

The Marquis (Mhic Mharki) and the MacDonalds

I recently got around to writing the story of the shared origins and history of Marquises and MacDonalds and sent it to the headquarters of Clan Donald at the Armadale Castle Centre on Skye. I also sent a copy to the editor of the MacDonald magazine *A' Bhirlinn*. The response of both was even far more positive than I had hoped for.

First to reply was the Chamberlain of the MacDonald High Council who was so impressed with my account he actually took it to the council which decided to pass it onto Ian Macdonnell, the Seanchaidh (official historian) of the High Council for evaluation. Ian described my article as a “worthy paper, well-written and well-researched that brings new perspectives to the history of Clan Donald. He recommended that the article be added to their library and added to the High Council website.

The editor of *A' Bhirlinn* also said he'd like to include something in the magazine but the original article was too long. So I sent three smaller articles which he is considering for inclusion into future editions.

As I said to all three who responded, that this marked a kind of symbolic reunion of the Marquises and MacDonalds after two centuries – at least in a written sense.

Steve Marquis.

The article: -

The MacMarquis (Mhic Mharki) and the MacDonalds

The Mhic Mharki have a shared history with the MacDonalds that goes back to the Viking invasions of the Gaelic world during the 9th century. A relationship that took various forms over the succeeding centuries and which lasted until the end of the 1700's.

In my book (*Life and Times of the Marquis Family of Argyll*) I describe how the Marquis family had emerged from the lands of the MacDonalds who for 250 years from around 1250 to 1494 ruled over the Western Isles, west coast of Scotland and parts of Ulster. Like the MacDonalds, the Marquises

were descended from the 9th century Viking invaders who went onto to marry local women from the existing Gaelic elites and gradually evolved into a Norse/Gaelic ruling class over the region referred to as Innes-Gall by the defeated Gaels. In particular, they claimed descent from Marcus (Marach) MacDonald (killed in Antrim in 1397) who was the leader (constable) of a galloglass band (Norse/Gaelic mercenaries fighting in the conflicts between the leading Irish clans) in Ulster and a member of the ruling family of the MacDonalds who later became the Lords of the Isles (see family tree below). The Marquis Gaelic family name was Mhic Mharki (son of Marcus) or MacMarcuis, which would have been a later latinised spelling, and anglicised to Marquis around 1800. The first recorded individual Mhic Mharki that I managed to locate was a Christinus Macmarkys in 1428, who was rector at the church of St. Moluag, Totternish, situated in the MacDonald area of Skye.



Galloglass and Viking Ancestry

The creation of galloglass fighters (in Gaelic *gallóglaigh* 'foreign young warriors') began to appear during the second half of the 13th century formed by the newly emerging Norse/Gaelic clans that filled the vacuum

in Innes-Gall left by the defeat of Haakon Haakonsson, King of Norway, at the Battle of Largs in 1263 by King Alexander III of Scotland. It was now that the heirs of Somhairle (Somerled), the great Norse/Gaelic 12th century warrior king of Argyll and the Isles, whose sons and grandsons created the Highland Gaelic clans of Clan Donald, Clan Dougall, Clan MacRory, Clan MacSweeney and Clan MacAlister, the principal clans of *A'Gàidhealtachd* (Land of the Gaels).

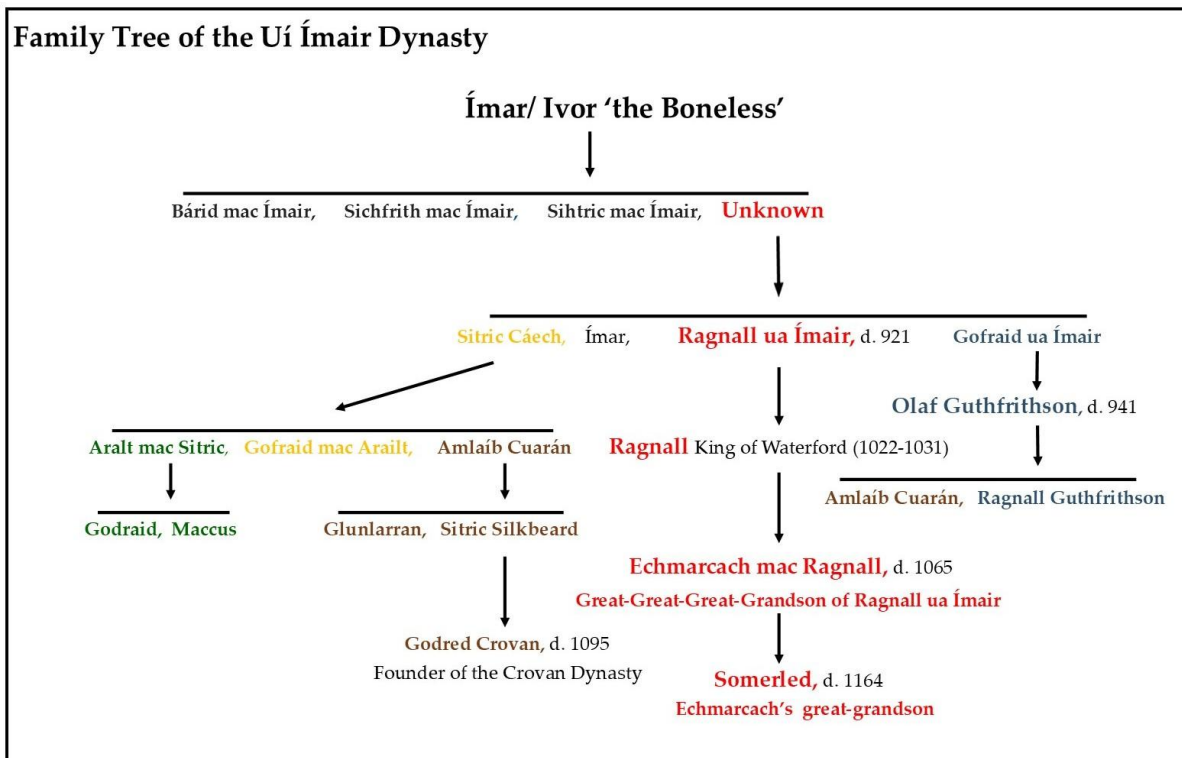
Marcus (Marcach) MacDonald was the grandson of Alasdair (Alexander) Og who in 1293 became Clan Chief (cinn-cinnidh) of the MacDonalds on the death of his father Aonghus (Angus) Mór, but his reign was short-lived as he was killed fighting the MacDougalls six years later on behalf of King Edward I of England. Alasdair Og was succeeded by his brother Aonghus Mór after a bitter dynastic succession battle, who went on to support Robert the Bruce in the Second Scottish War of Independence and reaped the rewards after Bruce's victory at Bannockburn in 1314. Aonghus Mór's son, John of Islay, became the first Lord of the Isles and married the daughter of Bruce's son, Robert II, as the MacDonalds consolidated their control over the Norse-Gaelic *Innes-Gall*. Over the next century the MacDonalds emerged as the dominant clan as the Lords of the Isles in what would become the Gaelic Highlands of Scotland.

In the meantime, Alasdair Og's family had fled to Ulster where his son, Somerled and his grandsons established some of the leading galloglass bands (Norse/Gaelic mercenaries fighting in the conflicts between the leading Irish clans) in Ireland. Marcus MacDonald was the youngest of four sons of Somerled all of whom were killed fighting in the Irish O'Connors civil war. Marcus was succeeded briefly by his son Somerled Buidhe who was killed only a year after his father. A second son of Marcus took over the family galloglass, Turlough (Charles) Mór, who rose to be Chief of the Connaught and Leinster MacDonalds.



13th century tomb of galloglass constable Felim O'Connor

Through Marcus MacDonald's grandfather, Alasdair Og, the Mhic Markie were also connected to Dòmhnall Mac Raghnuill (Donald, Son of Ranald), the eponymous progenitor of Clan Donald. This relationship leads to Somerled and two Viking kings of Dublin, Waterford and York, Ragnall ua Ímair (early 10th century), and Echmarcach mac Ragnall (mid-11th century). In the Annals of Ulster his name is 'Echmarcach' but in the MacFirbis genealogy he is called 'Imergi', probably pronounced 'Imerki' or just 'Merki'. His descendants were referred to as Mhic Mharki [in Gaelic], later anglicised as Mac Marquis and eventually Marquis. This connection to the Norse/Gaelic rulers of Innes-Gall takes all the way back to the dominant figure of the first Viking incursions into *A'Gàidhealtachd* during the second half of the 9th century, Ivar the Boneless, founder of the Uí Ímair dynasty that would rule over *Innes-Gall* for the best part of four hundred years as well as the Danelaw in England during the ninth and tenth centuries. This is a very long, intricate and complicated story of which a more detailed account can be found on my website: www.marquisfamilyhistory.com



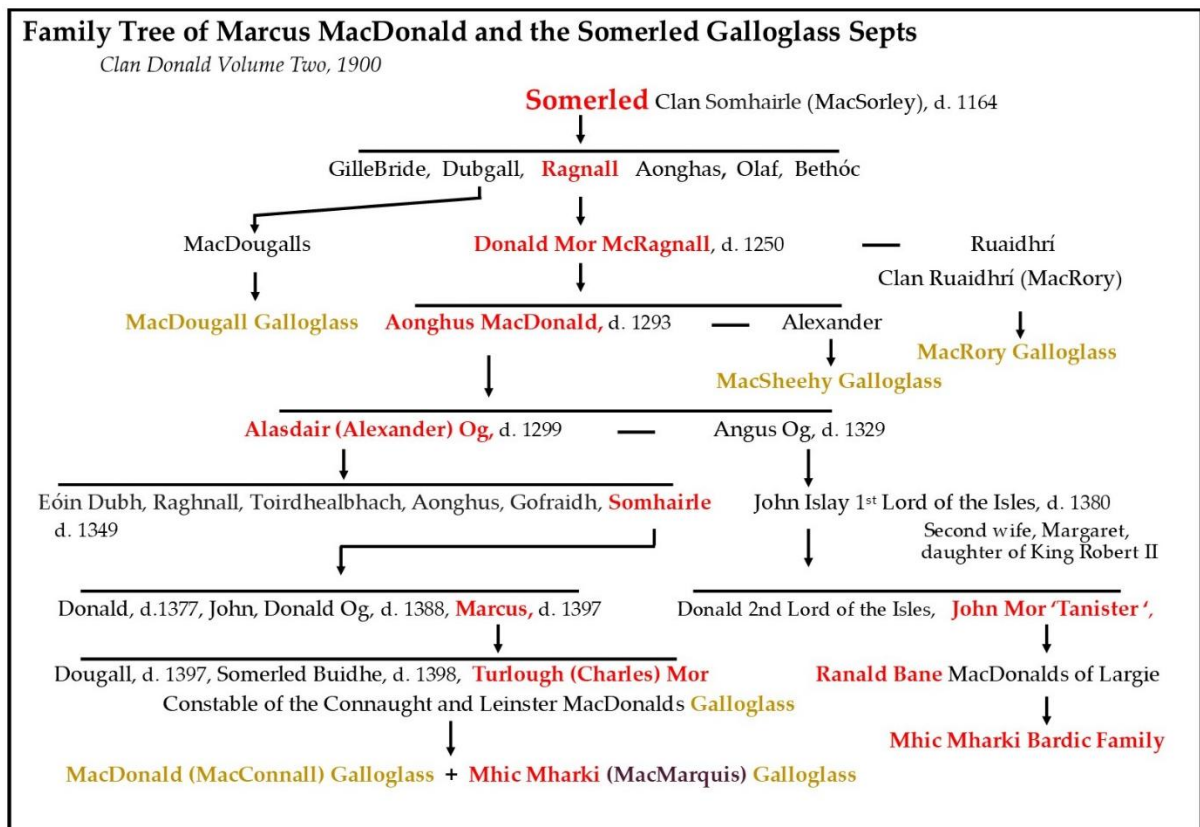
There are two mentions of a MacMarquis presence in Ulster in the second half of the 16th century during the final phase of the English conquest of Ireland. In 1568, Donnell McMarques, “whose statement made to the English authorities in Carrickfergus, concerning the possibility of the Campbells and MacDonalDs entering the war in Ireland, was passed on to Elizabeth I.” Twenty years later there is also a reference to a poem honouring the chief of the MacMarcuis galloglass of ‘Knocknacloy’ (Knockloughrim, Antrim, today). It is dated to 1588, but we do not have the name of its author nor the first name of that chief.

What to make of all this? These references would suggest that the MacMarquises had at some time since Marcus MacDonald created their own separate galloglass sept and it appears of some significance. Whether it was connected to the MacDonnell galloglass of Connaught or more likely Clan Donald South established by John Mór ‘Tanister’, younger brother to Donald, 2nd Lord of the Isles, it is impossible to tell. John Mór ‘Tanister’ had also fled to Ulster at the same time as the heirs of Alasdair Og MacDonald and created his own galloglass sept.

The heirs of Marcus MacDonald’s galloglass mainly remained in the service of the O’Connors of Connaught until the defeat of the Earl of

Kildare in 1535 when their allegiance was transferred to the English administration – again, as pointed out above, the act of true mercenaries. The reference to Donnell McMarques’s report to Elizabeth tends to suggest they did likewise.

In 1569, we get the intriguing account of the marriage between Trough Luineach O’Neill (clan chief) and Lady Agnes Campbell, daughter of Colin Campbell, 3rd Earl of Argyll, and the widow of James MacDonald, 6th chief of Clan Dunnyveg and the Glens. Her dowry consisted of 1,200 galloglass to add to the 5,000 or so galloglass already in Ulster. We do not know whether this included any of the MacMarquis galloglass, though they must be in there somewhere, but it does reflect an increasingly complicated relationship between the MacDonalds and Campbells by this date. Although, by this time my direct ancestors had moved back to Argyll with the MacDonalds of Largie.



The Mhic Mharki Bards and the MacDonalds of Largie

At a conference of Gaelic language enthusiasts in 1967, Professor D. S. Thomson introduced the Mhic Mharki Bardic Family to the world. It is interesting to speculate that had Professor Thomson not given this talk,

would the Mhic Mharki bards still be hidden away in dusty manuscripts and confined to the archives?

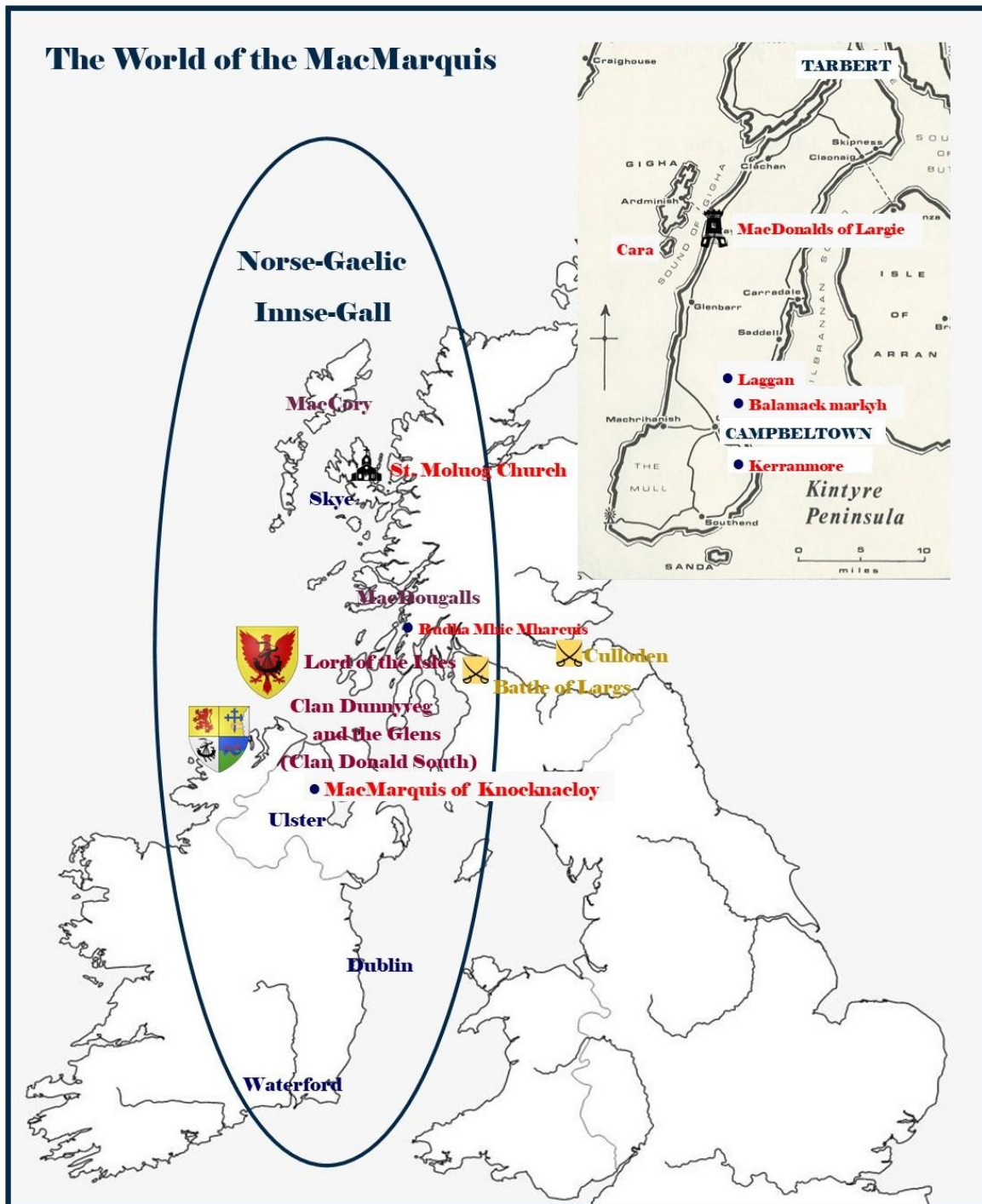
The Mhic Mharki bardic family whose patrons were the MacDonalds of Largie on Kintyre – founded by Ranald Bane MacDonald (circa 1410-76) second son of John Mór ‘Tanister’ – first entered the records in 1506 when John McMarkisch was granted tenancies to land at ‘Laggan’ in Glenlussa (just north of Campbeltown) and ‘Kerranmore’ in Glen Kerran (just south of Campbeltown), by King James IV for bardic services – the first recorded appearance of a MacMarquis in Kintyre. He was described as a ‘carminista’. The etymology of ‘carminista’ is presumably the Latin ‘carminis’, a word associated with song, singer, lyricist, which might indicate a bard rather than a poet. The MacMarquis sept clearly had a significant presence in Argyll over a long period, 17th century maps reveal that there was a small town near Laggan called ‘Balamack markykh’ ('Township of MacMarcuis'), there is also promontory called Rudha Mhic Mharcuis overlooking the island of Easdale, south of Oban. I provide full details of Mac Marcuis bardic family in my book.



1662 Map of Kintyre showing Balamack markykh, 'Township of MacMarcuis'

Those of my direct ancestors that survived the ‘Killing Time’ – which referred to the 17th century when clan conflict, civil war and Jacobite rebellions devastated and largely depopulated Kintyre – emerged as part of a whisky smuggling enterprise on the island of Cara (see map below) for the Laird of Largie during the 18th century, one of whom, Alexander

McMarcus (my x5great-grandfather) was married to a cousin of Flora MacDonald of Bonney Prince Charlie fame, whose mother was also a Largie MacDonald – but that’s another story. Records show that the MacMarquis sept fought in all the Clan Donald battles alongside the Largie MacDonalds including joining in the various Jacobite rebellions and some most likely fought at the Battle of Culloden in 1746.



Notes and References

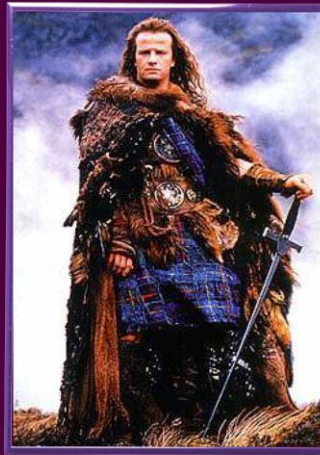
1. The role of the bard was to write poems and compose songs, but providing musical entertainment seems to have been their principal function. As with all Gaelic official posts, being a bard was a hereditary position, his services paid for with grants (*wadset*) of land. If a bard failed to produce a suitable male heir, he was expected to train a brother's son or other male relative (via tanistry) in order to preserve land titles and maintain the bardic tradition.
2. There are two mentions of a MacMarquis presence in Ulster in the second half of the 16th century during the final phase of the English conquest of Ireland. In 1568, Donnell McMarques, "whose statement made to the English authorities in Carrickfergus, concerning the possibility of the Campbells and MacDonalds entering the war in Ireland, was passed on to Elizabeth I." Twenty years later there is also a reference to a poem honouring the chief of the MacMarcuis galloglass of 'Knocknacloy' (Knockloughrim, Antrim, today). It is dated to 1588, but we do not have the name of its author nor the first name of that chief. Although, by this time my direct ancestors had moved back to Argyll with the MacDonalds of Largie.
3. Lord Hailes's in his *Annals of Scotland* written in 1776, stated that "in 973, Maccus, King of the Isles; Kenneth, King of the Scots, and Malcolm, King of the Cambri, entered into a bond for mutual defence. Then followed Gilledomnan, the grandfather of Somerled. Gilledomnan was driven from the Isles by the Scandinavians, and died in Ireland, where he had taken refuge. While there, his daughter married Harold Gille, King of Norway, in an attempt to bring peace."

It must be remembered that these very early Gaelic Annals are often contradictory and are more concerned with telling a story than providing an accurate historical record. The information in this article is based on the latest academic interpretation of these early Annals and clan histories, plus the analysis of Dennis Freeman-Wright.

The Life and Times of

The Marquis Family of Argyll

Smugglers, rebels, bards and fishermen



STEVE MARQUIS



The Island of Cara



Tacksman's House on Cara (built in 1735), where my Ancestors lived for around 70 years.



Steve Marquis, 2024.

stephen.marquis@ntlworld.com www.marquisfamilyhistory.com

<https://highcouncilofclandonald.com/scholarly-papers/origins-of-the-macmarquis-family/>

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