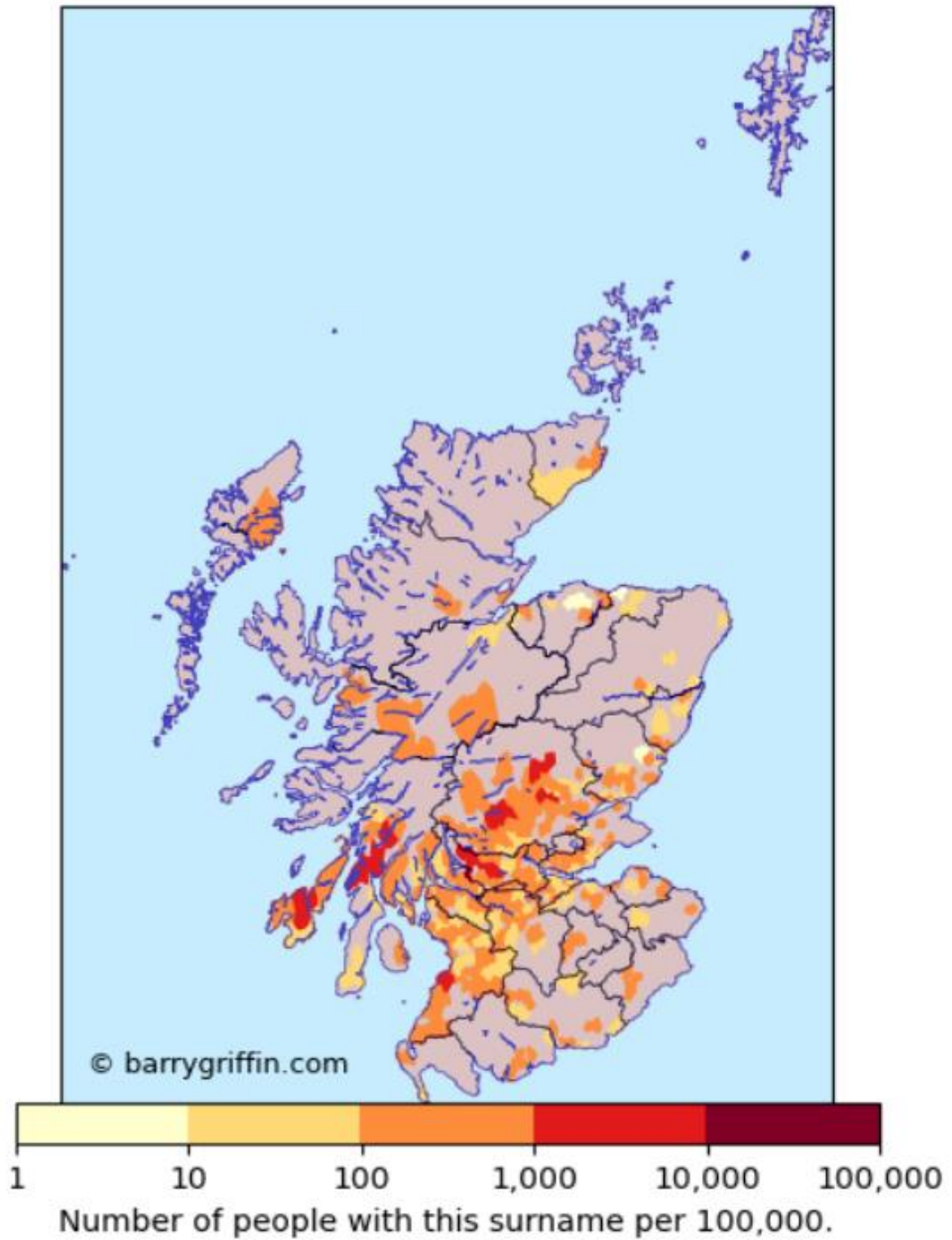
⁶ Clans MacKinnon, MacQuarrie, Grant, MacGregor, MacNab.

⁷ Barry Griffin surname maps www.barrygriffin.com

MCEWEN in 1901



MCEWAN in 1901



5. 'Our' McEwan/MacEwan family



Figure 1 Duncan MacEwan

Iain's father Duncan MacEwan⁸ (like at least four generations before him) was born and lived on the same small croft, on Lyrabus farm, Isle of Islay.

Duncan was the son of Alexander b. 1900; son of Alexander b. 1858; son of John/Iain b. 1820; son of John/Iain b. 1785; son of Sween McEwan.

There are two branches of McEwan families that intermarried within these above generations.

Sween is named on his son John's 1865 death certificate; we don't know whether John/Iain b.1785 was born on Islay, and we have no other records for Sween. We don't know where Sween lived his life.

Page 6.

1865. DEATHS in the Parish of Kilcarrow in the County of Argyll

17	John McEwan	1865	M. 80	Sween McEwan	Senile decay	Ann McEwan	1865
		March	Year	Agar, Kilcarrow	4 years prior	Her x Mark	March 31 st
		Twentyfourth			deceased;	Daughter	
	Orphan	St. Ann		Annell McEwan			St. Beavers
	Widow of Isabella McEwan	Pyrials Kilcarrow		M. S. McEwan	No Medical Attendant	Present - John Taylor, Registrar, Bithel Register	

Over the past 100 years our female McEwans have produced many offspring, while the male McEwans have produced few - so the father to son line has dwindled. We have traced all McEwan males born since John b.1785 and are certain there are no McEwan men left on Islay now, though many second cousins remain there, and we are also sure that we can identify the few living MacEwan men from this family line.



'Our' McEwan men were reputed to be and are more than 1.8m tall and broad-shouldered. Figure 2 Iain's great grandfather Alexander/Alasdair McEwan b.1858

⁸ Duncan's ancestors' name was spelled McEwan. His name came to be spelled MacEwan when he was young; we don't know the reasons for the change. In this article, when referencing 'our' McEwans/MacEwans the spelling used in the era will be applied; when referencing Clan MacEwan, that spelling will be used.

These McEwan families lived and worked rurally, and Gaidhlig was their first language. Census records list the occupations for the McEwan men as farmer, agricultural labourer, carter, linen weaver. To the present day ‘our’ MacEwan men have worked in the agrarian sector.

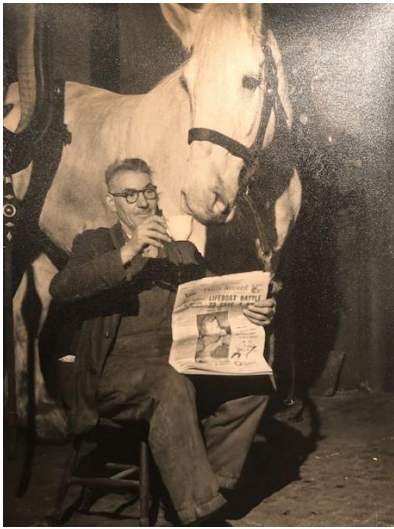


Figure 2 Iain's grandfather Alexander/Sandy McEwan b 1900



Figure 3 Iain's great grandfather Alexander/Alasdair McEwan b.1858. Photo courtesy Islay Museum Islay Life

Cousins tell us there were longstanding social constraints on naming children with Gaelic names (it was very common for registrars to anglicise common Gaelic forenames, for instance Morag as Mary, Iain as John, and Hamish as James) hence Iain would be baptised John, but he would be known as Iain - until ‘my’ Iain b. 1951. The cousins say that ‘my’ Iain is fortunate to be able to formally carry the name rather than carry it as a nickname.



The cruck-frame cottage illustrated in Pennant's *Tour* can still be recognised in Islay's r buildings, both ruined and occupied (Pennant, *Tour*).

Figure 4 Islay cottage Storrie p98

The McEwan croft house ‘Gort na Beinne’ (small field on a hill) on Lyrabus had a door on opposite sides so that the 1-2 cattle (brought inside overnight during winter) could exit, because there wasn't enough space for them to turn around to leave by the same door through which they'd entered. ‘Gort na Beinne’ is now a ruin and looks similar in size and appearance to the cottage above (without the roof).

History shows that Islay life was socially and economically harsh as communities grappled with twin issues of the markedly increased costs of farm rentals or leases around the mid-seventeenth century,

coupled with many years of poor agricultural yields. Despite this harsh environment ‘our’ MacEwans were not transient: only two of them shifted across to Glasgow in the twentieth century, and there are no stories of any of our Islay MacEwans emigrating from Scotland - until Duncan brought his family to New Zealand via a six-week sea journey in the 1950s.

6. Discussion

This discussion is based on material presented in Section B below. In Section B we started with a summary of what is known about Clan MacEwen of Otter and then summarised what is known about the ancient history and genealogical history through to recent times for the Inner Hebrides and adjacent mainland coast – as we looked for links to Iain’s Y-DNA SNP timelines. The focus was ‘our’ MacEwan family, and possible Clan MacEwen of Otter links, or links to other MacEwen branches - as we looked to build viable enlightening stories about ‘our’ MacEwan/MacEwen family origins story.

The questions we sought to answer

From the various sources of information (MacEwan family civil records dating back to the 1841 census and an 1865 death certificate, ancient genealogical and historical literature, and specific Y-DNA research) what assumptions can be made about where our family lived between 500 A.D. and 1800 A.D.? We know that more than 200 years of MacEwan bones are on Islay - where else could they lie?

Our search for information about the Inner Hebrides, including Cowal, Knapdale, and Kintyre, with a particular focus on Islay, aspired to build viable enlightening stories for two MacEwen/MacEwan enigmas and two associated questions:

1. *How long before 1800 was ‘our’ MacEwan family living on Islay and where were they before moving to Islay?*

This study has not enabled us to identify a date for ‘our’ MacEwans’ migration to Islay. For the second part of the query, we are still left with an unverified claim by a distant contact that he had found a 1729 birth record, and a 1750 marriage record, for Sween McEwan in Glassary or Kilmartin. Such a location is feasible because records for those parishes show hardships for tenant farmers resulting in population migration around the mid-18th century, and because those areas are close to ports that are used for accessing Islay.

2. *Did some of the Clan MacEwan of Otter families migrate westwards to the Inner Hebrides, as ‘men’ of the Argyll Campbells, after the fall of their last chief in the mid-late fifteenth century?*

Campbells of Cawdor, and Campbells of Shawfield, as landowners, brought waves of additional labour forces into Islay over the 200 years after 1614. This timeframe aligns with Black’s assertion⁹ that the name MacEwen was not known on Islay before 1614. It surely makes sense that people/labourers would more likely have been recruited from nearby localities such as the adjacent mainland coastal areas such as Cowal, Glassary, Kintyre. We believe it’s likely that ‘our’ MacEwans migrated to Islay during the seventeenth century and there is a case that can be put that Clan MacEwen of Otter families were also among the ‘incomers’ as labour force for Islay.

⁹ Black 2023 WHN&Q

3. *Does Iain share Y-DNA with any other Clan MacEwen Society members?*

We are left with this question until many more men submit kits for testing.

4. *To what extent is it possible to bridge the 1500 year 'genealogy' gap?*

We have made progress with this and expect more to be revealed in coming years.

Making sense of the data

The inclusion of the mainland coastal areas of Cowal, Glassary, and Kintyre in defining the Inner Hebrides recognises the easily accessible water highways between all these communities. Those districts are included together with the Isles, with a particular focus on the Isle of Islay (due to its special relevance for 'our' MacEwan family), observing the social experiences of people in the Inner Hebrides in the years 450-1800.

Following the signposts of Iain's Y-DNA SNPs we've scanned this region's successive realm histories of Dal Riata Scots, Scots/Picts, Norse Viking, Somerled/MacDonald and MacDougall, and Campbell, and associated clans. While written records are scarce and of inferential value only, Y-DNA is a permanent record, and together with peer-reviewed interpretations of links with the ancient texts, was able to throw light on our enquiries.

Iain's Y-DNA (see also table p.8) is positive for SNP markers: SNP L1335 is found in Scotland and NW Ireland around 1300 B.C; SNP L1065 is associated with Dal Riata Scots around 1350 B.C; SNP S744 suggests Siol Alpein origins around 400 A.D; SNP Y16858 suggests Cenél Gabhrain, linked to Cowal¹⁰ and Glassary (some evidence also includes Kintyre) around 450 A.D; the man who created the SNP Y17075 variant lived around 550 A.D; PF5236 suggests Inner Hebridean origins around 650 A.D; FT219046 matches a MacDougall on Mull around 950 A.D. and FT75946 matches a Hews on Glassary/Knapdale around 1550 A.D.

Notably these SNPs are all associated with Scotland, showing Scottish indigeneity. There are no markers for Niall of the Nine Hostages and his descendants (see genealogy p.19 and genogram p.33). Until we came to know through our study that scholars had rejected this early part of the Clan MacEwen of Otter genealogy, we had believed this meant that Iain's Y-DNA ruled out Otter ancestry (i.e. he is not related to Clan MacEwen of Otter). *Now though*, given the experts' rejections of the earlier parts of the ancient Otter genealogy and doubts about other parts, the question of an Otter linkage is reopened.

It seems there's been over-investment in the Niall of the Nine Hostages genealogy legend that's led to a distorted view of who we are. Rather than being descended from an Irish prince (i.e. Anrothan) who descended from Niall of the Nine Hostages and who arrived in the Western Isles in the tenth century, as the ancient genealogy declared, was Clan MacEwen of Otter descended from Erc and the Dal Riata from 450 A.D. - as Iain is? It's time for the Clan to investigate this, to establish a Y-DNA project and update its genealogical story – to clarify who we are.

Notably however, as Sellar remarked, there remains the likelihood that Clan Lamond (and perhaps others too) is a brother clan of Clan MacEwen of Otter, and we believe that Y-DNA research could soon find their shared progenitor.

We've seen that Y-DNA supported research is enabling more definitive challenges to some of the ancient genealogies; this research is still young and evolving and will tell us more in the next few years. It seems likely that as the database grows, allowing greater confidence levels, in time some of the older

¹⁰ Bernard Ó Murchadhain, Dal Riata FB

SNPs will be validly linked to named historic figures. In the meantime, current research capability has allowed us to apply Iain's Y-DNA data and sketch out the 1300 plus timeline from 450 - 1800 A.D.

People on the move

Massive agrarian changes swept the West Highlands and Islands of Scotland in the 2-300 years after the speculated exodus of Clan MacEwen of Otter families from the Loch Fyne coasts near Kilfinan. Shifts in the structure of land rental agreements; huge increases in costs, and many consecutive years of disease and weather-related poor productivity, separately and in combination caused hardship for landowners and tenant farmers alike. This clearly severely impacted the subsistence of tenants and labourers, creating the conditions for widespread migration *within* Scotland from the seventeenth century.

The agrarian sector changes also meant that working people were often not in the 'right' area in the 'right' numbers, which in turn led to large scale emigration to the colonies. Records show that large numbers of emigrants from the west coast and islands sailed for North Carolina (see section B d) and e) for more detail). The huge waves of exodus left some landowners with insufficient labour supply, in which cases their efforts focused on recruiting and relocating labour forces within Scotland. The population relocations were often at the direction of landowners, some of whom even initiated offshore emigration arrangements.

Assumptions based on the historical records

We picked up the story of the families of Clan MacEwen of Otter who prior to the sixteenth century had lived in the Kilfinan area of the Cowal peninsula and the Glassary coastal area on the Knapdale peninsula. Many of these MacEwen families are believed to have dispersed from the Barony lands sometime after the lands were transferred to Campbell of Argyll ownership in the mid-late fifteenth century.

Some MacEwens were listed in the 1602 Act of Parliament as vassals, or 'men', of the Earl of Argyll, so they must have stayed near the Barony lands at least until then. Others are believed to have moved before or after that to settle inland - to the north-east, central and south of Scotland; still others may have moved west to the Inner Hebridean isles. It is not known which of the inland settlement families are biologically related to Clan MacEwen of Otter and which are distinct, separate MacEwen families. Researchers with FTDNA project groups are keeping an eye out for Y-DNA clues about branches of MacEwens, and their settlement locations. Y-DNA data can make such distinctions, and the knowledge base and confidence will continue to grow as more men test.

Turning our attention towards Islay where more than 200 years (until the 21st century) of 'our' MacEwan bones lie, it seems safe to assume that 'our' MacEwans, as indeed all non-landowning people throughout Argyll, were impacted by the economic threats. Together with the 1602 legislation placing MacEwens in (Campbell of) Argyll territory, our scan of the literature connects the Campbells of Argyll and their relatives to Islay, and their importation of labour into Islay over the next two hundred years and more.

It is surely reasonable to assume that the labour forces transplanted into Islay were as likely, or even more likely, to have originated from the adjacent Argyll coastal areas rather than from further afield (acknowledging that Campbells of Cawdor had obvious contacts with labourers from the wider Inverness-shire).

Further, it may be safe to assume that impoverished people from Cowal, Knapdale, and Kintyre were amongst the incoming labour force, and that 'our' MacEwans, having certainly lived in one of those areas, were thus included with one of the Campbells' multiple influxes of labourers to Islay from 1614.

Given that life on Islay for ‘our’ MacEwans in the eighteenth-nineteenth centuries was hard and impoverished, it is remarkable that they stayed put and did not relocate to other parts of Scotland (or the world). We are therefore tempted to suggest that as in earlier times they had kept to the lands of their ancestors i.e. for centuries they had tended not to relocate for a better life – it wasn’t in their DNA? – implying that their move to Islay was likely to have been ‘facilitated’ by the landowner rather than being initiated by them.

‘Our’ MacEwan family story

The literature available for the seventeenth-eighteenth centuries was more detailed than that for the prior period back to 450 A.D. However, putting that literature together with the signposts from Y-DNA data we were able to sketch out a family story that stretches across those periods. Iain’s Y-DNA data broadly aligns with what we already know about the family i.e. they were living on Islay for at least several hundred years - therefore the combined personal data, historical genealogical and Y-DNA knowledge, pointing to the family’s continuous settlement in the Inner Hebrides from around 500 A.D., is not a surprise.

The story that can therefore be made for ‘our’ MacEwan family so far, goes back to around 500 A.D. As part of the nGabhraim related families they lived in the Cowal, Glassary, and possibly the Kintyre area. Over the many subsequent centuries our family might have moved within this small geographical area - but their later pattern of staying in place on Islay, despite harsh living conditions, suggests they were more likely to have been settled for centuries at a time in the place of their ancestors, on Cowal or Glassary. There is no indication that ‘our’ MacEwans were landowners at any stage, they seem likely to have been tenant farmers.

We suppose that ‘our’ MacEwans likely moved to Islay in the seventeenth century, with the encouragement or at the direction of their Campbell of Argyll landowner / masters.

We still do not know whether Iain’s Y-DNA is typical of a Clan MacEwen of Otter family. While this will not be conclusively proven one way or another, we could make more confident conclusions if more MacEwens test, and the database of MacEwen Y-DNA was larger.

However, our own study does allow us to make the following position statement, which we have had reviewed by experts:

During the era that Clan MacEwen of Otter families were known to have inhabited the Kilfinan and Glassary areas Iain’s ancestors lived in the same locality.

We then argue that for ‘our’ MacEwan ancestors to have lived in the same place for many centuries they must have belonged to a group or clan to whom they were related – but was that group or clan the Clan MacEwen of Otter? At the risk of being too repetitive, this is still an open question until other members of the clan submit their Y-DNA for testing.

Finally, it’s relevant to note that, *as indicated by the ancient histories*, as they lived in close proximity to one another, the clan families with whom both ‘our’ MacEwans and the Otter MacEwens would have had most contact, include MacDonalDs, Campbells, MacLachlans, Lamonts, MacGilchrists, MacDougall, MacSweens, and MacNeills. *As indicated by Y-DNA data*, perhaps prior to the period of living with the ‘Cowal clans’ and others in the *ancient histories* cluster, the clan families the MacEwans would have had most contact would have included Lamonts, MacKinnons, MacQuarries and MacGilchrists.

Where to now?

Our study shows that scholars e.g, Martin, Black, McWhannell, are continuing to evaluate the ancient genealogies and are making sure progress on clarifying whether some of the supposed progenitors were historical or mythical. During our study, we met several researchers with significant experience in interpreting Y-DNA data *and* interested in using that data to determine whereabouts the Barony of Otter MacEwens migrated to after the loss of their lands and fall of the chiefly line in the mid-late fifteenth century, and which MacEwen families are related. The researchers expressed frustration with not having enough Y-DNA kits to help them make more progress. We will keep contact with them.

It should be useful to stay in touch with developments and discoveries by other clans Y-DNA research projects, and to explore the social movements over 1000 years of the clans linked to ‘our’ MacEwans Y-DNA i.e. MacKinnons and MacQuarries, and the other ‘Cawal clans’. We will also keep an eye out for developments with Iain’s two closest Y-DNA matches – MacDougall (TMRCA¹¹ 950 A.D.) who traces their origins to the Isle of Mull; and Hews (TMRCA 1550 A.D.), whose research indicates his family were in the Knapdale area in earlier years and were likely to be near Glassary/Kilmartin around 1550.

It's exciting to see that the number of kits now tested positive by FTDNA for SNP PF5236 (the Inner Hebrides marker) has tripled in the last 2 years; if such increases continue it might soon be possible to identify this son and even his father SNP R-Y17075 too. That would be a great help for bridging the gaps in Iain’s ancestral timeline. If greater numbers of MacEwen men submitted kits for testing, more confident conclusions could be reached to bridge the time between 400 to 1800 A.D. and in time, those SNPs could be linked to specific progenitors.

7. Conclusion

Iain’s Y-DNA data points to ‘our’ MacEwan family’s continuous settlement in the Cawal/Glassary/Kintyre Inner Hebrides, from around 450 A.D. There is nothing to suggest that this continuity was broken until 1950 when Duncan left Islay.

The clues we found in the literature during this study gave us the confidence to make some assumptions about our family’s experiences and movements over the past 1500 years. The study also enabled us to put some flesh on the origins story for ‘our’ MacEwans. We were pleased to find that:

During the era that Clan MacEwen of Otter families were known to have inhabited the Kilfinan and Glassary areas Iain’s ancestors lived in the same locality.

For ‘our’ MacEwan ancestors to have lived in the same place for many centuries they must have belonged to a group or clan to whom they were related – was that group or clan the Clan MacEwen of Otter? We are cautious about jumping to conclusions but are somewhat optimistic about whether our family was linked to Clan MacEwen of Otter, noting that it is once again an open possibility. Iain’s genealogical identity is important to him; whatever it is, he will embrace the certainty of it when it comes.

It’s time for the Clan to put the Niall of the Nine Hostages legend aside, to investigate the issue of its genealogical identity, to establish a Y-DNA project and update its genealogical story – to clarify who we are.

¹¹ TMRCA Most Recent Common Ancestor

We have not made progress on the question of whether Iain shares Y-DNA with any other Clan MacEwen Society members – and hope that question will be answered when more men join the database.

We were not able to ascertain the date when ‘our’ MacEwan family relocated to Islay, but we can assume that it was in the seventeenth century, after 1614, and that this move was likely to have been facilitated by Campbells of Argyll. We have reached the conclusion that ‘our’ MacEwans lived in or near the Barony of Otter lands, as in the finding above, prior to their relocation to Islay. Further, at this point we assume that some of the Clan MacEwen of Otter families also relocated to Islay.

Our study has helped to bridge the 1500 year ‘genealogy’ gap and we’re optimistic about more details emerging in future as research into historical genealogies for the highland clans and Y-DNA research provide more revelations.

Where to next?

1. Our research in future will involve keeping a close eye on the findings of expert researchers, gauging their relevance for our family story.
2. While it is not possible to conclusively prove ancestry back 1000 years, it can be assumed that as greater numbers of men submit Y-DNA tests, firmer hypotheses and assumptions can be developed and peer reviewed by experts. It may soon be possible to identify the eponyms at Y16538, Y17075, and PF5236 and so help to bridge our time gap between 500 and 1800 A.D.

Final messages to MacEwens

MacEwens of all spellings and origins, whether originating from Otter Ferry, Glenboig, or wherever ... are of course authentically MacEwen - are you curious about where in Scotland your family came from?

Family stories can help to reveal or confirm information from other sources and vice versa so, might your ancestors have been among the several thousand people who emigrated from Islay or Jura? Does our story give you some ideas for your own search?

Acknowledgements:

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Section B

The sub sections below are summaries of history that was retrieved during our study. Section B content provides historical context for the study's lines of enquiry, relevant to points made in Section A.

a) Clan MacEwen of Otter

Most of the West Highland and Island clans trace their genealogy back through many generations to some figure well known in Irish or Dalriadic history or legend¹². Historian R.S.T. MacEwen tells us that the ancient Clan Ewen or MacEwen of Otter was one of the earliest of the western clans sprung from the Dalriada Scots.¹³

The genealogy given by ancient historians¹⁴ is that the families in Cowal and Knapdale descend from Niall of the Nine Hostages, a leading Irish King of the early 5th century^{15, 16}; through Niall Glundubh *v* 850-920; Flaithbheartach 'an Trosdāin', King of Aileach (d.1036); his grandson Anrothan Ui Neill (d.c.1080); through Donnslēibhe. Anrothan is by tradition the founder of the families in Scotland¹⁷ (see genogram in Appendix).

Niall of the Nine Hostages stands as the semi-historical founder of one of only two families, or groups of families, that can be traced back indisputably in the male line from the present day ... to the fifth or fourth century¹⁸.

Notably, recent historians¹⁹ reject the genealogy prior to Flaithbheartach as 'entirely artificial and untrustworthy' or 'the older part of the pedigree will be found to be partly historical and partly mythic'²⁰; while contemporary historians²¹ also dispute the authenticity of the three generations above Donnslēibhe.

Five great Highland Clans are said to descend from Donnslēibhe; these kindreds formed Siol Gillevray: MacEwens, Lamonts, MacLachlans (including MacGilchrist), and the MacNeills²². Apart from the MacNeills of Barra²³ these clans were associated with the area around Cowal peninsula.²⁴ Also claiming this early pedigree are Clans MacSorley of Moneydrain, MacSween, and the Argyllshire MacLeays.

The only Clan MacEwen of Otter written pedigree to survive is that contained in MS1467 and this, unfortunately, is virtually illegible in places.²⁵ However the pedigree shows MacEwens descending from Eoghan, son of Gillespie who was apparently a great grandson of 'Saibaran', another son of Donnslēibhe.²⁶

There is mention of MacEwens found in the literature related to Alexander II's conquest of the sub-kingdom of Argyll in 1222 – "the rebellious clans such as the MacEwens suffered severely and were

¹² Sellar W.D.H 1971

¹³ R.S.T. MacEwen

¹⁴ Sellar 1971; R.S.T. MacEwen; Skene Celtic Scotland 1886-90; MS 1467; Black R. WHN&Q 2014.

¹⁵ Sources include the Books of Ballymote and Lercan; the 15th century 'MS 1467'; the 16th century Book of the MacSweenys; the 17th century collections of Cū-choigriche O'Clery (d.1664) and of Duaid MacFirbis (d.1670).

¹⁶ Sellar W.D.H. 1971

¹⁷ Ibid

¹⁸ Ibid

¹⁹ Sellar quoting Skene

²⁰ Sellar

²¹ McWhannell, Black

²² See R.S.T. MacEwen 1904

²³ This genealogy for the MacNeills of Barra has since been disproven.

²⁴ See Appendix 1 for Genealogy of the Families of Cowal and Knapdale.

²⁵ Sellar, 1971

²⁶ *ibid*

involved in the aftermath ruin”.²⁷ A remnant of the family survived under their own chief at Otter, where the last chief died two and a half centuries later.²⁸ History showed that in the 13-15th century Clan MacEwen of Otter families lived around Kilfinan and on the opposite shore of Loch Fyne at Glassary. The chiefs of Clan MacEwen of Otter lived at Kilfinan, in a castle sited on the coast surrounded by administration buildings.

The MacEwens possessed a tract of land about twenty-five miles square and as an indication of their numbers, were said to probably be capable of bringing out 200 fighting men.²⁹ The MacEwen lands were separated from the Lamonds by the river Kilfinan and from the MacLachlans by the stream that divides the parishes of Kilfinan and Strath Lachlan. There is a very short distance across Loch Fyne from Otter Ferry to the West Otter ferry point at Port Ann on the Glassary coast; various forms of sea transport were readily used. The MacEwen families’ income came from agriculture, fishing, and pottery.

In his review of historical records Sellar noted that the Cowal and Knapdale families prospered in the thirteenth century by forming strategic alliances through marriage. It is known that the MacSween, Lamont and MacLaughlin families intermarried with the most powerful family group of the West Highland and Islands - the MacDougall, MacDonald and MacRuairi families - and with powerful Gaelic Ireland families O’Connors and O’Donnells.³⁰ Though little is written in this regard about the MacEwens, we could assume that they will have made similar strategic marriages.

In the fifteenth century the Clan was forced from its lands by royal authority. A charter of James I confirmed the barony of Otter to Swene MacEwen - and its destination to the heirs of Duncan Campbell of Loch Awe. Swene is believed to have died between 1432 - 1466³¹ and was the last known MacEwen chief. Following the loss of the barony, it is believed that some MacEwens stayed around the Kilfinan area. An Act of Parliament in 1602 lists MacEwens, alongside MacLachlans and McNeils, as ‘men’³² of the Earl of Argyll, who was responsible for their behaviour.

The dispersed clansmen had no bard-seannachies to crystallise and hand down the story of their race, nor charter boxes to preserve the record of past possessions and spoils³³ - although there is evidence that some MacEwens worked as seannachies - to MacDougall of Dunollie (1572) and Breadalbane Campbell families (1630) in the Knapdale and Lorne districts³⁴. Other MacEwens relocated east to nearby Lennox (near Luss and Arrochar); Dumbartonshire, or to Glenboig (North Lanarkshire), or Stirlingshire. Some others may have joined MacEwens of Muckley (said to descend from the Lorne-MacDougal branch) in Perthshire, or they may have taken the sea route to Greenock and then to Ayr, along the coast to Galloway. Still others moved west to the isles that border Argyll - Islay, Arran, Bute and Mull - with the Campbell expansion.^{35,36}

Although they are created about 400 years later, clues to where MacEwens migrated after the fifteenth century may be seen in Barry Griffiths’ surname heat maps based on 1901 census data (see page 5, 6 above). These show concentrations of people who share a particular surname. The heat maps for the surnames McEwan and McEwen showing concentrations of settlement in Scotland in 1901 prompt the

²⁷ R.S.T.MacEwen

²⁸ *ibid*

²⁹ *Ibid*

³⁰ Sellar 1971

³¹ MacEwen R.S.T. 1904

³² *Ibid*

³³ MacEwan R.S.T.1904.

³⁴ *Ibid* p10

³⁵ Colin Davies

³⁶ McWhannell, 2023

question: as it is known³⁷ that Scottish people have tended to remain in the same geographical location as many generations of their ancestors, how well do those 1901 patterns of settlement reflect settlement 4-500 years earlier?

Other MacEwen families/branches?

Contemporary Y-DNA researchers are looking for ways to verify which of the recorded MacEwen settlements in the period following the loss of the Otter barony were probably relocated MacEwen of Otter families, and which were separate, perhaps unrelated MacEwen families. Additionally, there are suggestions of a MacEwen line as a sept of MacDougall and another as a sept of MacPherson.

There could be several explanations for distinct MacEwen families who don't seem to be biologically related. Before surnames were commonly used it was not unusual for families to adopt the monikers of a place where they lived, or of an important leader or ally, or to be seen to be allied with another group, or even to avoid being seen as allied to a certain group, or to avoid attention after an indiscretion.

Clan MacEwen Society includes any person who is born with the name, with any spelling, or any person who has an interest in or identifies with the Clan, so it clearly also includes people who do not align with the ancient Irish genealogy and who may be shown to align with some other genealogical line.

b) Early history of the Inner Hebrides

This section is a heavily summarised portrayal of key events in the social and political life in the Kintyre, Cowal, and Knapdale peninsulas, and adjacent Inner Hebrides islands. This was a history marked by military, political and overlord conflicts, thriving international trade, land use changes, and economic fluctuations, including scarcity and famine. Our interest in this content relates both to the leadership and influence and places of settlement of nGabhraïn, and the impacts of the turbulence and economic factors on the ordinary people and their ability to provide a sustainable lifestyle for their families.

Islay, in the Inner Hebrides, had probably been occupied by peoples from both western and eastern directions before Gaelic speaking Scoti (from northwest Ireland) established the Dāl Riāta kingdom in Earra-ghaidheal/Argyll.³⁸ Around 498 A.D. Fergus Mor Mac Erc, born in Ireland about 434 A.D., moved his throne to Scotland, establishing his capital at Dunadd, forming a kingdom known as **Dal Riata**. In the early sixth century, Fergus' son Angus Mac Erc claimed Islay³⁹. Mac Erc had 12 sons including Loarn and Fergus Mor. Fergus Mor had one son Domangart. Domangart had two sons Gabran and Comhgall. Comhgall had one son Conall. Gabran had five sons including Aedan. Like their fathers before them, Conall and Aedan became prominent leaders.

Around the mid-later sixth century, **Loairn** and **Oenghus** who are believed to be brothers, sons of Mac Erc - who lived at the same time as Eoghan, son of Niall of Nine Hostages - and two grandsons of Mac Erc brothers **Comgail** and **Gabrainn** (who are believed to have been two generations younger)⁴⁰ became eponymic Dal Riadic leaders. They formed four distinct kingdoms of sea-faring peoples in the area now known as west Scotland. The territory was divided amongst them into the nations of Cenēl Lorne, Cenēl Oenghus, Cenēl nGabraïn, and Cenēl Comhghall. It is believed that Cenēl Oenghus ruled Islay and Jura; Cenēl Lorne ruled Colonsay and Lorne/Lorn (the district now named after them - Lorne district was later held by the lordship of MacDougalls); It is not certain where the boundaries were for

³⁷ The Scotland DNA Project 2019

³⁸ Storrie p31

³⁹ ibid

⁴⁰ <https://freepages.rootsweb.com/~alanmilliken/genealogy/Research/IrishRecords/Miscellaneous/Dal-Riata-Dynasty.html>

Cenēl nGabrain and Cenēl Comhghall. Some⁴¹ believe that Cenēl Gabrain ruled Cowal and Glassary, and possibly Kintyre, Knapdale and Arran. The area controlled by Cenēl Comhghall possibly initially included Cowal⁴² and the Isles of Bute⁴³ and largely extended into lands east of Druim Alba.

There were many powerful leaders of the Dal Riadic kingdoms in the region over the centuries. In the **eighth century** Siol Ailpin emerged; this was a grouping of seven Scottish clans that traditionally trace their descent from **Ailpin, father of Cinead mac Alpin**. The Clans Ailpin are MacGregor, MacAulay, Macfie, MacKinnon, MacNab, MacQuarrie and Grant.

After the killing of his father, Cinead Kenneth Ailpin (Macbeth) became leader. Mac Aiplin conquered Scone in Pict territory and became King of Scots and Picts in 843 A.D. His successors (from Dal Riada Cenēls Loairn and Gabhrain) ruled over what became Scotland until the union of the Crowns in 1603.

There is a (disputed) story that **Anrothan**, progenitor of clans Lachlan, Lamond and MacEwen of Otter (father of Donnslēibhe), an eleventh century prince of the Aileach, is said to have gained his Cowal lands by marrying a Princess of the Cenēl nGabrain, the heiress of Cowal and Knapdale.⁴⁴

Around **800 A.D.** onwards **Norse Viking** raiders made their way up from the Isle of Man and conquered Kintyre, pushing the remnants of Cenēl Gabhrain into Cowal⁴⁵. But ‘the Argyll islands were never completely Norsified.’⁴⁶ These islands were always recognised as essentially Gaelic islands in which Gaels lived⁴⁷. Following **300 years** of Hebridean incursions and settlement by Vikings, next came the **twelfth century** reign of Viking **Somerled** (d.1164) whose three sons Angus, Dougall, and Ranald each formed powerful groupings and landholdings in the West Highland and Islands. From Ranald came **Clan Donald** and from Dougall came **Clan MacDougall**, Angus’ lands were divided up amongst his brothers.

Clan Donald was for a time the most powerful clan in the Western Highlands. Known as the “Lords of the Isles” they commanded the Hebrides and much of the west coast of Scotland. Islay was the seat of their power. The Lords of the Isles operated as a semi-independent kingdom/state and an overtly Gaelic institution with a distinctive culture. They built alliances and a thriving economic community encompassing the Isle of Man, Ireland, the Hebrides, Orkney, Zetland, and Norway.

Politically the Inner Hebrides, Argyll and Lorne region remained largely unaffected by the policies of the Scottish kings until early in the **thirteenth century** when Alexander II campaigned against Donald, grandson of Somerled. Rivalries and feuds amongst Somerled’s descendants were said to then become their undoing. While the MacDougalls co-operated with the Scottish Crown in the 1260s, the MacDonalds did not. In the 40 years between the final winning of the west by the Crown in 1266 and the outbreak of civil war caused by Robert the Bruce’s seizure of the throne in 1306, the MacDougalls, Lords of Lorne, acted as royal agents in governing the west.

By the last decade of the thirteenth century the MacDonalds of Islay were serving Edward I of England, whilst the MacDougalls were still upholding the Scottish cause. But in 1306 when the MacDougalls shifted to side with the English Balliol, opposing Bruce, Angus Og (MacDonald) chose to help the Scots king. Unfortunately for the MacDougalls they took what turned out to be the losing side in this Bruce /

⁴¹ eg, Bernard O Murchadhain Dal Riada Facebook group and FTDNA group leaders.

⁴² The author notes ambiguity in reports about the Cenēl Comhghall reign in Cowal

⁴³ Bernard O Murchadhain Dal Riada Facebook group and FTDNA group leaders.

⁴⁴ Clan MacLea – Livingstone <http://www.clanlivingstone.info/Dalriada.htm> ; see also Anrothan, Ui Neill.

⁴⁵ Bernard O Murchadhain

⁴⁶ Storrie p.32

⁴⁷ Storrie p32

Balliol civil war and Clan Donald had their position strengthened at the expenses of Clan Dougall. King Robert I then destroyed the MacDougalls and granted much of their territory to the MacDonalds.

For most of the **fourteenth and fifteenth centuries** the MacDonald lordship of the isles was a force for peace rather than a destabilising influence.⁴⁸ Then came a period when MacDonalds gradually lost political influence over the province of Argyll, and relations with the Crown deteriorated.

Over the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, Campbells gradually became the most feudal of Celtic kindreds, basing their expansion on royal patronage, judicious marriages, feudal charters, and the newly created Sheriffdom of Argyll (*Colin Campbell was created earl of Argyll in 1457*), and by aggressively adopting lowland ways⁴⁹.

After 1493 (when King James IV forfeited MacDonald lands) MacDonalds' fortunes declined rapidly, just as those of Clan Campbell of Argyll (with royal blessing) were still rising steadily. In 1493 King James IV imposed final forfeiture on the MacDonald lord and gave charge of Islay to the earl of Argyll's son-in-law John MacLan. Then when John MacLan was killed in 1519 the 3rd earl of Argyll entrusted administration of his Islay estates to his brother John Campbell of Calder/Cawdor. By 1542 this Campbell of Cawdor was given a ten-year lease of Islay.⁵⁰

A long and bitter feud between MacDonalds and Campbells followed, rivalries raging throughout the **sixteenth century** – then the seventeenth century was a particularly bloody period for the Campbells and the MacDonalds.⁵¹ After the Union of the Crowns in 1603 James VI and I appropriated the lands of wayward clans; upset over losing their land, the MacDonalds, along with other anti-Campbell Clans, sided with the Royalists through several brutal conflicts.

The Campbells continued to encroach and in the early **seventeenth century** annexed the southern isles, including Islay. At that time Islay was depicted as a densely settled land. In 1612 the last (Angus) MacDonald was in financial difficulties and had to wadset his lands in Islay to Sir John Campbell of Cawdor who finally took possession of most of the island in 1615. The house of Dunyvaig, on Islay, had finally fallen, and more than 450 years of MacDonald rule ended, and the Campbells of Cawdor's acquisition of Islay thus continued their clan's established policy of expansion.⁵²

c) The rise of the Campbells of Argyll

This history is included to show Campbell of Argyll's likely influence on the lives of Clan MacEwen of Otter on Cowal/Glassary and then linking them to their role and influence on Islay.

One of Clan Campbell's famous progenitors, Cailean Mòr, was knighted by Robert the Bruce in 1280 and Cailean's son Neil was given lands in Loch Awe, and other parts of Argyll. Inverary Castle became the ancestral home, and seat of the Chief of Clan Campbell, the Duke of Argyll; where the Campbell's established their power base for the next seven hundred years.

Like the MacDonalds and MacDougalls (see above), Clan Campbell was involved in the scuffle between Robert the Bruce and John Balliol for the throne of Scotland. This consequently provided leverage for Edward I of England to assume overlordship of Scotland. In turn this led to the Scottish Wars of Independence (1296–1346) as Robert the Bruce fought to win back his crown.⁵³

⁴⁸ Storrie p47

⁴⁹ Storrie p53

⁵⁰ Storrie p49

⁵¹ <https://www.highlandtitles.com/blog/clans-scotland-campbell/Become a lord or lady now>

⁵² Storrie p53

⁵³ <https://www.highlandtitles.com/blog/clans-scotland-campbell/>

Since before the time of King Robert the Bruce, the Chiefs of Clan Campbell played leading roles in the governments of Scotland, and later, in Great Britain/United Kingdom. Then their influence expanded throughout the **fourteenth century**, as Clan Campbell amassed a great deal of land from their neighbours, which they leased back to them for comfortable sums⁵⁴.

The main and chiefly line of Clan Campbell is Campbell of Lochawe, later known as the Earls and Dukes of Argyll. There are several cadet branches of the family; branches such as the Campbells of Glenorchy (later becoming the Campbells of Breadalbane), the Campbells of Cawdor, and the Campbells of Loudon; all of which became earldoms. Colin Campbell of Loch Awe was made first Earl of Argyll in **1457**, and then Chancellor of Scotland; until the Union of the Kingdoms of Scotland and England in 1707, the Argyll family and followers were closely involved in Scottish governance.⁵⁵

In 1510 Sir John Campbell, third son of the 2nd Earl of Argyll, married Muriel Caddell and lived at Caddell (now Cawdor) Castle. In the seventeenth century their grandson John Campbell (d. 1642) sold property to buy the Isle of Islay. Islay was consequently held by the Campbells of Calder/Cawdor from **1612 to 1726**, when it was bought by Daniel Campbell of Shawfield.

d) Social transformation in the West Highland and Islands

This section is included to inform our search for clues to the circumstances and whereabouts of ‘our’ MacEwans and Clan MacEwen of Otter families in the period after the loss of the Barony lands.

By the early seventeenth century there still had been little change in the agrarian economy of Scotland. In the first half of the century, together with a restricted market for agricultural products both locally and nationally, Scotland also experienced low agricultural yields and fixed rents (the latter paid mainly in grain). Records suggest that there were between fifteen and twenty seasons of grain failure between **1600 and 1660** making the price of grain exceptionally high.⁵⁶ In the west where stock raising was more important, developments during the century saw farming for external sales increased at the expense of subsistence farming. At that time black cattle provided the tenant farmers with their main, and often only, source of cash income.

During the period **1730–1850** social change within the Scottish Highlands accelerated as clan chiefs turned themselves into landlords and the traditional forms of society faded away⁵⁷. These were wide-ranging changes that effectively destroyed its social relations and subordinated the Highland economy to the market demands of the developing British capitalist economy.⁵⁸ This was evidenced by the growth of the black cattle trade and the social assimilation of the Highland chiefs and gentry.⁵⁹

Then after many years of poor productivity and low earnings, landowners in the highland and islands started taking action to increase their income. Within Argyll the clan chiefs and gentry were amongst the foremost exponents of this ‘improvement’ ethos as the traditional agricultural system was not designed to support their increasingly heavy expenditure or to finance their social and political ambitions.

⁵⁴ [https://www.highlandtitles.com/blog/clans-scotland-campbell/Become a lord or lady now](https://www.highlandtitles.com/blog/clans-scotland-campbell/Become%20a%20lord%20or%20lady%20now)

⁵⁵ <https://www.ccsna.org/>

⁵⁶ Storrie p56

⁵⁷ McWhannell, 2023

⁵⁸ McGeachy 1988

⁵⁹ Ibid

This 'improvement' ethos involved a deliberate shift to larger scale farming, a process that made it much harder to access land for small scale agrarian activity and so was a sweeping attack on the indigenous culture, language, and labour rhythms.⁶⁰

'A farm of thirty pounds a year, will have ten such sub-tenants upon it. Each of these has a family. The tacksmen, besides his wife and children, has eight men servants, six women and two boys. The whole amounts to about seventy-one persons. A great deal of the labour performed on these farms is communally undertaken. They all join in labouring the arable part of the farm, and according to their valuation receive a portion of its produce'.⁶¹

Historically agricultural production from clan lands had also been used to support a military unit - an aspect which was retained despite the decline of clan warfare. However, in the first half of the eighteenth century it was accentuated as the Jacobite chiefs (in particular) relied upon this system to provide the manpower vital to any rebellion against the Hanoverians.⁶²

Although the traditional mode of agriculture was frequently condemned as inefficient, commercial criteria had generally been kept subordinate to social factors. Then commercial criteria began to receive increasing prominence, particularly on the Campbell lands in Argyll wherein by the 1730s they were rapidly becoming almost the sole consideration⁶³. Commercial interests took over leases of farms in Cowal, Kintyre, Lorn, and Mull and by introducing 'improvements' landlords were reportedly able to raise rents four-fold over the next sixty years.

While the shift to a commercial approach to land use involved increasingly high rents, this coincided with falling demand and prices for black cattle in the period **1730-1740**. The combination of these factors, exacerbated by harvest failure and a cattle epidemic (1736) severely reduced the 'commonalty's' ability to pay rent⁶⁴, and led to a general decline in economic conditions throughout Argyll, precipitating population shifts and considerable emigration.

Referring to a 1744 letter from Archibald Campbell to the Lord Justice Clerk (explaining his views on the 'improvement' and indicating his intention of supporting the poor) McGeachy⁶⁵ posited that more accurately the changes were about enhancing the Duke of Argyll's fortune. Still, the letter provides valuable insights into the prevalence in the first half of the eighteenth century of seasonal migration from the county:

"We have great numbers of poor and consequently labour must be cheap, our people go in great shoals to the low country for two or three months in the harvests to reap the corn there, and immediately return with what they have saved, commonly very little, to a burden for the other nine or ten months of the year ... "

In his letter, Archibald Campbell notes the large numbers of people who had already emigrated to North Carolina; the letter provides crucial evidence that **even before the 1745 Culloden Rebellion** the emigration of the tenantry in the face of oppression and poverty, and in response to agrarian change and the pressures of population growth, had been a major problem for the landlords. This context was similar all over the West Highlands and Islands. We have an anecdotal story from one of our DNA match

⁶⁰ Ibid

⁶¹ McGeachy, 1988 quoting J. Walker.

⁶² McGeachy 1988

⁶³ ibid

⁶⁴ ibid

⁶⁵ McGeachy 1988

contacts that in **1753** their ancestors were directed by their feudal superior, Campbell of Glenorchy, to relocate from Dalmally to Ardtainig, Loch Tay, Perthshire.

Argyll landlords also encountered intense resistance from the ‘commonalty’ who opposed the break-up of the traditional townships, the new regime of agricultural leases, and many of the initiatives to develop industry.⁶⁶ Resistance was greatest between **1760 and 1850** when landlords continued the transformation of the agrarian system and developed crofting; though the escalation of clearance activity and the correlated massive increase in emigration affected patterns of resistance.⁶⁷

As landlords brought in supplementary labour, expanding the incoming population, together with a decaying economy, recurrent famines and bitter poverty made exile inevitable for increasing numbers of people. Some 20,000 people from the Highlands left for the colonies between **1763-1775**; in one year alone 54 emigrant ships sailed from the western sea lochs.⁶⁸ Most were led and organised by small tacksmen who wished to escape the rack-renting of their chiefs. The extent that the mass emigration movements affected landlords’ income is shown in Skye: in 1769 all tenants and subtenants left the Skye estates, forcing the lord to import others from the mainland.

e) A hard life on Islay

In this section we look into the social and economic life available on Islay and how it impacted ‘our’ MacEwans on Islay, first as immigrants and then as part of a long-stay community.

The Isle of Islay (eee-la) lies in the Inner Hebrides, which includes four larger islands Skye, Mull, Jura, and Islay, and 17 smaller islands. The islands of Mull, Jura and Islay lie adjacent to the Cowal, Kintyre, and Knapdale peninsulas on mainland Scotland. To its west, Islay is only about 20 miles across the channel to the coast of Northern Ireland. Ileachs (people from Islay) accessed the mainland through ports at Tarbert, or Campbelltown/Kintyre, Lochgilphead/Knapdale, or Oban/Lorne.

Landownership

As noted above in section #7, after the long period of Dal Riadic rule that extended into Scots/Pict rule, about 300 years of Norse Viking incursions and settlements, around the turn of the first millennium Viking Somerled took over as leader, establishing what came to be known as the Lordship of the Isles; his sons forming Clan Donald and Clan MacDougall. Islay was the seat of power for the Lordship. Then came a time when MacDonald power overextended, leading to deteriorating relationships with the Crown at the same time as the power of Campbells was growing. The Lordship of the Isles was forfeited to the Scottish Crown in **1493** although MacDonalds continued to hold lands on Islay until 1615.

Islay was perhaps slower than other parts of the West Highlands and Islands to experience the impact of the agrarian ‘improvement’ movement. The landowners’ ability to extract more income from their lands was obstructed by the inability of tenants to pay, resulting in a markedly decreased income for the lord. On Islay, by the beginning of 1612 Angus MacDonald was in financial difficulties and had to wadset or mortgage his Islay lands to Sir John Campbell of Cawdor.

When Sir John of Cawdor finally took possession of most of Islay in 1615, more than 450 years of MacDonald rule appeared to have ended⁶⁹. The Campbells of Cawdor (whose landholdings had mostly lain on the north and east coast of Scotland) were important agents of Argyll domination and the

⁶⁶ *ibid*

⁶⁷ *ibid*

⁶⁸ Prebble 1963

⁶⁹ Storrie p53

acquisition of Islay continued their established policy of expansion on the west coast. As Storrie (p55) says, their acquisition of Islay was mainly for political rather than economic ends.

During the seventeenth century on Islay the Campbells made strenuous, often ruthless, efforts to dispossess all MacDonald tenants, even at times all ‘Macs’ to the extent that the name MacDonald is rare in surviving lists of Islay rentals from the **seventeenth and eighteenth centuries**⁷⁰. There is a report by Elspeth Kerr in the Maclagan MSS of a MacDonald man whose carter’s wagon was emblazoned with the name MacEwen and the belief of his descendant that “if anyone should call us MacEwens it could not hurt us.”⁷¹

The editor of *West Highland Notes & Queries*, Ronald Black, believes that the McEwan name wasn’t known on Islay prior to 1614, the date of the takeover of Islay by the Campbells of Calder/Cawdor. According to Black⁷² it is likely that MacEwens came into Islay with the Campbells after 1614 and held high positions in both Islay and Colonsay during the seventeenth century. ‘MacEwen’ may therefore have been chosen by some Ileachs because it was a high-status name favoured by the Campbells despite containing ‘Mac’.

Sir John Campbell found Islay ‘not weel plenished with civile people’ (Storrie p59) and so he peopled the ylland with a number of his awne friends’. By the mid-seventeenth century many of the Campbell tacksmen had been ‘planted’ on Islay. Still, fundamental improvements in agriculture were delayed many years due to frequent years of low prices and continuing successive gluts and famines.⁷³ Cattle formed the major portion of the rental payments in kind; droves of cattle were collected and despatched annually to the south of Scotland. In the **first half of the eighteenth-century** Islay’s growing population of villagers, tenants, subtenants and landless cottars made reorganisation of the system of agriculture simultaneously more imperative and more difficult⁷⁴.

Subsequent Cawdor landowners were more prepared to invest in the Western Isles and were involved in developments in lead mining, and so brought in miners from England. However, when (another) John Campbell succeeded in 1716 it was to a heavily debt-burdened property. There were then reports that 1717 became the ‘worse paid rent that has been in Islay for 100 years.’ Further, at this time, a higher death rate than usual was observed and the lord sent to Ireland for wheat or bread⁷⁵. Five years later things were not much better, in **1721** there was ‘not one cow out of Islay’ as too few were drivable.⁷⁶

In **1726** Daniel Campbell of Shawfield (also the Member of Parliament for Inverary Burgh in Argyll) purchased almost the whole of Islay and part of Jura from John Campbell of Cawdor for ‘not much more than £12,000’. Under the Shawfield Campbells Islay’s economy was diversified to include non-agricultural means of employment: linen manufacture, fishing, whisky distilling, mining, potato growing. Islay remained with the Campbells of Shawfield until 1853. “There was a sense in which the history of Islay as we know it today begins with the purchase of the island by the Campbells of Shawfield in 1726”⁷⁷.

⁷⁰ Ronald Black, comments in WHN&Q ser 5 no 11 July 2024

⁷¹ Ibid

⁷² Black, WHN&Q ser 5 2024

⁷³ Storrie p61

⁷⁴ Storrie p103

⁷⁵ Storrie p64

⁷⁶ ibid

⁷⁷ Storrie p68 quoting Lamont, Early History, preface.

Population migration, in and out of Islay

While information about the geographical origins and immigration dates for incomers to Islay does not seem to be available, there are references in the texts to the landowners bringing in labour. The Cawdor Campbells have connections with Cawdor on the northeast coast and are related to the Argyll Campbells so it can surely be assumed that this incoming labour force originated in Argyll and Inverness, perhaps more from Argyllshire given that it is so close to Islay.

Showing the extent of *immigration*, despite large scale *emigration*, in **1755** the population of Islay was 5,344 persons, rising by the late 1760s to 7,000, and in the early **1790s** the population was about 8,400. The cessation of civil warfare after the 1745 rebellion, changes in land use, and increases in overlords' prices for land rental were given as reasons for the influx of Islay's population from other parts of Argyll. Indeed, the rate of population increase might have been higher, if not for the ease of outward flow to the mainland and emigration beyond Scotland.⁷⁸ Note though, the large-scale *immigration* continued – at its peak in **1841** the population had increased to 15,000 people.⁷⁹

For a sustained period on Islay, land lease price increases, as well as lengthy periods of drought, led to widespread increasing destitution - some people who were in reduced circumstances, were obliged to emigrate, resulting in females on Islay being more numerous than males, the young men having left.⁸⁰

Data for Scotland shows that Highlanders and Islanders had left for Europe, England, and Ireland for centuries, long before the 1700s, and **from the 1730s** transatlantic emigrations to New York and North Carolina, including from Islay, involved substantial numbers. A description for North Knapdale⁸¹ parish on the mainland records significant emigration circa 1740 to Cape Fear, North Carolina, and notes for the 1841 census include in several places numerators' comments that certain families are about to emigrate. More examples of the scale of emigration are reflected in the attempted settlement of 423 people from Islay, many at their own expenses, in New York State between 1737 and 1740. While some eventually settled in Washington County, others went their own ways, some joining North Carolina pioneers⁸². Then despite, or perhaps due to, the incoming population, there was subsequently a renewed increase in emigration from Islay in the years between **1763 – 1775** with a further emigration of about 1,300 people from Islay to North Carolina.⁸³

⁷⁸ Storrie p104

⁷⁹ Today about 3000 people live on Islay.

⁸⁰ Storrie p104

⁸¹ Glasgow and West of Scotland notes for North Knapdale parish

⁸² Storrie p74

⁸³ Storrie p85

Section C

Recommended resources:

The Society of Highland & Island Historical Research – West Highland Notes & Queries. <https://www.highlandhistoricalresearch.com/>

The National Library of Scotland. <https://www.nls.uk/>

Glasgow and West of Scotland Family History Society. <https://www.gwsfhs.org.uk/>

Foundation for Medieval Genealogy. <https://fmg.ac/>

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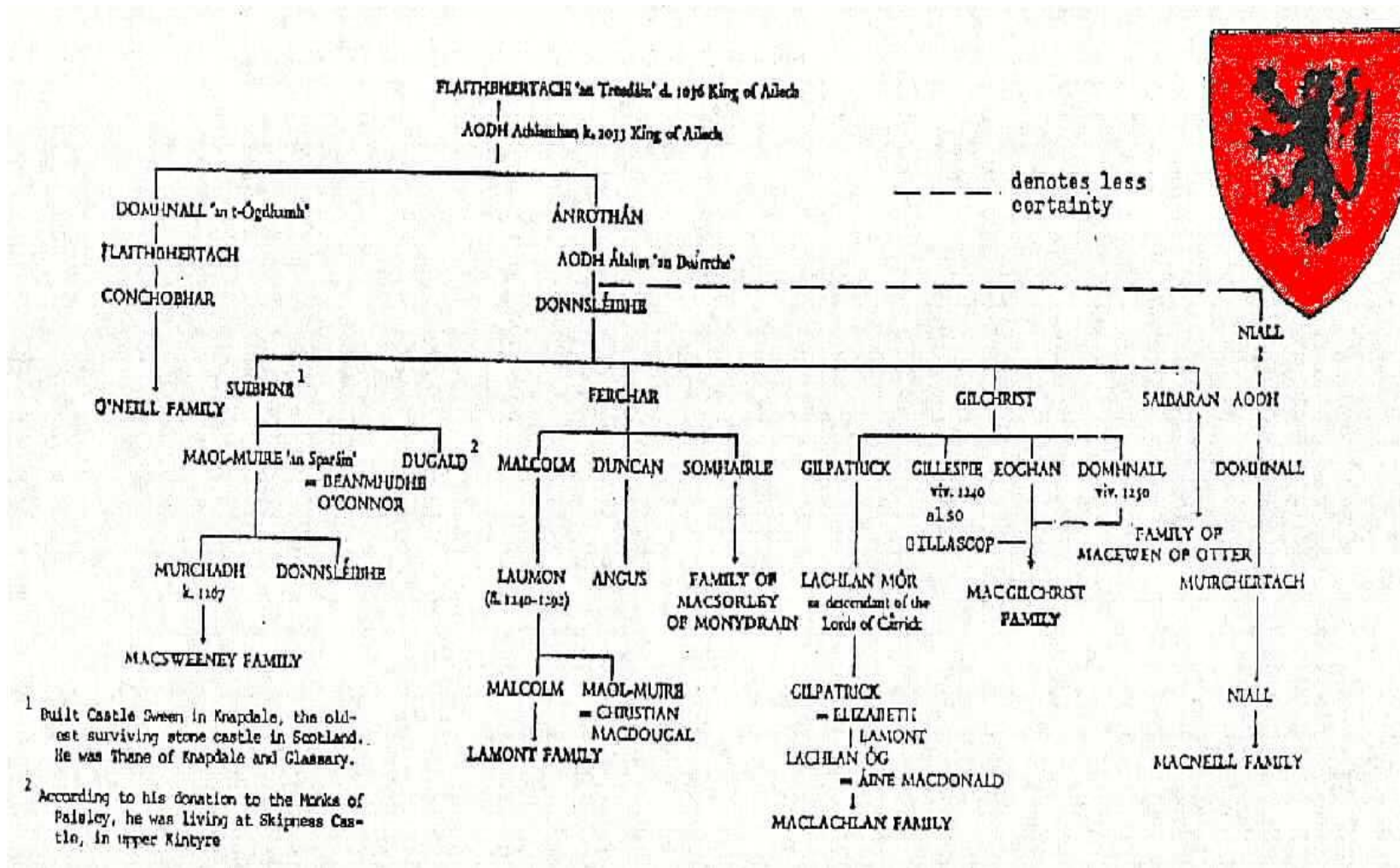


Figure 5 Genealogy of the Families in Cowal and Knapdale. Taken from: W.D.H. Sellar; "FAMILY ORIGINS IN COWAL AND KNAPDALE". Scottish Studies, Volume 15, Edinburgh, 1971, pp. 21-37. ("MS 1467" is in the National Library of Scotland, Edinburgh).



About the author

Around the time of my recent retirement from a career in health services, policy, and research, Clan MacEwen's genealogist suggested that I document my part time amateur study of MacEwen history, genealogy and Y-DNA research in an article for the bulletin. Needless to say, the article document continued to grow until it reached this rather lengthy paper. While the timing for a writing project was perfect, I hadn't fully appreciated that such a project has no end – it will not only absorb much more time, but it will also actually be an endless project. I can't imagine my interest in the subject flagging but if it does, I hope the paper will be a catalyst for others to conduct their own studies and share their findings with us.

Figure 6 Virginia MacEwan