

Who are the MacLeans?

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

THE ACT of searching for answers to a question like this helps us probe into the ways of life and thought processes of our ancestors. And I don't just mean those of us who have MacLean blood and are proud of it. I also mean those like me who *might* be MacLeans but do not mind very much one way or the other, and those of us who are definitely no such thing.

Nor do I mean islanders only or Highlanders, because the search for clan or kindred origins takes us back to an emptier and more mobile Scotland which was thoroughly Celtic, with Gaelic a language of prestige which might be spoken anywhere.

The fact of a kindred like the MacLeans being named after a person is helpful. It allows us to focus on a particular individual, and say, who was he? When did he live? What was his world like? Who were his people who came before him, and who were his people who came after him? So the story comes alive.

First of all then, the name MacLean. In Gaelic it is (in modern spelling) *Macilleathain*. The capital 'E' is our way of indicating where the secondary stress comes. Sorley MacLean, famously, goes for a different version: *MacGill-Eain*. This shows that the 'G' of *gille* 'a boy' has retained its sound, but loses track of what is stressed and what is not, and does not indicate the long sound of the third element, which means 'John'.

The name means 'the Son of the Devotee of St John'. It evolved in stages. First of all of course came a knowledge of the two great St Johns of scripture, namely St John the Baptist and St John the Apostle (the author of the fourth gospel and, according to tradition but not modern scholarship, of Revelations also). This kind of knowledge was brought to us by the Christians of the Roman Empire and then more firmly by Calum Cille who arrived in Iona in 563 AD.

The feast-day of the Baptist was 24 June and the feast-day of the Apostle was 27 December. In Gaelic tradition 24 June (*Latha Fhéill Eathain*, midsummer) was a hugely important festival and 27 December was not kept at all, falling as it did between Christmas and the New Year. So I think that the St John of the MacLeans was John the Baptist.

John the Baptist has a strong connection with the MacLean lands through the 'sea-god' figure of Manannan. Until the middle of the nineteenth century an offering of porridge was made in the western bay of Iona every year in Easter Week. This practice was known throughout the Isles, and its recipient was variously known as Manannan and John. Clearly the pagan Manannan had turned quietly into the Christian St John.

St John's name in Latin was *Iohannes* and this turned into *Eoin*. So in old manuscripts the name MacLean appears as *Mac Giolla Eoin*. In Norman French and English the name became *Jean* or *John* and from these came *Seathan*. In Irish *Seathan* turned into *Seán* and in Scottish Gaelic it became *Eathan* and ultimately *Iain* which has returned to English as *Ian*. The surname *Macilleathain* is our best evidence for the *Eathan* stage of development — the crucial 'missing link', if you like.

From quite an early period, most peoples made free with the names of the saints. There were popes called John from a very early stage and the English had a king called John from 1167. Here in the Celtic countries we treated such names with huge respect until very recent times. Ordinary mortals could not be John or Mary any more than they could be Christ or Venus. They could however be delivered by their parents (or abbot or abbess) into the care of Christ, of John or of Mary by being called the likes of *Giolla Eoin* or *Gill' Eathain*, where the word *giolla* or *gille* means boy, lad, servant or devotee.

The *Gill' Eathain* who gave his name to the MacLeans was a man remembered as *Gill' Eathain na Tuaigne*, Gille Eoin of the Axe. According to the first published history of the MacLeans, published in 1838 by a man who called himself only 'A Seaneachie', Gilleain took part in a stag hunt on *Beinn an t-Seilge* or 'the hunting hill'. This should read *beinn na seilge* and is unlikely to be a placename, so it could be anywhere; as the late Dr Alan Bruford told Nicholas Maclean-Bristol, there is no evidence that Gille Eoin was ever in Mull.

"During the hunt," says Maclean-Bristol, "Gille Eoin wandered away from the rest of his companions when a heavy mist descended and he lost his way. For three days he wandered about in the mist unable to find his friends. On the fourth day he took shelter in a clump of blaeberry, and before he fell into an exhausted sleep, had the presence of mind to drive the shaft of his battle-axe into the ground. That same evening his friends noticed the head of the battle-axe above the bush. Its owner was unconscious with his hand firmly round the shaft."

It is a curious tale and all the more credible for it, both as fact and as mythology. The father of all the MacLeans is depicted not as a great warrior but as a hapless hillwalker. If his axe were an ice-axe and *beinn na seilge* the Cuillins it would be exactly the kind of story that occupies an inch or two of the **Free Press** every week of the winter. If Gille Eoin, with his monkish-sounding name, was to be famous, it was as a typically idiotic student who became a typically absent-minded professor.

Maclean-Bristol's conclusion is effectively the same as mine. "The origins of the Clann Gill eoin are still uncertain," he says. "However, such evidence as survives suggests that they were one of the hereditary learned families of the Gaeltachd."

Gille Eoin would have lived sometime around 1300, the era of Bannockburn, when Argyll was the stamping-ground of MacDonald Kings of the Isles, of MacDougall Lords of Lorne, and of the earliest Campbells. His pedigree seems to be this: Gille Eoin, mac Mhic Rath, mhc Mhaol Shuthain, mhc Néill, mhc Con Duilich, mhc Ceallaich, mhc Fhraing, mhc Seannubhghaill Sgoinne, mhc Fhearchair Abhraruaidh, and so on back through seven more names to Loairn or Latharna the brother of Fergus, the first king of the Scottish Dal Riada.

Seven names is not enough to make that connection, but the oldest part of the pedigree is likely to be the most fictitious anyway. Gille Eoin's immediate ancestors offer a fine collection of names. His father Mac Rath was 'the Son of Prosperity'; this is the name that gave us the MacRaes. His grandfather Maol Suthain was 'Tonsured One of Eternity'. His great grandfather was Niall.

His great great grandfather was Cù Duilich, 'Stubborn Hound', who had two brothers Cù Catha 'Battle Hound' and Cù Sidhe, which means either 'Peace Hound' or 'Otherworld Hound'. These are pagan-sounding names, reminiscent of the Ulster hero Cù Chulainn. 'Conduiligh' remained in use in Mull into the present century among Rankins and Morrisons, the descendants of families who served the MacLeans as pipers and poets respectively.

Cù Duilich's father was Ceallach, which means 'Cell-Dweller' or, if you like, 'Churchman'. This is the name that gave us the Kellys of Skye. According to the manuscript genealogies, either Cù Duilich or his father Ceallach was Abbot of Lismore. As Maclean-Bristol very fairly points out, this could be Lismore in Argyll or Lismore in Co. Waterford — both were sites of abbeys in the Celtic Church, and Dr Hector MacLean once remarked that "about the only thing known about the ancestors of the MacLeans is that they were Irishmen"!

It certainly sounds from their pedigree as if they were professional men rather than warriors or farmers, and the pattern of professional men in the medieval Gaelic world was that they moved freely from profession to profession and from country to country. Above all others it could be said of them that they were neither Scottish nor Irish but *Gaidhil*. They functioned as ambassadors and civil servants and bearers of information, knowledge and skills. And since it was crucial in Gaelic society that knowledge and skills be transmitted from father to son, they had no time for celibacy even if when holding holy office. As Maclean-Bristol acutely remarks in his chapter on the Reformation, "This may have been a factor that encouraged their support of the Reformed Church."

Ceallach's father, Gille Eoin's great great great great grandfather, was Frang. This is of great interest, because we have reached back to the 12th century or thereabouts, and the name Frang has two possible explanations. It represents either a Frank or Frenchman, or the name of St Francis of Assisi, who lived from about 1181 to 1226 and was canonised in 1228. If we adopt the latter explanation, which seems likely, then Frang was born about 1228, and Gille Eoin must have been born in the period 1350-1400.

- **Nicholas Maclean-Bristol, Warriors and Priests: The History of the Clan MacLean 1300–1570 (Tuckwell Press, £19.95)**

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