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# Meamhair MacNeacail: On the Irish and Celtic Origins of the MacNicol, and their Biblical Ancestry

by Michael Nicholson

[Editor's Note: Michael, a clan member from Nepean, Ontario has contributed several previous articles for *Scorrybreac*. Here he tackles a controversial topic: that the origins of Clan MacNicol are Irish and Celtic rather than Norse, as claimed by David Sellar in our clan history, "The Highland Clan MacNeacail" by Sellar and Maclean. Michael uses as his sources ancient Irish manuscripts summarized in books by Cusack and Keating, from which he quotes at length, and he also quotes a passage from our late Chief, Iain MacNeacail of MacNeacail and Scorrybreac which appeared as his Preface in our 1988 reprinting of *The Clan Nicolson*, by J.G. Nicholson.]

*"(circa AD 310) Ernín, son of Duach, that is son of the King of Connacht...it was he that collected the Genealogies and Histories of the men of Erinn in one book, that is, the Cin of Drom Snechta (the book of the Invasions, of Ireland)"*

THOUGH IT HAS BEEN A FEW YEARS NOW since I have taken pen in hand and produced a Meamhair MacNeacail column for the clan newsletter I am sure none of the articles I have written will raise such eyebrows nor perhaps disagreements among the clan and Scottish historians. I will only preface this article by mentioning the fact that my own family has found my extreme interest in genealogy a strange curiosity even though they are always interested to see what new things I have uncovered. I myself have never completely understood why I couldn't let go until some deep seated questions were answered. Suffice it to say that by the end of this article you will see and hopefully believe that there was a purpose to it, both towards your own ends and mine. That is if you so choose to believe and check out the proof for yourselves, as the old saying goes 'the proof of the pudding is in the eating'.

When I was a little boy I remember people talking about what they were, in Canada often enough they would say French or English, or maybe Irish and so I remember distinctly turning to my father at a very early age and asking "Dad what are we?" to which he turned towards me with his pale blue eyes and smiled not miss-

ing a wink and said, distinctly without a second's hesitation "Scottish," so I then asked, "Well how do you know?" to which he replied, "Your great great grandfather told me when I was a boy in Nova Scotia."

As a young boy of four or five growing up in Canada where the politics of divide and conquer were in full motion in a country run by the unscrupulous machinations of Canada's Tammany Hall political set, what group you were from was being fully emphasized and as a child one couldn't help but notice, so it was that the rest of my life I would endeavour to find out just who I was and what that meant. When I discovered the Scottish proverb that "You cannot know where you're going unless you know from whence you came," I never knew how true it would turn out for me. So as I moved on through life collecting genealogical information about my family and the clan from which they came while at St. Francis Xavier University in Nova Scotia I started to realize that there was more to know about history and my people's place in it. I first got in depth knowledge at the Gaelic College in St. Annes Nova Scotia which taught me that my clan was relatively independent on the Isle of Skye and that in the past it had been attacked by the MacLeods. All of this only furthered to whet my appetite in regard to attaining knowledge about my clan and people.

Along the way of genealogical research and clan histories I had learned that several prominent clans, such as clan MacDonald of Sleat claimed fervently that they could trace their ancestors back to Noah's son Japheth or in the case of Clan Ranald right back to Adam. Some clans even claimed that Gaelic was the language spoken in the Garden of Eden. Understanding that the Gaels individually relied on oral memorization of family genealogies, I was myself very sceptical about such claims coming from a family of lawyers who know the frailty of human memory and the human capacity to lie or make such tales more spectacular to suit one's given purpose.

However as time passed and my investigations deepened I came to see that while much of the history had been forgotten or brushed aside in regards to the origin of the Scottish Highland clans it had been far from lost. Our modern clan historians lean heavily towards a Norse Origin for the Clan MacNicol while accepting



fully the fact that it was a mixed group of Norse and Gaels. However as I hope you will see the late Chief's (Iain Nicolson, MacNeacail of MacNeacail and Scorrybreac) words in the preface to the book *Clan Nicolson* by J.G. Nicholson, were in fact prophetic when he said, "I postulate that the Clan was originally an ancient Celtic clan that had, by the eleventh century, evolved into a Gallgael clan (i.e. a clan of mixed Norse/Celtic makeup and character)."

The Chief then proceeded to briefly summarize and outline the early history of the clan, and

genealogy of his forefathers, which for the purposes of this article is worthwhile to repeat as he stated: *"The MacNiocaill migration from Northern Ireland to Scotland (or to be accurate, from Ancient Scotia to Pictavia) took place near the end of the fifth century when Fergus Mor MacEarca, a brother of the King of Ireland, brought an army from Antrim to strengthen the foothold already gained by the Scots in the region that is now Argyllshire (anciently the Kingdom of Dalriada). Fergus Mor was accompanied by a small band of noblemen among whom was Cobthaigh Fionn, founder of the settlement of Dairenoi. The Dairine tribe were of the race of Ith and the senior family of that tribe were the MacNiocaills, progenitors of what is thought to have been the first clan to settle in the Hebrides."*

It is this Ith, or race of Ith, which the Chief himself mentions, and is aware of as his ancestor, who will unlock the key as to who we really are and once again our late Chief's remarks *"in my opinion, Dr. Nicholson may have been a little hasty in dismissing (the validity of) the Irish MS manuscripts"* will prove to be prophetic (which pointed out the Clan MacNeacail was definitely of clearly traceable Celtic origin).

The records in which early Irish history has been preserved have been masterfully summarised by the scholar nun Cusack.

*"Ernín, son of Duach, that is son of the King of Connacht...it was he that collected the Genealogies and Histories of the men of Erinn in one book, that is, the Cin of Drom Snechta (i.e. the book of the Invasions, of Ireland)"*

The importance of this passage lies in the fact that Duach is known to have died in the year AD 365, which places Ernín's gathering of the material well before the coming to Ireland of St. Patrick (whose mission to Ireland took place in ca AD 432) and the later Christian monks whose sole business, some *modernist scholars* would have us believe, was to forge or fake histories for the early nations of western Europe.



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Keating in his book *The History of Ireland* from the Irish Texts Society writes: 'We will set down here the branching off of the races of Magog, according to the Book of Invasions (of Ireland), which was called the Cin of Drom Snechta...'

'..the decidedly pagan Irish traced their origins back to the biblical patriarch, Magog, the son of Japheth. This is in direct contrast to the claims of the Britons and other European nations, whose genealogies were traced back to Javan, another son of Japheth.'

"Magog ...was considered.... the father of the Scythian peoples, and early Irish chroniclers were most emphatic in their insistence that the Irish were of Scythian stock. And there is good etymological evidence for this. The Irish were long referred to as Scots even before some of them migrated to the country that today bears their name,...". Even Robert the Bruce who our clan fought with at Bannockburn claimed a Scythian origin for the Scottish people in the treaty of Arbroath after Scottish independence was won.

It would be no strange thing to find Scythian peoples as far west as Ireland. After all, the land on Asia Minor (in present day Turkey) known of old as Galatia, was populated by a migrating colony of Gallic Celts from whom the country got its name. St Paul in 49 AD wrote his famous epistle to their descendants. Entitled the book of Galatians in which God spoke to the Gallic peoples warning them not to turn back so easily to pagan systems of works through a legalistic following of the biblical law but to live by the gracious provision of his son Jesus on the cross for the covering of our sins.

The dispersal of the races or families of man is depicted in (the book of) Genesis as having occurred in the fifth generation after the Flood, and we note in these ancient genealogies that after the fifth generation the Irish and continental pedigrees diverge in a most pointed way in exact accordance with the Genesis account. Of further interest to us, however, is the pagan memory revealed in the early Irish chronicles, of the Creation and the Flood. These were remembered by the Irish as relatively recent and definitely historical events.

The first colonisation of Ireland seems to have

taken place ca 1484 BC (the 2520<sup>th</sup> Anno Mundi, i.e. year from the Creation, according to the ancient pagan Irish records)

The next recorded invasion (or settlement) of Ireland took place, according to the chronicles, in Anno Mundi 2859, or ca 1145 BC in our terms. This colony was led by Nemedius (see Genealogy table), or Nemedh, and it is recorded that the people of Nemedh were credited with having built certain types of forts as well as clearing the land for a particular method of cultivation.

Plague took its toll on the population as well as invasions that left few Nemedian survivors who then settled further inland. They are then recorded as subsequently dividing themselves into three 'bands' with their respective leaders. One of these groups migrated to northern Europe, where they founded a nation later known to the Irish as the Tuatha de Danann. A second group settled, intriguingly, in the northernmost parts of Britain, apparently the first Pictish settlement of what is now Scotland.

The third group are named as the Firbolgs, who migrated to Greece and then returned to Ireland which they subsequently divided up into five provinces...in Anno Mundi 3303, or ca 701 BC in our terms. The Firbolgs were subdued in their turn by the returning colony of Tuatha de Danann. The last colonisation of Ireland is then recorded under Anno Mundi 3500 (i.e. ca 504 BC): *'The fleet of the sons of Milidh came to Ireland at the end of this year, to take it from the Tuatha De Danann, and they fought the battle of Sliabh Mis with them on the third day after landing.'*

The Children of Milidh, known to us as the Milesians, had landed unobserved in the mouth of the river Slaney in what is today the county of Wexford, from where they marched to Tara, the central seat of government.

..the Milesians were newly arrived (via the Spanish peninsula) from the city of Miletus, whose ruins still stand on the Turkish mainland, and which was finally destroyed by the Persian army in the year 494 BC. ...the city of Miletus should also be known to us as an Ionian outpost whose population consisted of, amongst other races, Scythians and Phoenicians.

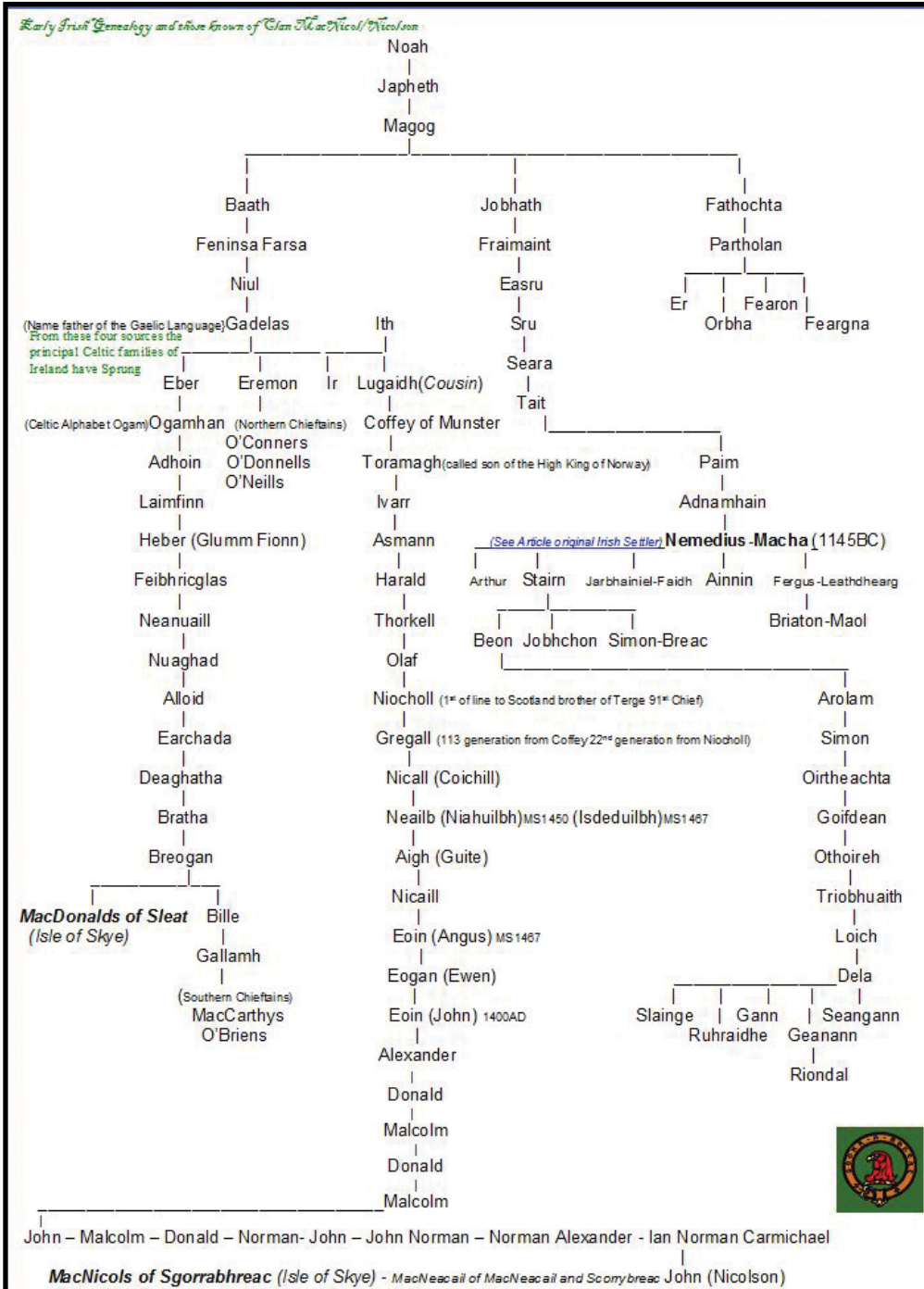
Irish chroniclers were passing on an account, albeit garbled in places, of authentic historical



events and personages, and of the equally historic descent of their own race from Phoenician and Scythian stock.

And on the subject of that descent, Cusack adds yet again to our store of knowledge: 'As the Milesians were the last of the ancient colonists...only their genealogies, with a few exceptions, have been preserved. The genealogical tree begins, therefore, with the brothers Eber and Eremon, the two

surviving leaders of the expedition, whose ancestors are traced back to Magog, the son of Japheth. The great southern chieftains, such as the MacCarthys and O'Briens, claim descent from Eber; the northern families of the O'Conner, O'Donnell and O'Neill, claim Eremon as their head. There are also other families claiming descent from Emer, the son of Ir, brother to Eber and Eremon; as also from their cousin Lugaidh, the son of Ith. From these four sources the principle Celtic families of Ireland have sprung....'



As we see in the genealogy, Eber and Eremon were able to trace their own descent from Gadelas, the father of the Gaels and the Gaelic language, for it is from the 5th generation after the flood that God sent the confusion of languages on the earth to stop the building of the Tower of Babel and it is from this fifth descendant after the flood that the name of our forefathers language derived its name, merely coincidence or simple correlation once again of the reliability of the Biblical and pagan genealogical accounts. For even the modern Jews trace the origin of their language "Hebrew" from their 5th descendant after the flood whose name was "Heber", as do many other nations.

Were they (the ancient Celts) serious enough to take the trouble to keep accurate records over long periods of time? Once more, Cusack answers the question for us: 'The Books of Genealogies and Pedigrees form a most important element in Irish pagan history. For social and political reasons, the Irish Celt preserved his genealogical tree with scrupulous precision. The rights of property and the governing power were transmitted with patriarchal exactitude on strict claims of primogeniture, which claims could only be refused under certain conditions defined by law... and in obedience to an ancient law, established long before the introduction of Christianity, all the provincial records, as well as those of



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the various chieftains, were required to be furnished every third year to the convocation at Tara, where they were compared and corrected. We see the practice continued with the registering of the genealogies of the clan chiefs of the Lordship of the Isles (our Chiefs among them) in Dublin with the Gaelic MS 1467 manuscripts and their like.

As in the case of the Norwegian and Danish Vikings (pre-Christian records), it is easy to state, as many modernist articles do on the subject, that these patriarchal genealogies were faked. But it is impossible to imagine this happening when we consider the natural temperament of these various peoples and the gravity with which they viewed the importance of the records that contained the detailed accounts of their own patriarchal descent. It is impossible to see how anyone could have deliberately or even accidentally contrived even a minor alteration to their pedigree without everyone else becoming immediately aware of the fact, and to imagine an alteration on the scale of that required to give substance to the modernist scenario of things, would bring us firmly into the realms of fantasy. Where early Christian monks are baselessly accused or suspected of doctoring all pagan genealogical records. This false assertion looking even more ludicrous in the light of the vast numbers who converted to the new truth, would they have done this if their genealogies were being rewritten and fabricated by these new religion scribes, something they protected so strictly, of course not!

Historically, the modernist view on this simply cannot be justified. Such an attempt at fraud or forgery would have brought the full force of the law, or rather the more immediate remedy of someone's sword, crashing down upon the culprits head. These records may be relied upon, therefore, to be as accurate as any record can be. Historically rival monarchical lines trusted the weight of legitimacy the pagan genealogical records held with the public so much that they killed off all the lines descending from some branches so as to have a legitimate hold on the throne which no one could dispute or would dispute given the total acceptance of their accuracy by the Christian and pre-Christian pagan peoples of Europe. Thus the pagan Irish genealogies along with all those other pagan European nations were untampered with by early Christian monks and

line up exactly with the Biblical table of nations in Genesis leading one to believe that the Clan MacNicol/Nicolsons origin from Magog and the Scythians who then became the Irish and Scottish gaelis is wholly credible, trustworthily recorded and accurate.

Pulling together now our Chiefs knowledge of his ancestor, Ith, and the clan's origins we can see that the clan MacNicol originated or sprung from one of the principal sources of the four main Celtic family lines in Ireland. And that our genealogy was meticulously kept by our pagan forefathers who knew nothing of the Bible nor who the recorded sons of Noah were therein, which are found in Chapter 10 of the Book of Genesis known as the table of Nations, but who nonetheless traced their own genealogical forebears right back to Noah's grandson Magog.

But we are not left with only ancient trustworthily recorded genealogies as proof for our Celtic descent indeed the modern science of DNA testing, which can not lie is adding weight to the verity of our Celtic past. Modern DNA testing can differentiate between a genetic Haplo-marker that reveals Scandinavian or Celtic west European lineage. While the full results are not in yet and still early for all the Nicolson, MacNicol and Nicol men who are being tested inside and outside the clan society and among those of known Skye origin, and otherwise, the results are pointing strongly and somewhat overwhelmingly to a suspected Celtic DNA Haplo-marker as opposed to a known Scandinavian one which we might have expected if the clan was of Norse origin.

So, to summarize with a play on that old Scottish proverb, if you now know and believe from where you came, you can also know and trust where you are going, to that great Celtic clan gathering in the heavens where, of course, Gaelic, the language spoken in the Garden of Eden will be spoken eternally. 🏴󠁧󠁢󠁥󠁮󠁧󠁿

Sources:

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