

The Possibility of a Common McGrath Origin

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Introduction

This paper represents an attempt to organize and document my research into the origins of the McGrath Clans. Since this research is continuing to explore new information, as it is uncovered, this paper will need to be updated periodically. It is my hope that this information will aid others in their research and allow them to go further and to find new information. The original formulation of this paper developed as Liam McGrath (Dunmore East, Co. Waterford) and I exchanged research notes back in 2000 and 2001. I am also grateful to John Cunningham for sharing his insight into the history of the McGraths of Co. Donegal.

In the Beginning

The McGraths were of Dalcassian ancestry, stemming from Cormac Cas, son of Oilíoll Olum, King of Munster in the 3rd century A.D. The name McGrath is derived from Macraith, a surname of ancient Irish origin, which is borne by the descendents of four distinguished septs that had their common origin in the Kingdom of Thomond in present day County Clare. The Irish surname Macraith is considered to be patronymic in origin, being one of those names derived from the first name of the original bearer. However, in the "The Pedigree of the Dal-g Cais Sept of Mac Craith, MagCraith or Magrath",¹ there is no person named Craith only a Macraith. In the "Wars of Turlough," authored by Sean McCraith in the mid 14th century his ancestors are referred to as "Clan Craith."

The name McGrath is from the Irish Mac Craith or MacRaith with the prefix Mac denoting the "son of Craith" that means son of grace. The surname McGraw was not found in Ireland during ancient times and occurs only infrequently in Ireland today. McGraw is a variation of McGrath, which yields an English pronunciation equivalent to the Irish pronunciation of McGrath, where the "th" is not pronounced.

The Visibility Problem

Sorting out the beginning of the Macraith line in Co. Clare in the 10th and 11th centuries is like trying to undo a big knot that has been tied for so long that it might never come undone. However, it might be possible, with a little finesse and with some help from the other McGrath researchers, to loosen the knot up just enough to be able to understand the different connections.

A persistent problem has been the inability to assign patrimonial lands to the Macraith Clan of Co. Clare – one author even claimed that he could find no records of such lands². Part of

the problem, I believe, stems from thinking of them as a separate Macraith clan too soon. During the reign of Brian Boru (941–1014 AD) and for a while there after, had they chosen to use surnames, they would have been known as “O’Kennedys” or “O’Larkins” or even “O’Briens” The quotation marks on the surnames indicate that these actual surnames were not used at that time but to emphasize the point that the Macraiths would descend from their ancestors named Kennedy and Lorcan.

When Brian Boru died these proto-Macraiths were within the generational range that made them eligible for the leadership position of the clan - they were part of the *deirbhfhine*³. Membership in the group consisted of everyone who had a common great grandfather with the dead king. With the succession of one of Brian’s sons as the leader of the clan and with the passage of time the proto-Macraiths were no longer eligible for the leadership of the “O’Brian” Clan. Perhaps this was when they began to establish a dynasty of their own and became known as the Macraith Clan.

Cinnéide (Kennedy), the father of Brian Boru, had the support of the Uí Néill clan of Northern Ireland in his rise to power⁴. The Uí Néill supported the rise of the Dalcassians in the south to balance the power of the Eoghanachta in south Munster. This could have been the link that drew part of the McGrath clan north to the Lough Derg region if one is persuaded to believe that version of the origin of the northern clan of McGraths. The Uí Néill clan might have been influential in getting Miler Magrath’s ancestors installed in the buffer area near Pettigo to help insulate themselves from the O’Donnells in the west.

“Brian Boru’s achievement was obviously due to his own personal ability as a political leader and a military commander. He was also a clever manipulator of the church, whose support he won by a show of generosity and by filling the leading ecclesiastical offices with friends and relatives.”⁵ These early appointments to ecclesiastical offices by Brian might have been the beginning of the McGrath tradition of following the pursuit of religious careers. In the 14th and 15th centuries the Macraiths were bishops of Kilfenora, Clare Abbey and Killaloe in Co. Clare.⁶

The Emergence of the McGraths

The earliest references to the name McGrath occurs in a citation from 1086⁷ referring to a Magrath who was described as the Chief Poet of the Province of Munster. This Magrath is the probable progenitor of the Clan Craith, who were related to the O’Briens of Thomond (North Munster) and served them as poets around the 12th century.

The Macraith lineage⁸ goes: Lorcán, Cenneidi, Etchtighern, Flan, Macraith, ... with Macraith probably being born around 970 and he may have participated in the Battle of Clontarf. Now Toirhealbhadh O Briain was Brian Boru’s grandson and he was the first person to use Brian’s name as a surname. He was of the same generation as Macraith and in 1097 the Annals of Innisfallen record that “son of Mac Raith the poet died.” So we see that the Macraiths haven’t

started using a surname yet but the O'Briains are showing the way. Notice also that in 1097 the person known as Mac Raith, possibly the Macraith in the pedigree listed above, was already known as a poet and was considered important enough to be recorded in the annals.

These early Macraiths, since they were relatives of the O'Briains, were probably living in close proximity to them. However the lands, which the Macraiths also owned due to clan membership in accordance with the Brehon laws, would have been described as O'Briain lands. These lands were around the Killaloe area in eastern Co. Clare. At a later date, in about 1178, the families of Clare had begun using certain family names. "The O'Briens, as the dominant clan, had secured lands in many parts of the county (although the division of Thomond into counties had not yet occurred), the principal being the territory around the palace of Kincora, the greatest part of the barony of Inchiquin, part of Tradee, and the district along the Atlantic, from Dunbeg, by Milltown-Malbay to Ennistymon."⁹

After the intrusion into the area by the Normans in 1169 the O'Briens moved their principle seat from Kincora at Killaloe to Clonroad near Ennis. "Clonroad was one of the most renowned of the Irish schools."¹⁰ In the 14th century the Macraiths were running a bardic school that was distinct from the later one establish by the family near Cahir in Co. Tipperary.¹¹ The date of the establishment of this first bardic school is uncertain but Killaloe and Clonroad are two likely locations for such a school and again the Macraiths would have been located within the "O'Brien lands."

The McGrath Clans of Ireland

There are seven groupings or septs of McGraths in Ireland that can be identified. Four of these septs have been determined to be related, while the others are separate septs that had adopted the same surname independently. Although the modern spelling of the name is McGrath there have been several variations of the surname that were associated with particular septs. In the following the different variations will be used where they are known. The Magraths of Pettigo, Co. Donegal, the McGraths Co. Tipperary and the McCraghs of Co. Waterford are all descended from the Macraiths of Thomond that was located in modern day Co. Clare.

In the descriptions that follow the septs are identified by their earliest known location or the location where they rose to prominence.

Co. Clare

Much of the early history of the clan in Co. Clare has already been covered in the earlier sections. The Co. Clare sept of Macraiths was associated with Thomond (North Munster) as far back as 1000 AD. Members of the sept were descended from Echtighern, son of Cennedi, and brother of Brian Boru. They served as the hereditary poets to the head of the O'Brien clan and ran a Bardic School in the 14th century probably located at Killaloe or Clonroad in Co. Clare.

From this original Thomond clan came the Magraths of Termon Magrath in Co. Donegal (according to one school of thought) and the McCraiths of Co. Tipperary and the McCraghs of Co. Waterford. The McCraiths of Co. Tipperary subsequently spread into Co. Waterford, Co. Limerick, and Co. Cork. Until at least 1574 there was a castle or towerhouse situated on Islandmagrath in Co. Clare that was in the possession of a MacCraith. In the Book of Survey and Distribution¹² for Co. Clare the area of Islandmagrath was in the possession of the Earl of Thomond in 1641 and no castle or towerhouse was mentioned. An open question here is the age of the connection of the name Islandmagrath with this particular piece of land. I suspect that it is not as ancient as the latter part of the 13th century as one author reports¹³.

There was also a small group of McCraghs in the northwest corner of Co. Tipperary, North Riding in the 1650s. This group probably originated in Co. Clare and are quite possibly related to the Macraiths of Thomond. They will be described in more detail in the Co. Tipperary portion of this paper.

Around the middle of the 16th century it appears there were no "McGraths" of any surname variation residing in Co. Clare. At least they don't appear in any of the usual records for the period. With the Cromwellian Transplantations of the mid 16th century Co. Clare was re-populated with Magraths as Miler Magrath's descendants settled in on their newly assigned lands.

Co. Donegal

According to some authorities the Magraths of Termon Magrath were of Dalcassian origin by way of the Thomond clan in Co. Clare. The majority of these Magraths remained in the north while Miler Magrath and a band of relatives and friends made a new life for themselves in the southern part of Co. Tipperary in the latter part of the 16th century.

Abbot Beoc came to Ireland in the 5th or 6th century. He was the youngest son of a Welsh chieftain and founded a monastery on an island in Lough Derg. Beoc's church was referred to as Teo-da-Beoc and this probably gave rise to the spelling Dabeoc that is sometimes shown as Dabeog or Daveog. Recently John Cunningham pointed out that Dr. Michael Harbison has put forth the opinion that St. Daveog might have been a pre-Christian deity even though he is listed as one of the great saints of Ireland. The land on which the monastery was located was originally called Termon Dabeog but later became known as Termon Magrath after the local family in Pettigo. In the early years of the 17th century James Magrath, son of Miler, built a castle at Pettigoe the remains of which are still standing today. The present owner of the castle is Billy Lytle, Aghafoy, Pettigo, Co. Donegal.

There are two options for the origins of these Magraths of Co. Donegal. They might be descendants of the founder of the church of St. Daveog as their coarb status would indicate or they might have been descended from the Macraiths of Thomond as indicated by several

authorities. Liam McGrath, of Dunsmore East, Co. Waterford, has reminded me that these lands were sometimes bought and sold or outright taken from the current owners. Therefore, it is possible that the Magraths of Termon Magrath could have come from the Thomond sept and then acquired the termon lands of St. Daveog through some means. John Cunningham, an authority on the northern McGraths, points out that there is a townland named Carrigmagrath near Ballybofey in northern Co. Donegal. This translates to McGrath's Rock and John believes that this location was the origin of the ancestors of the Magraths of Pettigo¹⁴. There are still McGraths in Templecarn parish in Co. Donegal according to the Griffith's Valuation and the Irish Census of 1901. This is the same parish where Pettigo is located.

Miler Magrath, the most prominent member of the clan, came into Co. Tipperary from Pettigo, Co. Donegal in 1571. He was the Protestant Archbishop of Cashel and Emly, newly appointed by Queen Elizabeth I, and he started what can be considered another clan of the McGraths. His choice of spelling - Magrath rather than McGrath or McCragh - could have been an attempt to distinguish himself and his family from the McCraghs of Co. Waterford who were supporters of the Earl of Desmond. At the time of Miler's arrival in Cashel, Desmond and his followers were in full rebellion against Queen Elizabeth I. The fact that Miler traveled to Cashel with a large group of relatives and friends would suggest that he was expecting less than a warm welcome in Co. Tipperary. Whether there were family connections to the Tipperary McGraths or not, Miler's new position required that he stay in the good graces of the crown and this was a skill at which he truly excelled.

At a later time Edmond Magrath, grandson of Miler Magrath, owned 800 acres at Ballymore, parish of Clonoulty, Co. Tipperary in 1641. His land was taken from him and he was transplanted to the parish of Feakle, Co. Clare during the Cromwellian transplants. Knowing he had been a spy for the English during the Rebellion of 1641 his new neighbors, some Moloneys among them, took to cutting down the trees on his property. Edmond appealed his transplantation to Cromwell himself and received his 800 acres back again. However, he appears to have remained in Co. Clare, dying there in 1683. Ballymore is in the parish of Clonoulty, which is separated from the parish of Moyliffe to the north by only the intervening parish of Clogher - the total distance between them being only about 6 miles. It wasn't unusual for the expelled Irish to return to their former lands and in this case with the return of Ballymore to Edmond perhaps some of the family moved back to Ballymore. The number of Magraths found in the parishes of Clogher and Moyliff in 1851 strengthens the possibility.

Miler's descendants spread out in central Tipperary in the area north of Cashel. At the end of the Rebellion of 1641, in about 1654, Miler's descendants were transplanted to Co. Clare, Galway and Mayo with the largest portion landing in the parishes of Feakle and Tulla in Co. Clare. As far as can be determined Co. Clare was just about empty of "McGraths" when Miller's descendants arrived. The repopulation of Co. Clare with McGraths and Magraths seems to be

largely due to this family.

It appears that all the Magraths didn't go to Co. Clare or perhaps some of them returned to Co. Tipperary after the Cromwellian Transplantation of the 1650s. In the 18th century descendants of these Magraths were located in north central Co. Tipperary east and south of the civil parish of Upperchurch some married into the Flood and Fogarty families in the area while others carried on the Magrath name. In the 19th century there were numerous Magraths in Moyaliff and Clogher parishes adjacent to Upperchurch on the south. One of these was Michael Magrath and he had a son named Edmond who was my gg-grandfather. He married Mary Ryan of Gleninchaveigh, Upperchurch on September 1, 1841 and their first two children were born in Moyaliff parish and the third was born in Upperchurch parish.

Co. Tipperary

According to the Civil Survey of 1654 for Tipperary the "McGraths" of Tipperary can be grouped into three families. One was Miler Magrath's descendents in central Tipperary, another was a family listed as McCragh in northwest Tipperary while a third family was listed as McCragh and was in the Cahir area.

In 1640 there were several McCragh families in County Tipperary, living in the townland of Curraghduffe, civil parish of Killoskully & Killcomonty, barony of Arra and Owny, which is northwest of Upperchurch near the River Shannon. At the same time there was a Marcus Magrath, son of Brian, son of Miler Magrath, who was living in the parish of Aghnamaydull (now Aghnameadle), barony of Upper Ormond, He also owned land in the adjacent parishes of Ballymacky and Latheragh. These lands were just north of the parish of Upperchurch.

Members of the Thomond branch of the Macraiths migrated to Cahir in Co. Tipperary and in the latter half of the 16th century were operating a bardic school near the town of Cahir. In 1641 there were McCraghs in Ballylomasna (Bhaile Ui Lomasna)and Burgesse (Buirgeise).

A McCraith family occupied the tower house at Loughlohery both before and after the Cromwellian transplantation that removed many Irish families from their homesteads. Their descendants still occupy the townland of Loughlohery to this day. Over the subsequent years some of these McCraghs migrated into Co. Limerick, Co. Cork and Co. Waterford.

Co. Waterford

The best known Waterford McGraths, often referred to as McCragh, were located on the eastern slopes of the Knockmealdown Mountains. These families were descended from the Macraiths of Thomond and were associated with the Fitzgerald family (Earl of Desmond). The McGraths and O'Briens were invited to occupy the slopes of the Knockmealdown and Commeragh Mountains respectively to protect the Fitzgerald territory was incursion from the North.

The head of the clan in the early 1600's was Philip McCragh of Sliabh Gua who constructed a castle called Sleady Castle in 1628 at Curragh na Sleady. The walls of the impressive 17th century, four story structure are still standing. Sleady Castle is located just east of Cappaquin a little off the road to Clonmel. The family also had a castle at Mountain Castle (which is still standing), where Philip lived prior to building Sleady Castle. A tower house at Abbeyside across the river from Dungarvan was built by a member of this family in the mid 1500s but was finally demolished in the 1960's. There were also other branches of the Waterford family living near by: McCraghs in Ballynagilty, north of Sleady Castle and McCraghs of Lisfinny, southwest of Lismore (McCragh of Lismore Muchada)

Co. Fermanagh

McGraths of Fermanagh - probably descended from the Maguires. There are pedigrees that show the existence of a Macraith in the Maguire descent¹⁵. There are also extensive genealogical records for these McGraths of Fermanagh in this traditional territory of the Maguires.

Co. Kerry

One of leading families of Co. Kerry were the O'Sullivans. A branch of this family was headed by a person named Macraith and the descendants of this individual used his name as their surname. They were located at the castle of Cappanacushy near Kenmare, Co. Kerry. According to one source this branch of the family is extinct and cannot be traced to the present day (1906)¹⁶

Northern Ireland - Ulster

Clandeboy McGraths - former O'Neill territory in Co. Down. The name comes from Clan Aedh Buidhe (Hugh [O'Neill] of the Yellow Hair). It is uncertain at this time whether these McGraths originated here or migrated to this region. They possibly originated in Scotland and came over to Ireland during the Plantation of Ulster after the Flight of the Earls in the early 17th century. The name is usually written as McGraw and they would be Presbyterians. Population concentrations of McGraths in the region were still evident in the Griffiths Valuation data ~1855.

The term Scotch-Irish originated in the United States in the early 19th century.¹⁷ The northern Irish, originally from Scotland, had come over to America prior to the revolutionary war and had established themselves in America. They were Presbyterians and wanted to distinguish themselves from the poorer Irish Catholics that started arriving in America in the early to mid 19th century. These newer refugees to American shores were looked down upon and the earlier Irish arrivals wanted to distance themselves from this rabble.

According to Liam McGrath the northern Scots Irish McCraes are to be thought of as Clan na Dalriada, because they moved back and forth in plantations and transplantations

between N.E. Ulster and Kintail, Scotland. That is a story in itself. An old tale has 2 McGraths migrating to Scotland from Ireland after exhibiting some bad behavior at a party and the McCraes are descended from these two party animals. Whether there is any truth to this amusing legend is uncertain but it makes an interesting story that for now will have to remain unverified.

¹ Twigge A&I MS 39270 FF Microfilm, "The Pedigree of the Dal-g Cais Sept of Mac Craith, MagCraith or Magrath", Local Studies Center, Ennis, County Clare.

² Frost, James M.R.I.A., *The History and Topography of the County of Clare*, Soaly, Bryers & Walker, Middle Abbey Street, Dublin 1893, pp. 225.

³ The *Ardri*, indeed every king in ancient and mediaeval Ireland, was chosen by election from within the royal house, from the *deirbhfhine* group within which any man whose father, grandfather or great grandfather had been king was theoretically of the *rioghdhamhna*, or king material, and thus eligible for election. Future eligibility extended from the king to the whole *deirbhfhine* descended from him. In the lifetime of the king, one man of the *deirbhfhine* was nominated *tánaiste*, or heir presumptive, to succeed on the king's death; the *tánaiste* was second in authority. - Brian Boru, King of Ireland, Roger Chatterton Newman, Anvil Books, Dublin, 1996, p. 23.

⁴ Chatterton Newman, Roger, *Brian Boru, King of Ireland*, Anvil Books, Dublin, 1996, p. 50.

⁵ Duffy, Sean, *Ireland in the Middle Ages*, MacMillan Press, Ltd., London, 1997, p. 34.

⁶ Frost, James M.R.I.A., *The History and Topography of the County of Clare*, Soaly, Bryers & Walker, Middle Abbey Street, Dublin 1893, pp. 160-1.

⁷ Frost, James M.R.I.A., *The History and Topography of the County of Clare*, Soaly, Bryers & Walker, Middle Abbey Street, Dublin 1893.

⁸ MS 23.p.1 – Gen. Cloinne Craith no Mhecraith, p. 648 (or maybe b48) –Pedigree of the McGraths of Thomond and Termon Magrath. This manuscript is cited in the Twigge A&I MS 39266 – Clare Local Studies Center, Ennis, Co. Clare. The original is in the Royal Irish Academy.

⁹ White, Rev. P., *History of Clare and the Dalcassian Clans of Tipperary, Limerick, and Galway*, M.H. Gill & Son, 50 Upper O'Connell Street, Dublin, 1893, republished by O'Brien Book Publications, Newmarket-on-Fergus, Co. Clare, 1997, p. 116-7.

¹⁰ White, Rev. P., *History of Clare and the Dalcassian Clans of Tipperary, Limerick, and Galway*, M.H. Gill & Son, 50 Upper O'Connell Street, Dublin, 1893, republished by O'Brien Book Publications, Newmarket-on-Fergus, Co. Clare, 1997, p. 127.

¹¹ Aitdiogluim Dana, Irish Texts Society, Vol. XXXVII (1935) 1939
A Miscellany of Irish Bardic Poetry, Historical and Religious, including the historical poems of the Duanaire in the Yellow Book of Lecan, Edited with Translation, Introduction, Notes and Glossary By Lambert McKenna, S.J., Published for the Irish Texts Society by The Educational Company of Ireland, Ltd., 89 Talbot Street, Dublin, 1939.

¹² Books of Survey and Distribution 1636-1703, Vol. 4, County Clare; Breandan Mac Giolla Choille - 1967

¹³ The Other Clare, Vol 21, "Islandmagrath and the Macraith Family", p. 16, Paddy Connors

¹⁴ Cunningham, John, Private correspondence with author April 27, 2000.

¹⁵ Maguire, Thomas (of Chuocninne, Clanabogan, Omagh, Co. Tyrone), *Fermanagh, its Native Chiefs and Clans*, Omagh, 1945.

¹⁶ Butler, W.F., "The Lordship of Mac Carthy Mor", *The Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland*, Vol. 36, 1906, p. 366.

¹⁷ Leyburn, James G., *The Scotch-Irish A social History*, The University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, 1962, p. 327. Bannan, Theresa M.D., *Pioneer Irish of Onondaga (About 1776-1847)*, G.P. Putnam's Sons, The Knickerbocker Press, New York and London, 1911, p. 285.