

# Origins of the MacEoghainn clan: What information can Y chromosome markers provide?

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10<sup>th</sup> July 2005

The intention of this article is to provide background to the Y chromosome investigation we are attempting to undertake into the origins of the Ewing and McEwan surname variants. There is no guarantee of success of the project and it may take some time before we are in a position to judge the outcome. The objective is to identify if the oral and written history of the clan and weigh it on the scales of the information DNA provides. Specifically, the article reviews the recorded origins of the **MacEoghainn** surname and then describes some potential investigations that can be done using the DNA data. Later articles will describe the results of work to address these questions.

## Surnames

Surnames largely became fixed in England and Ireland during the period 1000-1200 AD, but in Scotland they are primarily related to the clan system. The reason for surnames derives from the Norman invasion and various aspects of the feudal system. However, detailed genealogies were a feature of Celtic life and many Scottish clans can trace their ancestry (at least as an oral tradition) back 1500 to 2000 years.

## Accepted origin

The available oral and written tradition is that the Scottish **MacEoghainn** clan (to use a Gaelic rendering of the name which means "son of Ewen") originally resided in Argyll. When transliterated into English, from Gaelic this became **Ewing, McEwen, McEwan** and other associated variants. In tracing my own family the earliest spelling of the name was **McEwing** in the late 1700s, then **McEwen** and after 1870 when they had shifted from Islay to the Glasgow area **McEwan**. Investigation of Scottish census records show similar surname spelling shifts with time.

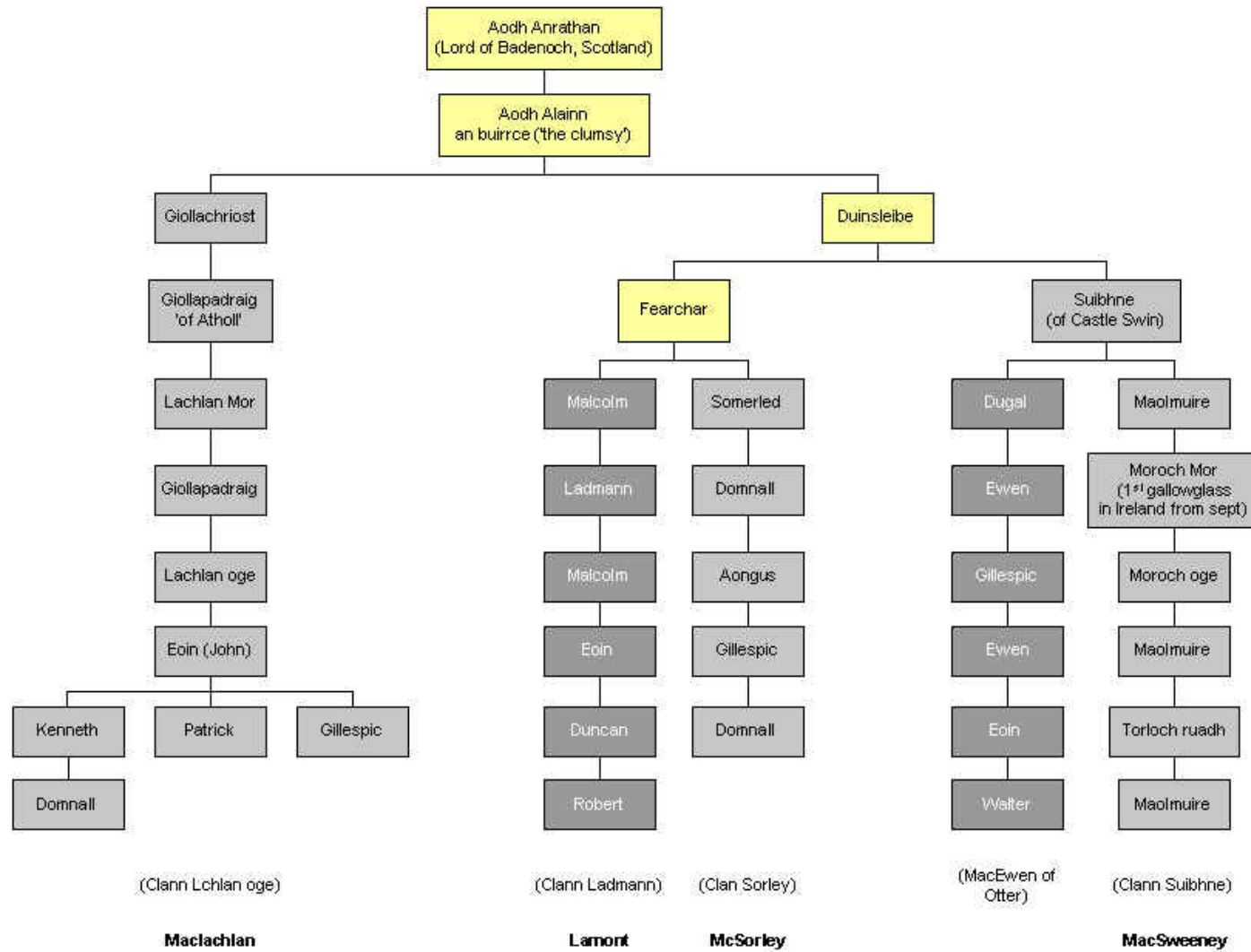
Putting aside for a moment, the comprehensive work of James McMichael [http://www.clanewing.org/Ewing\\_name01.html](http://www.clanewing.org/Ewing_name01.html) that at least some branches of Clan Ewing descended separately from lowland Cymric origin I will here investigate and contrast the alternative: a Dal Riadic Gaelic origin.

The Dal Riadic **MacEoghainn** clan commonly trace their ancestry back to **Aodh Athlaman Ua Neill** (O'Neill), the King of Aileach who died in 1033 A.D. According to legend his younger son, **Aodh Anrathan**, left Ireland to campaign in Scotland, never to return. Most accounts of the family have this **Aodh Anrathan** marrying an heiress of the **Lamonts**, Lords of Cowall, from whom they are said to have inherited the lands of Cowal and Knapdale in Argyle, Scotland. In turn **Aodh Athlaman** traces his ancestors to **Niall Mor** (=Great) or **Naoighiallach** (= "of The Nine Hostages") an Irish King who died in 405AD. **Niall Naoighiallach** (the first "historical" figure from written Irish history) is reputed to have descended from King **Milesius** a mythical figure whose sons invaded Ireland from Spain several hundred years before the birth of Christ.

The genealogy shows the line of descent from **Niall Naoighiallach** to **Aodh Anrathan**

87. Niall 'of the Nine Hostages'
88. Eoghan
89. Muireadhac
90. Muirchertach mac Ercae
91. Domnall Illchealgach
92. Aodh Uairiodhnach
93. Maoilfithrich
94. Maolduin
95. Niall Frasach
96. Aodh Oirnidhe
97. Niall Caille
98. Aodh Finnlaith
99. Niall Glundubh
100. Muirchertach 'of the leather cloaks'
101. Domnall 'of Armagh'
102. Muirchertach 'of Meath'
103. Flaithbertach 'of the pilgrim's staff'
104. Aodh Athlaman
105. Aodh Anrathan

The diagram below shows a family tree as it radiated from **Aodh Anrathan** into various Scottish clans. The information in this diagram comes from the **McLaughlin** site <http://members.aol.com/lochlan/scotland.htm>, but is largely consistent with other sources and all are based on the **Skene's** translation of a Gaelic manuscript written in 1467 AD.



**Clans and septs of Scotland descended from Aodh Anrathan of the Ui Neill of Ulster [Gaelic Ms. 1450 (1467)]**

## Doubts about the genealogy

Before examining the subsequent history of the **McEwen's** and variant surnames like **Ewing**, a close examination of this genealogy is required. One such examination is <http://members.aol.com/lochlan/anradan.htm>. In it doubt is expressed that **Aodh Anrathan** can actually be linked to **Aodh Athlaman** and in fact it is suggested that it is a fabrication from a later period. Similarly, the famous historical figure, **Somerled**, who "evicted" the Norse from western Scotland ~1156AD and from whom the **McDonald**, **MacDougall**, **MacAllister** and **Mac Sorley** clans are also reputed to have descended, has at various times been imputed with Norse ancestry. Note **Mac Sorley** = a son of **Somerled** (gaelic **Mac Somhairle**). **Somerled** is an English transliteration of the Gaelic for "summer wanderer". Why the need to alter the genealogies? Well the **MacSorley's** and **MacSweeney's** in particular were well known "gallowglass" families. More correctly a **gallogladh** (gaelic for foreign warrior) was a mercenary to Irish Kings during the 1200-1600 period. They typically came from Argyll and the Hebrides and were of mixed Gaelic and Viking origin. Obviously when living and fighting in Ireland it was useful to be accepted by the locals as being descended from "true" Irish stock.



"The merciless MacDonald ... from the western Isles of Kems and Gallowglass supplied" act I, Scene 2, 'Macbeth'

## Are they even Gaels?

In fact the story gets even murkier. It is well recorded and accepted that the Irish from Antrim invaded and settled Argyll starting around 300AD and established a kingdom called **Dal Riada**. They finally gained control of what is now called Scotland after the marriage of Kenneth MacAlpin in 843AD. These people were called various names including **Scotti**, but were commonly known as the **Dal Riada** and resided on both sides of the Irish sea from at least 300AD to about 1300AD. At this time only those in Argyll remained as a united group. What is unclear is the historical origin of the **Dal Riada** themselves. Some Irish histories suggest that they are descended from **Heremon**, a **Gaelic** ancestor of the **Ui Neill** (descendants of **Niall Naoighiallach**). Other sources suggest they primarily descend from the **Erainn**, earlier inhabitants more commonly referred to in contemporary references as the **Firbolgs**, although some component of the group was definitely **Gaelic** and they were subservient to **Gaelic** high kings. To understand this difference a quick review of oral history is required. However, please remember that almost all elements of fact have been blurred in the retelling of these tales. The dates in particular should be viewed skeptically.

The following is paraphrased from

<http://www.thewildgeese.com/pages/celts.html>.

The original inhabitants the **Priteni** tribes (Ireland and Britain were known to the early Greeks as the **Pritenic** Islands) are believed to have arrived some time prior to 700 B.C. Their origin as Celts is questionable, and according to some sources they were more likely to have been the indigenous descendants of the earlier Neolithic inhabitants of the island. Probably, they were a mixture of both. Their descendants in Ireland became known as the **Cruitin** tribes, living alongside the powerful **Dal-Riada** (**Belgae** tribes, see later) that dominated northeastern Ulster up to the ninth century A.D. The Romans, who never fully succeeded in conquering them in northern Britain, referred to them as the **Picti**, meaning painted people.

The second wave, the **Euerni**, or **Erainn**, belonging to the **Belgae** people of northern Gaul (Celts), began arriving about the 6th century B.C. They called their new home **Eueriio**, which would later evolve through the Old Irish **Eriu** to **Eire**, and from **Eire** to **Ireland**. The **Erainn** are more commonly referred to in contemporary references as the **Firbolgs**. They preserved traditions that told how their ancestor **Lugaid** had led an army from Britain and conquered Ireland. The significance of the legend concerning **Lugaid** is that the **Erainn**, according to their traditions, came to Ireland from Britain. From Ptolemy's account of Ireland (c.325 B.C.) there is good reason to believe that the **Erainn** tribes were then the most widespread and predominant on the island. Several offshoots of the **Belgae** colonists can be identified: the **Menappi** in Wicklow, the **Dal-Riada** in western Antrim and the **Dal-Fiatach** in eastern Ulster.

The third wave of colonization is believed to have taken place about 300 B.C. They were the **Laginians** or, according to their own tradition, **Gauls** who

came to Ireland from **Armorica**. Another branch of the same people was the **Galioin** (or **Gailenga**), who settled in an area north of Dublin and Meath. Eventually the **Galioin** extended their power to northwestern Connacht and in the process forced many **Belgae (Firbolg)** tribes into the remoter parts of the province. Like the **Belgae**, the **Laginian** tribes were linguistically P-Celts, and had kinsmen in Britain.

The last major Celtic settlement in Ireland is believed to have taken place between 150 and 50 B.C. These people have been identified as the **Milesians** (Sons of **Mil**, or **Gaels**) who, according to tradition, fled Roman incursions into northern **Iberia** and southern **Gaul**. These were Iron Age Celts and their dominance over the island was to last well over a thousand years. **Gael** subjugation of the **Belgae** and **Laighin** occupiers of the island was still incomplete as late as the beginning of the fifth century A.D. These Gaels spoke q-Celtic which is the language now spoken in Ireland and Scotland.

So in summary, we have at least 4 “invasions” though whether any displaced a majority of the previous populations is unclear. An initial Neolithic group also perhaps mixed with **Cruitin/Picts** that inhabited both Britain and Ireland, followed by the **Firbolgs** again present in Southern Britain and Ireland, then **Laginian** tribes similarly distributed and finally **Gaels** in Ireland primarily.

## Recent history

The **MacEwens** of Otter, lost their lands to the **Campbells** in 1463AD and were subsequently considered a “broken clan” and dispersed and gained protection of various clans including the **Campbells** (Argyll), **Stewarts** (Loch Lomond) and their relatives the **Lamonts** and the **MacLachlans**. Separate branches were also present in Galloway, Lochaber and Perthshire. It is possible that at least several of these groups consist of independent origin of the same surname variants and in the case of Clan Ewing considerable evidence has been amassed suggesting a lowland Cymric origin, followed by a migration of a portion to Ulster and then for many to United States of America.

## How can Y DNA markers help?

What can we do with Y chromosome DNA markers? Well the history as outlined above has outlined a series of well defined and testable questions:

- **Recent history:** How many strands are there to the **McEoghainn** clan? This is the study that **David Ewing** is undertaking with his **Ewing** DNA study and he has discussed his results separately. At present he has defined at least three strands that would predate the recorded creation of the surname from the McEwen's of Otter. However, all are within the R1b haplogroup. This emerged about 10,000 years ago at the end of the last Ice Age, probably in Iberia and descendants

inhabited Britain and Ireland. This is consistent with separate origins of the name, but at present does not exclude a common origin for the clan which “included” distantly related individuals from the same location.

- **1000 year old relatives:** Which if any of the **McEoghainn** variants are related to reputed **Aodh Anrathan** descendants from the other related families? There is some available evidence here, and I will summarise the answers more fully in a later article. Suffice to say that **Somerled** is not paternally related to **Aodh Anrathan** and is probably Norse in origin. Similarly, at least my strand of the McEwan descendants is unlikely to be related to **Niall Naoghiallach** based on personal correspondence with a group studying his descendants. A scientific publication is expected shortly outlining the haplotype of **Niall Naoghiallach** and it will be interesting to see if it matches David Wilson’s Irish/Scots R1b cluster that most of the **Ewing’s** match <http://home.earthlink.net/~wilsondna/DYS392=14%20Summary.htm>. More evidence is needed, but it appears that at least several of the branches of genealogy recorded in the Gaelic manuscript that Skene translated may have been “modified”.
- **2000-4000 year old relatives:** Based on the highly suspect oral history of the Celtic “invasions” of Britain and Ireland it may be possible to identify R1b “signatures” that are consistent with the **Cruitin**, **Eriann**, **Laginian**, **Gaels**, and other groups, based on their geographic isolation prior to invasion and subsequent association with specific surnames and geographical location. Again this will be the subject of a later article, but the very tentative information currently available, suggests the variants found within the **Ewing** surname study are overrepresented in **Irish** or **Dal Riadic** surnames, but are also present in **Britonic** surnames. This suggests but does not prove an Irish origin (and may be consistent with descent from the **Gaels**). However, the best explanation based on oral, written and Y chromosome data may be **Erainn** origin as these were present on both islands, but this should be treated as speculation at this time.

For those interested, in further details of the current work in progress please visit <http://www.geocities.com/mcewanjc/> which will act as the basis for future articles.

## Summary

The oral and recorded history of the Dal Riadic **McEoghainn** clan has been summarized. The information is very detailed and spans 1600 years. However, there is doubt as to its authenticity. There appears to be doubt at three levels, the relationship of **Aodh Anrathan** with the **Ui Neill’s**, the relationships between the various subsequent Dal Riadic clans, and after the breakup of the clan, the relationship (or separate origin) of the various

branches. Some speculative information can be gleaned from the current results of DNA testing but further work is required and will be the subject of future articles.