

The MacLures of Skye

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

FOLLOWING my articles about strange Norse surnames from MacLeod lands, I've been asked if "McClure" or "MacLure" is one of them. After all, its associations are with Glenelg and Sleat, and Glenelg was MacLeod territory.

The answer is no. Like nearly all the traditional surnames of the Highlands and Islands, MacLure (let's settle for that spelling) is as Gaelic as crowdie and cream.

Let's be careful though. The name has more than one origin. And the part of Scotland where it was first turned into English is naturally the part where the Gaelic name bears the closest relationship to the English one.

What I mean is this. In Galloway and Carrick, where Gaelic died out in the seventeenth century, the name is *Mac a' Ghille Uidhir*, from a forename *an Gille Odhar* meaning "the Sallow Lad". I think we could take a risk and describe this as a low-caste name, though we don't really know much about classes or castes in Gaelic society. *Mac a' Ghille Uidhir* turned easily into *MacillUidhir* and MacLure.

George F. Black, author of "The Surnames of Scotland", is very entertaining on these Galloway MacLures. His book teems with real people and little snapshots of their lives. "Elizabeth McCloor or McClwre is in record in Barley, Galloway, 1684, and as Elizabeth McWhore (!) in Barley, she and Mary McWhore were sentenced to be banished to the plantations for resetting of rebels and other offences in the same year . . . Andrew McKluire in the parish of Carsfern was reckoned a disorderly person (i.e. a non-conformist) in the same year . . . William MacClure (1763–1840), born in Ayr, was called 'Father of American geology'."

In the circumstances of 1684, "rebels" and "non-conformists" mean "Covenanters". These MacLure women were God-fearing Presbyterians.

One place where *an Gille Odhar* was still in use as a forename until those times was Jura. Martin Martin wrote of that island in 1702: "Several of the Natives have liv'd to a great Age: I was told that one of them, called *Gillouir Mack-Crain*, liv'd to have kept one hundred and eighty *Christmasses* in his own House; he died about fifty Years ago, and there are several of his Acquaintance living to this day, from whom I had this Account."

Curiously, this man's surname raises the issue of castes again, because by all accounts (including Black's) *Mac Cràine* means "Son of Sow". It doesn't sound like a high-status name, but totemism (alleged descent from a tribal animal) had its own rules, and it's worth remembering that the Campbells' totem was also a pig. There were MacCraines in Jura until the twentieth century.

Coming to the second of the two Gaelic names anglicised as MacLure, Black says: "There are a number of families in Sleat named in English Maclure, but whose name is spelled in Gaelic *McLeòra* (for *MacGille dheòradha*), a side form of DEWAR, q.v. The earliest documentary evidence of a clan piper is a reference to Robert MacLure, piper to the chief of the Buchanans, in 1600, who got into trouble a few years later as appears from the Stirling Kirk-Session Register, under May 28th, 1604."

This is the nub of the issue. MacLures from north and west of the Clyde are, in origin, Dewars. We find the name in Gaelic with spellings like *Mac-a-Leòr*: whether this derives from *Mac Gille Dheòradha* ("the Son of the Dewar's Servant") or simply *Mac an Deòir* ("the Son of the Dewar") doesn't matter much, in my opinion.

So what is a dewar? Well, it's a Gaelic word, so you can look it up in Dwelly under *deòiridh*, *deòir* ("Almoner") and *deòradh*. Unfortunately Dwelly was so up-to-date for his own time (in a descriptive rather than a prescriptive way) that his definitions will only confuse you. It takes a historian like George F. Black to define it clearly: "a pilgrim, the person who had custody of the relic of a saint".

A dewar was known in Ireland as a co-arb or *comh-arba* (you can find that one in Dwelly too). The authority and prestige of a dewar in his community derived from his being the keeper of the relic or relics of a saint. As such keepership was hereditary, it's no surprise that "dewar" became a surname.

Most Dewars would have earned a living by selling (for medicinal purposes) water that had been charmed by contact with the holy relic, or by carrying the relic in church

processions, such as funerals. In the case of at least one family in Highland Perthshire, however, the job was a lot more exciting – possession of the relic gave Dewars such immunity from attack that they routinely went in pursuit of stolen cattle.

Returning to our “caste” theory, this puts Dewars and MacLures firmly in the “professional” rank of society (unless you want to distinguish between middle-caste *Mac an Deòir* and lower-caste *Mac Gille Dheòradha*). Perhaps because of their ecclesiastical origins, professionals tended to be unconnected to any particular clan or kindred. They moved around a lot.

For this reason, I think it’s of great interest that the first “clan piper” on record was a MacLure. There was a lot of shifting from profession to profession in Gaelic society, and if it was the job of the head of a family to carry a relic at funerals, it’s not hard to imagine a brother or son providing the music.

We can take this point further. We know that there was a connection between piping, the carrying of crosses in religious processions, and the composition of a certain type of ribald satire called *crostanachd*, originally composed by bands of popular entertainers who at one time were cross-bearers, but took to wandering from township to township. *Crostanachd* is literally “cross-carrying”, but in the title of the pipe-tune *Crostanachd an Doill* it is mistranslated as “obstinacy” – “The Blind Piper’s Obstinacy”!

This brings us to wandering minstrels, to poetry, to satire, and to Skye. I can think of three Gaelic poets bearing the name in question: Donald Dewar (*Donull Deora*, 1739–92) from Ardrasgairt, Fortingall, Perthshire; John Dewar (*Ioin Mac An leora*) from Fionncharn, Loch Awe, Argyll; and a Skye man called Maclure (*Mac-a-Leoir*, first name unknown). The Rev. Archibald MacDonald told in “Uist Bards” how the last-named “came all the way to Uist” to satirise the North Uist poet John MacCodrum (1693–1779).

This probably happened in 1763, because in that year Sir James MacDonald of Sleat made MacCodrum his bard, with a croft free of rent for life. Mac-a-Leoir said:

*Iain 'ic Fhearchair 'ic Odrum nan ròn
A thòisich air an droch ceàird,
Àrd éisg nan droch fhilidh,
'S fheàrr dhòmhsa do thilleadh tràth.*

“John son of Fearchar MacCodrum of the seals / Who has taken up the evil trade, / The arch satirist of the bad poets, / I had better repulse you early.” There’s a pun here, I think. The MacCodrums were said to be descended from seals (totemism again); seals were believed to be fish, and *àrd éisg* means “tall fishes” as well as “arch satirist”!

MacDonald also ascribes to Maclure the well-known comic proverb “Swift is the man with the bad wife on the Uist machair”. He writes: “It was the same Mac-a-Leoir who afterwards, on a particularly cold day, and in remembrance of the bare, shelterless nature of the Uist links, said, “*S luath fear na droch mhna air a’ machair Uidhisteach*,” probably thinking that a man with a thriftless wife would be poorly clad, and to keep warm would walk fast or run.”

That’s all we know for sure about this MacLure, but it sounds as if he was a native of well-wooded Sleat, and deeply resented the favour shown to MacCodrum.

We can trace the Glenelg MacLures back to 1651, judging from a story told by James Boswell (it’s in my new book “To the Hebrides”). Late in the evening of 16 October 1773 he and Dr Johnson reached Ulva Ferry on the coast of Mull to find that the ferry had gone. “We should have been in a very bad situation,” he wrote, “had there not fortunately been lying in the little sound of Ulva an Irish vessel, the *Bonetta*, of Londonderry, Captain McClure, master. He himself was at MacGuarie’s, but his men obligingly came with their long-boat and ferried us over.”

Arriving safely in Ulva House, the two travellers met MacQuarrie and the skipper. “Captain McClure, whom we found here, was of Scotch extraction, and properly a MacLeod, being descended of some of the MacLeods who went with Sir Norman of Bernera to the battle of Worcester, and after the defeat of the royalists, fled to Ireland, and, to conceal themselves, took a different name. He told me there was a great number of them about Londonderry, some of good property. I said they should now resume their real name. The Laird of MacLeod should go over and assemble them, and make them all drink the large horn full, and from that time they should be MacLeods.”

Boswell, if not the skipper himself, misunderstood the relationship between MacLeods and MacLures, but it seems clear from this that there had already been MacLures in Glenelg for some time when Sir Norman raised 700 men to fight for King Charles. The campaign ended disastrously at Worcester on 3 September 1751, the MacLeods being decimated by Cromwell's forces. Sir Norman was taken prisoner and tried for his life, but due to the similarity of his surname to Lloyd, he was stated in the indictment to be a Welshman, the trial was held up, and before it could be resumed he escaped from prison. In light of all this, it seems perfectly credible that some of his men ended up in Ireland.

Finally, what did *Mac an Deòir* become in Galloway, where "MacLure" was already taken, so to speak? The answer may make you laugh (or cry). MacGeorge!

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