

## **Changing Argyll Names**

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I have an impeccable Argyll descent on the maternal side. I mean by that that my mother had not one single antecedent, as far as we can get her back, who did not come from Argyllshire and this has an advantage greater than mere connection, for it is my experience that the distaff side is much more aware of its heritage than the male line. As a child, I spent many hours in the company of grown-ups, particularly females, who discussed their relatives endlessly, and I was lucky enough to be curious about those remote ancestors at a very early age.

My Kintyre grandmother's name was Janet McGill MacCorkindale, but on the dozen or so official documents which mark her transit through life, this name could alter as many times in spelling and in presentation. She told us that in Kintyre, the 'Mac' was dropped, in affectionate parlance, so that McEacherns might become simple Eacherns, and McGills would be Gills. For example, she might say: "Two of my Gill relations were shepherds." My grandmother's name, following the standard Highland naming pattern, was the name of her father's mother, Janet McGill, born in 1800, but somehow the degree of affection and regard in which the ancestor was held, made her 'Janet Gill', which appears on some certificates. If the name had been carried on in the male line, it might have quickly become 'Gill', thus erasing all suggestions of Highland forbears.

But this change would have been trifling compared with the alterations that were made to traditional surnames in Kintyre in the years between 1800 and 1860. On my grandmother's mother's side, the name McMath had altered to Mathieson, and the territorially titled McOshenoigs of Lephenstrath became first McShannock (but perhaps this was spelt as it sounded), and then Shannon. Or at least the last lairds of Lephenstrath changed their names from McOshenoig to Shannon, but in our line it was simply a maiden name which did not survive in any form. It seems that there was a general embarrassment about having an 'outlandish' Gaelic-sounding name. The author of *Kintyre in the 17th Century*, Andrew McKerral, tells of a Kintyre divinity student named Obrolachan who changed his surname to Brodie on becoming ordained, but our family's version of the story is that he was so laughed at by fellow students in the college of Glasgow that he changed the offending surname to Brodie on the spot. That shows how easy it was. Indeed, it was still easy even in the

first half of the twentieth century to change one's name to any old name. We were always told that 'by deed poll' did not exist in Scots Law. In Scotland we had the freedom to call ourselves whatever we liked.

This freedom in naming may be derived from a long-standing habit, vaguely in the clan system, vaguely in the feudal system. If people in the Highlands did not really use surnames until the seventeenth to eighteenth centuries, but were assumed to be of a certain clan or family, then only their forenames or nicknames mattered. They only began to require surnames when it came to army or church records and rent rolls. In the seventeenth century, men could be identified in rent rolls by strings of patronymics. Women were seldom mentioned, so possessed only first names. In the eighteenth century we find the occasional full double name in rent rolls, and then in those rare censuses or catechists' lists such as the Inhabitants of the Argyll Estate, 1779<sup>i</sup>, or the ominous catechist's list<sup>ii</sup> made of the Small Isles in 1764-5, which was to provide evidence of Popery for the grand sweep of ethnic cleansing which was to follow shortly.

If people were assumed to bear the surnames of their clan chiefs, even of their vanquished chiefs, there also existed a kind of opportunism aided and abetted by the feudal system. Tenants, when their estates changed hands were quick to assume the name of the new landowner if they thought it might give them some advancement. There seems to have been no shame in the shedding of an old name and the taking-up of a more profitable one, like that of the laird. It is quite clear to me that the name of McQuarrie, which was the name of nearly everyone on the island of Ulva before 1777, was slowly being discarded in favour of the name of McDonald after Colin McDonald of Boisdale bought the island in 1785, and some years after the old Chief, Lachlan McQuarrie of Ulva was exiled to the nearby island of Little Colonsay, like Napoleon on Elba. As the old laird was more and more discredited, and especially when a handsome, active young McDonald heir appeared on the scene in 1800, the McQuarrie followers became McDonalds in droves. McDonald was not a Mull name before this time, although it existed in Iona. When this handsome young landowner had to sell his island less than twenty years later, and it was bought by another MacQuarie<sup>iii</sup>, was there a rush to re-assume the old name or had tenants learned that it was no good sucking up to landowners? We do not know, because it was unlikely that Ulva tenants ever offered up or wrote down their own names. All lists were made by clerks representing an

owner or by a church official, and it is his perception of a name which has come down to us.

The Duke of Argyll's census of his Argyll estate in 1779 is a superb resource for genealogists. It is also witness to a certain flexibility in names. Edited by Eric Cregeen in 1962, and published by the Scottish Record Society, it kick-started an interest in name changes when Cregeen, a specialist in Argyll history, saw that some names appeared in two forms. McDuffie and McPhee was an obvious pair, which is acknowledged in the index, but any throbbing excitement provoked by this discovery might be puzzlingly made dubious by occasional footnotes in much later censuses, or judiciary records, such as 'McKinnon, alias McShirrie'. What could this alias possibly infer? The Argyll census was compiled by the literate members of the community – tacksmen or ministers. Why did they never provide an explanation?<sup>iv</sup> You would think that the 5th Duke of Argyll, such an able and interested landowner, might wish an explanation for a man with two names. But perhaps the word which sounds so sinister to us – alias – has a perfectly gentle and reasonable connotation in the context, like some people know this fellow as McKinnon, but there are others who keep calling him McShirrie.

Of course a move from Gaelic-speaking areas to the lowlands was a move into enemy territory. In the second half of the eighteenth and beginning of the nineteenth century, Gaelic-speaking highlanders were regarded as savages by lowlanders. They had to speak English to get on, and if they thought their names sounded too outlandish, or if they were received with hostility, a quick change was effected, as in the case of our Obrolachan, above. People who were clearly not savages, like the scholarly Iain Maclulich of Glenurquhart, later Dr John Smith of the Highland Parish in Campbeltown, felt it necessary to assume a safe and dull name. The funny thing is that I have seen an article about him, written in Gaelic by Ronald Black, which, instead of calling him by his original Gaelic name, has him as Iain Mac a'Ghobhainn, a re-translation of 'Smith' as in 'blacksmith' (although Maclulich is mentioned). But Maclulichs going overseas, to Canada for instance, were able to keep their delightful melodious name, because they met with no prejudice. There are, I believe, numerous Maclulichs in the burying grounds of Kilmartin, where it was not considered an outlandish name. Outlandishness must be subjective and relative. Why should a sensible man like Dr Smith (and his brother Donald) seek to change?

A doctor in the Ross of Mull, Alexander MacKechnie, was prejudiced against a name common among his patients - McEachern. According to Attie MacKechnie, the late highly respected craftsman and Gaelic raconteur from the Ross of Mull, Dr MacKechnie (who was from Jura) advised all Mull McEacherns to adopt the name of MacKechnie, as if it was a less offensive surname, but from the same stock. Sometime between 1870 and 1880 the names were duly altered. All of my grandfather's family of McEacherns, whether living in Tiree or in Mull, took on the name of MacKechnie. Why should Dr Alexander's word carry so much weight? Did he say, "I think you'll be a lot better off if you simply change to MacKechnie"? Why should it concern him? Did he instruct the enumerator of the census to write every McEachern down as a MacKechnie? In the Oban Times, in the years between 1905 and 1915, fierce debates raged about relationships between names, and in 1912 an irate J.M. MacKechnie insisted that McEacherns and MacKechnies were not the same. Of course he was right, but he did not appreciate that Dr MacKechnie in Bunessan, Mull, had forced a merger<sup>v</sup>.

The name of Currie, which in my own case was a married name, is a surname which I have researched both as the name of my father-in-law and his ancestors, and as a Mull name which appeared in the 18th century in the parish of Torosay. I cannot believe that the Scottish surname has much connection with the lightly-populated Midlothian village of Currie, but I can accept that it was the name given to a large number of Gaelic-speaking people formerly known as McVurich or McMhurich, mainly from Colonsay, Jura and Islay. I have found references to McVurich tenants in Lochbuy in Mull in 1760, and observed that forty years later the same families are called Currie<sup>vi</sup>, while the name of McVurich is extinct. An intelligent diarist, Lauchlan Maclaine in Garmony in Mull, made a List of Souls<sup>vii</sup> which included many Curries in 1829. These people certainly did not come from Midlothian, but were descended from the McVurichs mentioned earlier on the Lochbuy estate, usually in notices of eviction.

So much for Mull Curries. But where did my Currie in-laws originate? Well, they turned out to have been in Larbert, Dunipace and Denny; they are calico printers in the early 19th century. The earliest Currie, John C. was born about 1760 and was a quarrier. I know that I am on the right track, because my father-in-law had told me that he was informed they came from Islay via Denny. Records in Islay, alas, do not go back to the

mid-18th century. How then do we bridge the gap between Denny and Islay, between Currie and McVurich? If the John Currie (Iain McVurich ?) born about 1760 was the one who made the leap from Islay to the Falkirk area, could it have been because Falkirk was where the cattle market was, and drovers would have brought cattle there from Islay ? It would appear that the name-change and the arrival in the lowlands came at about the same time as the movement into the Inner Hebrides. Had the decision to leave for the mainland been part of a far more seismic change like an alteration in tenants' conditions? Perhaps on one of those trips with the drovers a McVurich had decided never to return to Islay or Jura. Name-changing is unsurprisingly associated with a drizzling kind of moving into a community where suspicion of the Highlander is obvious, and where advisers are at hand to suggest name changes. Judging from the names which survived overseas emigration, groups of Highlanders in Canada were not constrained to change, or didn't suffer the deep embarrassment of Mr Brolachan. There is a strong impression that Scottish lowlanders were positively crude in their criticism of Highlanders, that it took generations for Gaelic-speakers to dispel prejudice, and that some names must have been treated as particularly funny. A few well-known, brave surnames escaped criticism – such as Maclean, Macdonald, Mackintosh, Munro, Fraser, Cameron – but some of them are already lightly anglicised. Some people today still find certain surnames funny – such as McSporran and McTavish and McClarty (all from Kintyre). But we can have no idea of the ridicule Highlanders endured in the nineteenth century as they settled tentatively in their new landscapes.

You may have gathered that I have been trying for many years to catch somebody out in the act of changing his name, wilfully, deliberately, purposefully, with an eye to his progeny – not simply bowing to the whims of some scribe or other. I have waved carrots in front of the eyes of eager ancestor-hunters, in the hope that they might supply evidence in the form of a letter, of a moment when enough was enough and Highlanders could face the world no longer bearing a Gaelic-sounding name. The story of Obrolachan is too obviously anecdotal. I would like to find a letter in the style of Dear Father, This will come as a surprise, but I wish no longer to be known as Lachlan McLucas. Henceforth I will be Lachlan McDougall. Break this gently to my dear Mother. Your loving son, L.M. For between 1765 and 1785, a large number of McLucas changed their names to McDougall, and many of their descendants, unaware of this, have come to a complete halt in their family searches. And what are we to make of Neil

and Kathrine Luke of Calgary in Mull, who appear in the Old Parish Records of Kilninian in the 1760s? Was the Session Clerk being affectionate (as my grandmother's explanation would suggest), when he wrote them down as Luke, and were they actually halfway to becoming McDougalls? A great deal of serious research still requires to be done on the disguising of Gaelic surnames, and the target period should be 1750-1800 rather than the nineteenth century. The 'Forty-five and its aftermath clearly had something to do with the subterfuge.

I shall leave you with a true story of how a nickname can stick, and even become a surname.

In the Ross of Mull, when I was a small child, in the 1940s, a kenspeckle figure who walked everywhere in a dignified manner carrying a briefcase, was known as 'Dr Currie'. Indeed this name was engraved on his briefcase, which looked more like a black doctor's bag, the kind that babies are delivered in. It was only many years later, when I was working on my book about Mull, and visiting my only remaining relative, that, enquiring about doctors, I asked about Dr Currie. My uncle revealed that he was not a doctor at all. His real name was Donie Cowan, but he had bought the black bag at a jumble sale, with DR CURRIE stamped on it, and from that moment onwards, till the day he died, he and the bag were inseparable, and he was known as Dr Currie to everyone. Few remembered his real name, and my uncle would not have been surprised if Currie was on his death certificate.

### Endnotes

<sup>i</sup> Cregeen, Eric R., *Inhabitants of the Argyll Estate, 1779*. Scottish Record Society, Edinburgh, 1963

<sup>ii</sup> *List of the Inhabitants of Eigg, Rum, Muck and Canna* [ a catechist's list compiled by Neil McNeil in 1764/5 with the purpose of identifying 'Papists' in the Small Isles ] Edinburgh University Library, Special Collections, MS La.III 839. The MS is marked with notes about clearing certain named families. Although there was a Presbyterian minister resident in the parish from 1756, doing his best to convert the inhabitants, the re-leasing of farms meant that Catholic tenants were dispossessed. Canna, being almost entirely 'Papist' was cleared to be possessed by Mr McKinnon of Corichatchan, protestant. " It is to be hoped," says a note on the MS, "that the farm will soon be inhabited by protestants."

<sup>iii</sup> Charles MacQuarie, brother of the Governor of New South Wales. The spelling differed from the last Chief's.

<sup>iv</sup> Eric Cregeen provides an editorial explanation of McShirrie and McKinnon, saying in a footnote that in Mull the surname McSherie (sic) has been given up in favour of McKinnon, and in Skye in favour of Maclean.

<sup>v</sup> *The Oban Times*, October 1912, in which the correspondent is a purist fighting the tide of arbitrary changes.

<sup>vi</sup> On 30 May 1803, Andrew Halliday, tutor at Lochbuy, Mull, reported in a letter that Duncan Currie's wife had died of the fever then affecting all the people of Mull. National Archives of Scotland, GD174/1600

<sup>vii</sup> *List of Souls* compiled by Lauchlan Maclaine for Gillean Maclaine in Java, 1829. Gloucestershire Record Office, Uncatalogued MSS.

### **Further reading**

Jo Currie. Mull Family Names for Ancestor Hunters. Brown & Whittaker, Tobermory, 1998, 60pp.

Jo Currie. Mull the island and its people. Birlinn, 2001, 461pp