

Correcting History: Origins of the Clan Morrison

The commonly used phrase "Clan Morrison" refers to the assimilation of numerous Morrison families across Scotland who have no common origin or shared history. The Morrisons were never a clan in the same way many of the famous highland families became known. Historically the name Morrison was first recorded in recognisable form in the fifteenth century and can be found in many Scottish records such as the Aberdeen Burgh Records [1].

Origin of the name

The list of early spellings of the name Morrison in the historical documents of Scotland have been transcribed into the modern spelling of Morrison from Morison, Morisson, Morcion, Morisone, Morsion, Moriston, Moryson, Morrieson, Morriceson, Morishon, Merson, Mollisone, Morason, Morzon, Moorison, Morisoun, Moresoun, Marrson, Murrion, Murison, Muirison, Murieson, Murrison, Muresoun, Muirsoun, Murson, Murescun, Muryson, Mwryson and no doubt many other phonetic synonyms or Anglicised adaptations.

The name is most probably of Anglo-Norman origin. The generally accepted theory suggests it is a patronymic form of either Morris to become son of Morris or Morrison, or similarly More or Muir (from the European origin Maure or Saracen) to become son of More or Moreson or son of Muir or Muirson. According to Mitchell-Gill *"Of the five entries in the Lyon Register, to families of the name of Moir or More in Scotland, all are connected with Aberdeenshire, and bear the three Moors' or Saracens heads. The name of Morison in Scotland bears azure three Sarcens' heads, conjoined in one neck proper, the faces looking to the chief, dexter and sinister sides of the shield"* [2].

The earliest historical reference to the spelling comes from Yorkshire in England as "Ricardus Morisson" in 1379 [3]. The earliest Scottish recording is 1429 for "Arthuro Morison domino de Darleith" [4]. Aberdeen Burgh records of 1440 cite "Morison, Angus, of Kynkardyn" [5], and in 1443 the name "Gothra Morison" is cited in the Rental Books of the Cistercian Monks of Coupar-Angus [6].

The Clan Buchanan has a fascinating historical connection to the origin of the name Morrison in the Strathern district where a "Morrison" family is said to originate from an illegitimate son of the Maurice, the 10th Laird of the Buchanans, named Arthur MacMaurice in the late 1300s [7].

By 1854 the standardisation of vital records in Scotland saw the many variations of the spelling become "Morrison" although there were some families who preferred to use a single "r" spelling. The difference in spelling bears no special significance, just as in the spelling of Ker or Kerr, it simply became a matter of family preference.

The Fictional Origin

There is a popularly held fiction that the origin of the name Morrison in Scotland comes from the Isles of Lewis and Harris. However, the reality is the name Morrison only came to these Isles about 1640 when a family associated with the Lewis Brieves known as "McBreif" or "Clan na Breitheamh" adopted the name "Morrison" when one of this family, the Rev Donald Morrison, was appointed minister of Barvas [8]. The early history surrounding this family suggests they were involved in great bloodshed between the warring factions of MacLeods and MacCaulays.

The practice of adopting a new surname was relatively common in the 1600s and 1700s, particularly amongst Scots who migrated from the Isles and Highlands to the Lowlands, either searching for work or escaping oppression [9]. For many Lewis and Harris families, adopting a new surname was a way of disassociating themselves from clannish feuds that had dogged the Isles for most of the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. A classic example of "rebranding" a surname in this period involved Rob Roy MacGregor who changed to his mother's name Campbell when he was being pursued by the Duke of Montrose. Many other MacGregors were also forced to change their name when the clan was "proscribed" in 1603 [10].

The name Morrison is often associated with the Viking occupation of Scotland, particularly with one named "Olaf the Black" (1177-1237) [11]. This fabled Viking has no connection to the name Morrison. The names "Gillemorrie" and "MacGilleMhuire" are falsely claimed to be early Gaelic forms of Morrison descending from a Norseman named Leod. Morrison is not a translation of "MacGilleMhuire". The McBreifs, MacGillieMhuires and a family of Irish descent named O'Mhuirgheasain are unrelated families who Anglicised their names to Morrison at some time in the seventeenth century [12].

Another prominent fiction claims there was a migration from Lewis of some sixty "Morrison" families to the mainland region near Durness at an unspecified time who supposedly followed a Lewisman named Ay Mac Hormaid [13]. He is described as being a Morrison. As the myth is told, "*a handsome good-looking fellow*" [14] named Ay Mac Hormaid was reputed to have married the Bishop of Caithness' illegitimate daughter or sister and been given lands around Durness. This myth bears a striking resemblance to MacKay history where according to the *Blackcastle MS* [15], Iye Mackay's son Iye Mor Mackay, 2nd chief of Clan Mackay married a daughter of Walter de Baltrocin, the Bishop of Caithness, in 1263, and was given 12 davochs of land at Durness [16].

Whatever the origins were that brought about the sudden prominence of these newly rebranded Morrison families on Lewis and Harris will probably never be known. It is a tantalising enigma that will no doubt vex the many adherents who believe the Morrisons originated in Lewis and Harris. The consequential effect of the name change meant that these families were now able to trace their family trees back retrospectively, that is, they also changed the names of

their forebears to Morrison as well. Thus, according to Thomas (1876-78, p 508), "*Cain Macvurich (Cathan Mac Mhurich), was the first Morrison in Lewis*". Had the families rebranded themselves MacMurray instead of Morrison then this same person would have been claimed to be the first MacMurray. This 17th century rebranding has created an historical distortion of extraordinary dimensions.

Early Morrison Family Dynasties

The earliest family identified in historical Scottish records is referred to as the "Morrison of Prestongrange and Dairsie" which dates to 1537 in Edinburgh when John Morrison and his wife Beatrix Hill began a dynasty that lasted until 1791 when the last male member of the family, George Morrison, died. The Prestongrange Morrisons purchased part of the Barony of Prestongrange in Haddingtonshire from the the Ker's in 1609, then the full title in 1622 and held it until it was sold in 1746 following the financial ruin of Sir William Morrison. A cousin of the Prestongrange Morrisons, Sir George Morrison, bought the Dairsie estate in Fife from Sir John Spottiswood in 1646. Dairsie was later sold to Alexander Bruce of Broomhall in 1692.

The oldest continuing Morrison family in Scotland are the "Morrisons of Bognie". This family was established by Alexander Morrison and his wife Elizabeth Garden in 1635 when they acquired the lands of Bognie from Sir James Crichton in Aberdeenshire. This family has held continuous title to Bognie ever since with the current and 13th Baron being Alexander Morrison who succeeded his father Alexander Gordon Morrison in 2013. Another prominent Aberdeenshire Morrison family were known as the "Morrisons of Pitfour".

Tartans and Crests

The Morrisons have two tartans, one red and one green. Both tartans were reported by Charles Fergusson in 1879 as being "a beautiful red clan tartan, and a green hunting tartan" [17]. The green is more correctly known as the "Society Morrison" tartan and is based on the MacKay sett with the red stipe replacing the green through the blue centres. There are contradictory and differing accounts about the tartan origins but none have any factual evidence to support them. Both tartans were officially recognised by the Lord Lyon in 1968 [18].

The crest of the Clan Morrison Society of Scotland registered in 1919 features "*Argent three Saracens' heads coupéd conjoined in one neck one affrontée the others looking to the dexter and sinister proper between three foils slipped Vert two in chief and one in base*" [19], similar in design to that of the Morrisons of Prestongrange, Dairsie and Bognie.

The motto attached to this crest is *Pretio Prudentia Praestat* (In Price Prudence Predominates).

The Plant Emblem is Driftwood.

Many Scottish descendants in overseas countries have expressed an interest in clan associations. In 1965 an application was made to the Lord Lyon to recognise a Morrison "Chief". The person selected by the Lord Lyon was John Morrison from Ruchdi whose family traces back to the GilleMhoires of Lingay. The Morrison Chief's motto is *Teaghlach Phabbay*.

Footnotes

1 *Register of burgesses of guild and trade of the burgh of Aberdeen 1349-1631,*

and

Scottish Record Society, *Roll of Edinburgh Burgesses and Guild Bretheren, 1406-1700.*

2 Black, George F. (1946). *The Surnames of Scotland: Their Origin, Meaning, and History*, The New York Public Library, New York (see p 612).

and

Mitchell-Gill, A. J. (1913). *The Surname of Moir or More in Moir Genealogy and collateral lines in Moir*, Alexander L. *Moir Genealogy and Collateral Lines*, Union Printing Co., Lowell, Massachusetts (see p 16).

3 Nelson, P and Hinson, C. (2001). Yorkshire: Some of the Subsidy Rolls (Poll Tax) for the year 1379, *Yorkshire Archaeological and Topographical Journals*, with the agreement of the Yorkshire Archaeological Society, Geniuk

4 Fraser, William (1869). *The Cheifs of Colquhoun and their country*, Vol 2, Edinburgh.

5 Munro, A. M. (ed.). (1890). Register of Burgesses of the Burgh of Aberdeen, 1399-1631, Miscellany of the New Spalding Club. Vol 1.

6 Rogers, Rev Charles, (ed). (1879). *Rental Book of the Cistercian Abbey of Cupar-Angus with the Breviary of the Register*, Vol. 1, London.

7 Buchanan, William of Auchmar. (1723). An Account of the Origin of the MacMaurices, MacAndeoirs, MacChruiters, and MacGreeusichs, In *A Historical and Genealogical Essay Upon the Family and Surname of Buchanan*, William Auld, Turk's Close, Lawn-Market.

8 Scott, H. (1928). *Fasti Ecclesiae Scoticae The Succession of Ministers in the Church of Scotland from the Reformation*, Vol VII, Oliver and Boyd, Edinburgh.

and

MacCoinnich, A. (2015). Dùn Èistean: the historical background, c. 1493 – c. 1700. In: Barrowman, R.C. (ed.) *Dùn Èistean, Ness: The Excavation of a Clan Stronghold*. Acair Press: Stornoway, UK.

9 Scotland's People, "Scottish Surnames and Variants" (<http://www.scotlandspeople.gov.uk/content/help/index.aspx?r=551&560>)

10 Clan Gregor, From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia.

11 Morrison, Alick. (1956). *The Clan Morrison, Heritage of the Isles*, W and A K Johnston and G W Bacon Ltd, Edinburgh.

12 MacCoinnich, A. (2015). Dùn Èistean: the historical background, c. 1493 – c.1700. In: Barrowman, R.C. (ed.) *Dùn Èistean, Ness: The Excavation of a Clan Stronghold*. Acair Press: Stornoway, UK.

13 and 14 Thomas, F. W. L. (1876-78). Traditions of the Morrissions (Clan Mac Ghillemuire), Hereditary Judges of Lewis, *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries*, Volume 12, pp 503-556.

15 and 16 MacKay, Angus. (1906). *The Book of MacKay*, N. MacLeod, Edinburgh.

17 Mac Fhearghuis (Charles Fergusson). (1879). in "The Highlander," published at Inverness, Scotland, by John Murdoch.

18 Scobie, W. *Mysteries of the Morrison Tartans*. <http://www.tartansauthority.com> and Scobie, W. *Territorial Tartans*. <http://www.tartansauthority.com>

19 Fairbairn, James. (1905). *Crests of the families of Great Britain and Ireland*, T.C. and E.C. Jack, London.

References

Black, George F. (1946). *The Surnames of Scotland: Their Origin, Meaning, and History*, The New York Public Library, New York.

Buchanan, William of Auchmar. (1723). An Account of the Origin of the MacMaurices, MacAndeoirs, MacChruiters, and MacGreeusichs, In *A Historical and Genealogical Essay Upon the Family and Surname of Buchanan*, William Auld, Turk's Close, Lawn-Market.

Clan Gregor, From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia.

Fairbairn, James. (1905). *Crests of the families of Great Britain and Ireland, T.C. and E.C. Jack, London.*

Fraser, William (1869). *The Cheifs of Colquhoun and their country*, Vol 2, Edinburgh.

MacCoinnich, A. (2015). *Dùn Èistean: the historical background, c. 1493 – c. 1700*. In: Barrowman, R.C. (ed.) *Dùn Èistean, Ness: The Excavation of a Clan Stronghold*. Acair Press: Stornoway, UK.

MacKay, Angus. (1906). *The Book of MacKay*, N. MacLeod, Edinburgh.

Mitchell-Gill, A. J. (1913). The Surname of Moir or More in Moir Genealogy and collateral lines in Moir, Alexander L. *Moir Genealogy and Collateral Lines*, Union Printing Co., Lowell, Massachusetts.

Morrison, Alick. (1956). *The Clan Morrison, Heritage of the Isles*, W and A K Johnston and G W Bacon Ltd, Edinburgh.

Munro, A. M. (ed.). (1890). *Register of Burgesses of the Burgh of Aberdeen, 1399-1631*, Miscellany of the New Spalding Club. Vol 1.

Nelson, P and Hinson, C. (2001). Yorkshire: Some of the Subsidy Rolls (Poll Tax) for the year 1379, *Yorkshire Archaeological and Topographical Journals*, with the agreement of the Yorkshire Archaeological Society, Geniuk.

Register of burgesses of guild and trade of the burgh of Aberdeen 1349-1631.

Rogers, Rev Charles, (ed). (1879). *Rental Book of the Cistercian Abbey of Cupar-Angus with the Breviary of the Register, Vol. 1*, London.

Scobie, W. *Mysteries of the Morrison Tartans*. <http://www.tartansauthority.com>

Scobie, W. *Territorial Tartans*. <http://www.tartansauthority.com>

Scotland's People, "Scottish Surnames and Variants" (<http://www.scotlandspeople.gov.uk/content/help/index.aspx?r=551&560>)

Scott, H. (1928). *Fasti Ecclesiae Scoticae The Succession of Ministers in the Church of Scotland from the Reformation*, Vol VII, Oliver and Boyd, Edinburgh.

Scottish Record Society Roll of Edinburgh Burgesses and Guild Bretheren, 1406-1700.

Thomas, F. W. L. (1876-78). Traditions of the Morrissions (Clan Mac Ghillemhuire), Hereditary Judges of Lewis, *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries*, Volume 12, pp 503-556.

Alexander W Morrison, May 2016