

Origins of the Marquis (Mhic Mharki) Family

“My word but you have an interesting family tree.”

These were the opening words in an email Dennis Freeman-Wright sent me after meeting him for the first time at a history fair in Leicestershire where we got into a conversation about the origins of the Marquis family and their links to Clan Donald. Dennis is a keen etymologist and has studied in great detail the history of certain place and family names including the MacDonalds.

The information he provided plus some of my own additional research has raised some fascinating questions about the earliest roots of the Marquis family. As a result, I have written a more detailed account of that early history which tells a remarkable story of a family at the heart of the key historical events in the bloody creation of A’Gàidhealtachd - Land of the Gaels.

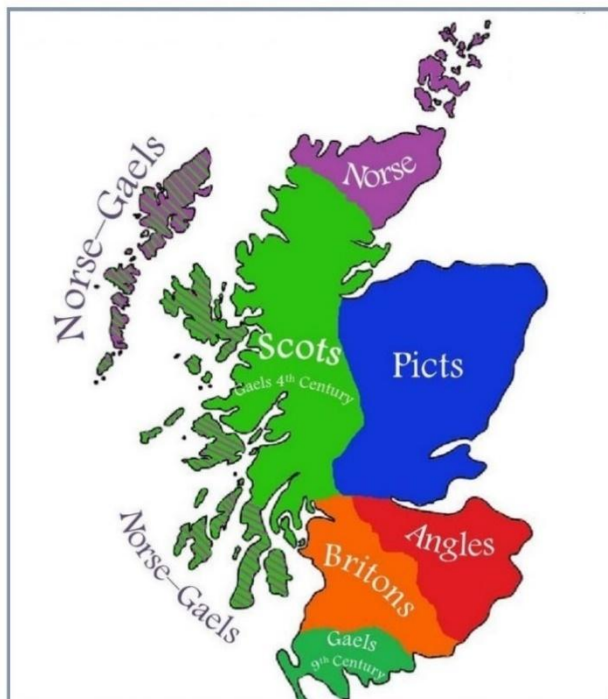
In my book *The Life and Times of the Marquis Family of Argyll* I describe how the Marquis family had emerged from the lands of the MacDonalds who for 250 years from around 1250 to 1494 ruled over the Western Isles, western Scotland and parts of Ulster, and that the Marquises were part of the MacDonald clan structure. In particular, they claimed to be descended from Marcus (*Marcach*) MacDonald leader (constable) of a galloglass (Gaelic: *gallóglaigh* meaning ‘foreign warriors’) company in Ulster and a member of the ruling family of the MacDonalds who became the Lords of the Isles (see family tree below). He was killed in Antrim in 1397 fighting to establish his galloglass warriors as a force to be reckoned with. The Marquis Gaelic family name was Mhic Mharki (son of Mark) or MacMarcuis, which would have been a later latinised spelling and eventually anglicised to Marquis around 1800 as the close relationship between the Marquises and MacDonalds ended.

Although members of the Mhic Mharki family were spread across the Gaelic world from the Hebrides in the north to Waterford, Ireland, in the south, that included galloglass fighters in Ireland and perhaps the largest contingent concentrated in Argyll as a sept (sub-clan) of the Clan Donald of Dunnyveg and the Glens (also referred to as Clan Donald South), with one branch becoming a very important family of court poets

for the MacDonalds (MacDonnells in Ireland) in Ulster – I write about this family in an Appendix to my book. A second branch with a very significant presence in Argyll, especially on Kintyre, who became the hereditary bardic family to the MacDonalds of Largie.¹ It is this family, my direct forebears, that the book tells the story of.

Earliest Origins of the Marquis (Mhic Mharki) Family

Little is known of the peoples who lived on the west coast of Scotland and the Western Isles before the 5th century when the area was occupied by Gaels from Ireland who established the Kingdom of Dalriada (Dál Riata), between 498-850. These lands were invaded again in the 9th and 10th centuries by Norse Vikings who established control over an area that was referred to as *Innse-Gall*, the ‘Islands of the Foreigners’ by the conquered Gaels. The MacDonalds and the Mhic Mharki were descended from male Vikings and Gaelic women. Two Norse/Gaelic kings in particular played a key role in the origins of the Mhic Mharki and MacDonalds: Echmarcach mac Ragnall in the mid-11th century and Somerled (Somhairle) in the mid-12th century.



The Peoples of Scotland



Gaelic Kingdom of Dalriada, 498-850

Echmarcach mac Ragnall – The First Marquis?

Dennis Freeman-Wright states that “Marcus MacDonald in the Annals of the Four Masters is referred to as "Marcach", is obviously a hypochoristicon (the nature of a pet name or diminutive form of a name) of Echmarcach, which confirms my hypothesis about your family origins.” Dennis also pointed out that the spelling of the name of Christinus Macmarkys, the very first recorded (1428) Marquis that I came across in my research – he was rector at the church of St. Moluag, Trotternish, situated in the MacDonald part of the Isle of Skye; its ruins are still there – confirmed his analysis as well.



Echmarcach mac Ragnall (great-grandfather of Somerled) was the dominant figure of the Irish Sea region during the middle of the 11th century and was described as the King of Dublin and the Isles. He is recorded attending a meeting in 1031 with King Cnut of England and Denmark, King Malcolm of Scotland and MacBeth of Moray (later, in 1040, King MacBeth of Shakespearian fame), so clearly, Echmarcach was acknowledged as the principal ruler of the region. Presumably to the

chagrin of King Malcolm, Norse/Gael Echmarcach agreed to accept Danish Cnut as the sovereign overlord of *Innse-Gall*.

As with all rulers of this period, Echmarcach was constantly at war, he was overthrown first in 1038, but restored his kingship eight-years later only to be forced out again in 1052, when he retreated to the Isle of Man which he ruled until 1061. Sometime during 1064 or 65, Echmarcach died whilst on a pilgrimage to Rome.

The Norse Vikings first occupied the Dublin area in the mid-9th century, and soon after established the ports of Wexford, Waterford, Cork and Limerick. Their presence would lead to persistent attacks from the native Irish resulting in Dublin changing hands on a number of occasions. Eventually, Viking leaders would marry into the Irish ruling dynasties and ordinary Vikings merge into the native population, although, Dublin remained linked to Viking-ruled *Innse-Gall* until captured by the Normans in 1171. The most important impact of the Viking founding of Dublin was to integrate this new port, and hence Ireland as well, into the extensive Scandinavian trading network which reached as far as Russia and the Mediterranean and thus ending Ireland's isolation caused by the fall of the Roman Empire. Dublin became one of the major trading centres of western Europe, specialising in slaves.

Echmarcach mac Ragnall's precise origins are uncertain, his father was obviously called Ragnall and the general consensus, shared by Dennis Freeman-Wright (see below), is that this Ragnall was the King of Waterford (1022-1031). This would make him the great-grandson of Ragnall ua Ímair, King of Dublin, Waterford, York and Northumbria who died in 921, who was described as "king of the fair foreigners (Norse) and the dark foreigners (Danes)" in the Annals of Ulster.

King Ragnall ua Ímair was the likely leader of a group of Norwegian warriors that arrived off the southern coast of Ireland in 914, in order to restore Norse rule over Dublin and the surrounding area which had been lost when the Irish forced them out in 902. Waterford was also recaptured, hence the reference to Ragnall ua Ímair being King of Waterford as well.

The inclusion of 'York' in Ragnall's title shows the strong links between the Vikings of Jorvik and the Vikings of the Western Isles and the Irish Sea

region. Ragnall ua Ímair is believed to be the grandson of Ímar, the principal Norse figure in this area during the second half of the ninth century, described as the Viking King of Dublin between 870-873 but had been the dominant figure in the region since 853 and founder of the Uí Ímair dynasty. In the Norse Sagas 'Ímar' becomes 'Ivar the Boneless' son of Ragnar Lodbrok, the central characters in the recent TV series the *Vikings*. Ímar/Ivar 'the Boneless' not only dominated the Irish Sea region with Norse Olaf 'the White, uniting the Norse and Danish Vikings and consolidating Viking rule over all of *Innse-Gall*. Ivar 'the Boneless' was also the most prominent leader of the mainly Danish army that captured York and then invaded East Anglia in 869, slaughtering its king Edmund the Martyr. If Ímar was indeed Ivar 'the Boneless' as a majority of experts in this field believe, then that presents us with the intriguing prospect of the Mhic Mharki being directly related to Ivar 'the Boneless' son of Ragnar Lodbrok – now there's a thought!



A fifteenth-century depiction of Ívarr and Ubba ravaging the countryside as it appears on folio in the British Library.

Echmarcach mac Ragnall is therefore thought to be the great-great grandson of Ragnall ua Ímair, King of Dublin, Waterford, York and Northumbria whose heirs had married into the Irish ruling families. This

would make him a member of the Uí Ímair dynasty, founded by Ímar or Ivar 'the Boneless'.

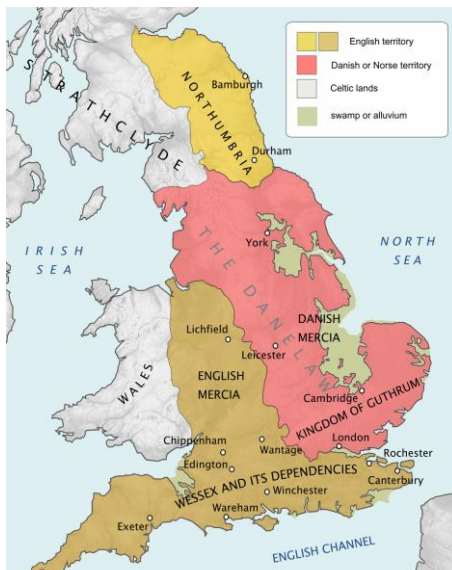
It seems that Echmarcach formed some kind of alliance with Ui Briain, Irish King of Munster, whose wife, Cacht ingen Ragnaill, is believed to be closely related to Echmarcach, possibly a sister. Echmarcach's daughter, Mór, also married one of Uí Briain's close kinsmen. In his pilgrimage to Rome, Echmarcach was accompanied by Ui Briain where he died aged around 65.

Two other grandsons of Ivar 'the Boneless' who accompanied Ragnall ua Imair in his attack on southern Ireland in 914, were Sitric Cáech and his son Godfraid ua Imair. All three would fight battles alongside each other in Ireland, Scotland and Northumbria, as well as on occasions against one and other. All three were at one time Kings of Dublin with Ragnall and Sitric also Kings of Northumbria and Jorvik. Godfraid tried to gain control over Northumbria and Jorvik but was defeated by King Æthelstan of England.

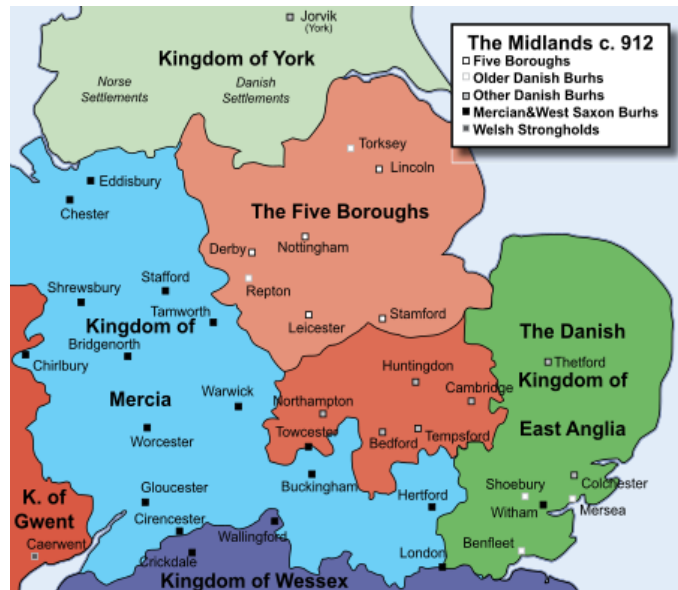
Godfraid's son, Olaf (also referred to as Anlaf) Guthfrithson, became king of both Dublin, Jorvik and Northumbria on his father's death in 934. Three years later he was defeated alongside Constantine II, King of Scotland, and Owain, King of Strathclyde, by Athelstan at the Battle of Brunanburh. Although forced to return to Dublin humiliated, Guthfrithson was able to take advantage of the confusion caused by the untimely death of Athelstan two years later and re-entered England to regain Viking control over York and Northumbria. He then moved south to reoccupy the Danish Five Boroughs.

The chronicler Symeon of Durham in his *Historia Regum* records that Guthfrithson and the new English King Edmund met at Leicester in 939 and came to an agreement on dividing England. According to the 12th century chronicler Roger of Howden "Anlaf (Olaf) took as his wife Aldgyth the daughter of Jarl Orm [Jarl of Leicester] by whose advice and help he had gained the aforesaid victory". This move to Leicester raises the intriguing prospect that members of the Marquis family likely accompanied Guthfrithson a millennium before my grandfather, Angus Marquis and my grandmother, Mary Jordan, migrated to Leicester from

Glasgow in 1925. However, his victory was short-lived, Olaf died in 941 and was succeeded by his nephew Blácaire mac Gofrith in Dublin, and by his cousin, Amlaíb Cuarán, and his son, Ragnall Guthfrithson, who were both driven out of Northumberland by Edmund I in 944. All three would become kings of Dublin and create the Crovan dynasty, which, like Somerled were part of the Uí Ímair dynasty, yet they would fight against each other over two centuries for dominance of *Innse-Gall* (see Somerled below).



Danelaw, 886



Danish Five Boroughs



Irish clans circa 900



The lands of the Crovan and Somerled dynasties in about 1200.

What follows is **Dennis Freeman-Wright's** own interpretation of the history of Echmarcach and the likelihood that he was the first Marquis:-

“Your conviction that your family descended from Marcus MacDonald son of Somerled, son of Alastair Og MacDonald Lord of the Isles and dispossessed by his younger brother Angus Og, the friend of Robert the Bruce, is interesting not least because in the Annals of the Four Masters this Marcus MacDonald is referred to as "Marcach", obviously a hypocharisticon [the nature of a pet name or diminutive form of a name] of Echmarcach, which confirms my hypothesis.”

The MacDonald genealogy given in MacFirbis and the Annals of Ulster runs thus: -

Ranald [Ragnall] King of Dublin, Waterford and York, died 921, his son
Ivarr died 950, his son

Ranald died 995, his son

Ranald King of Waterford, 1022-1031, killed in Dublin 1035. He clearly married into an Irish royal house to give one of his sons a Gaelic name.

Echmarcach King of Dublin and Man, Ruler of the Isles, defeated on Man in 1061 and died on pilgrimage to Rome 1065, his son

Solmund, who married into the kindred of St Columba [Gaelic Clans like the Malcolms and McCallums named after and claiming descent from the followers of the 6th century St. Columba of Iona, who himself was said to be from the Irish O'Neills], his son and more Gaelic inter-marriage.

Gilladomnan Lord of Argyll, his son [see note 2, SM]

Gillebride, claimant to Argyll, his son

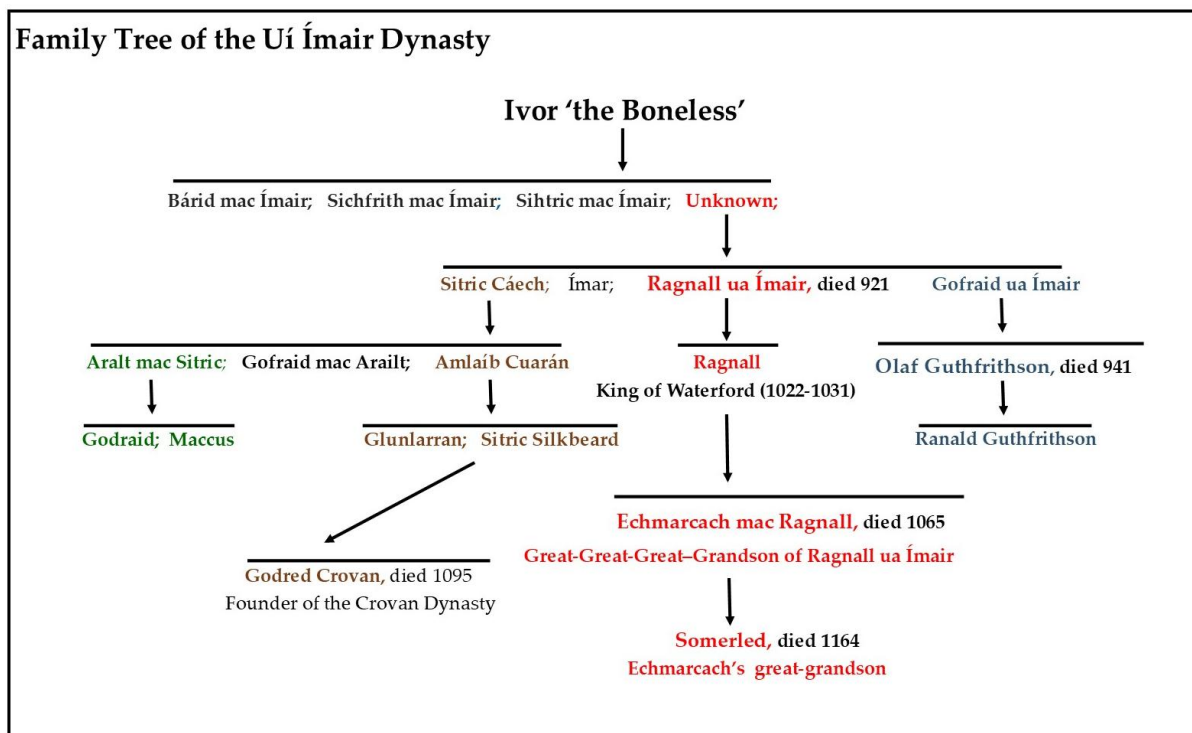
Somerled, King of the South Isles, Lord of the Isles, assassinated 1164 at Renfrew. Founder of the MacDonald clans and their septs.

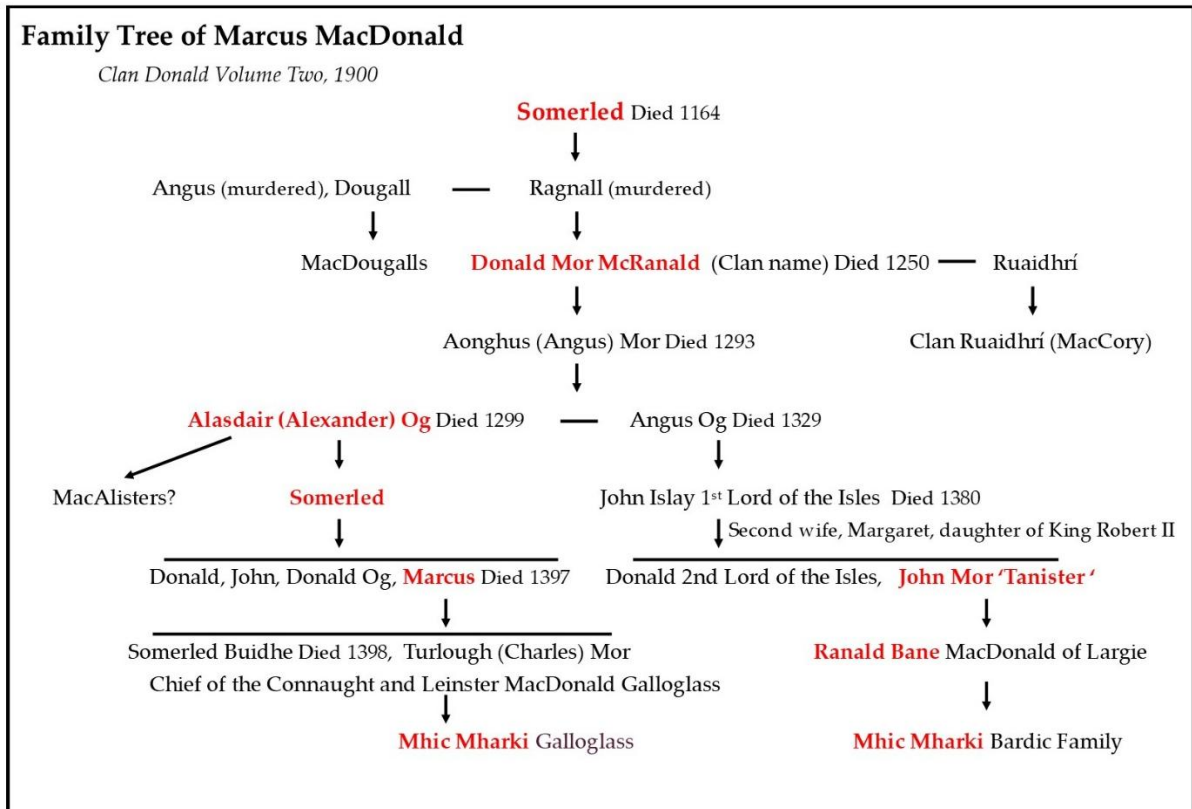
You will note I have emboldened Echmarcach; this is his name in the Annals of Ulster but in the MacFirbis genealogy he is called **Imergi**, probably pronounced Imerki or just Merki, and may account for the first

name Mark in MacDonald genealogy. This ruler had a well-documented and varied career and at various times ruled over Dublin (twice), Man, Rhinns of Galloway and the southern Hebrides. He certainly fathered innumerable children, but none managed to assert their claim to any substantial territories. He was a contemporary of King Canute the Mighty and MacBeth and was present at a notable meeting of the kings of Britain in 1031.

Now, although Eachmarcach (meaning ‘horse-rider’) as a name in Ireland is not uncommon and anglicised into MacCaffarky and then wrongly bastardised into McCarthy, I am suggesting that because of the Scandinavian influence in the Scottish isles and the apparent hypocoristic Imergi, his descendants in the southern isles were referred to as Mhic Mharki, anglicised Mac Marquis.”

Dennis Freeman-Wright





One sobering thought is how many of my leading male ancestors from this period were either murdered or killed in battle!

Somerled, King of Argyll and the Isles, died 1164

Being descended from Marcus MacDonald meant that the Mhic Mharki were also related to Somerled, the Norse/Gaelic King of Argyll and the Isles, and ultimately responsible for the creation of not only Clan Donald but also Clan Dugall, Clan MacRory, Clan MacSweeney and perhaps Clan MacAlister.

The arrival of the Norse Vikings during the 9th century merely added fuel to an already raging fire as Gaels, Scots and now Vikings fought for control over *A'Gàidhealtachd*. There were in fact two distinct waves of Viking incursions (Norse/Finngall and Danes/Dubhgall) and soon a very complicated situation developed as conflicts between Gaels and Vikings, and even amongst the two separate groups of Vikings, with all forming temporary alliances of convenience. Intermarriage made it increasingly difficult to distinguish between Gaels, Norse and Norse-Gaels (generally

referred to as 'Gall Gaels', literally 'foreign Gaels') amongst the ruling families as they fought over the next two centuries for effective control over *A'Gàidhealtachd*.

During this period a second struggle was underway for the overall sovereignty over *A'Gàidhealtachd* between the kings of Norway and Scotland. In 1098, Magnus 'Bareleg', King of Norway, was able to force the Scots King Edgar to sign a treaty granting Norwegian dominion over all the Isles off the coast of Scotland that could be circumnavigated by ship. In my book I describe how Magnus had a skiff hauled across the narrow isthmus at Tarbert, Loch Fyne, with himself at the helm, thus audaciously designating the Kintyre peninsula as one of the 'Isles' within his realm. Of course, both kings were too far away to rule directly so the battle for local control continued, and it was not until the appearance of Somerled (whose name means 'summer warrior') in the mid-12th century, that a more permanent authority was established.

Somerled's early years are largely a mystery, even his parentage is still debated, although it is widely accepted that his father was probably GilleBride² whose ancestry was thought to have been Gaelic-Norse and possibly related to an earlier Irish king. Most contemporary sources suggested Somerled was Gaelic through his paternal line and his mother probably of Norse extraction, and he was portrayed as leading Gaelic resistance to the Vikings. But recent DNA research contradicted this view (see below) and reveals that his paternal ancestry was in fact Norse. And although Somerled saw himself as a Gaelic liberator, he was very much part of the battle to become *Ri* (king) of Viking controlled *Innse-Gall*.

Whatever his origins, Somerled clearly came from a family of some prominence. His sister had married Malcolm MacHeth grandson of the Scottish King Malcolm Canmore, and Somerled himself married Ragnhild, daughter of Óláfr Guðrøðarson (a member of the Crovan Dynasty), King of the Isle of Man. By 1135 Somerled was being described as the King of Argyll and the Isles, in 1156 he defeated Guðrøðarson's son to also become King of Man. Somerled was *Ri Innse-Gall* until he was killed at the Battle of Renfrew in 1164, during a seaborne invasion of mainland Scotland. The *Chronicle of Mann* states that 160 ships were

involved which was an extraordinary number and likely an exaggeration. Somerled's real intentions are unknown, trying to throwback Scot's attempts to encroach on his territory is one possible reason, but with such a large force he may have had much higher ambitions, perhaps even to win the throne of Scotland itself. Things went disastrously wrong from the start of the landing on the coast and Somerled was killed very quickly – according to MacDonald accounts through treachery – a source of some controversy to this day.

Somerled was clearly a very capable warrior king and established a successful dynasty that would rule much of the area for decades, even centuries to come. And yet, his long-term significance and legacy in the wider history of Scotland was, in fact, achieved by his sons and grandsons. On Somerled's death, his heirs went on an orgy of familicides as if they were members of an imperial family in the Roman Empire. His eldest son, Angus, is thought to be responsible for the death of his younger brother Ranald, but Ranald's sons, Domhnaill and Ruaidhrí, gained revenge by killing Angus and his three sons in 1210. Domhnaill (Donald) was the eponymous progenitor of Clan Donald. Ruaidhrí's descendants would form Clan Ruaidhrí (MacRory) who dominated the northern Hebrides for a while. Somerled's eldest son, Dougall, whose descendants founded Clan Dougall. Even the MacAlisters, a breakaway clan from the MacDonalds, claimed lineage to one of Somerled's descendants, Alasdair (Alexander) Og, grandfather of our Marcus MacDonald.

Somerled had been very successful in his contest with the Crovans but after his death, Godred Crovan, with the help of the King of Norway, was able to re-establish Crovan control over the Hebrides and Man which he had lost to Somerled in 1156. Somerled's grandsons Ruaidhrí would take back the Hebrides, and Domhnaill, founder of the MacDonalds, would eventually dominate the whole region as the Lords of the Isles.

There have been several genetic studies on men bearing the clan names founded by Somerled's heirs, with the results suggesting that as many as 500,000 of Somerled's patrilineal descendants are living today. These surveys also concluded that many of these men carried the genetic marker

Haplogroup R1a, which is extremely rare in the general Gaelic population but very common in Norway, thus confirming that Somerled's patrilineal ancestors originated in Scandinavia.

At the Battle of Largs in 1263 (see map of MacDonalds above) Viking dominance over *Innse-Gall* came to a bloody end resulting in the evolving clan system filling the power vacuum with the MacDonalds eventually emerging as the ruling clan. But the lands of the now Norse-Gaels remained frontier territory and the fight for control was now between the MacDonalds and their supporting clans against the Scottish kings that would last for over two hundred years, even longer, if you count the Jacobite rebellions whose final defeat at the Battle of Culloden in 1746, resulted in the near genocide of an entire people and culture, aided by one of the greatest betrayals in history when the Highlanders were abandoned to their fate by their own despicable clan chiefs.

I tried to commemorate the demise of the Gaelic Highlanders in my book as one of my bardic ancestors might have done: -

"So, with the 'mist rolling in from the sea over now almost abandoned dark, distant mountains and valleys of green',* where the sounds of Gaelic poetry and music of the harp and pipes were replaced by a cacophony of bleating sheep and occasional gunfire on the new grouse wastelands – the new residents of *A' Ghàidhealtachd*."

* From the song *Mull of Kintyre* by Paul McCartney's Wings

Marcus Macdonald, circa 1370-97

Marcus (Marcach) MacDonald was the grandson of Alasdair (Alexander) Óg 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 Óg was succeeded by his brother Aonghus Óg 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 Óg's son, John of Islay, became the first Lord of the Isles and married the daughter of Bruce's son, Robert

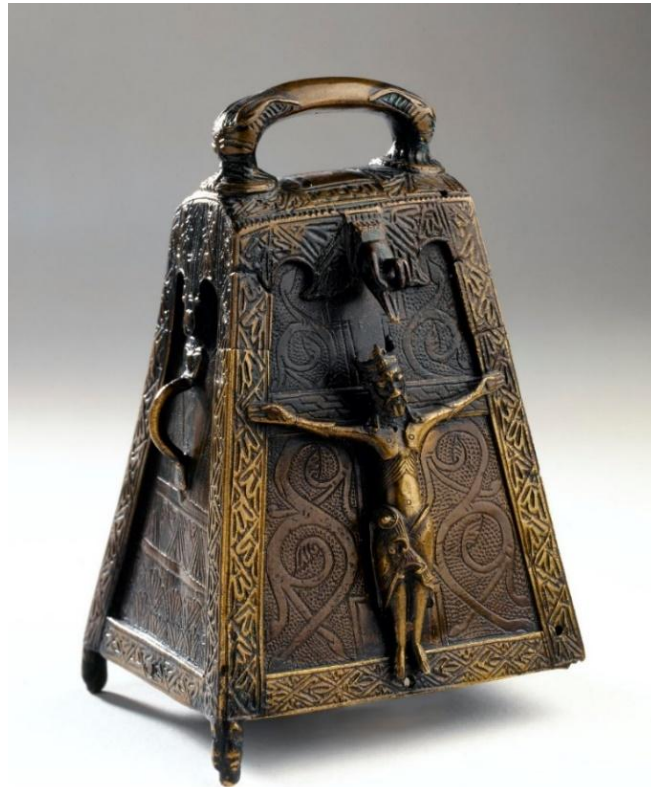
II, as the MacDonalds consolidated their control over *Innse-Gall*.

In the meantime, Alasdair Óg's family had moved to Ulster where his son, Somerled, established one of the leading MacDonald galloglass bands (Norse/Gaelic mercenaries fighting in the conflicts between the leading Irish clans). 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. The Mhic Mharki would establish a strong presence in both Ulster and Argyll (see article on 'The MacMarquis and the Galloglass' on my website).

The history of the Mhic Mharki family's relationship to Marcus is covered, fairly accurately in my book, with just one slight confusion. In the book I mention a conversation with a Dr Pia Coira, an academic of Gaelic studies at Aberdeen University, who thought Marcus was actually the son of Donald 2nd Lord of the Isles rather than Alasdair Óg, but it seems there were, in fact, two Marcus MacDonalds around this time, one presumably the son of Donald. The Mhic Mharki family were definitely descended from Marcus, grandson of Alasdair Óg.

As I described in my book, "The rise of Clan Donald as the Lords of the Isles not only created a new political entity that lasted for over two centuries it also acted as a catalyst for the revival of a distinct and vibrant Scottish Gaelic culture, a fusion of Scandinavian and Irish Gaelic heritage that evolved over five hundred years of shared occupation and intermarriages between the two peoples. In both societies the oral tradition of the Gaelic *bàrd* (plural *baird*) and Norse *skáld* was central in chronicling and preserving a cultural identity. MacDonald clan chiefs were generous benefactors of the key contributors to this cultural renaissance, in which poets (*filidh*) and bards played a crucial part. In a largely illiterate society with virtually no secular writing – apart from a few legal documents and religious texts, which were written in Latin – they were the library and historians of the clan. As well as helping generate this new Highland Gaelic identity, poets and bards just as importantly preserved and transmitted it across the generations. It seems

that the higher status court poet's (*fili*) chief function was to glorify his patron by paying homage to his Chief's ancestors, praising his personal accomplishments – real or imagined – and satirising his enemies. A kind of modern day 'spin-doctor' – the first 'Alistair Campbell-like propagandists, you could say."



12th century bronze reliquary of the crucifixion added to the Guthrie Bell from Killmichael Glassary, Argyll.

A good example of this fusion of Viking and Gaelic cultural influences is represented in this early medieval iron handbell from Kilmichael Glassary.

It must be remembered that until the defeat of the MacDonalds by King James IV in 1494, that ended their dominance over *A'Gàidhealtachd*, the Scotland that entered the second half of the millennium was still a country of two roughly equal halves, with as many Highland Gaelic speakers as Lowland Scots. However, the events of the 1490's determined that the future Scotland would be one nation, unified under one King, with one language, one culture, built on the destruction of one half by the other.

John Mór ‘Tanister’ and the MacDonalds of Largie

One of the constants in the story of the Argyll Mhic Mharki family history was their close relationship to the MacDonalds of Largie for whom the Mhic Mharki provided bardic services. The founder of the Largie MacDonalds was Ranald Bane MacDonald (circa 1410-76) second son of John Mór ‘Tanister’, the younger brother to Donald, 2nd Lord of the Isles. Ranald received lands in Kintyre as a reward for his role in the Battle of Inverlochy (Fort William) in 1431, which was a MacDonald victory in the conflict with King James I of Scotland.

John Mór ‘Tanister’, called ‘Tanister’ because he had been named the official heir to his older brother Donald, why is not stated. The Law of *Tanistry* was the Gaelic system of passing on titles and lands within the tribe or clan system. In such a violent society a clan was perpetually fighting to preserve itself and its lands. A capable military leader was therefore essential, the succession of a minor or someone weak in mind or body posed a real threat to the security of the clan. In the Gaelic world the leading figures of the clan elected a new leader and heir according to what was felt to be in the collective interest, both would be chosen from the ‘*righdamhna*’ (a list of those deemed suitable) and would normally be brother of the deceased chief or a younger son, even a bastard son instead of the natural heir, if he was thought unfit. Although the growing Norman influence amongst lower Scotland’s elites, like the *Brus*, was encouraging the adoption of primogeniture, it did not become the rule amongst the Gaelic clans until the final defeat of the Lords of the Isles by James IV in 1494.

It seems that Donald refused to accept the decision of his brother becoming his heir and a long-protracted feud developed between them with Donald eventually coming out on top and John Mór forced to flee to Ulster in 1395, where his wife, Margaret Bissett, was a daughter of Mac Eoin Bissett, Lord of the Glens of Antrim. To what extent John Mór was able to gain control over his wife’s lands is not known, as the male line of Mac Eoin Bissett still held official title until 1522. In fact, the Bissett’s were not a Gaelic clan but a Norman family from Nottinghamshire, England, and were not clan leaders but barons in the feudal sense under de Lacy,

Earl of Ulster. They were eventually absorbed into the Irish clan system.

However, John Mór was able to establish a strong presence in Ulster that allowed him to create his own separate Clan Donald of Dunnyveg and the Glens (also called Clan Donald South). He had already inherited large parts of Argyll from his father which along with the Antrim landholdings became part of his substantial fiefdom. Both the Largie MacDonalds and therefore the Mhic Mharki bards became septs within the MacDonalds of Dunnyveg and the Glens.

John Mór was assassinated by James Campbell in 1427. The main question surrounding this assassination concerns the role of King James I, recently returned from captivity in England. In order to re-establish his kingly authority, he felt it necessary to weaken the MacDonalds' hold over western Scotland. In an attempt to further divide Clan Donald, King James offered to support John Mór against his nephew, the current Lord of the Isles, Alexander MacDonald, who had recently succeeded his father, Donald. John Mór refused this 'Greek gift' and thus garnered the King's enmity. At a meeting called by King James, John Mór was treacherously murdered by James Campbell, James's representative. Although not in attendance himself, suspicion obviously fell on the King for being complicit, even ordering the act. Vehemently proclaiming his innocence James had Campbell arrested and executed, who even as he faced the axe still claimed he was merely obeying his liege lord. Thus began the eternal feud between the MacDonalds and Campbells that would ultimately all but destroy Clan Donald and the Mhic Mharki alongside them.

The Mhic Mharki Bards of Laggan

At a conference of Gaelic language enthusiasts in 1967, Professor D. S. Thomson introduced the Mhic Mharki Bardic Family to the world. Professor Colm O'Baoill, Angus Martin and Dr Pia Coira have added to our knowledge over the following decades. It is interesting to speculate that had Professor Thomson not given his 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, 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 markyh' ('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 markyh, 'Township of MacMarcuis'

Domhnall Mac Mharcuis was the last identified member of the bardic family with a connection to Laggan. Apparently, also employed by the Synod of Argyll between 1697 and 1701, mainly as a translator of religious texts. His one surviving poem is an address to the Synod, and in a note at the end of the poem he signs his name 'Domhnall Mac Mharcuis gan lagan', implying a relationship to the Laggan family. Reinforced by the

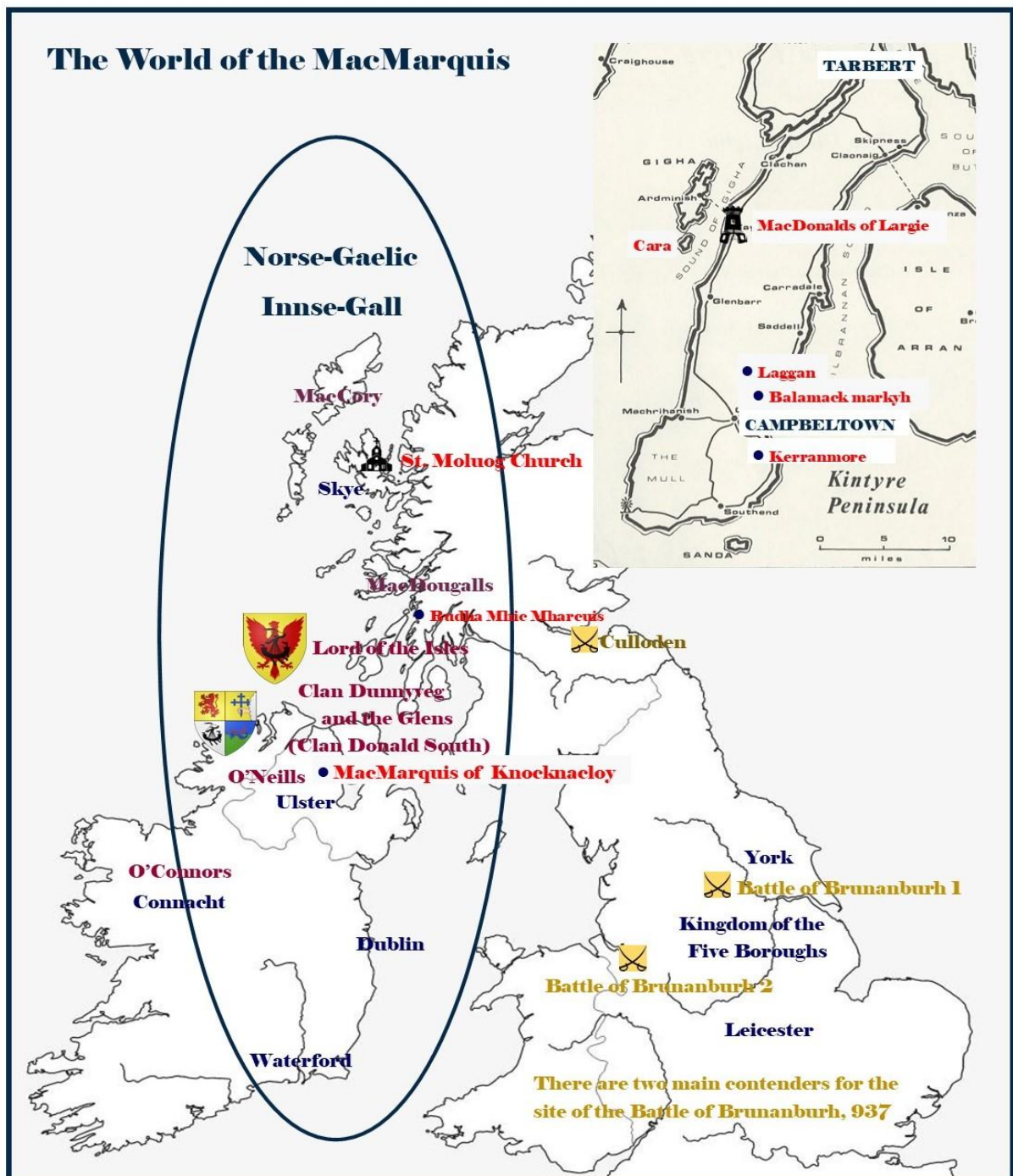
fact that the 'Donald McMarcuis' with land in Glenadall, Mull of Kintyre, (1694 Hearth Tax) was most likely the same Domhnall Mac Mharcuis.

With no further references for a Mac Mharcuis living around the Laggan area after 1694, we can only assume they had left or been driven out of the region within a few years. The last two decades of the 17th century in Argyll were extremely egregious – even by Kintyre standards – with the total breakdown in law and order and devastating violence resulting from the 1685-89 Jacobite disturbances, which members of the Mac Mharcuis family along with the MacDonalds of Largie were heavily involved in (see my book). This desperate situation deteriorated even further as severe famine – after years of exceptionally bad weather and poor harvests, which began in 1695 and lasted until 1698 – inflicted even more misery. Anything from a quarter to two-thirds of the population are estimated to have perished from starvation as a result. In such dire circumstances an almost cannibalistic level of criminality erupted, making life even more untenable for the wretched people of Kintyre. Criminal gangs like the already mentioned Cuttach 'stouthrieves', the local name for the worst thugs – mainly comprising of defeated and embittered ex-Jacobites – mercilessly ravaged the region virtually unchallenged. The century ended with an almost deserted countryside, a devastating de-population an inevitable consequence of such hellish times – the Mac Mharcuis Jacobite bardic landholders of Laggan and Kerranmore among them.

One survivor of the Mac Mharcuis bardic family reappears in the historical record in 1728 when William MacMurchy married Agnes Robertson on 14 March 1728, who gave birth to a daughter Ann on 29 December 1728. MacMurchy, born around 1700 in or near Campbeltown, became one of the Laird of Largie's pipers, but he was also described as a noted poet, wire-strung harper as well as a piper (see article on William MacMurchy on my website). Pipers tended to take over the role previously carried out by harp playing bards during the 17th century as explained in my book.

The first directly identifiable ancestor of mine, Alexander McMarcus, enters the records in 1770 as the tacksman for the MacDonalds of Largie on the tiny Island of Cara, just off the west coast of Kintyre. It seems that the McMarcus tacksmen were employed as smugglers (mainly whiskey)

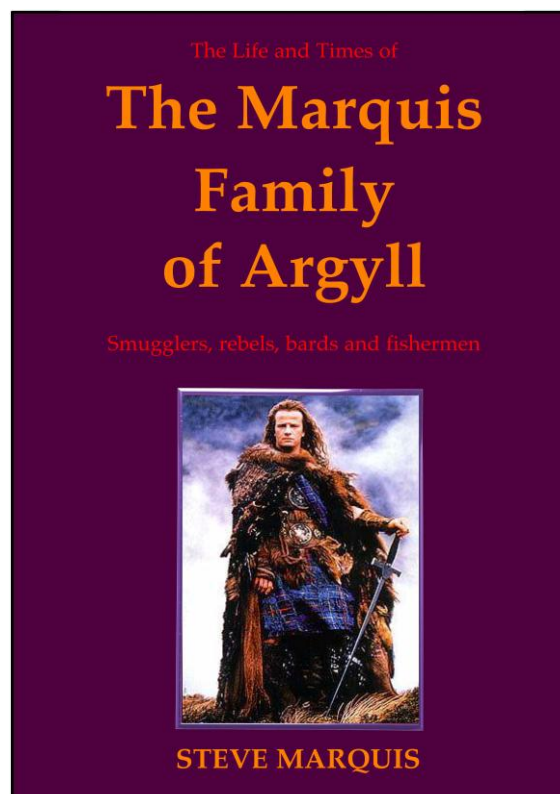
in a criminal enterprise with the Laird of Largie from at least 1735 (again see my book for further details). Alexander McMarcus was married to a cousin of Flora MacDonald (of Bonny Prince Charlie fame). Flora was also related to the MacDonalds of Largie through her mother, Elizabeth MacDonald. Alexander's grandson, also Alexander, moved to Tarbert sometime before 1818 when he married Catherine McCaog and started the fishing family my grandfather was born into in 1901.



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. 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 Island of Cara



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



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