

MacAskills of Rubh' an Dùnain Society



The last Norsemen in the Isles? Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

(First published in the West Highland Free Press 31.08.07)

AS everyone knows, the Isles were once part of the kingdom of Norway, but the Gaelic language gradually absorbed the Viking settlers. This even happened in places like Skye which had belonged to the Picts. So what traces remain of Norse origins amongst the people?

Off-hand, I can think of eleven families of Norse extraction – MacAskills, MacAulays, MacCorquodales, MacCrimmons, MacIvers, MacKillops, MacLeods, MacPhails, MacRailds, MacSwans and Nicolsons.

They were proud of their origin. Many of them wore it on their sleeves by giving Norse names to their children. The favourite MacLeod forename was *Thórmódhr*, which means “the Mind (or Courage) of the god Thor” – *Thórr* “Thor”, *módhr* “mind, courage”. When Gaelic took over it became *Tormod*.

Later on in the Middle Ages, a peculiar thing happened. It became necessary to write *Tormod* down in documents composed in Latin, Norman French or English. And it was turned into *Normanus*, *Normand*, *Norman*.

I suppose this was because the chiefs of Lewis and Skye were the leading Northmen or Norsemen in Scotland, and because so many of them were called *Tormod*, and because there's some similarity in sound between *Tormod* and *Norman*.

The MacLeods are descended from *Leòd* or *Leod* (*Ljótr*, “Ugly”). He was born about 1210 or 1220. According to the late Rev. William Matheson, he appears to have been a son of *Olvir*, son of *Bálki*, son of *Olvir Rósta*, who was described in the “Orkneyinga Saga” as “the tallest of men, and strong of limb, exceedingly overbearing, and a great fighter”. *Olvir Rósta* (it means “Oliver the Unruly”) lived by the Helmsdale River in Sutherland, but was obliged to flee to the Isles as a result of certain events in the district during the years 1135–39.

Bálki, son of *Olvir Rósta*, seems to have had at least two sons. One was *Olvir*, father of *Leod*. The other, a notable warrior, was *Páll* (Paul). *Páll* was deputy-governor of Skye (*vice-comes de Ski*) in the Norse kingdom of the Isles in the 1220s, and was slain in 1231. *Páll* and his father *Bálki* are probably the progenitors of two of the families on our list – the MacPhails of North Uist and Carloway, and the MacKillops of Berneray.

The MacKillops are a puzzle. Their name seems to be *MacPhilip*, the Son of Philip, but in Gaelic they were known as *Mac Phàice*, the Son of *Bálki*. What probably happened is that two or three centuries ago, when *Mac Phàice* was still *Mac Phàilce*, some incomer from the mainland, familiar with the name *MacPhilip* from Argyll, Perthshire, Ayrshire or Arran, decided that these people in Berneray

should be put down in English as MacKillops due to the rough similarity of the names.

There are two stories about how an ancestor of the MacLeods married the daughter of a man called *Mac Ràild Àrmann*. One of the stories declares that this ancestor was Leod himself. The other suggests that it was not Leod but his formidable great-grandfather Olvir Rósta. It describes the woman in question as “Helga of the beautiful hair, daughter of Harald, son of Ivar the Old, king of Norway”.

Mac Ràild Àrmann lived on the little island where Dunvegan Castle now stands. He was the progenitor of the MacRailds, and in Norse his name would have been *Haraldsson Ármadhr*. The *Ármadhr* part means that he was a steward – in other words, chamberlain or tax-gatherer to the jarl. In Leod’s time the jarl was Leod’s uncle Páll Bálkasson, whom we have met. Just how dangerous MacRaild’s job was is demonstrated not only by his choice of residence but also by the fact that *ármadhr*, in its genitive form *ármanns*, came into Gaelic as *àrmann*, which means quite simply “warrior”!

At any rate, Helga appears to have brought with her Duirinish, Minginish, Bracadale, Lyndale and part of Trotternish, thus laying the foundations of the MacLeod empire.

Matheson wrote about these things in 1977 in a ground-breaking paper called “The Ancestry of the MacLeods”. You can find it in volume 51 of the transactions of the Gaelic Society of Inverness. He points out that there’s also a long-standing tradition that the MacLeods were descended from Olaf the Black, king of Man, and that, if so, it must have been through a female – for example, perhaps Leod married a daughter or sister of Magnus Olafsson, king of Man. So why, asks Matheson, is the famous Olaf never mentioned in any of the MacLeod poetry, which is full of all the other people mentioned above?

The answer is amusing. It’s because Olaf the Black was the reputed ancestor of the MacAulays, who got in first.

We have to be a bit careful with MacAulays. There were some at Ardincaple on the Clyde whose name is completely Gaelic – *Mac Amhalghaidh*. It’s the MacAulays of Lewis and North Uist (*Clann Mhic Amhlaigh*) who are descended from Olaf. Right down to the twentieth century they continued to use two Norse forenames, one of which was Olaf itself in the form *Amhlaigh* (Aulay).

The other was *Sgàire*. It’s from a by-name *Skári* meaning “sea-mew”, and long ago “Zachary” was plucked out of the Bible to be used as its English spelling. It’s a name that makes you think of love-songs, beautiful ones. In the eighteenth century *Maighstir Sgàire mac Mhurchaidh mhic Aonghais mhic Dhòmhnail Chaim* made one that began:

*Tha mo chridhe mar chuaintean
Air bheil mulad is bruaillean a’ snàmh.*

“My heart is like oceans / On which grief and vexation are swimming.” And in the nineteenth Malcolm MacAulay put his own name and his father’s into one and promptly emigrated.

*Nuair a nochd i air fàire
Bha mo leannan-sa ag ràdhtainn,
“Siud an t-soitheach aig Cràgam,
Calum Sgàire tha innt’.*

“When she showed on the horizon / My sweetheart was saying, / ‘That is Cràgam’s vessel / With Calum Sgàire aboard.”

The Nicolsons demonstrate a similar pattern. Firstly, you need to be cautious – the mainland MacNicol, who never switched to “Nicolson”, trace themselves to a Nicholas MacPhee from Lochaber. And some Lewis Nicolsons are MacRitchies whose name got written down as “Nicolson”, perhaps because the “N” of *MacNeacail* sounds so like an “R”!

Secondly, they kept on using a whole set of Norse forenames – *Somhairle*, *Tormod*, *Torcuil* and *Armchul*. Sorley MacLean was so called because his mother was a Nicolson. *Torcuil* and *Armchul* make a trio with *Asgall*, the progenitor of the MacAskills, because all of them are derived from the same Norse word, *ketill*.

The Vikings’ *ketill* was no humble kettle for making tea but a great cauldron from which warriors were made. *Torcuil* is “Thor’s Cauldron” (*Thorketill*). *Asgall* seems to be “the Gods’ Cauldron” (*Asketill*). *Armchul* looks like “Eagle’s Cauldron” (*Arnkettill*), which brings to mind a famous winner of the Tour de France, Jacques Anquetil. He was from Normandy, so it’s likely to be the same name.

If *Thorketill* is also ringing a bell it’s because it was the name of the progenitor of the MacCorquodales, *Clann Mhic Thorcadail*. They were originally from Mid Argyll, and if you think that’s a strange place for a Viking, think again. Some of the earliest MacIvers were from there too, and *Ívarr* (Gaelic *Iomhar*) is a Norse name.

Of the MacCrimmons, *Clann Mhic Cruimein*, we can’t be quite so sure. *Crimthann* was a very common Gaelic name in the Middle Ages, but an equally plausible candidate is the Norse name *Hróðmundr* (*hróðh* “fame”, *mundr* “protection”). The one certainty is that it has nothing to do with bringing the art of music from Cremona in Italy!

What seems to clinch it for *Hróðmundr* is the simple fact that all the other little Skye families who came under MacLeod “protection” are Norse: MacAskills, MacKillops, MacRailds, MacSwans.

The MacSwans were tacksmen of Roag, and there were MacSwans in Raasay too. Again we must be careful. The name is *MacSuain*, from the Norse forename *Sveinn*, meaning “boy”, the same as the English word “swain”. In Argyll there are MacSweens, from the Gaelic name *Suibhne*; many of them went to Ireland as soldiers and became MacSweeneys and MacSwineys (Swinneys too, I suppose). These two families shouldn’t be confused.

The last MacSwan of Roag was *Suain MacSuain*. In the 1750s or 1760s Norman MacLeod of MacLeod, MP, put up his rents until he could take no more. He left, perhaps thus providing the motivation for the MacCrimmon piobaireachd *Cumha Mhic Suain á Ròraig*, the Lament for MacSwan of Roag.

He took up an offer of the tack of Grishipoll in Coll from his foster-brother Hugh MacLean of Coll. Perhaps it’s no coincidence that his own son was called Hugh. It was at Grishipoll in 1773 that Johnson and Boswell enjoyed his hospitality. They spelt the old man’s name Sweyn MacSweyn. Johnson saw at Grishipoll “more of the ancient life of a Highlander, than I had yet found”. The spoons were of horn, whisky was drunk out of a clam-shell, Mrs MacSweyn spoke no English and was dressed in tartan. Boswell said old MacSweyn was about seventy-seven but “looked as fresh and was as stout as a man of fifty”. His son Hugh looked older than his father.

The MacSweyns’ tack ran out in 1785 and they were replaced by MacLeans. Perhaps the old couple were dead by then. Nicholas Maclean-Bristol tells me that he doesn’t know what happened to Hugh and his wife. They simply disappear from the record.

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