

Finding Roots – The MacInnes DNA Project

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I'm not a genealogist and while interested in my roots, I had at best, made only a shallow effort to explore my lineage. My understanding of the history of the MacInnes surname was limited to pictures on coasters and tidbits on Kinlochaline Castle and the Glencoe Massacre.

I remember as a child we had a book on the Clans of the Highlands and the tartans of the clans and its evocation of a lifestyle I could only imagine. Of course in reality, it could only be imagined as it did not exist, but it is the nature of our brains to fill in the gaps as best we can and rely on the information at hand.

So I could picture all of us MacInnes' hanging around Kinlochaline Castle in our kilts, straw hanging from our lips, taking in the day. Whenever I thought about how people lived, what they ate, when they ate, what work, etc., there's little information aside from pictures of crofters with large wooden hoes or stomping potatoes and banging laundry on rocks.

Ridiculous, I know, but that is how shallow my research was. However, last spring I ruptured a tendon in my knee and was laid up for a couple of months and confined to a room with my computer.

I had been to the www.macinnes.org website a year earlier and checked in again to see if there was any more on Kinlochaline Castle and other events. There I saw a link to the DNA testing project.

Being an engineer/scientist, I guess the high tech bug got me and I applied for the kit.

The testing organization received my kit on June 8 and on July 22, I received the following message: "*A Y-DNA25 match has been found between you and another person(s) in the Family Tree DNA database.*" An exact match! This meant that I shared a common male ancestor with another person within the last few hundred years. It also revealed that we shared 'The Viking Gene' of the Norsemen of the Hebrides and the Northern Isles. But who was the person with the identical DNA match?

That person turned out to be Donald MacInnes from Scotland, the International Adjutant of The International Association of Clan MacInnes. Donald's ancestors are from Morvern and the Isles of Mull and Iona. My own ancestors were from Ballachulish just across Loch Linnhe from the Morvern. From then on I've been on a steep and rewarding learning curve.

Armed with my sister's research, in which she was able to trace our ancestry to our great great-grandfather in the 1840's in Ballachulish and Glencoe. I was able to give Donald and Colin McInnes our Scottish Secretary some information on my background hoping they would be able to identify a most recent common ancestor.

While we do not yet have that, Donald has helped gain some of the deeper understanding we probably all crave. In fact, Donald and Colin were able to link me up with living kinfolk in the village of Ballachulish and residing in the west coast port of Oban - the Gateway to the Isles.

I have also discovered that I am related to member Alasdair MacInnes Campbell of Fort William whose mother is a 'double' MacInnes. Such is the power of networking. I think this DNA project will ultimately lead to a great many more clan connections being found among our widely dispersed members.

I knew that my grandfather James and his wife Agnes moved to Canada around 1915 from Glasgow in Scotland.

I also knew that my grandfather, James, was born in Carnoch (Glencoe Village) and his father Hugh, in nearby Tigh Phuist (also spelled Tay Fruist, or Tigh-Phuirt, depending on the source) and that they were quarry workers.

The 'quarry' was the famous slate quarries of Ballachulish overlooking the holy burial Isle of Eilean Munda where many of our MacInnes clansfolk sleep, amidst the waters of Loch Levin. It has been good to find out that my ancestors rest on this beautiful and sacred island among their MacInnes kinsfolk.

The quarries were first opened in 1693 – the year following the bloody 'Massacre of Glencoe.' The beautiful slate monuments of Eilean Munda and St John's Church in Ballachulish are from these quarries.

At one time the quarries employed over 500 workers – many of them MacInneses – including, a MacInnes, as the manager of the quarries.

James' father Hugh was listed in the census as a quarry worker at the age of 14 but later as a shoemaker. We know from the records that a Donald MacInnes from Glencoe made the essential 'tackety boots' for the quarry workers – we now believe Hugh to be a member of that family.

I had the names of the brothers and sisters of Hugh and knew Hugh's father was Duncan and his wife was Christine.

Since then, on information contained in the records of St John's Church at Ballachulish, we have now gone back two more generations to Duncan's father, Dugald, and his mother Catherine Johnston and further back to Dugald's parents, John MacInnes and Kate Rankin.

We have also learned that Dugald drowned at Ballachulish ferry and is buried with members of his family on the burial Isle of Eilean Munda. Dugald and Catherine lived in Callart, on the north side of Loch Levin (opposite Ballachulish) and moved to Tigh Phuirst in the 1820's.

I've learned many other details as well but the most rewarding aspect has been the ability to delve into the local MacInnes history of my ancestors with Donald MacInnes, Colin MacInnes, Alasdair MacInnes Campbell, and several others.

Donald has stirred my imagination in many ways as well. In learning Dugald was drowned at Ballachulish, Donald raised the possibility he was one of the MacInnes families of ferrymasters at Ballachulish and related the story of the ferrymaster Archibald MacInnes whose son fought with the 'James of the Glen' at Culloden and died on that bloody field.

It was the painful duty of poor Archibald to have to ferry James of the Glen to his hanging and gibbeting at Ballachulish for the killing of Colin Campbell of Glenure, an incident known as 'The Appin Murder.' The real killer escaped and James of the Glen was made to pay the price. As a sign of the enmity that existed towards the Jacobite Highlanders, James' skeletal remains were gibbeted at the Ballachulish site under guard for years, within the sight of the homes of two of his sisters. The Appin Murder was the backdrop used by Robert Louis Stevenson in the book 'Kidnapped.'

One tale says that it was the sons of Anna MacInnes of Morvern who finally secreted the remains away to a Christian burial at Kiel Church in Appin when strong currents prevented the burial taking place on Eilean Munda.

There's even more. A young girl found the murder weapon, her name – Janet MacInnes in the hollow of a large elder tree growing on the grounds of the Ballachulish House. She took the gun to old Stewart of Ballachulish who told her "‘S e sin gunne dubh a' mhi-fhortain, a Sheonaidh" (That is the black gun of misfortune, Janet). Indeed. The gun is a Spanish made gun, now property of the West Highland Museum at Fort William. And it was a MacInnes family secret, kept for generations, as to the identity of the real killer.

The Ballachulish quarry is without equal for the quality of the slate and the length of operation. It closed in 1955. The fact is that the slate is the best slate for durability by a factor of 2, according the Bureau of Mining. It also could be split paper-thin and was favored for chalkboards. Men (and some boys) worked in crew of 6. Each crew was given 40 feet of a level to work with.

At its peak, Ballachulish produced an astonishing 24 million slates with just under 600 men. This also included support workers such as cobblers and blacksmiths. The tools all have Gaelic names and Gaelic was commonly spoken. In fact, I have since learned that Tigh Phuist was a Gaelic speaking community. To my embarrassment, I had no idea of the importance of Gaelic to my family.

Just to keep my imagination going I've learned some of the lore of the Glencoe area, known as the source of Ossian and Fingal and Celtic lore; Highland folklore going back over 2000 years and passed down by word of mouth in the oral tradition. There is so much to learn.

I have learned much, much, more but you see the level and richness of the information available through our network. We MacInneses, around the world, may hold the key to opening a vast store of information in our network.

I think, however, even more valuable has been the ability to discuss our ancestors with others of like descent and put some flesh on the bones of our memories. One of the most interesting things I experienced was when I sent out a picture of my grandfather. Many noticed similarities in their own families and I think what we all saw was the strength of character and intensity of life that the Highlanders were well known for.

When you participate in the DNA testing you will find that there are three haplogroups in the Clan MacInnes (so far). The haplogroup refers to mutations in the male chromosome that gets passed down through male heirs. The fact that there are three haplogroups is testimony to the size, age and power of the clan. We go back to the very beginning of Scotland and have a large place in the history of the Highlands. I hope we continue to build our networks and revel in the re-ascension of our Clan MacInnes.

When I was quite young a stanza from a famous poem by Robert Burns from the poem "Scots Wha Hae Wi' Wallace Bled", lit up my pride in being of Scottish descent:

Scots, wha hae wi' Wallace bled,
Scots, wham Bruce has aften led,
Welcome to your gory bed,
Or to victory!

Its heady stuff, but that is the stock we come from.