

The Seannachie's Brief History of Clan MacTavish

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Seannachie to the 27th Chief of the Clan MacTavish
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The ancient Gaelic name of MacTavish from Irish *Gaeilge* is *MACṢIOLLATṢAMBHAI*, or "Son of the Devotee of Saint Thomas". (See: Irish Names and Surnames) These saintly clansmen came to Scottish Dalriada, ancient Alba.

The name MacTavish stems from the Pictish Gaelic *Taviss* (Scottish Gaelic: Tamhais) the Irish Pictish tribe of *Cenél nDuach* out of Donegal, Ireland. The Pictish MacTavishes were related by marriage to the people of Dalriada, the so-called Scots. Tamhais Mor (the Great) was born to Calumn Maol Mhaith a nephew of Paul Balkason (called an Sporrán - the purse keeper), Sheriff of Skye and landowner of Lochawe. Calumn married a daughter of Suibhne Rudah of Castle Sween (Lord and Toiseach of Kintyre, Knapdale). Maol Mhaith secondly married a niece (by whom he had one son, Duncan called Gillespuig (servant of the bishop), from whom Clan Campbell springs) of King Alexander I. By Suibhne's daughter (1105-1156 AD), there were two sons, Taviss and his brother Ivor (1, 2) The origins of the two brothers, and the clans they founded, are mentioned by well known historians in no less than seven accountings of those ancient times.

The brothers Ivor and Taviss are noted as being distinguished in the art of war, and attributed with taking lands in Cowal from the ancestors of the Lamonts, or Clan Mhic Earachar. (Highland Papers)

In the Kilmartin Church Yard is a weathered, ancient, moss-covered gravestone with etched two-handed sword, and lettering in the Gaelic or Latin, which appears to spell Tamhais or Tamhas. It is so worn that the lettering is hard to decipher. Could this be the grave of Taviss Mhor, brother of Ivor, mentioned by Principal Campbell over two centuries ago? Also at Kilmartin is a newer, yet still ancient stone, often called the MacTavish Chief's stone. It is an etched effigy of helmeted; mail clad warrior, with broadsword, the letters "McTavish" chiseled across the chest, the lettering being a newer addition to the stone. We have no way to know who it was that once lay beneath this stone, which has been moved to a roofed enclosure for preservation.

A report of the graves of Taviss and Ivor in the Kilmartin Churchyard comes from an account of Principal Peter Colin Campbell (MacIver), however Campbell does not give reference for his statement concerning them. "The graves of the brothers are pointed out side by side in the Churchyard of Kilmartin." However, Tavis' grave is indeed located at Kilmartin. PC Campbell describes: "Iver (Crom), First Baron of Lergachonzie, and his brother, Tavish (Corr), ancestor of the MacTavishes, take part in the subjugation of Argyll and settle there", although he incorrectly places them both circa 1221. Several accountings of the history and/or lineage of the branches of Clan Campbell (or the earlier O'Duibhnes) provide for the lands of Scannish (Scanish) in Cowal as those settled upon after the subjugation of Argyll and Cowal. It would seem that the first lands held by the MacTavishes, as truly their own, were those of Scannish, but an account tells of the MacTavishes holding Dunardry since 893 AD. *Duncan Macthamais* is noted as a Baron of Argyll in a 1355 retour of inquest held at Inverlathan (now Furnace) before the Sheriff of Argyll (Argyll Transcripts), where he is described as one of the barons called upon to give testimony. Since we have (found) no proof or reference to Dunardry being in the hands of the MacTavishes prior to the actual charter of 1533, we can readily assume that Taviss was, possibly, the first Baron of Scannish in Cowal, and that Duncan, likely a grandson or great grand son, is that person noted in 1355. There is no known record of where

Scannish was situated, and its name has long since been changed so that it is now unrecognizable. From a letter in the 1950s from one Dr. Isabelle McTavish, Manitoba, Canada, we are told that Tavis, our epitome, had a son, also called Tavis, and it may be that father and son, bearing the same name, were often confused and hence placed in differing eras. We do not know how or why the MacTavishes lost or gave up the lands of Scannish, but early on, lands won by the sword, were most often kept by the sword. There are no early records for Kintyre, or for that matter Cowal, and what we know of this region often comes from the Irish and Norse chronicles, or later modern excavations.

(Note 1: Dunardry: a modernized spelling of the Gaelic for Tonardrie, Dimardrie, Donardarie, Dunardarie, Dunardrie, Dunardarigh, *Dun an Ard-Righ*, etc, with the form and meaning coming from Dun = Fort or fortified stone dwelling, Ard = High, and Ri or Righ = King. The interpretation is thusly given as Fort of the High King. RCAHMS)

(Note 2: A grave at Kilmartin Church bears the etched name of Tavis or Thamas, but overcutting of stones at Kilmartin Churchyard as recently as the 1940s has made it impossible to ascertain if the grave so marked is the Clan MacTavish founder's. RCAHMS)

The relationship of Ivor and Taviss, being brothers, is offered by the ancient seannachies of Clan Campbell, which PC Campbell twice addresses in his recordation of Clan MacIver. This tradition is often repeated by later authors of clan or Highland history, but since it has not been refuted, and repeated so many times, it probably holds true.

Taviss Mor, a Conqueror of Cowal, was the progenitor of the Clan Tavish and his brother, Ivor Cromb, the progenitor of Clan Iver. With the gradual changing of the Gaelic to English, MacTamhais became phonetically "Englished" to MacTavish. MacTamhais' literal translation is "Son of Thamaish" (Son of Thomas). In old charters, the name had many variant spellings. Some spellings found within old charters, post-Culloden parish registers, and in The Commons Argyll appear as MacAvis, MacCamis, McCawis, McKavis, McKnavis, M'Ash, MacAnish, mcTais, MacTavifh and mcThavish, to give but a few. It seems that from near the end of the 1600's, the spellings, MacTavish and/or Thom(p)son or Thomas were the most common. Variations in surname spelling within one document are often seen for the same person.(3)(4) The Clan is of great antiquity with Chartered lands from the 12th century in both North and South Knapdale. The Clan was seated at Dunardarie where they were one of the clans known as "the Children of Colla" or "children of mist."* (5) The Dalriadic Kingdom of Dunadd was once encompassed by the lands of Dunardarie.

(Note 3: Clan Colla, or Cholla is the Irish Dalriadic Clan from which the great Clan Donald also springs forth. Its most renowned leader was the great Somerled, often considered the King of the Isles, and Thane of Argyll.)

During the Battle of Flodden Field, 9th September 1513, the Scots Army faced the English, and many of Scotland's Nobles and Chiefs lost their lives with King James IV. Chief Ewin MacCawes (MacTavish) was one of those. (Airds, A Hist. of Clan Campbell)

In 1715 the Jacobite cause saw its first failed attempt to place the Stuarts back on the throne of Scotland and England. During this time Chief Archibald MacTavish was sympathetic to the Jacobite cause but took no action to support either the Government or the Jacobites. Sympathies strengthened in 1745, when many of the Heritable Lieges of North Knapdale supported Prince Charles Edward Stuart. (North Knapdale, Fraser)

During the period known as the Jacobite uprisings, the MacTavish, as with many Highland Clans, were sympathetic to placing the Stuarts back on the throne, as was their right. When Charles Edward Stuart, better known as Bonnie Prince Charlie, landed on Scottish soil in July of 1745, some Highland Clans were preparing to join Prince Charles in his quest to regain the throne of Scotland.

Adjacent to the Lands of Dunardarie was, Ach nabreck, the lands of Sir James Campbell who was a great friend to the MacTavish Chief (Archibald), and was also a Jacobite sympathizer; he was very "anti" Campbell of Argyll in thought. Unknown to both Sir James and to Chief Alexander, and his son Dugald MacTavish, Younger, the Duke of Argyll had installed a servant in the house of Sir James, as a spy. This servant intercepted four letters written to Sir James Campbell from Dugald MacTavish,

Younger, of Dunardarie, making arrangements and plans for raising their men to join Prince Charles Edward Stuart's Highland army. James Campbell was also Dugald's grandfather. During this time the Sheriff of Stonefield wrote two letters to Dugald, the Younger, asking him to keep alert for any Jacobite plotting or the movement of the Young Pretender, Prince Charles. Dugald MacTavish found this request to be most distasteful. (6, 9)

When Argyll received the letters between Dunardry, Younger and Achnabreck from the servant, he sent the Sheriff of Stonefield, John Campbell, to confront Chief Archibald MacTavish of Dunardarie and Dugald MacTavish, Younger. Dugald admitted to writing the letters as, "these are of my hand". A warrant was issued, and Dugald MacTavish, Younger, was arrested for "treasonable acts" against the Crown, and transported to Dunbarton Prison, September 1745. The Duke of Argyll hoped this would put an end to the Jacobite plotting in Knapdale. He took no action at this time against Sir James, no doubt because Sir James was titled and a Campbell kinsman. However, the Duke took measures against Sir James after Culloden, the finale of the 1745 Rising. A tremendously large request of funds was demanded from Sir James Campbell of Achnabreck as part of his "contribution" to the costs incurred by the Campbells of Argyll for placing the Argyll troops at Culloden. The Duke of Argyll knew well that Sir James Campbell of Achnabreck could never pay this amount. The Lands of Achnabreck were sold at public auction to pay the debt; and the "House of Campbell of Achnabreck" was no more. Dugald was released in the General Pardon in 1747 and upon the death of his father, became Dugald MacTavish of Dunardarie. Dugald later bought Lot #4 (consisting of 8 Merk Lands) of Achnabreck land, which was the area of Kilmichael-Inverlussay and adjoined the border of Dunardarie lands to the south. (6, 9)

Due to the fact that Dugald, the Younger, was imprisoned in September of 1745 and his father, the Chief (Archibald) was quite elderly during the 1745 Jacobite Rising, the MacTavishes did not attend the Army of Bonnie Prince Charlie as a Clan. Some of the MacTavishes fought within the ranks of their neighbor, MacIntosh (Iain Zaczek); and the Garthbeg McTavishes (part of Fraser of Lovat) were there as well. Stories abound that many of the clan simply made their way to join Prince Charlie's ranks and were never formally enlisted in the Stuart cause. For this reason there are few instances of the MacTavishes or Thomsons being noted as Jacobite soldiers, as they came and went of their own accord, having no formal leadership from within their own clan. Some of the Garthbeg McTavishes, however, were formally joined to the Highland Army.

On 16th April 1746 the Highland army was defeated at Culloden by a much larger force of the English army (5000 fighting for Prince Charles and 9000 fighting for the Government). The largest Highland force fighting for the English was the Campbell of Argyll Highlanders. How different history could have been had the Argyll Campbells fought with the Highlanders rather than for the English. On that day, the Highland army of Prince Charles lost the battle, and the fate of the Jacobite cause and the Stuart Kings was sealed.

After Culloden and for upwards of 2 years Argyll's Highland troops were acting as agents for the government in the Highlands. Unfortunately, after Culloden, some Jacobite Highland Chiefs joined with the victors and treated their own clansmen very badly transporting their Clan members off their land and, indeed, from their country. This was the period known as the Clearances. The MacTavish Chiefly line, still seated in Dunardarie with their clansmen, were not involved in the "clearing" of their own kin, and no MacTavish kindred were put off the lands. (5, 7)

Soon after the rebellion was put down, the English, under King George the IInd, implemented a series of Acts to eliminate the Scottish threat. Ingenious in their conception, these laws not only restored order, they virtually eliminated a way of life by destroying the Chiefs powers, the clans, their identities and economic structures. The rule of the Scottish lairds and their absolute control of the Clans had to be broken, and on August 1st, 1746 the Act of Proscription went into effect, forbidding the wearing of any type of Highland Dress, tartan, trews, kilt, belt, etc.... The Act of Proscription was closely followed by the Heritable Jurisdictions Act. This new Act forced all Scottish landowners to either accept English jurisdiction or forfeit their lands. The impact of these Acts on all levels of

Scottish society was swift and brutal. Landed peers who participated in the '45 had already lost their territory to the English outright. Now all the remaining lords of the land lost power over their subjects except the rights of landlord. The English system of law was forced on to the people and there was no turning back. It was not until the Repeal of the Act of 1782 that the Wearing of Highland Dress was granted to the Scots. (8)

After Culloden, many more of the MacTavish started to use the Thom(p)son spelling, for it was not healthy to be known as a "Mac". Use of an obvious Gaelic name, like MacTavish, could draw a suspicious scrutiny as a Jacobite sympathizer if used. Taking an "Englished" spelling of the name was believed to lessen such suspicion, and hopefully avoid trouble. Also, Highland names were often Anglicized because of social expediency, conforming to an English influenced way of life, government and economy. Many MacTavish kin scattered to the border country, to Ireland and to the New World. The Chiefly line of MacTavish, however, retained the name MacTavish and remained seated at Dunardry. If there was one advantage in Dugald MacTavish the Younger, being incarcerated in Dunbarton Prison, it was that the MacTavishes kept their lands without penalty. If Clan MacTavish had attended at Culloden as a Clan, the clan lands might have been forfeited. It is of interest to note that the Duke of Argyll, the same man who had Dugald arrested in 1747, was advised by King George III (in the 1750s) to place Dugald MacTavish as Argyll's Chamberlain and Baillie (judge) of the area. One of Dugald's first cases in this position was between the Duke of Argyll and a young woodsman who worked for Argyll. The Duke of Argyll lost his case. (7) By this time very few MacTavish Clan Members remained on the old Clan Lands, having left for the new world, the lowlands, or elsewhere.

Dugald's son and Heir, Lachlan MacTavish succeeded his father in 1775; but by 1785, was forced to sell Dunardry at public auction on the 31st December, as he fell into financial difficulties, partly due to the building of the Crinan Canal, which split the MacTavish lands in half. The Canal had lasting effects for Scotland, and against the MacTavishes, and its building eventually broke the Clan and was the cause of the scattering of the Dunardry MacTavish kindred. Lachlan, his wife and son, Dugald, who was three years old, moved to Edinburgh where Lachlan was installed as Governor of Taxes for the Crown, living at St. James' Court. Lachlan and his wife, Mary, had three more children: John George (1787-1847), Margaret and Flora. Lachlan registered his Arms in April 1793 and was attempting to buy back Dunardry but passed away in September 1796 without accomplishing this quest. His Heir, Dugald, was a mere lad of 14 (under the age of consent) and did not attempt to register his Arms. Dugald was well schooled and studied law, and was appointed one of His Majesty's Crown Lawyers, a Writer to the Signet (WS) for Kintyre. (Sir Malcolm Innes of Edingight, former Lord Lyon King of Arms, is also a Writer to the Signet). (6)

During his tenure as WS and Sheriff-Substitute of Kintyre, Dugald MacTavish built "Kilchrist House" (now known as Kilchrist Castle) at Stewarton, Argyllshire, in 1824. It was a palatial house resting on 10 acres of prime land. His wife, Letitia Lochhart, bore him 10 surviving children. The first born, Lachlan, died at birth. The second son, William (1816-1870) at age 18 immigrated; sailing in 1833 to Canada with the Hudson Bay Company (HBC) as a company clerk and later became a Chief Factor, taking up duties at Fort Garry (in Manitoba). William succeeded as Chief on the death of his father, Dugald, in 1855. William rose within the HBC to be appointed as Governor of Assinaboia and Ruperts Land (now Manitoba) and was instrumental in the formation of events leading up to the confederation of Canada in 1867, along with John A. MacDonald, first Prime Minister of Canada. (9)

Lachlan's son, Dugald, under age in 1796, did not register the MacTavish arms; and as a grown man, with his duties as the Sheriff Substitute of Kintyre he obviously did not feel inclined to do so, as he was, legally known as MacTavish of Dunardry. He died without having registered the Arms. Unfortunately, this carried on with his son William who had moved to the wilds of Canada. William also declined to matriculate. It is nominally suggested by Lord Lyon that at least every other generation re-register the Chiefly Arms, to avoid dormancy of the Clan. As a result of William not matriculating for the arms the Chiefly line was "lost" until 1949, when the Lord Lyon, Sir Thomas

Innes of Learney, contacted the MacTavish family in Canada, advising them that they were the missing Chiefly line, and inviting them to petition for the Arms and Chiefship of the Clan. (6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12)

William's great grandson, Edward Stewart Dugald MacTavish, was matriculated by the Court of the Lord Lyon 23 July 1997 and granted the Arms and Title of Chief of the Clan MacTavish of Dunardry, and was the 26th Chief of the Clan in an unbroken line. He passed away on 19 June 2005 at his home in Vancouver, BC. Dugald is succeeded by his son and heir, the 27th Chief, Steven Edward Dugald MacTavish of Dunardry. (13) In 2007 Chief Steven MacTavish of Dunardry was accepted into membership by the Standing Council of Scottish Chiefs.

ENDNOTES:

- 1- Manuscript History of Craignish, P. Campbell, 1720
- 2- The House of Argyll and Collateral Branches of the Clan Campbell, Tweed, 1871
- 3- Commons of Argyll, D.C. MacTavish, 1941
- 4- Poltalloch Writs, THE GENEALOGIST NEW SERIES. A Quarterly Magazine of Genealogical, Antiquarian, Topographical, and Heraldic Research. Edited by H. W. Forsyth Harwood, Barrister-at-Law (supplied by P. Adams, Clan MacTavish Genealogist)
- 5- Annals of the Four Masters, Ancient Eire, University of Dublin*
- 6- Culloden, by John Prebble, 1998
- 7- MacTavish of Dunardry, E.F. Bradford, 1997
- 8- Composite of the: Highland Proscription Acts
- 9- Sheriff Advocate Records, Argyll, Argyll & Bute
- 10- Encyclopedia of Canadian Biography, Governor William MacTavish
- 11- The Letters of Letitia Hargrave, Champlain Society, M. A. McLeod, 1947: "Upon his father's (Dugald MacTavish of Dunardry, WS,) he (William MacTavish Governor for HBC) inherited the Chiefship of Clan Tavish, but he never matriculated".
- 12- MacTavish Family Papers: Retained by the Family, in the Argyll and Bute repository, and National Library and Archives of Canada.
- 13- 1997 MacTavish Matriculation, Court of the Lord Lyon. The matriculation vellum names Edward Stewart Dugald MacTavish of Dunardry, Chief of the Clan MacTavish, and Steven Edward Dugald MacTavish as heir to the Chiefship. Chief Steven was accepted in 2007 as a Member of the Standing Council of Scottish Chiefs.
- 14- RCAHMS is The Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historic Monuments of Scotland

* Not to be confused with Clan Gregor, who are known as "The Children of the Mist".