

THE ORIGINS OF THE “McCrackens”

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“B’e a’ Ghaidhlig an canan na h’ Albanaich” – “Gaelic was the language of the Scottish people.” The McCrackens are originally Scottish and speakers of the Scottish Gaelic language, a cousin to Irish Gaelic. While today, Gaelic is only spoken by a few thousands, it was the language of most of the people of the north and west of Scotland until after 1900. The McCracken history comes from a long tradition passed from generation to generation by the “seannachies”, the oral historians, of the Gaelic speaking peoples.



According to tradition, the family is named for Nachten, Lord of Moray, a district in the northeast of Scotland. Nachten supposedly lived in the 9th century. In the course of time a number of his descendants moved southwest across Scotland and settled in Argyll. The family multiplied and prospered.

The Gaelic word for “son” is “mac” and that for “children” is “clann” The descendants of Nachten were called by their neighbors, the Campbells, MacDougalls, and others the “Children of the Son of Nachten”, in Gaelic “Cloinne MacNachtain”, “Clan MacNachtan”.

Spelling was not regularized in either Scotland or America until well after 1800. Two spellings alternate for the guttural /k/-like sound common in many Gaelic words, -ch and -gh. /ch/ is the most common Scottish spelling but the sound may be spelled -gh. The Scottish word for “lake” is “loch” while in Northern England and Ireland the same word is spelled “lough”. “MacLachlan” and “Mac Loughlin” are the same name as are “Docherty” and “Dougherty”. The present head or “Chief” of the family spells the name “Macnaghten” but the spelling “MacNaughton” is common.

In Argyll the descendants of Nachten lived in the beautiful valleys of Glen Aray and Glen Shira between the heads of Loch Fyne and Loch Awe. The MacNachtan’s battle cry was “Fraoch Eilean”, (Heather Island) the name of the royal island castle on Loch Awe given to their charge by King Alexander II in 1267. They obtained the picturesque castle of Dunderave (Castle of the Two Oars) just south of the modern A83 Highway on the north shore of Loch Fyne, from the Campbells around 1400.

The Macnachtans actively supported the Scottish kings. One chief died with the king fighting the English at Flodden (1513) while another aided Mary, Queen of Scots. In the bitter civil wars of the late 1600’s Sir Alexander MacNaughten fought at the Battle of Killiecrankie (1689) where, despite winning a major battle, the Highland Scots lost the war. William and Mary ruled both Scotland and England and

the MacNachtan estates were confiscated by the crown (1691). Some MacNachtans moved south to better lands or across the twelve miles of sea from Argyll to Northern Ireland. The current head or “chief” of the family is Sir Malcolm Francis Macnaghten of Bushmill, county Antrim, Northern Ireland.

But how did some of the “MacNachtans” become “McCrackens”?

Gaelic, like all languages, has its own special sound and spelling rules. These are not just “made up” but have reasons. For example, it is physically difficult to make a /k/ sound at the back of the mouth followed by an /n/ sound at the front of the mouth. In English this has resulted in the “silent” /k/ in words like “know” and “knot” where the /kn/ combination used to be fully pronounced.

Gaelic speakers had a different solution to the very same problem. Over time they developed the habit of pronouncing the /kn/ combination as if it were /kr/. Gaelic has no letter “k”, the /k/ sound is spelled with a “c”. The word “cnoc”, “hill” is pronounced like the English word “crock”, “cno”, “nut”, like English “crow”.

This rule, that “n” after “c” is pronounced as “r” applies to names beginning with “n” when the word for “son”, “mac” is put in front of them. “Neil” is a personal name, the “son of Neil” is MacNeil”, pronounced /mack reel/, because of the “n” of “Neil” now follows the “c” of “mac”. The name “MacNichol” is pronounced “Mac Rickle”. The name “Mac Nachtan” is pronounced like “Mac Ractan” in Gaelic.

This was how the “MacNahtans” pronounced their name when some of the family moved further south into the area of Scotland called Galloway. Here the Scottish dialect of the English language predominated. The Gallwegians, hearing the Gaelic pronunciation of “MacNachtan” with an “r” in it, called the new people the “MacRactans”.

“Mc” is an abbreviation of “Mac” common in both Scotland and Ireland. Here is the progression from “Mac Nachtan” to “McCracken”.

Original ----->	Nachten	Personal name
Mac Nachtan ----->	MacNachtan	Modern Spelling
Mac Rachten		pronounced
Mac Rachen		/t/ dropped
Mac Crachen		/c/ sound duplicated
Mac Cracken		/ch/ sound spelled with a “k”
Mc Cracken		“mac” abbreviated
McCracken		two words joined

The name became very numerous in Galloway and the MacCrackens became prominent as officials in Wigtown on the southern coast of Scotland. The name was spelled in many ways in the times of little literacy and phonetic spellings. G.F. Black in “THE SURNAMENES OF SCOTLAND” (New York Public Library, 1946) lists some of the early spellings of “McCracken”: 1500 Makcraken, 1536 M’crekane, 1540 Makcrakane, 1564 McCrekan, 1607 McKrachin, and in 1684 McCracan, McKraken and Mckeracken.

From the coast of Galloway to the coast of Ireland is only eighteen miles, an easy sail in calm weather. Many Scots were attracted to settle in Northern Ireland by the promise of inexpensive land. Others left to avoid religious and civil warfare in the 1600's. Scottish people who settled in Northern Ireland were non-Catholic and looked to Scotland as their cultural home. The religious reformer Alexander Campbell, for example, was born in Northern Ireland but attended the University of Glasgow and was heavily influenced by non-conforming Scottish religious thinkers.

Among those who moved across to Northern Ireland were both Macnachtans and McCrackens. Many stayed in Scotland. Few came to America at first. Until Scotland and England were officially joined in 1707, each maintained separate governments. America was an "English" possession and Scots (and Irish) were forbidden to settle in America unless through an English company – or as prisoners, sent to labor. One of the "trade-offs" of getting the Scots to agree to a joint government with the English was the right for Scots to do business with and to immigrate to America. No sooner had the ink dried on the Act of Union than the Scots were on the way, both directly and via Northern Ireland.

Scots who had lived for a while in Northern Ireland are called "Scotch-Irish" in North America to distinguish them from the Roman Catholic Irish who came a hundred years later. The term does NOT mean a mixture of Scotch and Irish but designates a person of Scottish ancestry who migrated first to Northern Ireland and then to America.

Between 1719 and 1775, more than 300,000 Scots and Scotch-Irish – McCrackens among them – came to America, the majority landing in New Castle, Delaware, spreading out to central Pennsylvania, Maryland, western Virginia and upland North Carolina as most coastal lands were already owned and cultivated. Their values of independence, hard work, education quickly made them leaders in the new nation.

Both Princeton and the University of Delaware began as their ministerial training schools. Seven Scots signed the Declaration of Independence. Other areas, largely settled by Gaelic speaking Scots, were the Upper Hudson Valley ("Albany" means "Scotland) and North Carolina's Cape Fear River Valley. Scottish mercenaries were imported to defend the new colony of Georgia. By 1790 their children crossed the mountains to settle Tennessee, Kentucky and the Ohio Country.

McCrackens who wish to show their Scottish heritage wear the red, blue and green "MacNachtan" tartan and show the Clan Crest badge, a castle tower surrounded by a circlet bearing the motto "I Hope in God". The Macnachtan plant, worn in the cap for quick identification, is the trailing azalea. Items made of the MacNachtan tartan and clan badges are available from a number of Scottish import shops or from vendors at Scottish Games and Festivals.

The name "MacNachtan" is spelled several ways – "MacNaughton", "Macnaghten", and MacNachten: are common alternates. "Macnachtan" is preferred by the Clan Association.

Philip Smith is the husband of Shirley Irene Grant, daughter of Helen Ione McCracken. A professor of Linguistics, he teaches Scottish Gaelic and writes on Scottish and Scottish-American culture. His book of Scottish names, "**TARTAN FOR ME!**" is in its Ninth Edition.