

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE 'McPHEE' CLAN

Dear Clansman,

You have already been contacted by other Australian MacPhies in an attempt to awaken or revive your interest in our Clan.

In pursuance of that aim I thought it may help to create such an interest in those of you who have not previously given much thought to your origin or perhaps have not had the opportunity to study the subject, if I, a first generation Australian with a life long interest in our Clan and Scottish history in general, set down a very brief outline of our history as I understand it to be.

My narrative must not be accepted as authoritative and is directed to the 'uninformed' in the hope that they will become interested in reading on the subject and particularly the works of recognised historians. My information has been obtained from various sources including Skene - a most highly respected Scottish genealogist - and De Vere Loder in his "Colonsay and Oronsay" (1935). I have not yet read the works of Dr Earle Douglas MacPhee.

When on holiday in Scotland last year I took the opportunity to make a sentimental journey to the island of Colonsay and tread our "native heath".

Our Name

The gaelic (Scottish pronunciation "gallic") spelling of our name was derived from two gaelic words, "Dubh" (pronounced "dtoooh") meaning Black, and "Sith" (pronounced "she") meaning Peace. The Sith were the peaceful "Little People" who were supposed to have inhabited Colonsay. The literal translation of our name is therefore "Black of Peace" or "The dark featured Clan".

The original gaelic spelling of the name derived from the combination of these two words is the subject of some controversy which I, not being a gaelic scholar, am not qualified to discuss. The gaelic "Mac", meaning son, was added as a prefix to designate sons of the original of that name.

Since there are differing opinions regarding the gaelic spelling it is to be expected that there will be different opinions regarding the earliest anglicised versions. Skene contends that "the most ancient inhabitants of Colonsay were the 'MacDuffies' or 'Macphees'". He also uses the spelling "Macfie" and this was the spelling used in 1609 by Malcolm our last chief and by his brother Donald, Vicar of the Priory on ~~Colonsay~~ Oronsay. It is also the spelling used to designate the Clan crest and tartan.

Following the murder of Malcolm by Colkitt Macdonald in 1623, the Macfies were dispossessed of their island and the Clan families migrated to other areas. It would appear that this was the beginning of the varied spellings of the name that exist to-day as most of our present spellings can be traced to particular areas in Scotland where dispossessed families settled. Whatever the spelling the pronunciation remains the same, therefore the spelling is of little consequence and we are all descended from the original inhabitants of that little island of Colonsay.

Our "Native Heath".

The home territory of our Clan was the small hilly island of Colonsay and the even smaller island of Oronsay; a causeway connects the two at low tide. Oronsay Priory was the burial place of the Chiefs.

These islands off the central west coast of Scotland are a short distance from the island of Iona - the cradle of Christianity in Scotland - and are part of the Inner Hebrides which, together with the Outer Hebrides, form the Western Isles.

The First Macfies.

The origin of the Clan is obscure but it is believed to have existed for at least 1000 years. All authorities agree that our first ancestors were Celts (pronounced Kelts) who, as I will explain, were a mixture of many races by the time they arrived on Colonsay.

The Celts are believed to have originated somewhere in the Middle

East and over a period of many centuries moved in a great body through Greece, Italy - they once occupied Rome - France etc., and finally arrived in Britain in advance of the Angels. It appears to have been the custom of the Celts to occupy an area, or country, live there for perhaps hundreds of years, intermarry with the local inhabitants and then, for some unknown reason, move on en masse. However, they always preserved their identity, customs and gaelic language intact.

Unfortunately for history the Celts during that period had no written language. However, by phenomenal feats of memory their Bards and Druids, - the latter being their astronomers and wise men - retained mental records of their language, history, science and songs and apparently with great accuracy.

The last strongholds of the Celts were in Wales, Isle of Man, Ireland, The Western Isles and Highlands of Scotland, - the latter two via Ireland. The intermarriage with many races must have contributed greatly in maintaining the virility of the Celts throughout their long history and no doubt the Celtic strain has given the Welsh, Manxman, Irish and Highland Scots that fierce national streak in their nature, produced such superb fighting men, and made them such inveterate wanderers.

In addition to our Celtic ancestors, it must be remembered that for a long period Norway controlled the Western Isles and Isle of Man - a Viking is buried with his ship on Oronsay - and, in consequence, there would be an infusion of Norse blood in the inhabitants in those areas. This control ended in the 13th century when the Norsemen were defeated by the Scots at the battle of Largs on the Ayrshire coast.

The inhabitants of the Western Isles did not consider their territory as part of mainland Scotland and it was not until 1609 that they were forced into submission by the armies of King James VI & I.

Following the defeat of the Norsemen the islands came under the control of Macdonald, self styled "Lord of the Isles" and his twelve subordinate chiefs of whom Macfie of Colonsay was one. This control continued for almost 400 years. Macfie was also appointed hereditary "Keeper of the Records" for the Lord of the Isles. The appointment of the chief of probably the smallest clan in the group - believed not to have exceeded 100 families - could have been related to the fact a Priory was established on Oronsay at an early date, and the Prior being more literate than most of the inhabitants of the Isles could, under the authority of the chief, carry out the secretarial work. My assumption is strengthened by Loder's statement that when the Statutes of Iona was signed by the 12 chiefs in 1609, Donald Macfie, Vicar of Oronsay, signed the document on behalf of his brother Malcolm, the Chief.

The Statutes of Iona was a kind of peace treaty agreed to by the 12 chiefs of the Isles after their defeat by the King's forces, and provided for a new order in the area. It was a simple document of nine clauses and was really a code of behavior and reforms that the chiefs undertook to introduce in their areas as subjects of King James VI & I. The document was revised in 1616.

Following the murder of Malcolm and a few of his companions at a "standing stone" on Baleromin Mor, Colonsay, in 1623, our clan was dispossessed of the island by the Macdonalds and, with few exceptions, the families migrated to other areas where they lived under the protection of other clans. Having lost its only land, the Clan forfeited its right to have a Chief and although there may have been claimants for the position, the fact that the chieftainship was not necessarily hereditary and ownership of land was, I understand, an essential requirement, the validity of such claims would be difficult to establish.

Ownership of Colonsay changed hands many times after the murder of Malcolm, alternating between the Macdonalds and Campbells and often depending on which Clan was in favour with the reigning monarch at the time. However, the island appears to have been in the hands of the McNeils from 1695 until 1904 when it passed to an Englishman, Lord Strathcona, in settlement of a debt.

For a present day picture of Colonsay I recommend those interested to read "The Crofter and The Laird" by John McPhee, an Australian edition of

which was published by Angus and Robertson in 1972 and is available at a cost of \$4.50. A most interesting little book.

The Dispersed Macfies

The dispossessed families leaving Colonsay moved to several areas including Islay, Bute and, according to Loder, the greater number to Upper Lorne and Lochaber where they took shelter under Lochiel Cameron. It is possible that in each area the clansmen joined other families, who because of the limited size of Colonsay, had migrated earlier from sheer necessity.

In each area the Macfies - under various spellings - appear to have been accepted as tenants probably on a "man rent" basis, i.e. on condition that they supplied fighting men to the chief when required. They also retained their own names and did not become Septs of the other clans. By all accounts they also multiplied in each area. This situation is quite evident at Lochaber where the name is still plentiful under the spellings MacPhee, McPhee, and Macphee. In Fort William I was informed that it is "a verra honoured name in these parts".

At Glenfinnan (near Fort William) where "Bonnie Prince Charlie" raised his standard to commence the Rising in 1745, there is a plaque which states that a "Macphee" and a "Macmaster" supported the standard when it was raised. The Macphees of Lochaber formed part of the Cameron force throughout that ill fated campaign which ended on Culloden Field in 1746.

After the defeat of the Scots at Culloden - the first time in 400 years - the English were determined to break up the Clans and rid themselves of these troublesome Highlanders for all time. How this was achieved is documented by John Prebble in "The Highland Clearances", available in paper back and well worth reading.

Migration from Scotland had been taking place for a long time due to the limited amount of arable land and - inspite of famine and disease - over population. However, during the 100 years after Culloden many tens of thousands of Highlanders were driven by force from their clan lands to seek unaccustomed work in the southern towns, or - to the lasting benefit of the countries concerned - to migrate to America, Canada, New Zealand, and our own Australia and Tasmania.

Thus, for the second time the Macphees of Lochaber and other areas became dispossessed and dispersed.

So ends my story of our beginnings, you may take it from there - We do have a name to be proud of so let us take pride in being a McPhee, MacPhee, MacPhie, Macphee, Macfie or any other spelling.

Charles Macphee