

## MACNEILL.

Source: The Scottish Highlands, Highland Clans and Highland Regiments, Volume II (of 2) by Sir John Scott Keltie

The Macneills consisted of two independent branches, the Macneills of Barra and the Macneills of Gigha, said to be descended from brothers. Their badge was the sea ware, but<sup>[163]</sup> they had different armorial bearings, and from this circumstance, joined to the fact that they were often opposed to each other in the clan fights of the period, and that the Christian names of the one, with the exception of Neill, were not used by the other, Mr Gregory thinks the tradition of their common descent erroneous. Part of their possessions were completely separated, and situated at a considerable distance from the rest.

The clan Neill were among the secondary vassal tribes of the lords of the Isles, and its heads appear to have been of Norse or Danish origin. Mr Smibert thinks this probable from the fact that the Macneills were lords of Castle Swen, plainly a Norse term. "The clan," he says,<sup>[165]</sup> "was in any case largely Gaelic, to a certainty. We speak of the fundamental line of the chiefs mainly, when we say that the Macneills appear to have at least shared the blood of the old Scandinavian inhabitants of the western islands. The names of those of the race first found in history are partly indicative of such a lineage. The isle of Barra and certain lands in Uist were chartered to a Macneill in 1427; and in 1472, a charter of the Macdonald family is witnessed by Hector Mactorquil Macneill, keeper of Castle Swen. The appellation 'Mac-Torquil,' half Gaelic, half Norse, speaks strongly in favour of the supposition that the two races were at this very time in the act of blending with one people. After all, we proceed not beyond the conclusion, that, by heirs male or heirs female, the founders of the house possessed a sprinkling of the blood of the ancient Norwegian occupants of the western isles and coasts, interfused with that of the native Gael of Albyn, and also of the Celtic visitants from Ireland. The proportion of Celtic blood, beyond doubt, is far the largest in the veins of the clan generally."

About the beginning of the 15th century, the Macneills were a considerable clan in Knapdale, Argyleshire. As this district was not then included in the sheriffdom of Argyle, it is probable that their ancestor had consented to hold his lands of the crown.

The first of the family on record is Nigellus Og, who obtained from Robert Bruce a charter of Barra and some lands in Kintyre. His great-grandson, Gilleonan Roderick Muchard Macneill, in 1427, received from Alexander, Lord of the Isles, a charter of that island. In the same charter were included the lands of Boisdale in South Uist, which lies about eight miles distant from Barra. With John Garve Maclean he disputed the possession of that island, and was killed by him in Coll. His grandson, Gilleonan, took part with John, the old Lord of the Isles, against his turbulent son, Angus, and fought on his side at the battle of Bloody Bay. He was chief of this sept or division of the Macneills in 1493, at the forfeiture of the lordship of the Isles.

The Gigha Macneills are supposed to have sprung from Torquil Macneill, designated in his charter, "filius Nigelli," who, in the early part of the 15th century, received from the Lord of the Isles a charter of the lands of Gigha and Taynish, with the constabulary of Castle Sweyn, in Knapdale. He had two sons, Neill his heir, and Hector, ancestor of the family of Taynish. Malcolm Macneill of Gigha, the son of Neill, who is first mentioned in 1478, was chief of this sept of the Macneills in 1493. After that period the Gigha branch followed the banner of Macdonald of Isla and Kintyre, while the Barra Macneills ranged themselves under that of Maclean of Dowart.

In 1545 Gilliganan Macneill of Barra was one of the barons and council of the Isles who accompanied Donald Dubh, styling himself Lord of the Isles and Earl of Ross, to Ireland, to swear allegiance to the king of England. His elder son, Roderick or Ruari Macneill, was killed at the battle of Glenlivet, by a shot from a fieldpiece, on 3d Oct. 1594. He left three sons—Roderick, his heir, called Ruari the turbulent, John, and Murdo. During the memorable and most disastrous feud which happened between the Macleans and the Macdonalds at this period, the Barra Macneills and

the Gigha branch of the same clan fought on different sides.

The Macneills of Barra were expert seamen, and did not scruple to act as pirates upon occasion. An English ship having been[164] seized off the island of Barra by Ruari the turbulent, Queen Elizabeth complained of this act of piracy. The laird of Barra was in consequence summoned to appear at Edinburgh, to answer for his conduct, but he treated the summons with contempt. All the attempts made to apprehend him proving unsuccessful, Mackenzie, tutor of Kintail, undertook to effect his capture by a stratagem frequently put in practice against the island chiefs when suspecting no hostile design. Under the pretence of a friendly visit, he arrived at Macneill's castle of Chisamul (pronounced Kisimul), the ruins of which stand on an insulated rock in Castlebay, on the south-east end of Barra, and invited him and all his attendants on board his vessel. There they were well plied with liquor, until they were all overpowered with it. The chief's followers were then sent on shore, while he himself was carried a prisoner to Edinburgh. Being put upon his trial, he confessed his seizure of the English ship, but pleaded in excuse that he thought himself bound by his loyalty to avenge, by every means in his power, the fate of his majesty's mother, so cruelly put to death by the queen of England. This politic answer procured his pardon, but his estate was forfeited, and given to the tutor of Kintail. The latter restored it to its owner, on condition of his holding it of him, and paying him sixty merks Scots, as a yearly feu duty. It had previously been held of the crown. Some time thereafter Sir James Macdonald of Sleat married a daughter of the tutor of Kintail, who made over the superiority to his son-in-law, and it is now possessed by Lord Macdonald, the representative of the house of Sleat.

The old chief of Barra, Ruari the turbulent, had several sons by a lady of the family of Maclean, with whom, according to an ancient practice in the Highlands, he had handfasted, instead of marrying her. He afterwards married a sister of the captain of the Clanranald, and by her also he had sons. To exclude the senior family from the succession, the captain of the Clanranald took the part of his nephews, whom he declared to be the only legitimate sons of the Barra chief. Having apprehended the eldest son of the first family for having been concerned in the piratical seizure of a ship of Bourdeaux, he conveyed him to Edinburgh for trial, but he died there soon after. His brothers-german, in revenge, assisted by Maclean of Dowart, seized Neill Macneill, the eldest son of the second family, and sent him to Edinburgh, to be tried as an actor in the piracy of the same Bourdeaux ship; and, thinking that their father was too partial to their half brothers, they also seized the old chief, and placed him in irons. Neill Macneill, called Weyislache, was found innocent, and liberated through the influence of his uncle. Barra's elder sons, on being charged to exhibit their father before the privy council, refused, on which they were proclaimed rebels, and commission was given to the captain of the Clanranald against them. In consequence of these proceedings, which occurred about 1613, Clanranald was enabled to secure the peaceable succession of his nephew to the estate of Barra, on the death of his father, which happened soon after.[166]

The island of Barra and the adjacent isles are still possessed by the descendant and representative of the family of Macneill. Their feudal castle of Chisamul has been already mentioned. It is a building of hexagonal form, strongly built, with a wall above thirty feet high, and anchorage for small vessels on every side of it. Martin, who visited Barra in 1703, in his *Description of the Western Islands*, says that the Highland Chroniclers or sennachies alleged that the then chief of Barra was the 34th lineal descendant from the first Macneill who had held it. He relates that the inhabitants of this and the other islands belonging to Macneill were in the custom of applying to him for wives and husbands, when he named the persons most suitable for them, and gave them a bottle of strong waters for the marriage feast.

The chief of the Macneills of Gigha, in the first half of the 16th century, was Neill Macneill, who was killed, with many gentlemen of his tribe, in 1530, in a feud with Allan Maclean of Torlusk, called Ailen nan Sop, brother of Maclean of Dowart. His only daughter, Annabella, made over the lands of Gigha to her natural brother, Neill. He sold Gigha to[165] James Macdonald of Isla in 1554, and died without legitimate issue in the latter part of the reign of Queen Mary.

On the extinction of the direct male line, Neill Macneill vic Eachan, who had obtained the lands of Taynish, became heir male of the family. His descendant, Hector Macneill of Taynish, purchased in 1590 the island of Gigha from John Campbell of Calder, who had acquired it from Macdonald of Isla, so that it again became the property of a Macneill.



The estates of Gigha and Taynish were possessed by his descendants till 1780, when the former was sold to Macneill of Colonsay, a cadet of the family.

The representative of the male line of the Macneills of Taynish and Gigha, Roger Hamilton Macneill of Taynish, married Elizabeth, daughter and heiress of Hamilton Price, Esq. of Raploch, Lanarkshire, with whom he got that estate, and assumed, in consequence, the name of Hamilton. His descendants are now designated of Raploch.

The principal cadets of the Gigha Macneills, besides the Taynish family, were those of Gallochallie, Carskeay, and Tirfergus. Torquil, a younger son of Lachlan Macneill Buy of Tirfergus, acquired the estate of Ugadale in Argyleshire, by marriage with the heiress of the Mackays in the end of the 17th century. The present proprietor spells his name Macneal. From Malcolm Beg Macneill, celebrated in Highland tradition for his extraordinary prowess and great strength, son of John Oig Macneill of Gallochallie, in the reign of James VI., sprung the Macneills of Arichonan. Malcolm's only son, Neill Oig, had two sons, John, who succeeded him, and Donald Macneill of Crerar, ancestor of the Macneills of Colonsay, now the possessors of Gigha. Many cadets of the Macneills of Gigha settled in the north of Ireland.

Both branches of the clan Neill laid claim to the chiefship. According to tradition, it has belonged, since the middle of the 16th century, to the house of Barra. Under the date of 1550, a letter appears in the register of the privy council, addressed to "Torkill Macneill, chief and principal of the clan and surname of Macnelis." Mr Skene conjectures this Torkill to have been the hereditary keeper of Castle Sweyn, and connected with neither branch of the Macneills. He is said, however, to have been the brother of Neill Macneill of Gigha, killed in 1530, as above mentioned, and to have, on his brother's death, obtained a grant of the non-entries of Gigha as representative of the family. If this be correct, according to the above designation, the chiefship was in the Gigha line. Torquil appears to have died without leaving any direct succession.

The first of the family of Colonsay, Donald Macneill of Crerar, in South Knapdale, exchanged that estate in 1700, with the Duke of Argyll, for the islands of Colonsay and Oronsay. The old possessors of these two islands, which are only separated by a narrow sound, dry at low water, were the Macduffies or Macphies. Donald's great-grandson, Archibald Macneill of Colonsay, sold that island to his cousin, John Macneill, who married Hester, daughter of Duncan Macneill of Dunmore, and had six sons. His eldest son, Alexander, younger of Colonsay, became the purchaser of Gigha. Two of his other sons, Duncan, Lord Colonsay, and Sir John Macneill, have distinguished themselves, the one as a lawyer and judge, and the other as a diplomatist.