

THE IRISH CHIEFS

After the tragic Battle of Culloden in 1746 the Scottish clan system was doomed. Around 1753 the last chief of the Macnachtan Clan, John McNaughton, died without issue. Eventually, in 1818, the arms of the chief were conferred on Edmond Alexander Macnaghten of Beardville, County Antrim, in Ireland, by the Lyon Court, the heraldic authority for Scotland. When Edmond died in 1832 the chieftanship passed to his younger brother, Francis Workman Macnaghten. In 1809 Francis had been appointed a judge of the Supreme Court in Madras, India and was simultaneously knighted. On 16 July 1836 he was created a baronet, an hereditary title awarded by the British crown that ranks between a baron and a knight and entitles the holder to the title of Sir. The chieftanship of the Clan Macnachtan and the Macnaghten baronetcy have been handed down in the Macnaghten family ever since.

The first son of Francis Workman Macnaghten, Edmund Charles Macnaghten, became the 2nd Baronet. Edmund's first son, Francis Edmund Macnaghten, 3rd Baronet, became the third Chief in the Macnaghten family. The second son, Edward Macnaghten, succeeded his brother as 4th Baronet and Chief. Edward was elected to the British House of Commons in 1880, received a life peerage as Baron Macnaghten of Runkerry, County Antrim in 1887, and successive knighthoods in 1902 and 1911. Edward's fourth son, Malcolm Martin Macnaghten, had a son Antony Macnaghten, whose first-born, Patrick Alexander Macnaghten, 11th Baronet, was Chief of the Clan Macnachtan from 1972 to 2007. The fourth son of Francis Workman Macnaghten, Elliot Macnaghten (1807-1888), was born in Ireland and died at Ovingdean in Sussex. His sixth son, Melville Leslie Macnaghten (1853-1921) was the father of Christabel Mary Melville Macnaghten, who later became Lady Aberconway.

CHRISTABEL LADY ABERCONWAY

Christabel Mary Melville Macnaghten (Fig. 1) was born on 12 December 1890. In 1899, when she was 9, she was best friends with Josephine, daughter of Rudyard Kipling, and Kipling wrote a poem "The Way Through the Woods" after talking with the young Christabel about the New Forest [2].



At age 19, Christabel married Henry Duncan "Harry" McLaren (1879-1953), son of Charles McLaren (1850-1934), a Scottish Liberal politician and jurist. In 1880, Charles was elected to the British House of Commons. In 1877 he married Laura Pochin who in 1895 inherited the Bodnant Estate on the River Conwy in Wales, twelve miles northeast of Bangor. In 1902 Charles became Sir Charles McLaren, Baronet of Bodnant. In 1911 he was created Baron Aberconway by Lloyd George for political services. He chose "Aberconway" because it is Welsh for "at the mouth of the Conwy." Harry became a successful industrialist and between 1920 and 1922, had constructed at 38 South Street in Mayfair, London, a neo-Georgian mansion of 22,788 sq. ft. with a southerly aspect over and access into one of Mayfair's secret gardens, in the center of the block; they lived there until 1939. On August 26, 2007, the Sunday Times reported that the property was for sale at £46 million, about \$90 million U.S.—"one of the most expensive properties for sale in London" [3].

Figure 1. Photograph by Cecil Beaton of Christabel Lady Aberconway with her cat.

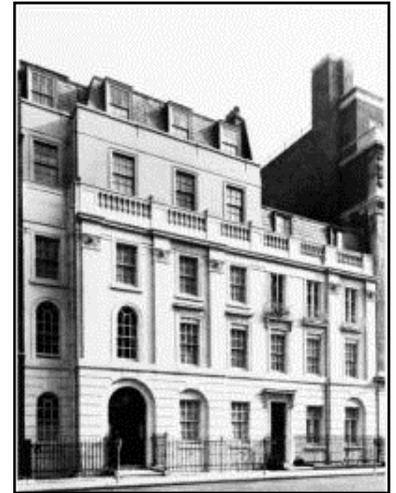
In 1929 William Walton—who became Sir William Walton in 1951—wrote his *Viola Concerto*, which catapulted him to the forefront of British classical music, its bittersweet melancholy proving quite popular; it remains a cornerstone of the solo viola repertoire. The concerto is dedicated "to Christabel" and probably records feelings engendered by Walton's unrequited passion for Christabel, Lady Aberconway, who remained a lifelong friend. During the 1920s, Walton lodged with the literary Sitwell siblings—Sacheverell, Osbert and Edith—and composed in their attic.

Harry McLaren developed and managed the Bodnant Garden for fifty years, most notably the five great terraces facing Snowdonia. He became 2nd Lord Aberconway on his father's death in 1934. When he became President of the Royal Horticultural Show he had the privilege of taking King George V and Queen Mary around the Chelsea Flower Show. The King was not as interested in flowers as the Queen so Christabel struck up a friendship to keep him amused. The Prince of Wales, later Edward VIII, stayed a night with the Aberconways at the Bodnant Estate. A few days before Britain declared war on Germany, Samuel Courtauld, who was Chairman of the Board of Trustees for the National Gallery, was spending the weekend at Bodnant seeking sanctuary for the pictures from the National Gallery, when Harry suggested a disused Welsh slate mine, and this solution was adopted. [I drove through this area in 1965 and strangely enough my most vivid memory is of looking into a disused slate mine].

In 1932, after the death of his wife, Samuel Courtauld purchased No. 12 North Audley Street and also acquired the lease of No. 11. On his death in 1947, Courtauld bequeathed both houses to Lady Aberconway, who had first drawn his attention to No. 12. Hence the two houses were reunited in 1948-49 (Fig. 2). Christabel moved in about 1950; Harry died in 1953; she lived in No. 12 until her death in 1974.

E. V Thaw [1] says: “Some of Samuel Courtauld’s collection was divided among the family, some of it was sold, and much of it was given to a great lady named Christabel Aberconway, who became, apparently, more than just a friend to Courtauld in his later years. Lady Aberconway’s part of the division included several masterpieces, including Picasso’s 1901 painting of a little child holding a pigeon, which many of us grew up knowing, as it was the cover illustration of a famous coffee-table survey of modern art published shortly after the Second World War by Albert Skira. This Picasso ... [is] ... on long-term loan at London’s National Gallery.” Seven other works are on long-term loan to the Courtauld Galleries.

Figure 2. Nos. 11 and 12 North Audley Street, London; front elevation ca. 1820 with later additions, in 1962 (Ref. 4).



In her memoir [2] at age 76, Christabel speaks fondly of her friendships and meetings with numerous celebrities, artists and writers, including H. G. Wells, Osbert Sitwell, Artur Rubenstein, Samuel Courtauld, Cecil Beaton, Max Beerbohm and Augustus John. One of the people she refers to often is Oscar Wilde.

OSCAR WILDE

Oscar Wilde, playwright, novelist, poet and author of short stories was born in Dublin, Ireland, in 1854 (Fig. 3). He left Ireland in 1878, visited Paris and the United States and married Constance Lloyd in 1884. They had two sons, Cyril, born in 1885, and Vyvyan, born in 1886, and lived at No. 34 Tite Street, Chelsea, London, until Oscar left England in 1895. Wilde, known for his barbed wit, became one of the most successful playwrights of late Victorian London, and one of the greatest celebrities of his day. He promoted the importance of art in life and lectured on aesthetics. He formed close relationships with various young men, in particular Lord Alfred “Bosie” Douglas and Robert “Robbie” Baldwin Ross and engaged in homosexual practices that eventually led to a legal confrontation with Bosie’s father, John Sholto Douglas, 9th Marquess of Queensberry. As a result he was convicted of “gross indecency” and sentenced to two years of hard labor. He spent his last three years in self-imposed exile from society and artistic circles, in Paris, where he died in 1900. After Oscar’s downfall, Constance took the surname Holland for herself and the boys. She died in Italy in 1898; Cyril was killed in France in World War I. Vyvyan survived the war and became an author and translator.



Christabel Lady Aberconway, who lived on Tite Street with her parents when she was two, opens her memoir [2] with the sentence “I like to think, indeed I do believe, that the first friend I made, and made entirely by myself, was Oscar Wilde.” She then relates an anecdote about an encounter at the age of two with Oscar. Later she remembers a fancy dress party where she went as Mrs. Wilde and two of her friends dressed as Oscar and Lord Alfred Douglas. She met Robbie Ross and wished she could have talked more with Oscar. At a luncheon party of her mother’s she once asked “Why did Oscar Wilde go to prison?” and not being satisfied with the answer, wrote a list “Things I want to know when I marry.” First on the list was ““Why did Oscar Wilde go to prison?”” and, one night when she and her new husband were in bed, she did ask him.

Figure 3. Photograph of Oscar Wilde by Napoleon Sarony, New York, 1882.

Oscar and Bosie had a close and powerful relationship. Oscar built his epic poem “The Ballad of Reading Gaol” around a theme:

“Yet each man kills the thing he loves
By each let this be heard,
Some do it with a bitter look,
Some with a flattering word,
The coward does it with a kiss,
The brave man with a sword!”

The relationship was very controversial, some supporters of Oscar feeling vindictive toward Bosie and vice versa. Christabel reveals her position in two extended references to Bosie. “Yet the man, a considerable poet, whom I have probably most disliked in my life, Lord Alfred Douglas, sent me threatening, unsigned postcards from Brighton and wrote this poem about Robbie Ross” A meeting of the Catholic Poetry Society was held at 38 South Street and Christabel was told “Our Vice-President, Lord Alfred Douglas, asks to be introduced to you.” “No, *no*,” she answered “he behaved abominably to Oscar Wilde; *no*, I won’t meet him.” In a follow-up letter she wrote “How suitable that Lord Alfred Douglas is your ‘Vice’ President,” but later regretted the joke. The unsigned postcards started arriving after this. Her father was head of criminal investigation at Scotland Yard; an officer there suggested the cards came from Douglas and stopped any further transmissions at the post office. Another night Christabel arrived late for the theater and as she inched to her seat got a “fearful pinch on my left buttock.” At interval, her companion, Osbert Sitwell, noticed Douglas down the row.

After my mother married in 1935, her only sibling, Doris Thelma Besant, left Melbourne for London, where she mixed in literary circles. She got a job with Cyclax, the cosmetics company, and became beauty adviser to Queen Elizabeth II. She traveled to Australia in advance of Royal visits and twice arranged for our family to meet the Queen, once at Government House in Melbourne and another time on board the Royal Yacht Britannia.



Figure 4. Vyvyan and Thelma Holland relaxing in their living room at Grosvenor Court, Knightsbridge, 2 May 1964.

In 1943 Thelma married Vyvyan Holland and in 1945 they had a son Merlin, my first cousin; they visited us a couple of times in Melbourne. Vyvyan published his moving memoir in 1954, “Son of Oscar Wilde” [5]. When I went to London in 1964 they were my only contacts in the United Kingdom. I sailed on the “Oriana” from Melbourne to Southampton and caught a train to Victoria Station. Thelma picked me up in a taxi and took me around the major sights in London, including Buckingham Palace, Trafalgar Square and Piccadilly Circus.

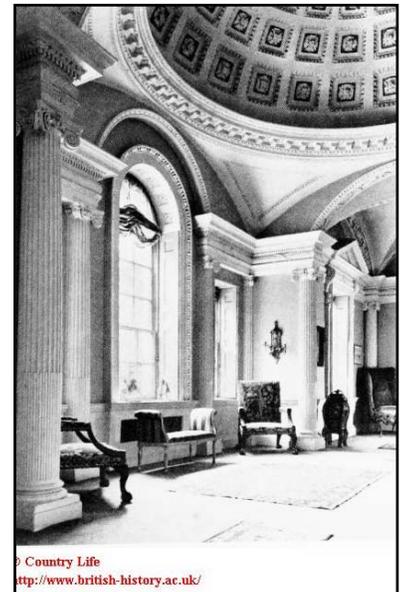
They lived at 12 Grosvenor Court, 99 Sloane Street, in Knightsbridge (Fig. 4). On this, my first night in England, Vyvyan, who was a gourmet cook, prepared a meal with seagull eggs from France as an appetizer. Like Christabel, they were great cat lovers (notice the porcelain cat). I went back to their home on 12 March to record messages for my mother’s birthday and on 22 July the two of them came to a surprise birthday party for me at our flat in Golders Green. Vyvyan died three years later, in 1967, aged 81.

CLAN MACNACHTAN ASSOCIATION

Now that I was 12,000 miles from home and close to Scotland, I became more curious about my McNaughton forbears. I visited Edinburgh, Glasgow and Kirkintilloch and inquired about the Clan Macnaghtan Association. Angus I. Macnaghten, secretary of the London branch, wrote me on January 1st, 1965 (and again on February 10th), “I hope in the summer to arrange a reception in London to meet Sir Antony [Macnaghten] and his wife [Lady Magdalene].” I had written to the Chief and he replied on January 19th from Dundarave, Bushmills, Ireland, referring me to Angus and the London, Glasgow and Edinburgh branches of the Clan Association. He concluded “If you ever come over to Ireland I should be delighted to entertain you here.” There is an entry in my diary for that year on Saturday 9 October, “Annual Dinner, Clan Macnaghtan, London Branch.” In a tape recording I made in December 1965 I reminisced to my mother and family about major events in my life in my second year in London:

Figure 5. Gallery of 12 North Audley Street, looking southeast, 1925 [Ref. 4].

“There was one particularly interesting occasion which I should have told you about and forgot and that was the occasion of meeting the Chief of the Clan at the home of Christabel Lady Aberconway. [The Chief, Sir Antony Macnaghten, would have been 66. I make no further comment on the tape about meeting him. It’s possible that people waited in line to speak to him and there was insufficient interaction between the two of us for me to relate anything on the tape.] I heard about this through a Clan news sheet and was very anxious to go. It was held at this lady’s place. She was a Macnaghten and married a rather wealthy man by the name of McFarlan [McLaren]. And they had this glorious house [Figs. 2, 5, 6] built I think about 1649 [the drawing room was actually built about 1720]. It was built in North Audley St. and this used to be a really cream area in Mayfair. Now there are very few residences left there and this one is one of the few





remaining ones. There's a glorious piazza area out the back [Fig. 7] with a fountain and pool and palm trees [actually fig trees] and chairs to recline in and Lady Aberconway spent most of her time out there making elaborate gestures with her hands and talking to her admirers.

Figure 6. Octagon room of 12 North Audley Street looking east, 1925 [Ref. 4].

“When I arrived I was greeted by a doorman and he ushered me into a little room to put my coat in and I noticed a list on the wall and I asked him what it was and he took it down and it read “In the event of fire please save the paintings in this order ...” And number one was a Picasso in the drawing room. Later on the doorman showed me these paintings and they were all originals. There were Picasso, ... Renoir, Monet, Manet—a glorious collection of original Impressionist paintings and this complete list of the order in which they should be saved in the event of fire. And there wasn't any mention of people on the list either. When I went into the long drawing room that was gloriously designed—very old style—and I started to meet some of the people and they were the most amazing collection of people you can imagine. Many “McNaughtons” of course and many people who had married into the McNaughton family. And one minute I'd be meeting a Lady McNaughton with her daughter Caroline and next minute some peculiar little man I couldn't work out.

“But at one stage this rather elderly gentleman—elderly and stout—came up to me and said to me in a rather aggressive fashion, “Are you a doctor? I'm a doctor. I'm the Queen's doctor!” And I tried not to giggle too much and listened to him for about five minutes. He had many stories to tell and I had my tongue in my cheek and I was rubbishing [making fun of] him as hard as I could without making it appear too obvious when after about five minutes I realized he wasn't rubbishing at all, he was deadly serious, and that's true.

He was Sir John Weir, who is, and has been, the Royal Surgeon for many years. I lost him shortly afterwards but he managed to bore everybody there with his fantastic stories and puns.” [John Weir (1879-1971) was born in Paisley, Scotland, and received his medical education at Glasgow University. He became president of the Faculty of Homeopathy at London Homeopathic Hospital in 1923 and became Physician Royal to King George V, King Edward VIII, King George VI, Queen Elizabeth II, and King Haakon VII of Norway. He was knighted by King George V in 1932, and opened the Manchester Homeopathic Institute and Dispensary in Oxford Street in 1939. He would have been 86 when I met him in 1965. Weir is a Sept or branch of the Macnachtan Clan; the main Macnachtan castle, Dunderave, was owned and occupied for many years by another John Weir and his widow.]

Figure 7. Garden behind 12 North Audley Street in 1925 [Ref. 4].

On the tape I describe another couple who came toward me. “The man introduced himself as Patrick Macnaghten, spelled—I'm not too sure here—something like MCNAGHTEN, which is the way to spell it if you've got money. I think that's the way the Chief spells his name. He was about 35 I suppose. And he had with him a rather dowager duchess type of about 65 to 70, done up to the hilt. And he wandered away shortly afterwards and I was chatting to this woman and she mentioned her husband. And after she'd mentioned him a couple of times, I said, “I'm sorry, I don't think I know your husband and she said “Oh, that's him there, Patrick, and sure enough, it was ...” [the same Patrick to whom I had been speaking. The Chief, Sir Antony, died in 1972 and his son, Patrick, inherited the baronetcy and Chieftainship. This Patrick was Chief from 1972 until he died on August 22, 2007, and would have been 38 at the time at the time of the party, so I wondered if I had met him. His widow, Lady Marianne, solved the mystery for me [6] when she explained that Sir Patrick was not much of a party goer, but he had a cousin (“the other Patrick”) who was a contemporary, a writer who enjoyed parties, and who married a much older woman. So I obviously met the writer and not the Chief to be.]



The tape continues: “I was getting pretty high on martini[s] by this stage and enjoying myself no end when a couple of funny-looking characters came up to me—one short and stout and the other one fairly tall and dark, with glasses and pop eyes. They both had pop eyes and they crept around [this lady] toward me and said, “Aha, another cousin. Do you spell your name with an “e” or an “o”?” And when I admitted it was with an “o” they were delighted. Apparently they were both Ian McNaughton and they weren't terribly happy

because all the money was with the Macnaghtens. And we had some great times together and I went down to Surrey to see them both last Sunday [taped comment in December 1965] and we had a very nice day indeed.”

My tape recording concludes: “After the cocktail party at Christabel’s place I remember coming home [to 2 St. George’s Terrace, Regent’s Park, opposite Primrose Hill Park] in the bus and grinning foolishly at everybody and being very glad that I could come home to Paula and Dougie [my housemate and her boyfriend] and a friend and tell them all about it.”

Christabel wrote of the differences between the Scottish and Irish branches of the clan: “For many centuries the heads of the Macnaghten clan lived in castles built on Loch Awe and Loch Fyne. But in the reign of Queen Elizabeth a younger son named Shane Dhu, who must have been a scholar, became secretary to his great-uncle, the Earl of Antrim, and went with him to Ulster. He was my direct ancestor. The Scottish branch of the family seem to have had a passion for hopeless causes, always following Old and Young Pretenders and, finally, after the Battle of Killiecrankie, they lost both their lives and their fortunes. All the same I expect they all enjoyed fighting for the Stuarts: being in a minority can be very stimulating.”

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