

A research study into the McNeil /McNeill families who lived on the island of Mull & Tiree

Sept 2014

Introduction

The island of Mull was occupied from early times by Pictish families of the Cruithe or ancient Celts.

From about 500 AD a part of the island became inhabited by Dalriad Scottis from Irish Dalriada. Even though these people occupied different parts of the island we can assume that they married each other over many years.

Mull was a part of the Kingdom of the Lord of the Isles and later Angus Macdonald granted the islands of Mull, Tiree, Jura and Coll to the MacLeans in 1314.

For some years the MacLeans and Macdonalds of the Isles and Kintyre feuded over Rhinn lands on Islay. During this period the MacNeils of Barra sided with the MacLeans and the McNeills of Gigha sided with the MacDonalds of the Isles (1550 – 1600).

In 1596 the MacLean of Duart left two sons of Ruari MacNeil of Barra, John and Murdo as hostages with his brother-in law Macdonald of Dunyveg.

Later as the Campbells came to power all the clans of the islands joined to fight against their adversary in 1615. Through these alliances it is possible that some MacNeil /McNeill families decided to remain living on the island of Mull. In fact in 1673 records show a number of McNeill / McNeil families living on Mull.

The family ancestry of Duncan Ban McNeill (1805 – 1897) of Colonsay, was reported in the “Scotsman” 1897 written by Professor McKinnon in and mentioned in the book of Murdoch McNeill published in 1910 “Colonsay one of the Hebrides” showed evidence of an important link of migration from the island of Barra through Duncan’s ancestors migrating to Colonsay in about 1600 to 1650. By 1900 most of the families of the population could claim descending from this family. The island of Colonsay lies between the island of Islay 12 kilometres away and the island of Mull 24 kilometres away. Many families have had relatives living on both islands. One of Duncan Ban McNeill’s descendants currently lives in Australia and her ancestors migrated from Mull. A copy of the obituary of Duncan Ban McNeill is attached for your information.

The Mull genealogy web site has valuable records of McNeil / McNeill births from 1651 to 1931 and a web site of ships sailing from Scotland with migrants show a large number of people from Mull and Tiree left their homeland for Canada and a smaller number for Australia.

While we have a record of the ancestors of Duncan Ban McNeill there is still a question to answer of whether all the McNeill families had Barra ancestors, from the island of Gigha or the Argyll mainland. We would like to find living descendants who represent a continued male family line to join the clan MacNeil DNA Ancestry program.

Early civilization on the isle of Mull

“Of the ancient history of the island of Mull little is known. On the high mountain that separates the North from the South are two cairns, called Cam Cul ri Erin, or, the cairn with its back to Eire, i. e., Irish Dalriada, and the other Cam Cul ri Allabyn, or, the cairn with its back to Alban, which seem to mark some ancient boundary, and believed to be the line between the Dalriad Scots from Erin and the Cruithne of Alban.

This conclusion appears to be probable from the fact that about the year 503 the Dalriad Scots occupied the south part of Argyleshire, consisting of the districts of Cowall, Kintyre, Knapdale,

Argyle proper, Lorn, and probably Morvern, Islay, Iona, Arran, and the small adjacent islands. The boundary which separated them from the Cruithne extended from the island of Colonsay through Mull to the center of the district of Morvern on to Luine Loch, opposite Appin.

Angus Og MacDonald granted Mull

Angus Og MacDonald, fifth in descent from Somerled, was a faithful and uncompromising friend of Robert Bruce in his attempt to free his native land from the harsh grasp of England. He sheltered this monarch, after the disastrous defeat at Methven, in his castle at Dunaverty, August 1306. In all his subsequent actions, Angus bore an important part, and at the battle of Bannockburn commanded five thousand Highlanders under sixteen of their own immediate chiefs. As a reward for his great services, Bruce conferred upon him, in 1314, the lordship of Lochaber forfeited by the Comyns, and the lands of Duror and Glencoe, and the islands of Mull, Jura, Coll, and Tiree, which had belonged to the family of Lorn.

Somerled, Gilledomman's grandson, seized the Isles from the King of Man in 1156 and founded a dynasty that in time became the Lords of the Isles. The end of the Lordship came in 1493 when John Macdonald II forfeited his estates and titles to James IV of Scotland

The repeated failures of the western clans to re-establish, in any shape, the old lordship of the Isles, proved to them the futility of making another attempt. Having no longer a common object, the clans, by degrees, became estranged from each other, and the less powerful ones were forced to contend against the aggressions of their stronger neighbors.

The MacLeans feuded with the MacDonalds of the Isles and Kintyre over the lands of Rhinn in Islay. In this conflict the MacLeans were joined by the MacNeil of Barra and the Macdonalds with the McNeills of Gigha.

Later in 1529 the MacLeans joined the ClanDonald of Islay against the Earl of Argyll, and ravaged with fire and sword the lands of Roseneath, Craignish, and others belonging to the Campbells, killing many of the inhabitants. The Campbells, on their part, retaliated by laying waste great portion of the isles of Mull and Tiree and the lands of Morvern, belonging to the MacLeans.

Legal proceedings against MacLeans in Edinburgh 1673.

The Duart estates had become deeply involved in debt, and the Marquis of Argyll, by purchasing them up, had acquired a claim against the lands of MacLean, which ultimately led to the greater portion of them becoming the property of that accumulating family.

This legal proceeding involved many families who were living on Mull at this date. A number of McNeil families were recorded –

John M'Neill vie Ean in Tormagag Aros Patrick M'Neill piper	Donald McNeill in Kloir Charles M'Neill in Cheneish	Malcolm Neill in Donald eir M'Neill
Finlay M'Neil vie Finlay in Tirergan	Neel M'Neel vie Roy	Ferquhar M'Neil in Tormtarroch
Patrick M'Neill dow in Glenrannar	Gilcallum M'Neil vie Donald	Hector M'Neill in Balhfuill
Neill Garvie M'Neil vie Ean Balliemoir	Hew M'Neel in Ochnocraig	Malcolm M'Neill vie Ean in
John M'Neill vie Rorie	Malcolm M'Neill vie Lean in Arrois	

Inhabitants living on the estates of the Duke of Argyll on Mull 1779

Aross in Mull

Baleskat

Angus McNeil inn-keeper 46yrs., John McNeil his son 4yrs., Donald McNeil his son 1yr., his wife, nurse and daughters 4 people

Treshnish

John McNeil servant 28yrs.

Suniboul

Archibald McNeil mealer 40yrs.

Hector McNeil his son 3yrs., his wife, daughters and servant-maid 4 people

Freckadill

Lachlan McNeil cottar 60yrs., Lachlan McNeil his son 24yrs., and his wife and daughters 3 people

Arin

Malcolm McNeil herd 38yrs., John McNeil his son 5yrs., his wife and daughters 4 people

Callich

Malcolm McNeil miller 20yrs., his mother and maid

Charles McNeil residenter 30yrs., Neil his son, his wife and daughters 3 people

Duchrin and Aroulchein

Archibald. McArthur tacksman

Donald McNeil his servant-man

John McNeil mealer 54yrs., Lachlan McNeil his son 23yrs., his wife and daughters 3 people

Broloss in Mull

Kilfinichan

Peter McNeil mealer 70yrs., Archibald his son 25yrs., Angus his son 12yrs., his wife and daughter

Gribune

John Mclean tacksman

Rory McNeil his servant 20yrs.

Angus McNeil workman 60yrs., his wife and daughter

Balinahard

Hugh McNeil mealer 45yrs., Donald his son 14yrs., Neil his son 10yrs., John his son 4yrs., Duncan his son 1yr., his wife and daughters 3 people

Burg

Neil McNeil keeper 35yrs., his wife and daughter

Changes in population numbers due to migration

The population of families living on Mull has changed over past years. In 1776 1,997 people, 1801 8,539 people, 1821 10,612 people, 1841 10,064 people 1861 7,331 people and 1881 5,624 people.

You can see the impact of migration and this has continued through to recent years. The population in 2001 was 2,667.

From 1803 to 1847 39 ships called at Mull to take migrant families to Canada. Other families migrated to Australia. Those affected by the evictions of the 1840s and 1850s generally refused to move to Lowland Scotland. They opted to settle in such places as Nova Scotia and Ontario in Canada where they could work on land and continue with their style of life. In the first half of the nineteenth century, 59% of settlers from the United Kingdom were Scots born.

http://scotstocanada.com/new_page_1.htm

<http://www.scotlandsfamily.com/ships-passengers.htm>

Mull genealogy web site

www.mullgenealogy.org.uk

Mull map which can be enlarged

<http://maps.nls.uk/view/74400197>



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Ancient fort near Haunn © Copyright [Rob Farrow](#) and licensed for [reuse](#) under this [Creative Commons Licence](#)



Crackaig abandon village, isle of Mull © Copyright [Duncan Grey](#) and licensed for [reuse](#) under this [Creative Commons Licence](#)

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A history of the Clan MacLean by J.P.MacLean 1889

Mull genealogy web site

National Library of Scotland

Internet research

DUNCAN BAN M'NEILL.

Professor MacKinnon writes in the *Scotsman*:—"There died in the lonely island of Colonsay a couple of weeks ago an old man who merits a passing notice not only for his own moral worth, but because he was the youngest and last of a large family of nine whose united ages make up the remarkable figure of 787 years. The register of Colonsay does not go back further than the year 1796, and four of this family were born before that date. But the baptism of the five youngest is duly recorded, so that the ages of the others can be verified with substantial accuracy. The family consisted of six sons and three daughters. Five emigrated to Upper Canada; four lived and died in Colonsay. The nine were all married and left families, many of them large, and the descendants at present living in Scotland and in Canada number several hundreds. Those who emigrated attained fully to the age of those who remained in this country, and on the whole the women lived longer than the men. Two sons died at the age of 77, and a daughter and son at the age of 81 and 85 respectively, a daughter and son at 91, two sons at 93, and a daughter at 93. The first death in the family occurred in September 1873 and at the time Duncan, the youngest of the nine, was 68 years of age. The family were descended on the father's side from a M'Neill who removed from the Island of Barra to Colonsay some 250 or 300 years ago; the mother was a Brown, whose forbears belonged to Lochbuy, in Mull. On the voyage from Barra a son was born, who became known in Colonsay afterwards as John 'of the Ocean,' an epithet applied to his descendants for many generations. The Barra settler flourished in his adopted island home. Nearly two-thirds of the present population of Colonsay can claim descent from him in the male or female line, while his descendants in Canada are still more numerous. This family possessed in a marked degree the physical and mental characteristics commonly attributed in the isles to the Norse strain in the blood. They were large, loose-limbed men and women with long backs and broad shoulders; fair and yellow hair, fair skin, blue eyes, and small ears. The late Hector M'Lean, a noted anthropologist of those parts, once mentioned to me that a descendant of John 'of the ocean' was the most perfect type of a Norsewoman he had seen in thirty years. They had all the gift of a good memory, a sound judgment, with a distinct touch of humour and an appreciation of music and song. Duncan, who died the other day at the age of ninety-one, was distinguished in his youth for his remarkable eyesight. He could see the stars in daylight, and on one occasion he described to his companions the rig of a vessel bearing down upon them under strong press of canvas fully fifteen minutes before any of the crew could see her. He was born in 1805, a few years after the late John M'Neill, of Colonsay, succeeded to the estate. He paid rent to five successive proprietors—John M'Neill, his three sons, Alexander, Duncan (Lord Colonsay), and Sir John; and his grandson, the present proprietor, Major-General Sir John M'Neill, V.C., K.C.B., &c. Duncan's two grandfathers, M'Neill and Brown, were out in the '45, but the grandson saw neither of them; the immediate forbears evidently did not attain to the age of their descendants. A curious instance of the displacement of names and peoples, even in remote localities, is afforded by the case of this excellent man and wife. When Duncan Ban was born, the most common name in Colonsay was Currie, the next being M'Neill. At the present time half the population is M'Neill, and there is not a Currie on the island, the last who bore the name being Duncan's own wife, who died some ten years ago.

