

# *Family Origins in Cowal and Knapdale*

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Tryst of a fleet against Castle Sween,  
Welcome is the adventure in Inis Fáil.

No one who has read the poem in the Book of the Dean of Lismore of which these are the opening lines, or who has stood by the ruins of Castle Sween in Knapdale, arguably the oldest surviving stone castle in Scotland, can have failed to wish to know more about the men who built the castle and who wished to recapture it—the MacSweens of Knapdale (Watson 1937:7).<sup>1</sup> When the MacSweens first appear firmly on historical record in the thirteenth century, they already occupy a position of great importance in West Highland affairs. Murchadh MacSween of Knapdale, indeed, is mentioned not only in Scottish but also in Norwegian and Irish sources: in Norwegian accounts of the campaign leading up to the battle of Largs in 1263 he is one of the few West Highland chieftains not of the race of Somerled to be named, while Irish sources record that he was subsequently captured in Ireland in 1267 by Donald O'Connor and languished and died in the Earl of Ulster's prison.<sup>2</sup> A few decades later, in the Wars of Independence, John MacSween played a prominent part in the English interest comparable to that of John MacDougal of Lorne and Alexander Óg MacDonald.<sup>3</sup> The MacSweens suffered for their allegiance to the English King even more than did the MacDougalls, for after the early fourteenth century their name disappears almost entirely from the Scottish record and it is to Ireland and to the numerous tribes of MacSweeney Galloglass that one must look to discover the further fortunes of the family.<sup>4</sup>

It is in Ireland too that the fullest and most reliable accounts of the origins of the MacSweens and of the various families of Cowal and Knapdale which claim descent from the same common stem have been preserved. Some of these families, such as the Lamonts and the MacLachlans, are noticed independently in thirteenth century sources although none figure so prominently as the MacSweens. Others, like the MacNeills (including the Barra branch), although well known in Scottish history, are scantily noticed, if at all, before the fifteenth century, while others yet, like the MacEwens of Otter, the MacSorleys of Monydrain and the Argyllshire MacLeays (otherwise MacDunsleve or Livingstone) made little mark at the national level. All these families, however, claim descent from the fifth century Irish King Niall of the Nine Hostages through the Cinél Éoghain (later 'O'Neill') Kings of Ailech in the North of Ireland.<sup>5</sup> Although the traditional origin of these families has been known for many years, the crucial part of the pedigree—that is, the part which purports to link the Scottish families

with the Kings of Ailech—and the claimed inter-relationship between the Scottish families themselves has been the subject of surprisingly little investigation. Two recently published books, *Castle in the Sea* by R. L. MacNeil, and *The Highland Clans* by Sir Iain Moncreiffe, have made the pedigree once more familiar, but while both MacNeil and Sir Iain relate and appear to accept the pedigree, neither examines it critically to establish its authenticity or to rebut the arguments put forward against it in the past—arguments which have generally been accepted by historians (MacNeil 1964; Moncreiffe 1967).<sup>6</sup>

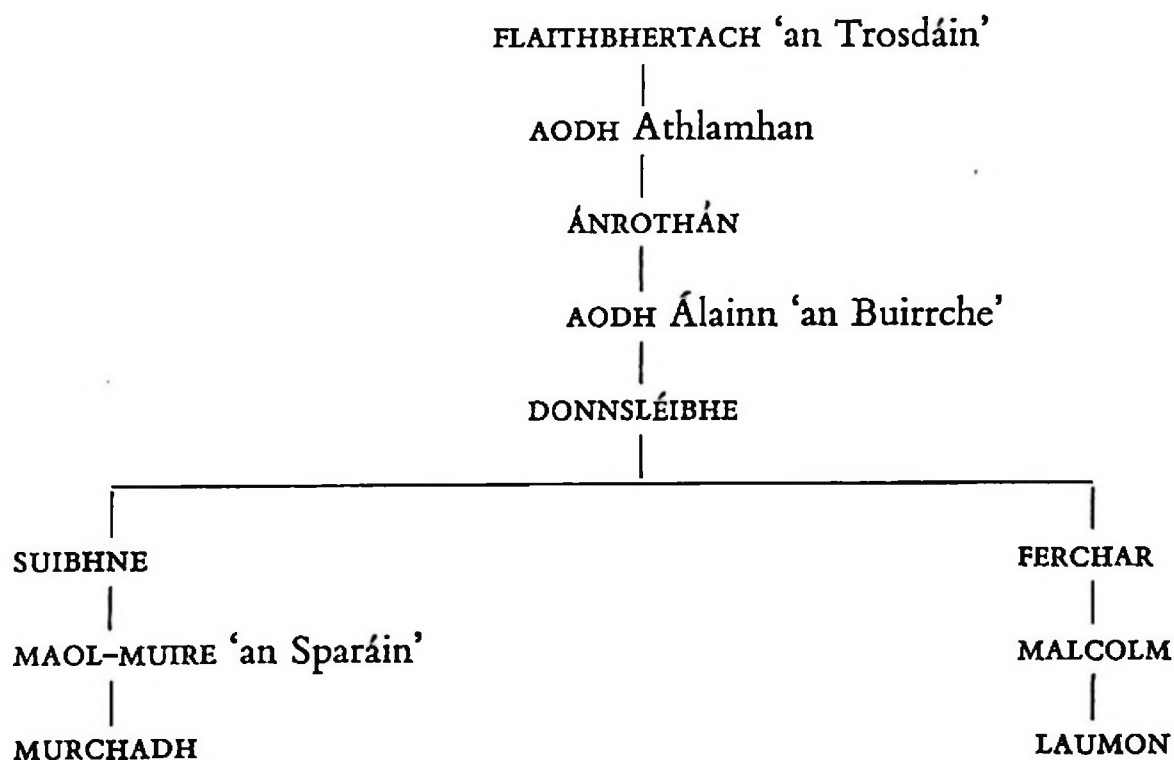
It is proposed in this article to look first at the traditional pedigree, then to examine the main argument put forward against accepting it, and finally to consider various factors which tend to support the pedigree's authenticity. In the interests of clarity the families referred to in the body of the text are restricted to the MacSweens, the Lamonts, the MacLachlans and the shadowy MacGilchrists, but short notes on the MacNeills, the MacEwens, the MacSorleys of Monydrain and the Argyllshire MacLeays are added by way of Appendix. A map and a genealogical chart are also included (figs. 1 and 2, pp. 30 and 33).

The traditional pedigrees of the Highland clans are perhaps best known from the invaluable Appendix attached to the third volume of Skene's *Celtic Scotland* (Skene 1886–90, III: 458–90). They have, on the whole, been viewed by historians and genealogists with considerable suspicion, if not downright disbelief. Most of the clans are traced back through many generations to some figure well known in Irish or Dalriadic history or legend: thus the MacDonalds and allied clans are derived from Colla Uais, an Irish King who must have lived about the fourth century A.D., if indeed he is a historical figure; other clans, such as the MacKenzies, the MacLeans and the MacNabs, are derived from Ferchar Fada, a historical seventh century King of Dalriada of the tribe of Loarn, via the mysterious Cormac son of Airbhertach; while the Cowal and Knapdale families are derived through Flaithbhertach 'an Trosdáin' (Flaherty of the Pilgrim's Staff), King of Ailech (d. 1036), from Niall of the Nine Hostages, a leading Irish King of the early fifth century, who stands on the borderline between legend and history.<sup>7</sup> The reliability of the pedigrees has often been questioned on the grounds that in no case is the number of generations given adequate to fill the centuries covered. Skene's own views are still generally accepted: 'The later portion of these pedigrees, as far back as the eponymus or common ancestor from which the clan takes its name, are in general tolerably well vouched, and may be held to be authentic. The older part of the pedigree will be found to be partly historical and partly mythic. So far as these links in the genealogic chain connect the clans with each other within what may be termed the historic period, the pedigree may be genuine; but the links which connect them with the mythic genealogies of the elaborate system of early Irish history, when analysed, prove to be entirely artificial and untrustworthy' (Skene 1886–90, III: 339). H. M. Chadwick commented on the same lines, 'All (the genealogies) seem to involve a chronological gap of at least two centuries—generally very much more—before a date, in the tenth, eleventh or twelfth centuries, at which an apparently trustworthy

series of names begins (Chadwick 1949:95).<sup>8</sup> However, to dismiss the pedigrees en bloc as medieval fabrications is far too simple. Fabrications there certainly were, but that does not prove that all the pedigrees are false. Gaps in the pedigrees there may be, but that does not prove that the pedigree concerned may not yet preserve a genuine tradition: certainly it can be argued of the traditional MacDonald pedigree, though it is deficient by many generations, that it is accurate in detail as far back as the beginning of the ninth century A.D. and that beyond that it incorporates an ancient and by no means improbable tradition of origin (Sellar 1966). Each pedigree must be examined on its own merits. In the case of the Cowal and Knapdale pedigrees, as will be seen, examination suggests that there are, in fact, no generation gaps at all.

The main sources for the Cowal and Knapdale pedigrees which have been consulted are the medieval Irish Books of Ballymote and of Lecan, the fifteenth-century Scottish genealogical manuscript known as 'MS 1467', the sixteenth-century *Leabhar Chlainne Suibhne* (The Book of the MacSweeneys), and the seventeenth-century genealogical collections of Cú-choigríche O'Clery (d. 1664) and of Duald MacFirbis (d. 1670).<sup>9</sup> These sources are all, with the possible exception of *Leabhar Chlainne Suibhne*, well known and there is no need to enter into their respective merits here. *Leabhar Chlainne Suibhne*, as Father Walsh informs us in his Preface, is a traditional account of the history of the family of MacSween or MacSweeney, written in Ireland, commencing about 1513, for Mary MacSweeney of Fanad.

As the authorities are in substantial agreement as to the main pedigree it may be expressed thus, in tabular form, taking as terminal points Murchadh MacSween of Knapdale and his contemporary and (if the genealogies are correct) second cousin, Laumon, the eponym of the Lamonts<sup>10</sup>:



Murchadh (d. 1267) appears as son of Maol-Muire 'an Sparáin' (Malmore of the Sporrán), grandson of Suibhne (Sween) and great-grandson of Donnsléibhe (Dunsleve); Laumon, who flourished c. 1240–post 1290, appears as son of Malcolm and grandson of Ferchar, another son of Donnsléibhe.<sup>11</sup> According to the pedigree Donnsléibhe was the son of Aodh Aláinn sometimes called 'Buirrche'.<sup>12</sup> Aodh Aláinn was the son of Ánrothán, and Ánrothán was the son of Aodh Athlamhan.<sup>13</sup> With Aodh Athlamhan we reach firm ground again as his existence is sufficiently vouched for in independent and contemporary Irish sources. Aodh was King of Ailech, in succession to his father Flaithbhertach and was killed in 1033 A.D. (AU 1887–1901).

*Leabhar Chlainne Suibhne* alone among the genealogical sources relates the circumstances in which these scions of the house of Ailech came to Scotland. It tells how Ánrothán, son of Aodh Athlamhan, quarrelled with his elder brother Domhnall 'an t-Ógdhamh' (Donald the Young Ox), the ancestor of the later family of O'Neill, and came to Scotland where he settled and married the daughter of an unnamed King of Scots: 'Then Anradhán himself in anger and haughtiness proceeded with a troop in his company to the place where his ships and galleys were. We shall not here speak of the extent of their wanderings on the seas, for it is more appropriate to aim at brevity of narration. In a word, they rested not till they reached the beautiful bright country of Scotland, more than half of which they brought by violence under their sway, and there they increased in strength, and power, and great expansiveness. And when they had spent some time in Scotland they enjoyed great prosperity, and wealth, and wide conquest in all the country. They made peace and marriage alliance with the King of Scotland then in this way, namely, the daughter of the King was given in marriage to Anradhán, and she bore him children, and descended from these two are the whole of Clann Suibhne from that time to now. That is the first conquest Clann Suibhne ever made in Scotland' (Walsh 1920: §1, 2).<sup>14</sup> Ánrothán, then, is by tradition the founder of the families in Scotland.

The genealogy of the Kings of Ailech is well known and well authenticated. Aodh's father, Flaithbhertach 'an Trosdáin', gave up his throne in 1030 to make a pilgrimage to Rome and thus acquired his nickname 'of the Pilgrim's staff'. He died in 1036, surviving his son Aodh by three years (AU 1887–1901). Flaithbhertach's grandfather was Domhnall (Donald) 'of Armagh', termed by the Annals of Ulster 'High King of Ireland'. Domhnall, who died in 980, is sometimes regarded as the first 'O'Neill', the 'Niall' in question being his grandfather Niall 'Glúndubh' (Black Knee), also termed 'High King of Ireland', who was killed in 919 fighting the Vikings of Dublin (AU 1887–1901). Niall's descent in turn can be traced through many generations of Irish Kings and princes such as Niall 'Frossach' (of the Showers), who died in Iona in 778, and Muirchertach mac Erca, who died about 533, to Éoghan (Ewen), one of the many sons of Niall of the Nine Hostages.<sup>15</sup>

Niall of the Nine Hostages is a figure of the greatest interest to the genealogist in that he stands as the semi-historical founder of one of the only two families or groups

of families in Europe that can be traced back indisputably in the male line from the present day through Medieval times beyond the Dark Ages to the fifth or fourth century A.D.<sup>16</sup> No generation has passed since Niall's day in which his descendants have not played a prominent part in Irish or European affairs. One of his many sons, Conall Gulban, from whom comes the place-name 'Tyrconnel', was the ancestor of St Columba, St Columbanus, St Adomnan and the later family of O'Donnell, while from another of his sons, Éoghan, who gave his name to 'Tyrone' ('Tír Éoghain'), descends, as has been seen, the family of O'Neill. Confusion can arise between this surname 'O'Neill' (otherwise 'Úa Néill') and the names 'Uí Néill' and 'MacNeill'. As a body, the descendants of Niall of the Nine Hostages are often referred to by Annalists and historians as the 'Uí Néill', taking their name from him: included among the northern Uí Néill are the O'Donnell chieftains and the O'Neill and MacLochlainn Kings of Ailech, while the southern Uí Néill includes the O'Melaghlin Kings of Meath. The 'O'Neills' are a branch of the northern Uí Néill and take their name from the Niall 'Glúndubh' who was killed in 919. The 'MacNeills' on the other hand, although claiming descent from both Niall 'Glúndubh' and Niall of the Nine Hostages, take their name from a later and Scottish Niall.<sup>17</sup>

The main argument which has been advanced against the authenticity of the Cowal and Knapdale pedigree is that it is too short by several generations and that consequently it is likely to be a medieval fabrication. This argument, first put forward by Skene, rests on the identification of Aodh Álainn of the pedigree, father of Donnsléibhe and great grandson of Flaithbhertach, with an Irish king, Hugh the Splendid, said to have died in 1047 (Skene 1886-90, III: 340-1). As some of Aodh Álainn's great grandsons can be shown to have been living in the mid-thirteenth century this identification, if correct, clearly tends to discredit the pedigree. Most later writers have followed Skene, and some add the additional information that Hugh came from 'Boirrche' in the Mourne Mountains, thus trying to explain the curious epithet 'Buirrche' in the pedigree.<sup>18</sup> The identification and the argument based on it have never been directly refuted although it is, of course, possible to accept the identification and yet tacitly to reject the argument that the pedigree is absolutely untrustworthy.<sup>19</sup>

However, the identification is palpably false and cannot withstand scrutiny. In the first place, neither Skene nor any subsequent writer gives authority for the statement that a Hugh the Splendid of Boirrche in the Mourne Mountains died in 1047. Secondly, it is not at all obvious why a prince of the northern Uí Néill should be associated with Mourne Mountains as this area was never Uí Néill territory and in the eleventh century formed part of the ancient Kingdom of Ulidia. Third, it would appear that the genealogies style Aodh Álainn 'the Buirrche' rather than 'of Boirrche'—a nickname, and not a territorial designation. That this is so, is confirmed by a poem in praise of Maol-Muire 'an Sparáin', father of Murchadh MacSween, quoted in *Leabhar Chlainne Suibhne* (Walsh 1920: §5). Here Maol-Muire is referred to as 'a hi barrbuidhe Buirrchi', that is, 'yellow-haired descendant of Buirrche', 'Buirrche' being used as a name or a

nickname, but clearly not as a place name. What 'Buirrche' means is not so clear, but it may represent the Gaelic word 'Boirche' meaning 'Buffalo' (MacBain 1911:43). If this is so, then Aodh was presumably a man of unusual size or strength, and it is tempting (and not entirely facetious) to compare his nickname with that of his uncle Domhnall 'an t-Ógdhamh'—'the Young Ox' (*supra* p. 24). The fourth and quite conclusive argument against the identification of Aodh Álainn with a Hugh the Splendid who died in 1047 lies in a consideration of the chronology involved. It is asserted that Aodh died in 1047. Yet it is known that Aodh's grandfather, Aodh Athlamhan, died in 1033, and his great grandfather Flaithbhertach in 1036 (*supra* p. 24). That a man should die, leaving children, only eleven years after his great grandfather is, of course, not impossible, although it is certainly unlikely. But the matter need not rest there. As it happens, Flaithbhertach was a posthumous child and so his birth was recorded as an event of some interest and importance. According to the Annals of Ulster, he was born in 977 A.D. some months after his father Muirchertach had been killed in battle (AU 1887-1901). It follows that Flaithbhertach was about 59 years old when he died in 1036, and, had he survived until 1047, the year in which his great grandson is said to have died leaving issue, he would have been about seventy. Clearly then, the identification of the Aodh Álainn of the pedigree with a 'Hugh the Splendid' who died in 1047 is quite untenable.

The next question to be considered is whether a re-examination of the pedigree discloses any generation gap at all. In fact, it does not. Although surviving information is far from complete it is possible to arrive at a working approximation in terms of generations per century and years per generation. Flaithbhertach was born in 977 and his son Aodh died in 1033. From this it seems reasonable to assume that Aodh's son Ánrothán, must have been born about 1030. Murchadh MacSween and Laumon are placed five generations below Ánrothán in the pedigree. Their births may be tentatively placed in the decade 1220 to 1230: Laumon, with his uncle Duncan, granted a Charter recorded in the *Register of the Monastery of Paisley circa 1235*, while Murchadh, as has been seen, was clearly an influential West Highland magnate by the 1260s (*Paisley Registrum* 1832:132).<sup>20</sup> It is unlikely that Murchadh and Laumon were born much after 1230, although quite possible that they were born before 1220. Taking the second date gives five generations in the space of 200 years, an average of 40 years per generation, while the first date provides an average of 38 years per generation. Both these averages, although longer than the traditional 30 years, are quite acceptable and in no way extraordinary in a Gaelic genealogy: in fact averages of 35 to 40 years per generation occur so frequently in Irish and Highland genealogies that one is almost tempted to regard them as the norm.<sup>21</sup> The pedigree of the Cowal and Knapdale clans, then, cannot be faulted for omitting any generations and the main argument which has been deployed against its authenticity is quite without foundation.

Another argument which could be urged against the pedigree is the fact that Irish Annals completely fail to mention Ánrothán, Aodh Álainn and Donnsléibhe although

they refer several times to Flaithbhertach and Aodh Athlamhan. There is, however, an explanation for this silence. After the death of Aodh Athlamhan the main power in Ailech slipped from the hands of the O'Neill descendants of Flaithbhertach to other, although related families, especially the MacLochlainns, and it was not for over one hundred years that the O'Neills re-established their hegemony (Walsh 1920: xv, xvi). The result of this decline in O'Neill power is that although the later O'Neills trace their descent from Domhnall 'an t-Ógdhamh' (brother of Anrothan) through his son Flaithbhertach and his grandson Conchobhar, contemporary Irish sources fail to mention Domhnall, Flaithbhertach and Conchobhar just as they fail to mention Ánrothán, Aodh Álainn and Donnsléibhe. 'It is impossible,' concludes Father Walsh, 'to determine from reliable sources the names of Aodh's sons' (Aodh Athlamhan) (Walsh 1920:xii).<sup>22</sup> The course of O'Neill fortunes in Ireland, then, not only provides an explanation for the silence of the Annals, but also suggests why a grandson of Flaithbhertach, frustrated in his ambitions at home, might have looked abroad to the neighbouring kingdom of Scotland to seek his fortune.

Before looking in general, however, at the credibility of the genealogical tradition preserved by the pedigree, it is worth considering what can be inferred more particularly from sources other than the pedigree proper about the existence and historicity of the generations between Aodh Athlamhan in the eleventh century and Murchadh MacSween and Laumon in the thirteenth. Although no contemporary references to Suibhne and Ferchar, the grandfathers of Murchadh and Laumon respectively, survive, the patronymic designations applied to their sons and grandsons in such sources as the *Register of the Monastery of Paisley* and the Record Edition of the *Acts of the Parliaments of Scotland* can leave no doubt as to their existence. Laumon, for instance, appears in 1292 as 'Lochman mac Malcolm Mac Erewer'—that is 'Laumon, son of Malcolm, son of Ferchar'. Dugald, son of Suibhne, grants or witnesses charters as 'filius Syfyn', 'filius Sewen', and 'filius Syvin', while his nephew Murchadh witnesses the second of these as 'filius Malcmur' (APS 1814-75:447; *Paisley Registrum* 1832:120-2, 132, 134, 137-8.).

Of Ferchar no more is known, but some memory of Suibhne (who is, of course, the eponym of 'Mac Sween') was preserved by later generations. *Leabhar Chlainne Suibhne* attributes the building of Castle Sween in Knapdale to him—and there is no reason to doubt this—while an old account of the Campbells says that Iver, ancestor of the MacIver Campbells, was 'begotten on the daughter of a great man called Swineruo he was owner of Castle Swine in Knapdaill and was Thane of Knapdaill and Glassrie' (Macphail 1916a:82). 'Swineruo' is 'Suibhne Ruadh' or 'Sween the Red'. According to the genealogies Suibhne and Ferchar were brothers, and it is interesting to note, as tending to confirm this relationship, that Dugall, son of Suibhne, witnesses a charter of Laumon, grandson of Ferchar. Another witness to this charter is Gilpatrick son of Gilchrist, the ancestor of the MacLachlans (*Paisley Registrum* 1832:132-3). If one follows O'Clery, Gilchrist was another brother of Suibhne and Ferchar, while the less reliable MS 1467 makes him their uncle (O'Clery 1951:306, 307; MS 1467 fo. 1 va).<sup>23</sup>

If Suibhne and Ferchar were in fact brothers and if this is the point at which the MacLachlan line branches off from the MacSweens and the Lamonts, it seems unlikely that the name of the father of Suibhne and Ferchar, and probably of Gilchrist as well, that is 'Donnsléibhe', should not have been accurately preserved. A further argument for Donnsléibhe's existence is the recurrence of the name later in the family: 'Dunslene fratri Murchardi' (brother of Murchadh MacSween) witnesses a charter in 1262, while James MacDunsleve had a grant of  $7\frac{1}{2}$  merklands in Kintyre from King Robert Bruce in 1309 (*Paisley Registrum* 1832:122; RMS 1882-1914:I, App. I, 105). An argument can also be made out for the historicity of Donnsléibhe's father, Aodh Álainn 'an Buirrche', partly on the strength of the bare existence of the nickname but more on account of the poem already referred to. As this poem was composed in favour of Maol-Muire 'an Sparáin', father of Murchadh MacSween, it presumably dates from the mid-thirteenth century. Therefore, when the author refers to Maol-Muire as the 'yellow-haired descendant of Buirrche' he is speaking of what must have been to himself and to his hearers a matter of common knowledge, the 'Buirrche' in question being the great grandfather of his hero. Further, a stray pedigree in the O'Clery book, stray in the sense of being out of position, is termed 'Genelach Meg Buirrce', that is 'Genealogy of the descendants of Buirrche'. The genealogy given is, in fact, that of the Lamonts, rendered elsewhere in O'Clery, but in this case when the pedigree reaches the name 'Buirrche' it continues 'a quo meg Buirrce' that is 'from whom the descendants of Buirrche' (O'Clery 1951:588).<sup>24</sup> Now, if the term 'descendants of Buirrche' was used for a time as this genealogy in O'Clery suggests, then that is an additional reason for accepting the historicity of 'Buirrche', alias Aodh Álainn. It is possible, therefore, on evidence independent of the pedigree proper to argue for the authenticity of the pedigree as far back as Aodh Álainn, who, it will be remembered, stands only two steps below the well authenticated Irish king Aodh Athlamhan.

From the strictly genealogical point of view then the traditional account of the origins of the families of Knapdale and Cowal is quite feasible. The next question which one must ask is whether the general tradition of the descent of these families, so prominent in thirteenth century Scotland, from an eleventh-century Irish prince, a prince who, moreover, if *Leabhar Chlainne Suibhne* is to be believed, married a Scottish princess, is in tune with other historical evidence. In answering this, it seems relevant to review the evidence for contact between Gaelic Scotland and Gaelic Ireland in the eleventh to the thirteenth centuries, and to consider the status enjoyed by the Cowal and Knapdale families in the Gaelic society of their day.

Taking first the question of contact between Scotland and Ireland, it is in general true that from the time of the earliest records until the wars of Montrose in the seventeenth-century Gaelic Scotland and Gaelic Ireland, sharing common traditions and a common language, were in constant cultural and political contact. A few disjointed references taken chronologically from the scanty annals of the time show that the eleventh and twelfth centuries were in no way exceptional. Men from Scotland and



the Hebrides took part on both sides in the famous battle of Clontarf fought in Ireland in 1014 between Brian Bóramha on the one hand and King Sihtric of Dublin and Earl Sigurd of Orkney on the other: on Sihtric's side those slain included Olaf son of Lagman, almost certainly a member of the ruling family of Man and the Isles, while among those who fell with Brian was Donald, son of Eimhin, son of Cainnech, Mormaer of Mar. The King of Scots at this time was Malcolm son of Kenneth (d. 1034) whose Irish connections are clear from St Berchan's Prophecy in which he is termed the 'son of a woman of Leinster', and 'son of the cow that grazes upon the countryside of the Liffey'. In 1072 the death is recorded of Diarmait mac Mael-na-mBó 'King of Leinster, Dublin and the Hebrides'. Early in the twelfth century, Donald son of Tadhg of the royal house of Munster controlled the Hebrides from about 1111 to 1115. Later, about 1142, 'Ottar, son of the son of Ottar, of the people of the Hebrides' was chosen by the Norse of Dublin as their King.<sup>25</sup> In 1154 'The Cinel Éoghan and Muirceartach son of Niall their ruler sent persons over sea to hire [and who did hire] the fleets of the Gall-Gaeidhil of Arran, of Kintyre, of Man and the borders of Alba in general, over which MacScelling was in command'. The sequel is soon told: 'the foreign host was defeated and slaughtered—they left their ships behind and the teeth of MacScelling were knocked out' (AFM 1851).<sup>26</sup> Ten years later, in 1164, Somerled, King of the Isles and Regulus of Argyll, tried unsuccessfully to persuade a leading Irish churchman of the day, Flaithbheartach O Broilchán, to become Abbot of Iona.<sup>25</sup> If more adequate records survived, these instances of contact between Scotland and Ireland in the eleventh and twelfth centuries could doubtless be multiplied ten-fold, but enough remains to show that there is nothing improbable about a tradition which records the settlement in Scotland of an eleventh-century Irish prince.

An examination of the status of the Cowal and Knapdale families in the thirteenth century likewise discloses nothing improbable in the traditional account—rather, it adds credence to it. The importance of the families is evident from the extent of their lands alone. The Lamont descendants of Ferchar, son of Donnsléibhe, controlled much of Cowal and also held land on the opposite shore of Loch Fyne—according to clan tradition they controlled more territory before the Wars of Independence than they ever did afterwards, when their possessions can be more definitely charted (McKechnie 1938: 50–1). The descendants of Gilchrist, son (or perhaps brother) of Donnsléibhe, also controlled much territory: one of them, Lachlan Mor, gave his name to Castle Lachlan and Strathlachlan and founded the family of MacLachlan; Gillespie son of Gilchrist was granted a charter by Alexander II in 1240, and he and his brother Éoghan (Ewen) had large estates in Glassary, including the lands of Fincharn; a 'Dovenaldus Macgilchriste', perhaps a brother of Gillespie and Éoghan, appears about 1250 as Lord of Tarbert in Kintyre.<sup>27</sup> The descendants of Suibhne, son of Donnsléibhe, were established in Knapdale, where, as has been seen, Suibhne probably built and gave his name to the oldest surviving stone castle in Scotland. Suibhne's son Dugald seems to have lived at Skipness Castle in Kintyre.<sup>28</sup> The disposition of these lands among the

various families is such that one would be inclined to postulate a common ancestor for them even if one did not know that one was claimed. It may also be not without significance that these lands are situated at the heart of ancient Dalriada from which Kenneth mac Alpin had emerged only two centuries before Ánrothán must have lived,

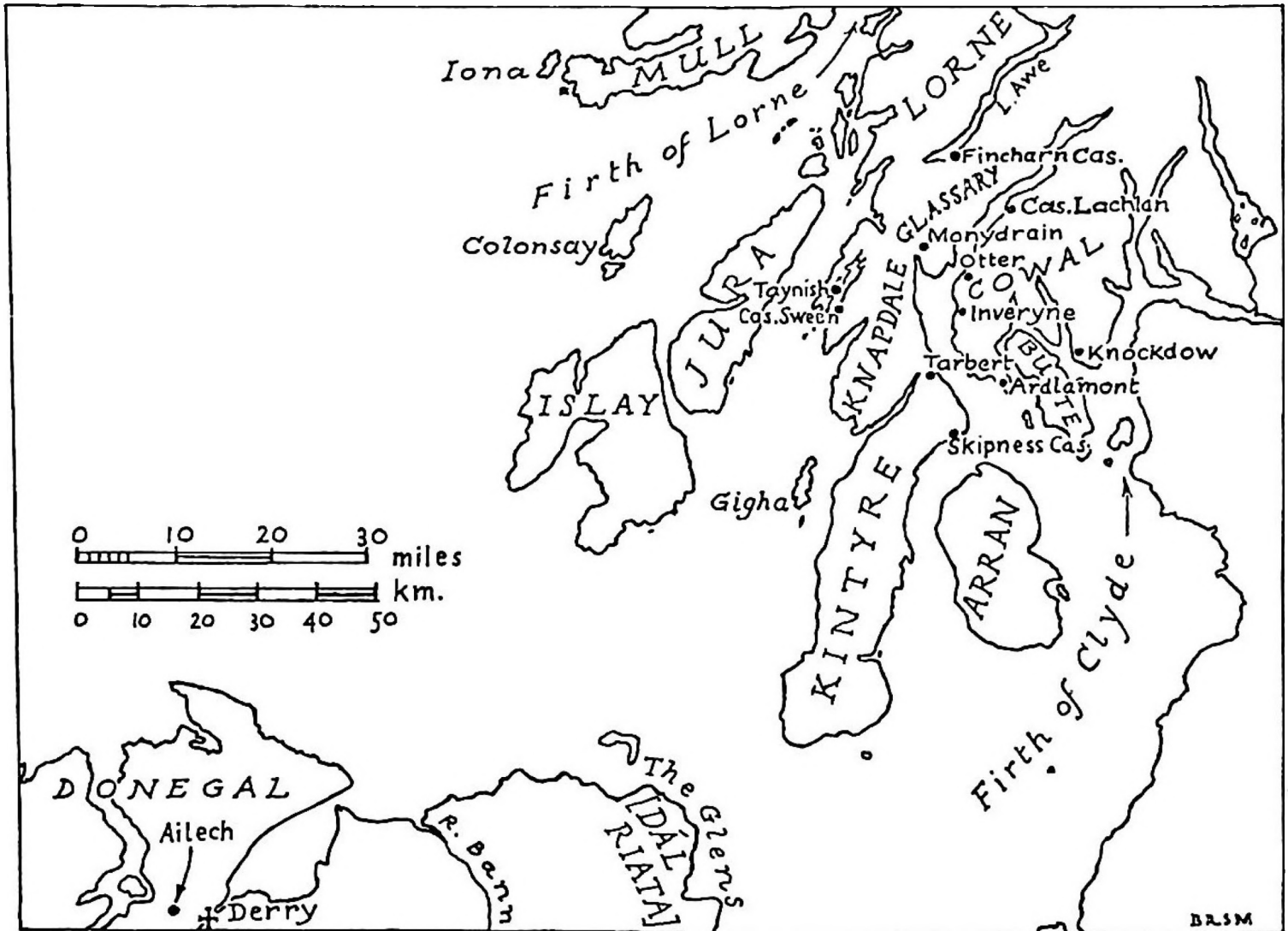


FIG 1 Cowal and Knapdale with adjoining areas. (Note: Inveryne, Ardlamont and Knockdow, not mentioned in the text, were all Lamont strongholds.)

a fact which gives some credence to the tradition of a royal marriage alliance (*supra* p. 24).

Indeed, the meagre details that have survived of the marriages of the members of the Cowal and Knapdale families fully bear out the impression of status which can be inferred from the extent of their lands. The MacSweens in the thirteenth century are known to have been allied to two of the most ancient native Irish royal families. Maol-Muire 'an Sparáin' was married to Beanmhidhe O'Connor, daughter of Turrough, King of Connaught, and granddaughter of Ruairi O'Connor (d. 1198), High King of Ireland, while Aodh O'Donnell, King of Tyrconell intermittently from 1281 to 1333, was the son of a MacSween mother (AFM 1851:s.a. 1269; Walsh 1920: §3, 4,

7, 16, xvii). Few details of early Lamont marriages have survived, but it is known that Maol-Muire, a younger son of Laumon, married Christian MacDougal, daughter of Alexander de Ergadia, and granddaughter of Ewen, King of the Hebrides (CPL 1893, I: 518). Maol-Muire was thus the brother-in-law of Bruce's opponent, John of Lorne, as too were Alexander Óg MacDonald, chief of that name, and Lachlan MacRuairi, both of whom similarly married daughters of Alexander de Ergadia. Maol-Muire and Christian indeed were already related as they required Papal dispensation to sanction their marriage which was within the fourth degree of consanguinity. Early MacLachlan marriages, very fully recorded in MS 1467, show intermarriage with the Lamonts, a further MacDonald connection, and an apparent alliance with the ruling family of Carrick, related to Fergus, Lord of Galloway: the wife of Lachlan Óg, descendant in the fourth generation of Gilchrist is said to have been Áine, daughter of MacDonald—presumably a daughter of Angus Óg MacDonald and Áine O Cathán—while the mother of Lachlan's father Gilpatrick is said to have been a daughter or granddaughter of Henry son of Kennedy, 'Lord of Carrick' (MS 1467, fo. 1 rd.).<sup>29</sup>

The thirteenth-century families of Cowal and Knapdale then, while claiming descent from O'Neill stock, were certainly allied by marriage to two of the most powerful families in Gaelic Ireland, the O'Connors and the O'Donnells. They were also related to the most powerful family group in the West Highlands and Islands, the MacDougal, MacDonald and MacRuairi descendants of Somerled and probably related to the Lords of Galloway as well. It is quite apparent that in status they were second to none in Gaeldom.

To sum up, the genealogical tradition regarding the origins of the families of Cowal and Knapdale is clear and reasonably consistent. Contrary to what has been asserted the generations given in the pedigree are adequate to bridge the gap between known historical persons. The main argument levied against the authenticity of the pedigree rests on a false identification and appears to be entirely without foundation. There are reasons, independent of the pedigree proper, for accepting the historicity of nearly all the persons mentioned in it. The general tradition of descent from an Irish prince who married a Scottish princess is not unlikely, and the lands held and marriage alliances contracted by the families concerned in the thirteenth century show clearly that they belonged to the first rank of the Gaelic aristocracy. If the paucity of surviving material is such that the authenticity of the pedigree cannot be put entirely beyond doubt surely there is much to be said for accepting the genealogical tradition as it stands as providing a reasonable explanation of the origins of the powerful and inter-related families of Cowal and Knapdale.

## APPENDIX

*MacNeills, MacEwens, MacSorleys of Monydrain and Argyllshire MacLeays*

1 *MacNeill* Although the traditional MacNeill descent is now perhaps the best known of all the families considered, it is by far the least well supported by documentary evidence. Indeed the crucial links in the MacNeill pedigree appear to rest, incredible though it may seem, on the authority of two crofters living in Barra at the turn of the century. This pedigree as recorded by R. L. MacNeil traces the descent of the Barra MacNeils from 'Niall Son of Muirceartach, son of Donal, son of Aodh, son of Niall, son of Aodh Alaind, son of Aodh Aonrachan, son of Aodh Athlamh, son of Flathartach'. Although the names are clearly garbled and although MacNeil's account of the early history of his clan is, to say the least, highly questionable, there can be little doubt that the Barra MacNeils claimed the same descent as the Cowal and Knapdale families. No traditional pedigree of the MacNeills of Taynish and Gigha has survived but it seems more than likely that they descend from the same parent stem as the Barra MacNeils.<sup>30</sup>

Against this view it is sometimes argued, following A. MacLean Sinclair, that the two families of MacNeill are not related and have separate origins (Sinclair 1906-7; 1909-10). MacLean Sinclair, however, cannot be relied on in this matter: he gives hardly any authority for his views, which involve taking a pedigree in MS 1467 thought by Skene to be that of the MacLennans for that of the MacNeils of Barra and tacking the MacNeills of Taynish and Gigha on to the MacLeans. In view of the Cowal and Knapdale associations the claim of MacNeil of Barra to be chief of all Clan Neill does not appear to be beyond question and the date given in *Castle in the Sea* for the arrival of the first MacNeil ancestor in Barra (c. 1030 A.D.) cannot be accepted. The Clan Neill, in any case, would appear to have been a junior branch of the descendants of Aodh Álainn, distinctly overshadowed in the thirteenth century by the MacSweens, the Lamonts and the descendants of Gilchrist.

2 *MacEwens of Otter* This clan, whose chief used to live at Otter on Loch Fyne, claims descent from Donnsléibhe. The only pedigree of the clan to have survived is that contained in MS 1467 and this, unfortunately, is virtually illegible in places (MS 1467: fo. 1 rd. 9). Niall, D. of Argyll, suggested that the family were a branch of the MacSweens and descended from Dugald, son of Suibhne (Campbell 1911-2).<sup>31</sup> The pedigree, however, derives the MacEwens from Éoghan (Ewen), son of Gillespie, Gillespie being apparently a great grandson (the intervening names being illegible) of one 'Saibaran', yet another son of Donnsléibhe.

3 *MacSorleys of Monydrain* The origin of this family, centred on Monydrain, near Lochgilphead, is fully discussed by McKechnie (McKechnie 1938: 378-94). Once again MS 1467 provides the only known pedigree, deriving the family from Somhairle (Sorley, Somerled), son of Ferchar, son of Donnsléibhe (MS 1467: fo. 1 vb 11). McKechnie takes the view that the pedigree is too short and inserts Duncan, son of

FLAITHBHERTACH 'an Troisain' d. 1036 King of Ailech  
 AODH Athlamhan k. 1033 King of Ailech

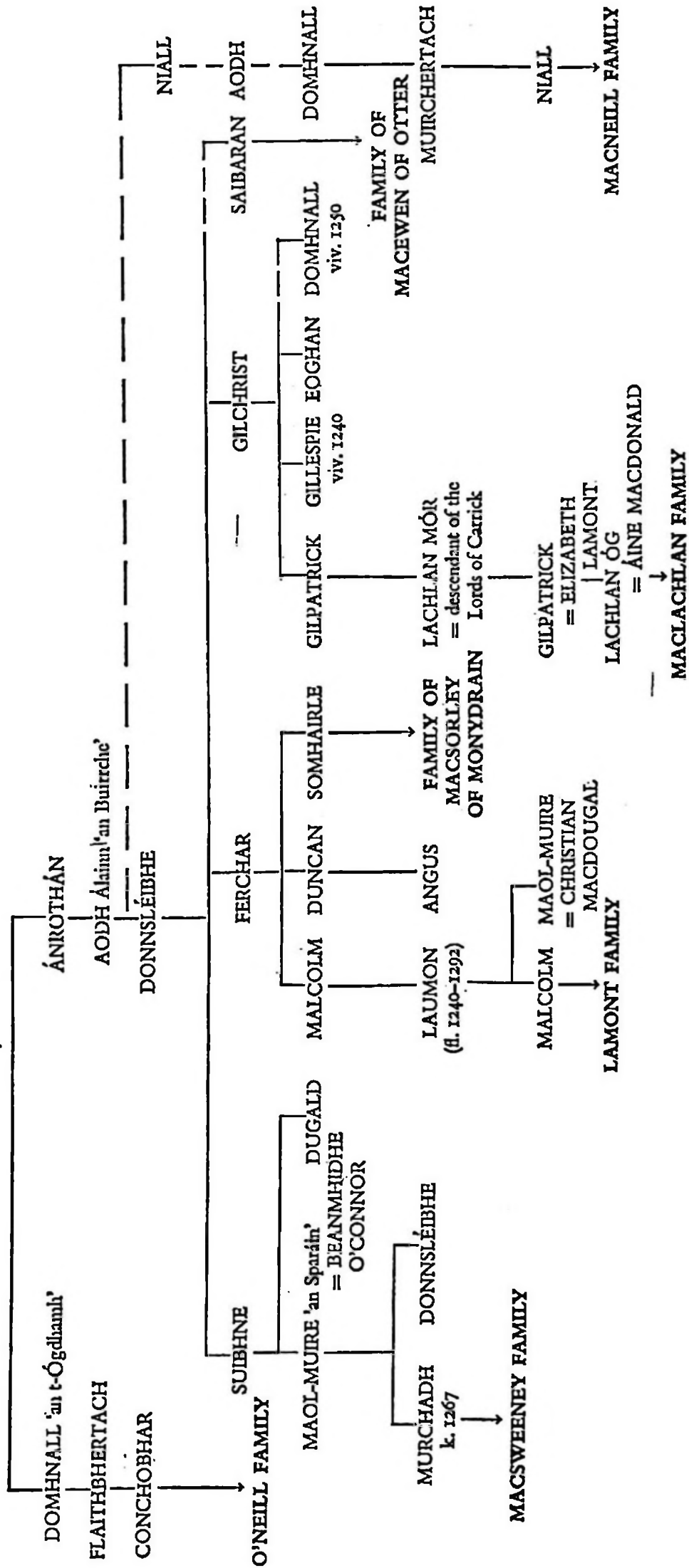


FIG. 2.

1. --- denotes less certainty.
2. The MacLeays in Argyll almost certainly descend from Suibhne.
3. Aodh O'Donnell, King of Tyrconnel, d. 1333 was the grandson of a John MacSween who must have been a close relative of Maol-Muire 'an Sparáin'.
4. The purpose of this chart is to supplement the text: it is not a complete catalogue of the descendants of Flaithbheartach.

Ferchar and Angus his son, both known from the *Register of the Monastery of Paisley*, between Ferchar and Somhairle (*Paisley Registrum* 1832: 132, 137–8). There seems to be no warrant for this.

4 *Argyllshire MacLeays* No detailed pedigree exists for this family, originally known as MacDunsleve, later as MacOnlea or MacLeay, and later still as Livingstone—David Livingstone's forebears were MacLeays from Mull. However, there can be little doubt that they are an offshoot of the MacSweens. *Leabhar Chlainne Suibhne* mentions that an early MacSween was known as 'MacDuinnshléibhe', while Moncreiffe derives the family from the 'Dunsleve', who appears in the *Register of the Monastery of Paisley* (*supra* p. 28); as already mentioned, a James mac Dunsleve is recorded in Kintyre in 1309. These Argyllshire MacLeays should be distinguished from the MacLeays of the north, in Inverness-shire, Ross and Sutherland, whose surname may derive—although the matter is not beyond dispute—from an early member of the famous Beaton family who was called 'the Doctor' or 'Leech' ('an Lighiche')—whence 'MacLeay'—and not from an ancestor called 'Donnsléibhe'.<sup>32</sup>

## NOTES

- 1 See also Watson 1937: 257–59; for the dating of Castle Sween see Cruden 1960: 22 *et passim*.
- 2 See Anderson 1922: II, 617, 618, 635; AU 1887–1901; AFM 1851; and Duncan and Brown 1956–7. Duncan and Brown (1956–7: 203 and chart) are mistaken in taking Murchadh for a brother of Angus Mór MacDonald of Islay.
- 3 For their careers see Barrow 1965.
- 4 For the family of MacSweeney Galloglass see, *inter alia*, Hayes-McCoy 1937 and McKerral 1951.
- 5 The genealogical source material is listed below, p. 23.
- 6 It is only fair to add that both these books are avowedly popular rather than academic.
- 7 Skene does not give a MacNeill or a MacSween pedigree.
- 8 Later, however, Chadwick expressly excepts the Ailech pedigrees from some of his strictures (Chadwick 1949: 96, n. 2).
- 9 The full references for these sources are as follows: *The Book of Ballymote*, facsimile edition, ed. R. Atkinson (Dublin, 1887), 77c; *The Book of Lecan*, facsimile edition, ed. K. Mulchrone (Dublin, 1937), 56a,b; National Library of Scotland, Adv. MS 72.1.1. ('MS 1467') fo. 1 rd. 9, re 20, va 28 and vb 11 (the transcription of this manuscript in *Coll. de Rebus Alban.* 1847, is quite unreliable); *Leabhar Chlainne Suibhne*, ed. P. Walsh (Dublin 1920); 'The O'Clery Book of Genealogies', ed. S. Pender, *Analecta Hibernica*, xviii (1951), Nos. 306, 307, 336, 493 and 588; and the 'Book of the Genealogies of Duaid MacFirbis' 122–125 as in Walsh 1920: 90.
- 10 The most significant variants in the pedigrees are that the *Book of Ballymote* and the *Book of Lecan* both omit 'Donnsléibhe' while MS 1467 omits 'Aodh Athlamhan'. For a more complete pedigree chart see Figure 1.
- 11 For Laumon's career see McKechnie 1938: 41–55.
- 12 'Aodh' is sometimes anglicised as 'Hugh'. The name 'Buirrche' which occurs in some form in all the sources is discussed below, p. 25.
- 13 MacNeil (1964) unaccountably renders the name 'Ánrothán' as 'Aodh Aonrachan' or 'Hugh the Solitary', and Moncreiffe (1967) conjecturally—and on what authority it is not clear—inserts a 'Niall' between 'Aodh Álainn' and 'Ánrothán'.

- 14 Walsh himself (1920: xii, xiii) is sceptical about the traditional origin; Moncreiffe (1967: 87) postulate<sup>s</sup> a marriage with a daughter of a 'local King of Argyll' or a 'Sub-King of Cowall'.
- 15 The whole pedigree is attractively set out in the end paper of Moncreiffe 1967.
- 16 See Wagner 1960: 16–29; the other group of families descend from the fifth century British prince Coel Hen.
- 17 This distinction between 'Uí Néill', 'O'Neill' and 'MacNeill' is frequently not made clear—as for example in MacNeil 1964.
- 18 For example see McKechnie 1938: 44–9 and 497–8 and Campbell 1911–12.
- 19 As I suppose MacNeil (1964) must do, Moncreiffe (1967) carefully omits all reference to the 1047 identification.
- 20 Murchadh's great-great-great-grandsons Turlough Caoch and Éoghan Connachtach were active c. 1360 (Walsh 1920: xxiv, xxxiv).
- 21 For examples of well authenticated Gaelic pedigrees showing long averages, see Sellar 1966: 137 n. 1. A combination of economic circumstances, permissive marriage customs, rules of succession which did not necessarily involve primogeniture and considerable medical skill doubtless explain these long averages.
- 22 These Irish 'MacLochlainns' should be distinguished from the Scottish 'MacLachlans': both families claimed ultimate descent from the same stock but the eponymous 'Lachlan' in each case is different.
- 23 O'Clery is the better authority. According to *Leabhar Chlainne Suibhne* §3 (Walsh 1920) Donnsléibhe had twelve sons but only Suibhne is named there.
- 24 What this genealogy suggests is that the chiefs of the Lamonts, before adopting that surname, were known as 'MacBuirrche'. Dr and Mrs W. D. Lamont have pointed out to me that MacKechnie (1938: 47) mentions a seventeenth-century French patent of nobility which traces the descent of one Robert de Lamont back to 'Oneille bark roy d'Irlande'.
- 25 Anderson (1922: I, 574, II, 42–3, 143, 204 and 253–4) lists the various sources.
- 26 'MacScelling' is a curious name. I would suggest that he is the same as 'Gall MacSgillin' of the Book of Clanranald (Cameron 1892–4: 157) and therefore a son of Somerled.
- 27 See Macphail 1916b and *Paisley Registrum* 1832: 157—'Carta Donaldi Makgilcriste domini de Tarbard.' Macphail 1916b: 121, n. 2, was not aware of the original Gilchrist's connection with the other families of Cowal and Knapdale. The Scrymgeours appear to descend from Gilchrist in the female line.
- 28 *Paisley Registrum* 1832: 120—'Castrum meum de Schepehinche'; and see above p. 27.
- 29 Skene misread this section both in *Collectanea de Rebus Albanicis* and in *Celtic Scotland*. In *Celtic Scotland* III, 473 (Skene 1886–90) the mother of Gilpatrick is made a daughter of Donald son of Eric son of Kennedy: 'Eric' is a misreading for 'Henry', while it is not clear what place should be assigned to Donald, whose name is added in the margin. At least two men named Henry son of Kennedy are known in this period: one appears as a member of an assize in 1260 and the other is known only from the pages of Fordun as a supporter of Gilbert of Galloway against his brother Uhtred. On these early 'Kennedys' see Fergusson 1958.
- 30 For the MacNeil of Barra pedigree see MacNeil 1923: 23–38 and 1964: 32–61; the Barra Song and the extract from the *Scots Magazine* of 1763 quoted by MacNeil show that although the details of the traditional pedigree have not survived in a pre-twentieth century form the tradition was one of long standing.
- 31 Moncreiffe (1967) follows this conjecture. The late Duke of Argyll, incidentally, was of the opinion, incorrectly, it is believed, that the Barra MacNeils did not belong to the same stock as the Gigha MacNeills and that 'Buirrche' was a place-name.
- 32 On this family, apart from Moncreiffe 1967, see also Campbell 1909–10, Carmichael 1908–9, and Macphail 1934.

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I am most grateful to Dr John Bannerman for his advice on many points, not least on the spelling of Gaelic names.

## ADDENDA

Tarbert and Skipness may have been considered as part of Knapdale rather than Kintyre in the thirteenth century (Dunbar and Duncan 1971, 'Tarbert Castle', *Scottish Historical Review* L: 1-17). This adds cogency to the argument for a family grouping in Cowal and Knapdale.

