

# *DISTRIBUTION OF SURNAMES IN THE ISLE OF LEWIS*

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Although the study of place-names has for many years provided valuable information on matters relating to the origin and growth of human settlements, comparatively little research has yet been carried out in respect of personal names. This is rather surprising because, despite their great variety, their overall frequency and distribution can often provide a useful indication of the extent and direction of past population movements. This is particularly so in areas where—as throughout most of the Highlands and Islands of Scotland—surnames have long had significant local connotations.

It would, of course, be dangerous to carry the analogy too far. In most cases the surnames in their present English form bear little or no historical relationship to the original Gaelic ones, each name often having been adopted by or conferred upon various minor tribes with widely varying Gaelic titles. With very few exceptions, such surnames have been stabilised in their present anglicised form only since parish ministers began to keep registers of baptisms and marriages towards the end of the eighteenth century. Thus, whereas a study of the distribution of place-names can shed light on matters such as, say, the extent of Norse penetration and settlement nearly one thousand years ago, any conclusions based upon the present distribution of personal names can only be valid for comparatively recent times.

Nevertheless, despite these limitations, an analysis of the overall frequency and distribution of surnames can still produce interesting results. In the Isle of Lewis, for example, certain names are known to have been established in the island for several centuries, and in some cases it is even possible to trace their approximate time of arrival and subsequent distribution. By studying the present pattern in the context of this historical background it becomes possible to assess more clearly just how

mobile (or immobile) the population has been during the last hundred and fifty years or so.

### *The Historical Background*

Following the withdrawal of Norse sovereignty in 1266, three families or clans gradually established themselves in a dominant position in Lewis. In the north there were the Morisons, in whom was vested the hereditary Brieveship of Lewis and whose base was at Habost, Ness. In the south-west there were the Macaulays, whose territory covered much of the present parish of Uig. On the eastern side of Lewis, with their headquarters at Stornoway, there were the Macleods (Siol Torquil). All three owed allegiance to the Lords of the Isles (Macdonalds), who took possession of the island in 1335 and continued to own it until their fall in 1493.

Other names which were present in Lewis at that time probably included the Nicolsons (or Macnicols), who are reputed to be one of the oldest families in the island and to have built Stornoway Castle, together with the Macritchies, an ancient Lewis sept closely connected with the Nicolsons. According to tradition, Torquil, the son of Leod, gained the districts now known as Stornoway and Lochs by killing the male members of a family of Nicolsons who controlled them, and marrying the heiress (Grant 1959:32). Also present may have been the Macaskills, who are said to have been the lieutenants of Macleod of Dunvegan, and the Martins, who were also closely associated with the Tormod Macleods. In view of the links between the two branches of the clan, it is reasonable to assume that the Macaskills and Martins were similarly associated with the Macleods of Lewis.

At the turn of the sixteenth century the Fife Adventurers made three attempts to colonise "the hitherto most barbarous Isle of Lewis", but on each occasion the expedition ended in failure. Following their failure to retain control of the island, in 1610 King James VI of Scotland granted Lewis to Lord Mackenzie of Kintail, who immediately landed a strong contingent of his clansmen in Stornoway and soon brought the whole island under his control—though for a year or two Neil, the last of the Macleods of Lewis, managed to hold out on the little isle of Berisay in Loch Roag. Among the mainland supporters whom Lord Mackenzie took with him to Lewis were the Macivers, Mathesons, Maclennans and Rosses. The island remained in the ownership of the Mackenzies until 1843.

In 1890-91 a return was made of the surnames of the schoolchildren in three of the parishes of Lewis. The Macleods headed the list in each parish, the Morisons being second in Barvas, the Mackenzies in Lochs and the Macdonalds in Uig. No return was made for the burgh or parish of Stornoway. Total figures exceeding 100 were as follows: Macleod 585, Macdonald 364, Morison 239, Mackenzie 184, Mackay 166, Maclean 155, Smith 132, Maciver 127 and Macaulay 106 (Mackenzie 1903:64-5).

### *The Present Situation*

The above account is necessarily brief and perhaps somewhat over-simplified, but it provides a general background against which to consider the facts of the present. These can most easily be obtained through an examination of the Electoral Register for the Isle of Lewis, and the following analysis is based upon a detailed study of the Register compiled in October 1961.

Altogether, in 1961 the 16,207 electors in the island (comprising 74.6 per cent of the total population enumerated in the 1961 Census) shared a total of 489 different surnames—a ratio of one surname to every 33 electors. However, these figures conceal an even more striking homogeneity, for 88.8 per cent of the electors shared only 34 surnames and 66.8 per cent shared as few as 10 surnames.

As in 1890-91, the Macleods headed the list, nearly one elector in five (19.6 per cent) having this name. The Macdonalds were still second, comprising nearly one-eighth (12.2 per cent) of all electors. Next in order of numerical superiority came the Morisons and Mackenzies (5.7 per cent), the Macivers (5.0 per cent), the Macleans (4.3 per cent), the Smiths and Mackays (3.8 per cent), the Murrays (3.7 per cent), the Campbells (3.0 per cent) and the Macaulays (2.1 per cent). These figures show a close similarity to those of the 1890-91 survey, and where differences do occur they are more likely to be due to the exclusion of the burgh and parish of Stornoway from the earlier survey than to any marked change in the relative frequency of these surnames over the past seventy years.

More important than their overall frequency, however, is their actual distribution within the island. The accompanying Table gives details of the distribution of the 23 surnames which occurred most frequently in 1961, and from this it is clearly

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*Number of electors by electoral districts*

Surname	Barvas		Uig		Lochs		Stornoway			Burgh of Stornoway	Isle of Lewis
	South	North	East	West	Lochs	Park	Back	Point	Central		
Macloed		251	268	70	364	158	340	421	331	609	3,174
Maddonald	195	269	86	210	126	37	194	290	269	301	1,977
Morison	125	302	42	56	49	24	61	11	107	148	925
Mackenzie	9	88	34	29	169	32	52	168	122	221	924
Maciver	66	24	84	48	28	—	238	100	106	117	811
Maclean	142	100	69	26	58	6	49	27	94	119	690
Smith	117	103	27	31	59	15	52	40	69	108	621
Mackay	90	65	53	42	47	22	73	92	52	75	611
Murray	67	193	2	1	7	—	151	56	66	58	601
Campbell	80	79	5	—	4	29	89	93	26	89	494
Macaulay	41	—	50	42	49	5	9	58	39	50	343
Nicolson	5	27	3	3	36	44	12	26	43	58	254
Graham	10	64	1	—	—	—	73	35	21	34	238
MacIennan	17	2	28	48	19	12	32	2	16	54	230
Matheson	32	13	—	50	3	28	7	10	23	56	222
Macarthur	9	2	70	—	19	14	4	7	11	62	198
Macmillan	9	3	—	—	17	55	25	31	13	35	188
Macrae	2	3	3	—	25	10	10	34	39	50	176
Mackinnon	6	2	1	3	65	28	11	3	22	22	163
Macritchie	12	64	7	20	—	6	16	4	19	12	160
Martin	20	8	3	5	40	—	14	22	21	23	156
Montgomery	—	—	—	2	39	23	—	19	16	44	143
Macaskill	7	6	13	2	3	20	15	25	12	39	142
Others	166	197	91	105	122	94	266	180	450	1,095	2,766
<b>Total Electors</b>	<b>1,589</b>	<b>1,865</b>	<b>937</b>	<b>793</b>	<b>1,348</b>	<b>662</b>	<b>1,793</b>	<b>1,754</b>	<b>1,987</b>	<b>3,479</b>	<b>16,207</b>
<b>Total Names</b>	<b>48</b>	<b>60</b>	<b>38</b>	<b>48</b>	<b>53</b>	<b>29</b>	<b>70</b>	<b>68</b>	<b>146</b>	<b>339</b>	<b>489</b>

apparent that many of them were still highly localised. For example, nearly one-third of all the Morisons in Lewis lived in the electoral district of North Barvas, where they outnumbered all other surnames, and though the name was not uncommon in most other parts of the island it was almost completely absent from the electoral district of Point (the Eye Peninsula). Of the 601 Murrays listed in the Electoral Register, nearly a half lived in the electoral districts of North and South Barvas, and a further quarter lived in the electoral district of Back, but only 10 Murrays were listed in the entire parishes of Lochs and Uig. Similarly, the 238 Grahams were concentrated primarily in the electoral districts of Back and North Barvas, the name appearing only once in the parishes of Lochs and Uig. Other names which showed particularly marked geographical concentrations were the Macivers (Back), the Macritchies (North Barvas), the Macarthurs (East Uig), and the Montgomerys and Mackinnons (Lochs parish). Among the names not listed in the accompanying Table there were also the Macphails (79 out of 117 in South Barvas and East Uig), the Gillies's (75 out of 98 in Barvas parish), the Kennedys (52 out of 89 in Lochs parish—none in the parishes of Uig and Barvas), the Gunns (37 out of 63 in North Barvas—none in South Barvas or the parishes of Lochs and Uig) and the Munros (88 out of 92 in the burgh and parish of Stornoway).

Even within electoral districts it is possible to find marked concentrations of this kind. For example, 74 of the 80 Campbells listed in South Barvas lived in the townships of Arnol and Bragar, none living in Barvas itself and only three in Shawbost. In North Barvas 43 of the 64 Grahams lived at Borge, and in Lochs district 52 of the 58 Macleans lived at Leurbost. In West Uig only 8 of the 106 Mathesons and Morisons lived on the island of Bernera, where at least two electors out of every five were named Macdonald. The most striking contrast of all occurred in the electoral district of Point, where 53 Macivers were listed in Lower Bayble and none in the contiguous township of Upper Bayble.

### *The Legacy of the Past*

Such marked concentrations are obviously indicative of a general lack of population mobility in the past. This is evident in the fact that whereas in 1961 the eastern side of Lewis (i.e. the parish of Lochs and the parish and burgh of Stornoway) contained 67.4 per cent of all the electors in Lewis, they still

held 86·2 per cent of the Nicolsons, 82·7 per cent of the Mackenzies, 80·3 per cent of the Macaskills and 76·9 per cent of the Martins. It is also evident in the continued numerical superiority of the Morisons in North Barvas, their ancient "homeland". This latter feature is not altogether surprising when it is remembered that as late as 1818 it was written of the people of Ness that "they are strikingly dissimilar to the general population of the islands, preserving their unmixed Danish blood in as great purity at least as the inhabitants of Shetland. . . . They constitute even now an independent colony among their neighbours, who still consider them as a distinct people and almost view them in the light of foreigners" (Macculloch 1819:179).

However, as the fate of the Macaulays shows, the history of Lewis has not been one of uninterrupted stability. The Macaulays represent one of the oldest clans in the island, and as late as 1750 it was recorded that "the common inhabitants of Lewis are the Morisons, McAulays and MacKivers, but when they go from home all who live under Seaforth call themselves MacKenzies" (Macgregor 1949:40). Yet by 1961 the Macaulays comprised a mere 2·1 per cent of all the electors in the island, and although more numerous in the parish of Uig than elsewhere they were even there outnumbered by the Macivers, Morisons, Mackays and Macleans, as well as by the Macleods and Macdonalds. The decline of the Macaulays must clearly have been related primarily to the widespread clearances which took place within Uig parish in the mid-nineteenth century, for though many of the cleared areas were subsequently resettled they were rarely re-occupied by their former inhabitants. Moreover, this is the area which has subsequently experienced the highest rate of depopulation in Lewis.

The bulk of the people who were cleared from their homes in Uig left Lewis altogether, many of them emigrating to North America. However, some were sent to other parts of the island, and it is interesting to observe that the present distribution of Macaulays in Lewis still reflects these involuntary population movements of a hundred years ago. Excluding the burgh of Stornoway and its environs, nearly all the Macaulays who now live outside Uig parish are to be found in the electoral districts of Lochs, Point and South Barvas. In 1961 more than four-fifths of the 148 Macaulays listed in these three districts lived in the townships of Balallan, Crossbost and Keose (Lochs),



Bayble, Sheshader and Shulishader (Point), and Brue and Shawbost (South Barvas)—all of which were enlarged in the mid-nineteenth century to accommodate people who had been removed from their homes elsewhere in the island. For example, in North Shawbost the two roads leading to the coast from the main Carloway-Barvas road were specially laid out by the Estates Officers in 1851 for the benefit of people who had been evacuated from Uig parish, which may well account for the fact that 110 years later the township of Shawbost contained 32 of the 41 Macaulays listed in South Barvas (Geddes 1936:301).

A fairly reliable guide to the extent of population mobility in the past is the ratio of surnames per 100 electors. In the burgh of Stornoway, which has some of the cosmopolitan characteristics of an island capital and seaport, the 1961 figure was 9.7. In the electoral district of Stornoway Central, which contains the town's growing outskirts, it was 7.4. In West Uig, which suffered from extensive clearances in the mid-nineteenth century, there was an average of 6.1 names per 100 electors. In the Park district of Lochs parish, where large areas were cleared between 1818-42 and have since remained mostly unoccupied, the figure was 4.4. In East Uig the ratio was 4.1, and in the district of Lochs and the districts of Back and Point in Stornoway parish it was 3.9. The lowest ratios were 3.2 in North Barvas and 3.0 in South Barvas, historically the most stable parts of the island.

The picture which emerges is therefore one of a general lack of population mobility in Lewis over the last hundred and fifty years. There would seem to have been little movement between different parts of the island except at the time of the Clearances, when the bulk of the movement took the form of emigration rather than internal migration, and except for the general movement of population from the rural areas into the growing town of Stornoway. There would also appear to have been relatively little movement into the island, and such as has occurred has tended to be confined mainly to Stornoway, the island's commercial and administrative centre.

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