

THE McWILLIAM SAGA
Ireland to Australasia

CHAPTER 1

The Days of William The Conqueror

It is possible to find traces of the McWilliam ancestry for nearly a thousand years. This of course takes us back to William the Conqueror; thus the year 1066 or thereabouts is the point in time at which this story commences. It is about the ancestors of John McWilliam and the descendants of him and his wife, Rebecca.

Most historians agree, though a few dispute it, that Robert, Duke of Normandy (known as 'Robert the Devil') had an extramarital love affair with the daughter of a rich tanner from the town of Falaise. Her name is variously given as Arlette, Arlotte, Arlotta, and even Herleve. The liaison produced two children, one of whom was William, born in either 1027 or 1028. The story goes that because of the great social gap between the Duke and a mere tanner's daughter, notwithstanding the tanner's wealth, marriage was out of the question. A few years later (1035) Duke Robert decided to make a pilgrimage to the Holy Land and, being a prudent, even prescient, individual, assembled his underlords and vassals, and legitimised William's birth by commending him to his nobles as his successor, should any misfortune befall him. It was said that in his adult life William took no exception to being known as 'William the Bastard', bastardy being a relatively common condition in that day and among the Duke's forebears, but his fury knew no bounds if it was insinuated that he stank of the tannery!

Robert's assembled lords were hardly persuaded by his argument that, though he knew William was small, he was sure he would grow. In the circumstances of their being unable to agree on anyone else, however, they had no option and William became grudgingly accepted as the heir to his father's dukedom.

When Robert succumbed to the rigours of his Palestine journey and died, the leading men of Normandy decided to try to dispose of the boy, now about seven years old. To his mother, Arlotte or Herleve, and her family must go the credit for his protection and escape. On reaching manhood (1054) and with the aid of his overlord, the King of France (of which kingdom Normandy was part) William subdued his opponents and proceeded to rule as Duke of Normandy.

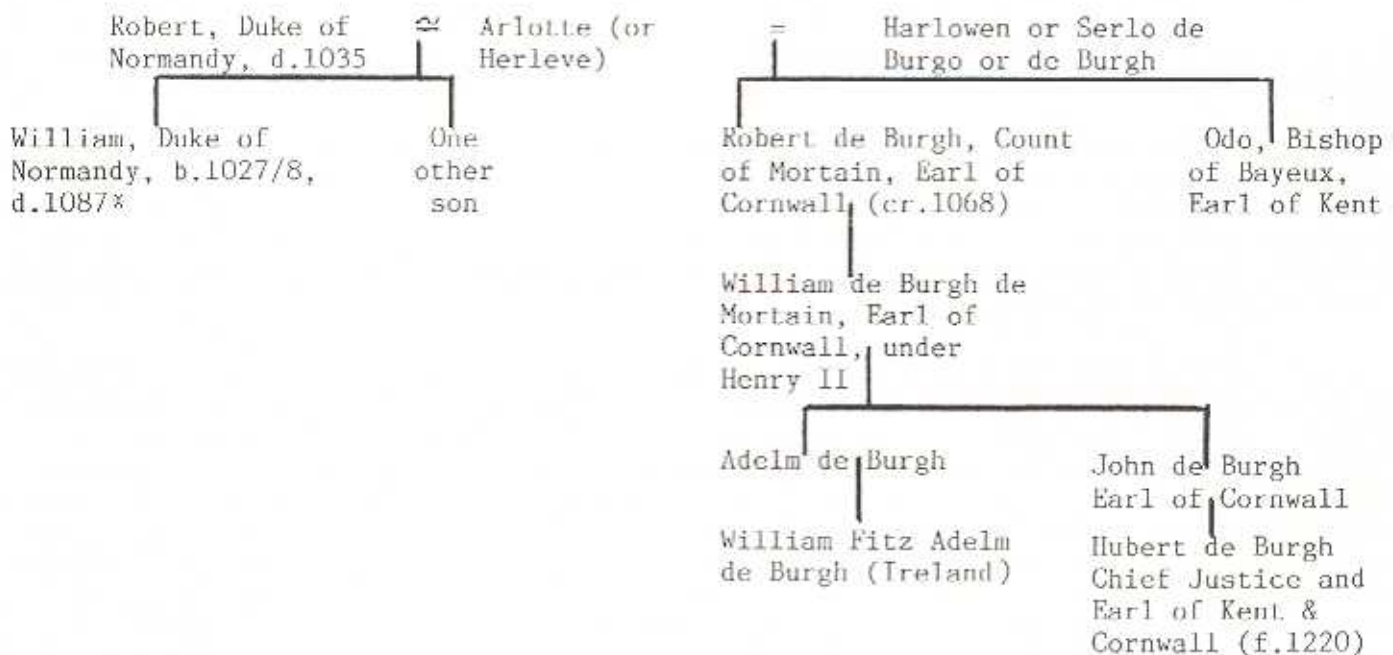
We are well able to understand that William's mother, unmarried as most think she was, would be something of an embarrassment, especially as the Church was at this time trying to induce a stricter code of morality in its own attitude to the sanctity of wedlock and in turn in the people. At all events she was married off to the son of a lord of Normandy. The lord's name was Eustace and his son was Harlowen (or Harluin, or Serlo) de Burgh or de Burgo. Eustace, his son, Harlowen and his wife Arlotte (or Herleve) are the starting point of the McWilliam history, for the family (mostly spelt Mac William in the records) owes its descent from William de Burgh, its etymology being: Mac = 'son of', William (de Burgh)*. More of the de Burghs and the McWilliams in due course.

* According to some sources 'Mac' and 'O' in Irish lore connoted 'head of clan'. Others maintain that 'Mac' meant 'son of' and 'Mc' or 'O' 'grandson of'. Still others say the Anglo-Irish adopted the prefix 'Mac' to ingratiate themselves with the locals.

It should be explained, as an aside, that most of the actors in the events being described at this time seemed to have two or even more names. One authority might use one name, and another a different name; some might use both or all the names. From now on an attempt will be made to keep to the appellation first mentioned, not because it is thought to be more authentic but simply to save the tedium of repetition. One might speculate how the multiplicity of names came about. Was it because an individual in fact had two names, like Harlowen and Serlo; was it because of the practice of families of common descent distinguishing themselves from one another in various ways - one being by adding the name of their recent ancestor, or place of title origin, for example William de Mortain de Burgo; was one name a sobriquet, a kind of nickname; or is the second a variant in rendition when transcribed from one language to another, eg Harlowen and Herluin; did the general and universal indifference to orthographic accuracy account for varying forms of the same name, such as Arlotte, Arlette, Arlotta? Whatever the correct explanation a variety of name modalities and spellings must be expected throughout this history. In particular notice that McWilliam is more often rendered MacWilliam and that even M'William occurs occasionally. At one much later stage the now detested form of McWilliams (with the final 's') was for a time used indifferently by members of the same family.

It will be seen from the chart below that Harlowen and Arlotte's two legitimate sons, Robert and Odo who were the offspring of this marriage, were half-brothers to William the Conqueror. It appears likely that these three, Harlowen, Robert and Odo all accompanied William in his ship Mora for the invasion of England in October 1066; Robert and Odo at any rate were handsomely rewarded for their trouble at Hastings. The gift of Norman bishoprics was in the hands of the Duke, and William favoured his half-brother, Odo, with the appointment as Bishop of Bayeux at the improbable age of little more than thirteen - or so the report goes!

FAMILY TREE CHART



* The usual abbreviations are used throughout: '=' means married, b=born, d=died, r=reigned, f=flourished, cr=created.

Some five years after the Battle of Hastings, in which Odo evidently took a very active part, the tradition is that Odo commissioned a tapestry for his new cathedral at Bayeux and had it embroidered by the ladies of Canterbury and then transported to the French town. This has little to do with the de Burgh or MacWilliam story; it is, however, topical in the sense that Halley's comet is again approaching its perihelion as this history is being written and the celestial visitor figures prominently on the Bayeux tapestry, as do Bishop Odo and his offshoots. To the English the appearance of the comet became a portent of doom, while the Normans, of course, saw it as an omen of victory. Anyway it is interesting to reflect that this 76-year-period visitor is now making its twelfth return since William crossed the English Channel and won his famous Battle of Hastings. Odo leaves our story as, after the battle, he receives his earthly reward, his Earldom of Kent and becomes, in the words of David Howarth (1)* 'a man the English came to detest more than any other.'

To return from the sidetrack of Bishop Odo, we notice from the Family Tree Chart on the previous page that his full brother was Robert de Burgh, Count of Mortain. The names of these towns of long ago, Mortain, Bayeux and Falaise, are today all familiar to those who followed the Allied landings in Normandy in World War II (1944). Robert de Burgh, Count of Mortain, was created Earl of Cornwall in 1068 and he is the second step in our main line of interest. He was succeeded by his son William de Mortain (de Burgh); in turn William became Earl of Cornwall; he produced two sons.

Begging leave of the Reader to make one more digression, we will deal with and dispose of one of his sons, John, and his offspring, Hubert de Burgh, William's grandson. This latter seems to have been both Earl of Cornwall after his father and grandfather and also Earl of Kent. He became Chief Justice of England. The Abbe James MacGeoghegan (2) writes of him: 'He was deprived of his office, judged by his peers in full parliament, and degraded for having counselled King Henry III (r.1216-72) to annul the Grand Charter and privileges of his subjects.' On this unhappy note Hubert de Burgh leaves our story.

Returning from the digression we come back to our chief line of interest, the other son of William de Mortain (de Burgh). He was Adelm, usually referred to as Adelm de Burgo. The Chart of the foregoing page shows that his son was William Fitz Adelm, Fitz meaning, of course, 'son of'. In the next Chapter we will go on with the central account by following the fortunes of this William Fitz Adelm who, as was the custom, still retained the patronym of de Burgo or de Burgh.

References

- (1) Howarth, David, 1066 The Year of the Conquest, Collins, London, 1977. Page 201.
- (2) MacGeoghegan, Abbe James, The History of Ireland, (Translated from the French and published by James Duffy, Dublin 1844). Page 263.

* Numbers in brackets, eg (1), following an author's name, give the source reference at the end of each Chapter.