

The Mysterious McOran-Campbells

By
Malcolm Lobban

Back in November 1923, the *Oban Times* ran a story on the McOran-Campbells, said to be a collateral branch of the Melfort Campbells, who moved from Argyll to Menteith sometime during the mid-17th century. A prominent descendant of this family was Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman, British prime minister (1905-1908).

The story of this small clan is a strange one, which was largely 'put about' by Campbell historians. Like most clan histories, written by 'themselves', there is always the tendency to slant available information in their own direction. My own source comes from a slim volume in Dumbarton Library entitled *The Campbells of Stracathro and Tullichewan*, which appears to have been published for private circulation as an afterthought to *The History of the Campbells of Melfort*, 1882.¹

The story begins sometime around 1660, when a younger son of the Laird of Melfort is alleged to have caused the accidental death of a young lad named McColl. Tradition is not clear on the circumstances surrounding the incident, other than that it may have occurred during a clan gathering. The McColls seemed to be known as followers of the Campbells.

The father of the dead youth apportioned no blame on young Campbell and did much to screen him from other more irate McColls. However, the dead boy's kinsmen became so incensed as to seek retribution, which resulted in the laird's son leaving Melfort. He is said to have travelled to the Lowlands, where he placed himself under the protection of the Earl of Menteith, who apparently befriended the young fugitive, and even took him as a companion during his visits around his estates. If the date is accurate, the earl in question would be William Graham, 8th Earl of Airth and Menteith.

During one such trip with the earl the youth is said to have met and fallen in love with Nancy Haldane, a relative of John Haldane of Lanrick, with whom he eloped and married (c.1670-75, according to the Campbell account). About this time he also adopted the surname McOran.

Thereafter the newly-weds are said to have settled on the small estate (or farm) called Inchanoch, Port of Menteith parish, which they initially held rent-free, at the insistence of their noble benefactor.

Although with a new name and removed from Argyll, McOran appears not to have forgotten his true allegiance and identity. Two fields in Inchanoch were known, it is said, as Easter-Lorn and Wester-Lorn, and it seems that Melfort Campbells were frequent visitors to Menteith.

The Campbell account does not identify the young exile by first name, or the name of his immediate heir in Inchanoch. The first of the family to be so identified is James McOran (1709-1790) who married Janet McKerchar and held a lease from Graham of Gartmore. His son, also James (1752-1831)

married Helen, daughter of John Forrester of Frew, near Kippen. They surrendered the lease in 1805, just two years after the property had been sold to the Graham-Shepherds of Rednock (an old barony in Menteith), at which time Inchanoch seems to have been incorporated into the Rednock estate, which may explain why the name no longer appears in modern maps of the area.

In 1805 James McOran and his family moved to Glasgow where they became successful in commerce ~ and it was here that they reverted back to their original Campbell surname. Old McOran's eldest son, John Campbell (1786-1872) married Mary Kennedy and finally settled in Fonda, New York State, USA.

James McOran's second son, James Campbell of Stracathro (1790-1872), became a successful merchant, and was knighted in 1842 when he became Lord Provost of Glasgow. He married Janet Bannerman, daughter of a wealthy businessman, and their son was Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman, mentioned earlier.

Meanwhile Old McOran's third son, William Campbell, shared the fortunes of partnership with his brother James. In 1841 he bought the Tullichewan estate, Dunbartonshire, thereby founding a new dynasty ~ an offspring of which later took the surname McOran-Campbell.

The strange thing about this clan is that they appear not to have used their adopted name as a mere alias. Throughout their years in Menteith, it is said, they were never addressed as Campbells. A local saying states that "*there has never been a Campbell in Inchanoch or a McOran out of it!*"²

When a later member of the Stracathro family applied to the registrar for information from the parish records of Port of Menteith, he discovered the birth entry "*son of James McCorran (as then known)*", with no mention of the name Campbell.

The old estate of Tullichewan, in the Vale of Leven, is now intersected by a modern by-pass road (A82) and much of the land has been given over to housing development. Tullichewan Castle, most of which was demolished during the 1960s, can still be seen overlooking the vale. It was the Tullichewan Campbells who carried out most of the research into the McOran tradition.

Part of this research refers to a letter from a John McCaig in Oban; dated 20 September 1875 about an interview he conducted with a ninety-year-old resident, Mrs. McColl in Melfort, Argyllshire. It concerns the killing of the young McColl lad by the Laird of Melfort's son, part of which reads: "*...the outcry caused Campbell to leave the country never to return. The Campbells of Melfort showed much kindness to the lad's family for some generations, till the last of them died, twenty or twenty-five years ago.*"³

The Tullichewan Campbells were apparently satisfied to learn that their illustrious forebear flourished around 1660, and that he married Nancy Haldane some 10 or 15 years after his arrival in Menteith. They appear also to have accepted a tradition that the McOran name was adopted out of respect for the young exile's father, believed to be Dugald Campbell.⁴ This laird, because of his impeccable character is said to have rejoiced under the nickname 'Dunchorran' (Gaelic '*duin*' = man and '*coir*' = excellent or honest).

This would seem to be supported by yet another letter, this time believed to be among the papers of the Haldanes of Lanrick, dated 1st November 1884 written by a Miss C. McNab and addressed to a Haldane descendant, part of which reads:

“...One of the Campbells of Melfort was distinguished by the name of Honest Man ~ in Gaelic Dunchorran. His son fought a duel and had slain the antagonist, consequently he was obliged to fly from Argyllshire. He took refuge in this part of the country [Menteith] ...the Earl befriended him and had him in his house, took him to visit with him all over the country and made him give up the name Campbell, and take that of McCorran after the Honest Man...”⁵

This would imply that the McOran name had been introduced to Menteith around 1660 by this unfortunate lad from Melfort. Indeed, the entire story is one of tragedy, romance, hard work and the traditional ‘they all lived happily ever after!’ But the story appears to be flawed!

The Investigation

Doubt first creeps in with the suggestion that the young Campbell received the patronage of the 8th Earl of Airth and Menteith. However, it is well recorded that this nobleman was so impoverished that he was obliged to borrow regalia from fellow peers in order to attend Parliament. Speaking of his numerous creditors, he wrote in 1677: (sic) “*I am warpt in a laberinth of almost never-ending trouble!*”⁶ It seems highly unlikely that such a ‘poor soul’ would be in a position to offer lands rent-free, more especially to a Campbell, whose own kinsmen were then at the zenith of their power and influence.

My own inquiries around Port of Menteith revealed that few, if any, of the then residents (1993) knew of a place named Inchanoch, nor did the local saying described earlier fall from their lips. However, one elderly gentleman, whose family has farmed in the area for many years, directed me to a plot of land known to him as ‘Inchnock’, which I thought might possibly be a modern contraction of the original name. The site was located beside the A81 main road, about a half mile east of Port of Menteith village (O.S. Sheet 57, grid ref 565015). It is now heavily wooded, but close to the road a considerable pile of stones can be seen among the undergrowth which might just be the remains of a dwelling house.

Later at Stirling Public Library I was shown Stobie’s Map of the area (1783) which clearly shows an Easter and Wester ‘Unchenoch’ straddling the existing main road and including the plot described to me as Inchnock. This, I am certain is the correct area.⁷

Nevertheless, doubt is further cast concerning the arrival of the McOran name into Menteith. In G.F. Black’s *The Surnames of Scotland* we find a ‘*Janet McCorrane in Ynschannoch, parish of Port [Menteith] 1661*’.⁸ Who then was this lady who seems to have been established there before or about the time the Campbell fugitive arrived in Menteith? Other entries in the same volume include ‘*Forsyth McCorane as tenant*’ at Cessintully in 1480 (only 5 miles to the east). Indeed, the name by various spellings is on record

long before Campbell’s alleged appearance. Not far from Port of Menteith there is a farm now styled McCorriston which in 1587 was named ‘McCorranstoun’.⁹ And, searching for an Argyll connection, I found ‘*Dougall McCorran*’ in Fernoch, parish of Kilmelford, 1698. Dr. G. F. Black suggests the name may be derived from MacOdhrain or MacGille-Odhrain, son of the gillie of St. Oran, of the old Celtic clergy who died c. 548.

So the name McOran was well established in the Menteith district long before the period of the Honest Man of Melfort and his fugitive son. A good deal of the Campbell account is accurate and MacOrans *did* occupy Inchanoch. I found, in addition to their family tree, one ‘*Donald McCooran*’ who married ‘*Agnes Haddane*’, parish of Port, c. 1700.¹⁰

My own thoughts are that these McOrans may have been among the host of Highland refugees who were brought in to drain and reclaim arable land from the extensive bog and moss area in the old Menteith lands.

Perhaps the story of the McOran-Campbells’ origin is correct in context, but confused by time scale. Perhaps it all took place much earlier than 1660, which would account for the name’s obvious presence in Menteith before that date.

It could be that when later members of the family became more prosperous they, like so many other families born of humble stock, did what they could to create a ‘respectable’ family tree.

The Tullichewan researchers might have stumbled on a piece of Melfort folklore which, after some slight modification, gave them a link to the noble Campbells of Argyll which, once accepted and if repeated often enough, no concerted effort would be made to verify the claim!

Where have all the McOrans gone? Their ancient name occupies little space in current telephone directories ~ have they all become Campbells?

NOTES.

1. ‘*The Campbells of Stracathro and of Tullichewan*’ was produced as a supplement to Miss M.O. Campbell’s ‘*Memorial History of the Campbells of Melfort*’ (London: Simmons & Botten, 1882).

2. ‘*The Campbells of Stracathro*, p 4

3. *Ibid.*, p 5

4. *Ibid.*, p 8. The Campbells suggest that the young exile was the son of ‘Dougal Campbell and his wife Isabella’. This may refer to those named in a sasine dated 9 April 1669 of the lands of Fernoch and Ardinsture in the lordship of Melfort, where I note the names “*Dougal Campbell, eldest lawful son to John Campbell of Kenmoir*” and his spouse “*Isabel Campbell*”. It would appear that Melfort (a barony) was sometimes referred to as ‘Kenmoir’. (Argyll sasines, vol xxi, 3rd series, No. 1472).

5 *Ibid.*, p 6

6. R.B. Cunninghame Graham. “*Notes on the District of Menteith for Tourists and Others*” pp 45, 49.

7. J. Stobie. Map: “*Perthshire and Clackmannan*” (London, 1783)

8. George F. Black: “*The Surnames of Scotland*” (New York 1946)

9. “*Red Book of Menteith*, vol I, p 545

10. International Genealogical Index (Mormon Church) (1988), F.0481, Perthshire.