

Clan Donald Mid-East Region Convener's Handbook

A History of Clan Donald

Branches: Ardnamurchan, Isles, Clanranald, Glencoe, Glengarry, Keppoch, Sleat.

Motto: Per Mare, Per Terras (Latin: By Sea, By Land)

Slogan: Fraoch Eilean (Gaelic: The Heathery Isle)

Plant Badge: Heather

The Clan Donald is one of the most numerous and widespread of the clans, and includes several families, who, while using different surnames or different methods of writing the same surname, have an identical genealogical derivation. Of these, the families of MacDonald or McDonald, and MacDonnell or McDonnell, are the most important. The mode of writing is immaterial, the name is the same; they are of one stock; and the story of Clan Donald is the story of their ancestors. As told later, the Clan derived its generic name from Donald, the grandson of *Somerled*: and hence the name MacDonald, or son of Donald, Mac, or the Gaelic Mhic, signifying son. By abbreviating the prefix to Mc and M' many families write the name McDonald and M'Donald. The surname MacDonnell, McDonnell, McDonell, and other forms and methods of writing this name, came first into use, when, as mentioned in Chapter IV, Aeneas MacDonald of the Glengarry branch was, in >1660, raised to the Peerage of Scotland by the title of Lord MacDonell. In the earlier chapters the family name has been written in its unabbreviated form, MacDonald, although, even in those bygone days the shorter forms of Mac were frequently used; and any record of names in Scotland of today will indicate that the prefix is quite as frequently Mc as Mac. In the case of the modern families descended from the Clan, the mode of orthography has been followed, which, from long usage, the families have rightly been in the habit of using.

The important position occupied by the Clan Donald and its branches invests the narrative of its rise and history with unusual interest to all, but more especially to those of the Clan, who may well refer with pride to their noble descent from the independent rulers of the island principality, the Kings of the Isles. The early history and descent of the Clan are involved in the cloudy shades of antiquity; and its origin is connected with many of the most interesting questions of Scottish ethnology.

After the evacuation of Britain by the Romans, the country north of the Firth of Forth was occupied by a Pictish people designated the Alban Gael, whom historians agree were of the same race as the Cruithne of Ireland, and whose language was a type of a modern Scottish Gaelic. This people probably came first to Scotland between >500 B.C. and 300 B.C. To the south, the Scots of Dalriada occupied part of Argyll, and the country of Mull, Islay and the Southern Isles. The Alban Gaels or Picts, north of the Forth, were divided into the Northern Picts, who held the country north of the Grampians, and the Southern Picts. When, in >844, the Dalriads, Scots and Southern Picts were united in one kingdom by Kenneth MacAlpin, the Northern Picts remained unaffected by the union. Included in the territory occupied by these Picts, or Alban Gael, were the Western Islands, know to the Gael as Innse-Gall, or the Island of the

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Strangers, which later formed part of the dominion of the Kings of the Isles, progenitors of the Clan Donald. In these early days the Islands were constantly ravaged by the Norsemen and the Danes, who kept the whole western seaboard in a state of perpetual turmoil.

"When watch fires burst across the main
From Rona, and Uist and Skye,
To tell that the ships of the Dane
And the red-haired slayer were nigh;
Our Islesmen rose from their slumbers,
And buckled on their arms.
But few, alas! were their numbers
To Lochlin's mailed swarms;
And the blade of the bloody Norse
Has filled the shores of the Gael
With many a floating corpse
And many a widow's wail."

When Harold, the Fair Haired, in the year >875, constituted himself King of the whole of Norway, many of the small independent jarls, or princes, of that country refused to acknowledge his authority, and came to the innse-Gall, or Western Isles. Harold pursued them, and conquered Man, the Hebrides, Shetlands, and Orkneys. The year following this conquest, the Isles rose in rebellion against Harold, who sent his cousin Ketil to restore order; but Ketil exceeded his instructions, and declared himself King of the Isles, being followed by a succession of Kings, until the Isles were finally added to Scotland. Allied with these Norse sea rovers was a Pictish people, called the Gall Gael, and Dr. Skene, the historian, claims that from the Gall Gael sprung the ancestors of the Clan Donald. The name Gall has always been applied by the Gael to strangers and Skene maintains that the Western Gaels came, by association, to resemble their Norwegian allies in characteristics and mode of life, and thus acquired the descriptive name of Gall.

The historical founder of the Family of the Isles was Somerled, Rex Insularum, for whom some writers have claimed a Norwegian origin, but although the name is Norse all other circumstances point to a different conclusion. The traditions of the Clan Donald invariably represent that he descended from the ancient Pictish division of the Gael, and the early history of the Clan Cholla, the designation of the Clan prior to the time of Donald, penetrates into far antiquity. Tradition takes us back to the celebrated Irish King, Conn-Ceud Chathach, or Conn of a Hundred Fights, the hundredth "Ard Righ," or supreme King of Ireland. Conn's court was at Tara and he died in >157 A.D. The Scottish poet Ewen MacLachlan refers to this early royal ancestor of the race of Somerled. -

"Before the pomp advanced in kingly grace I see the stem of Conn's victorious
race, Whose sires of old the Western sceptre swayed, Which all the Isles and
Albion's half obeyed."

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Fourth in descent from Coon came Eochaid Duibhlein, who married a Scottish Princess, Aileach, a daughter of the King of Alba. An old Irish poem describes the Princess as "a mild, true woman, modest, blooming till the love of the Gael disturbed her, and she passed with him from the midst of Kintyre to the land of Uladh." Their three sons all bore the name of Cholla - Colla Uais, Colla Meann and Colla da Crich. The designation Colla was "imposed on them for rebelling," and means a strong man, their original names being Cairball, Aodh and Muredach. The three Collas went to Scotland to obtain the assistance of their kindred to place Colla Uais on the Irish throne, and with their help placed him there, but he was compelled to give way to a relative, Muredach Tirech, who had a better title to the sovereignty. The three brothers then returned to Scotland, where they obtained extensive settlements and founded the Clan Cholla. Colla Uais came Erc, who died in >502 A.D., leaving three sons, Fergus, Lorn and Angus. Fergus came from Ireland to Scotland and founded in Argyllshire the Kingdom of Dalriada in Albany, which later extended and became the Kingdom of Scotland. At this point the Clan Donald line touches that of the Scottish Kings, showing their common origin and ancestry. Fergus had two sons, Domangart, the elder, who succeeded his father and was the progenitor of Kenneth Macalpin, and the line of Scottish Kings; and Godfruch, or Godfrey, the young son, who was known as Toshach or Ruler of the Isles, and was the progenitor of the line from which the Clan Donald sprang.

The Seannachies carry the line through several generations, through Hugh the Fair Haired, who was inaugurated Ruler of the Isles by St. Columba in Iona, in >574, through Ethach of the Yellow Locks, and Aidan of the Golden Hilted Sword, who died in >621, down to Etach III, who died in >733, having first united the Isles after they had been alternately ruled by Chiefs of the houses of Fergus and Lorn. Kenneth MacAlpin, the first King of the united Dalriads, Scots and Picts, married the daughter of Godfrey, a later Lord of the Isles. We now arrive at the immediate ancestors of Somerled.

Hailes in his Annals related that, in >973, Marcus, King of the Isles; Kenneth, King of the Scots, and Malcolm, King of the Cambri, entered into a bond for mutual defense. Then followed Gilledomnan, the grandfather of Somerled. Gilledomnan was driven from the Isles by the Scandinavians, and died in Ireland, where he had taken refuge. His son, Gillebride, who had gone to Ireland with his father, obtained the help of the Irish of the Clan Cholla, and, landing in Argyll, made a gallant attempt to expel the invaders. The Norsemen proved too strong, and Gillebride was compelled to hide in the woods and caves of Morven. At this time, when the fortunes of the Clan were at the lowest ebb, there arose a savior in the person of one of the most celebrated of Celtic heroes, Somerled, the son of Gillebride. He was living with his father in the caves of Morven and is described in an ancient chronicle as "A well tempered man, in body shapely, of a fair and piercing eye, of middle stature and quick discernment." His early years were passed in hunting and fishing; "his looking glass was the stream; his drinking cup the heel of his shoe; he would rather spear a salmon than spear a foe; he cared more to caress the skins of seals and otters than the shining hair of women.

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At present he was as peaceful as a torch or beacon - unlit. The hour was coming when he would be changed, when he would blaze like a burnished torch, or a beacon on a hilltop against which the wind is blowing." But when the Isles' men, over whom his ancestors had ruled, were in dire need of a leader Somerled came forward in his true character. A local tradition in Skye tells that the Islesmen held a council at which they decided to offer Somerled the chiefship, to be his and his descendants forever. They found Somerled fishing, and to him made their offer. Somerled replied, "Islesmen, there is a newly run salmon in the black pool yonder. If I catch him, I will go with you as your Chief; if I catch him not, I shall remain where I am." The Islesmen, a race who believed implicitly in omens, were content, and Somerled cast his line over the black pool. Soon after a shining salmon leapt in the sun and the skilful angler had the silvery fish on the riverbank. The Islesmen acclaimed him their leader, and as such he sailed back with them "over the sea to Skye," where the people joyously proclaimed that the Lord of the Isles had come. Such a tradition in Skye. Other accounts say that the scene of Somerled's first achievements was in Morven and his conquest of the Isles later.

Somerled, Rex Insularum, took his place as a leader of men, from whom descended a race of Kings, a dynasty distinguished in the stormy history of the Middle Ages, who ranked themselves before the Scottish Kings.

"The mate of monarchs, and allied On equal terms with England's pride."

The young hunter uprose a mighty warrior, who with dauntless courage and invincible sword struck terror into the hearts of his foes. Nor did he depend along on his matchless courage. In one of his first encounters with the Norse invaders he made full use of that "quick discernment" ascribed to him by the early chronicler. It happened that while on a small island with a following of only one hundred Islesmen, he was surrounded by the whole Norwegian fleet, and, realizing that his small force was utterly inadequate to resist their attack, conceived a clever stratagem to deter the Norsemen from landing on the island. Each of his men was ordered to kill a cow, and this having been done, and the cows skinned, Somerled ordered his little force to march round the hill on which they lay encamped; which having been done, in full view of the enemy, he then made them all put on the cowhides to disguise themselves, and repeat the march round the hill. He now ordered his men to reverse the cowhides, and for a third time march round the hill, thus exhibiting to the Norsemen the appearance of a force composed of three divisions. The ruse succeeded, for the enemy fleet withdrew.

This story is related in another form by the bards or seannachies of Sleat, as follows: There was a little hill betwixt them and the enemy, and Somerled ordered his men to put off their coats, and put their shorts and full armor above their coats. So, making them go three times in disguised manner about the hill, that they might seem more in number than they really were, at last he ordered them to engage the Danes, saying that some of them were on shore and the rest in their ships; that those on shore would fight but faintly so near their ships; withal he exhorted his soldiers to be of good courage, and to do as they would see him do, so they led on the charge.

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The first whom Somerled slew he ript up and took out his heart, desiring the rest to do the same, because that the Danes were no Christians. So the Danes were put to flight; many of them were lost in the sea endeavoring to gain their ships, the lands of Mull and Morverin being freed at that time from their yoke and slavery.

Somerled prosecuted the war into the heart of the enemy's country; and having gained possession of the mainland domain of his forefathers, he took the title of Thane or Regulus of Argyll, determining to obtain possession of the Kingdom of Man and the Isles and thus form a Celtic Kingdom.

Olave the Red, then King of Man and the Isles, becoming alarmed at the increasing power of Somerled, arrived with a fleet in Storna Bay. The "quick discernment" of Somerled again proved equal to the occasion. He was desirous of obtaining the hand of Olave's daughter, Ragnhildis, in marriage, and went to meet the King of Man. Somerled wishing to remain unknown to Olave, said, "I Come from Somerled, Thane of Argyll, who promises to assist you in your expedition, provided you bestow upon him the hand of your daughter, Ragnhildis." Olave, however, recognized Somerled, and declined his request. Tradition says that Somerled was much in love with the fair Ragnhildis, and considering all is fair in love and war, agreed to the following plan to obtain her father's consent:

Maurice MacNeill, a foster brother of Olave, but also a close friend of Somerled, bored several holes in the bottom of the King's galley, making pins to plug them when the necessity arose, but meanwhile filled the holes with tallow and butter. When, next day, Olave put to sea, the action of the water displaced the tallow and butter, and the galley began to sink. Olave and his men in the sinking galley called upon Somerled for aid. who sent to his marriage with Ragnhildis. The promise was given, Olave found safety in Somerled's galley, Maurice MacNeill fixed the pins he had prepared into the holes, and, to the King's amazement, his galley proceeded in safety. The marriage of Somerled and Ragnhildis took place in the year >1140. In >1154, Olave was murdered by his nephews, who claimed half the Kingdom of the Isles.

Godred, son of Olave, who was in Norway at the time, returned to the Isles, but his tyranny and oppression caused the Islesmen to revolt, and Somerled, joining forces with them, seized half the Kingdom of the Isles, and became Righ Innesegall, or King of the Isles, as well as Thane of Argyll. Later Somerled invaded the Isle of Man, defeated Godfrey, and became possessed of the whole Kingdom of Man and the Isles. The power of Somerled, King of the Isles, now caused great anxiety on the neighboring mainland, and King Malcolm IV of Scotland dispatched a large army to Argyll. Somerled took up the challenge, and a hard fought battle left both sides too exhausted to continue hostilities. Peace was established between the King of Scotland and Somerled, but after suffering great provocation from Malcolm and his ministers, the King of the Isles again took up arms in >1164, and gathering a great host, 15,000 strong, with a fleet of 164 galleys, sailed up the Clyde to Greenock. He disembarked in the Bay of St. Lawrence, and marched to Renfrew, where the King of Scotland's army lay. The traditional version of what then occurred is, that feeling reluctant to join

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issue with the Highland host, and being numerically inferior, Malcom's advisers determined to accomplish the death of Somerled by treachery. They bribed a young nephew of Somerled, named Maurice MacNeill, to visit his uncle and murder him. MacNeill was admitted to Somerled's tent, and finding him off his guard, stabbed him to the heart. When Somerled's army learnt of the fate of their great leader, they fled to their galleys and dispersed.

Tradition tells of a dramatic episode that is said to have occurred when King Malcolm and his nobles came to view the corpse of their late powerful foe. One of the nobles kicked the dead hero with his foot. When Maurice MacNeill, the murderer, saw this cowardly action, the shame of his own foul deed came upon him. He denounced his past treachery, and confessed that he had sinned "most villainously and against his own conscience," being "unworthy and base to do so." He stabbed to the heart the man who had insulted the mighty Somerled, and fled. Through one Maurice MacNeill had Somerled won a bride, and at the hands of another Maurice MacNeill met his death.

"With regal pomp and ceremony the body of the King of the Isles was buried
..... In Iona's piles, Where rest from mortal coil the mighty of the Isles."

Family tradition, however, says that the Monastery of Sadel was the final resting place of the mighty founder and progenitor of the line of Princes that sat upon the Island throne, from whom descended the great Clan Donald.

Taken from HISTORY OF THE CLAN DONALD The Families of MacDonald, McDonald and McDonnell, By Henry Lee, New York, R. L. Polk and Company, INC. (Copyright 1920)

Thank you for volunteering for this important position and for your continuing support of Clan Donald!

"Ní h-éibhneas gan Chlainn Domhnaill" – "It is no joy without Clan Donald."

Prepared by
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A Pretty Good Library to have at Games Tent

Adam, Frank	<u>The Clans, Septs, & Regiments of the Scottish Highlands</u>
Bain, Robert	<u>The Clans & Tartans of Scotland</u>
Barnes, Maj. R.M.	<u>The Uniforms & History of the Scottish Regiments</u>
Bell, Robert	✓ <u>Ulster Surnames</u>
Betit & Radford	<u>Ireland, A Genealogical Guide</u>
Black, George F.	✓ <u>The Surnames of Scotland</u>
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Dobson, David	<u>Ships from Scotland to America, 1628-1828</u>
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Irvine, Sherry	<u>Your Scottish Ancestry, A Guide for N. Americans</u>
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Johnson, Lt. Col. Richard S.	<u>How to Locate Anyone Who Has Been in the Military</u>
Johnston & Smith	<u>Tartans</u> 3 vol.
MacLysaght, Edward	✓ <u>The Surnames of Ireland</u>
Mitchell, Brian	<u>A New Genealogical Atlas of Ireland</u>
Moncreiffe, Sir Ian	<u>The Highland Clans</u>
Prebble, John	<u>The Lion in the North</u>
Rowlands, John & Sheila	✓ <u>The Surnames of Wales</u>
Teall & Smith	✓ <u>District Tartans</u>
Thomson, Derick	<u>The New English-Gaelic Dictionary</u>
Thorndale & Dollarhide	✓ <u>Map Guide to the U.S. Federal Censuses, 1790-1920</u>

✓ = minimum

Clan Donald USA Publications

Index of Individual Clan Donald Families in our files. 2001
 Index of Possible Clan Donald Emigrants (By name) v. 1. 2001
 Scots Military Units: Home, Colonies, Empire. 2001
 Clan Donald Collection, Odom Library, Moultrie, GA. 2001
 Ulster & The Ulster Scots. 2000
 Emigrant Ships. 2002
 Possible Clan Donald Families in 1790 U.S. Census. 1997
 Clan Donald Confederate Soldiers. 2001
 Clan Donald Union Soldiers. 2002/2003 - *Delayed till 2004*
 Names of Clan Donald. 1999
 Book List. 2000
 Genealogical Research – USA. 2000
 Genealogical Research – Canada. 2000
 Genealogical Research – Great Britain. 2000
 Clan Donald USA Officer, Staff and Convener Roster. ~~2000~~ 2003
 Genealogists for the Scottish Clans.

} *Being upgraded*

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