

CHAPTER 6

Scottish Hills or Connacht's Plains ?

Neville G. McWilliam left notes of what he labelled 'Records of MacWilliam Ancestry' which he assembled in about 1930 and added to in March 1954. The early parts of this record consist almost entirely of quotations from various genealogical sources. These have been most helpful to the present writer and have formed the starting point for further amplification and research.

N.G. McWilliam commences the notes by writing:-

The histories and memoirs here mentioned constitute a fairly unbroken record from the Conquest to 1653 though little is known... of the family's movements after that date ...

The first part of Neville's 1954 addendum follows. The earlier recording to which he refers are his 'Records' of 1930.

As recorded earlier, for some one hundred and fifty years from the middle of the seventeenth Century, my warring ancestors of Ireland left Ireland 'for Ireland's sake' for the wilder hills of Scotland where it was thought they should become more amenable to law and order, as in fact seems to have been the case.

Unfortunately Neville McWilliam omits to provide an indication of the source from which he obtained this information. He offers no evidence of his ancestors leaving Ireland, nor of the more significant statement that they left for Ireland's sake. The wording as given suggests that they were forced to migrate or at least that the moral suasion of their peers compelled them to do so. The underlying implication is that it was the warring proclivities of the MacWilliam family that caused them to be adjudged worthy of expulsion. The message comes through that these ancestors were commonly seen to disregard law and order at this time. Further, the passage conveys the thought that life in the wilds of the Scottish mountains disciplined the clan so that they finally became amenable to a more civilized way of life. It was then they returned to Ireland.

All this may be true but it is a pity that Neville McWilliam neglects to produce any authority for his statement and its implications. One is left to wonder whether the move out of Ireland (assuming the McWilliam ancestors did so move) could have been due rather to a simpler cause. As pointed out on page 14, from the fifteenth century onwards, because of conflict between the King's law and the Pope's law, 'it (is) clear enough that a constant stream of emigrants left Ireland for England (and Scotland ?) and that these were largely from among the king's loyal subjects', writes Dudley Edwards (50).

As has been shown, the de Burghs, both MacWilliam Fighter and MacWilliam Oughter engaged in many battles both internecine warfare and against outsiders. It has been accepted that this was 'par for the course' in that age and place. Nevertheless we can appreciate why they might be called the 'warring MacWilliams'.

The departure of one of the sept, though admittedly from the Oughter branch of the clan, for Spain has already been described. (See page 20). Theobald Burke fled to Spain in 1595 and was well received by Philip II of that empire. It is possible,

too, that certain of the family, especially those adhering to the Catholic faith, may have accompanied James II into exile after his flight and defeat in battle in Ireland at the Battle of the Boyne (1690). But these are at most merely isolated instances.

By the time Anne came to the throne of England (1702) stability and comparative quiescence had settled on Ireland, or rather the parts of it with which we are concerned. Also the record from the family histories of Ireland shows that the MacWilliam Eighters, under the headship of the Earls of Clanricarde, continued to exist in Ireland right up to modern times, though admittedly the last Earl proved to be an embarrassing anticlimax to a great line of peers, as will be shown. The point is that the Earldom continued on until 1916.

Vicary Gibbs (51) in his Complete Peerage gives the following as the Earls of Clanricarde, in succession from John, born 1642 who was attainted and restored, as recorded at the end of the last Chapter (page 22), and died on 17 October 1702. Next was

Michael, died 29 November 1726, then

John Smith De Burgh who was, amongst other things, a Fellow of the Royal Society (FRS 1753), next

Henry De Burgh, died 8 December 1797, next

John Thomas De Burgh, died 27 July 1808, then

Ulick John, born 1802 died 10 April 1874, finally

Hubert George (De Burgh-Canning), 1832-1916, more of whom later.

It is important to note from the point of view of the family history that the name MacWilliam had disappeared from the titles of the holders of the Earldom.

There will be much more about Neville Gilbert McWilliam in this historical survey, for he was arguably the most outstanding and best known of any McWilliam in this century. He was a successful barrister, held two university degrees, was chairman of the NSW Arbitration Commission, an author of several books and in every way a scholar. It is very difficult, therefore, to question a considered statement by him in the face of his impressive reputation. Nevertheless one wonders just what was happening to those who bore the name of McWilliam contemporaneously with the lifetime of those in the list above. Had the McWilliams really moved to Scotland?

In favour of the truth of Neville's claim of the MacWilliams' punitive removal to Scotland is the following anecdote recalled by the present writer who as a boy of about 16 remembers asking his grandfather, William McWilliam (b.1844), where his father came from. The youth followed up the reply of 'Ireland' by saying, 'But weren't the family Scottish?' The response was, 'Oh, yes, at some stage.' The words of the reply supported Neville's assertion, but the tone left some residual ambiguity.

It seems that there could be more plausible reasons for the John McWilliam ancestors leaving Ireland in the seventeenth century. First there is the insecurity engendered by the religious turmoil as described earlier and the unbelievably barbaric cruelty of Oliver Cromwell's campaigns in the 1650s and the subsequent settlement of Ireland by transplantation and confiscation of lands. The Reader will notice that the year given by Neville McWilliam after which little is known of the family's movements is precisely stated as 1653. As Desiree Edwards-Rees (52) describes it, 'In 1652 Ireland was swarming with people whose claims could only be satisfied by

confiscations.' A large part of the English soldiery was paid by means of land grants in Ireland, not least in Connacht. Indirectly it was the Catholic land holders and tenants in Connacht who paid the price. Cromwell's enactment required that those dispossessed east of the Shannon should be transplanted west of the provincial border into Connacht to land belonging to the inhabitants of that province. They in turn had to be dispossessed, of course. Let it be said, however, that Cromwell himself did not have much to do with the implementation of his policy... The record shows that his personal involvements were always on the side of mercy for individuals, yet his policies engendered an everlasting hatred.

The planting of English settlers went on after the Battle of the Boyne (1690) and in the end it led to the ownership of nearly all Irish real estate passing into English hands. This, too, could have been a reason for some of the McWilliam ancestors seeking new pastures - literally !

Another factor which could have induced some of the McWilliam precursors to leave Ireland, assuming they did leave it, was the great shortage of food following Cromwell's destruction and rampage. Margaret MacCurtain puts it this way (53):-

By 1653 even Inishbofin off the coast of Connemara had been taken by the Cromwellians and famine and pestilence stalked the land. Starvation was general, the wolves coming down to the towns and carrying off people from outlying houses.

This is a description of the plight of many, but is not necessarily an account of the situation of the McWilliam forebears. In so far as it may fit the circumstances of some of this family's ancestors, it could have been an incitement for its members to leave Ireland. There is, however, no evidence that this was the predicament of the MacWilliams or Burkes. Historians tell us that some of the English in Ireland grew poor and discontented and degenerated into Irish; while some of the Irish by enterprise and the use of energy, reconciled to the English and prospered. The present writer sees the latter as the much more likely fate of the McWilliams.

This history aims to focus specifically on the forebears and descendants of John McWilliam, as already stated at the beginning. The position is taken that the family was a large one and that the connection between any particular member of it and the head of it, the Earl himself, may well have been distant or even remote. No claim is made that John McWilliam was closely connected to any of the Earls of Clanricarde. It should be remembered that the earldom was very much in the possession of its incumbent holder during the lifetime of John which spanned a substantial portion of the nineteenth century.

As the list on the previous page shows, there is an unbroken continuum of Clanricarde peers right through the period of doubt about the whereabouts of John McWilliam's line of forebears. If John McWilliam's grandfather, great-grandfather etc. were in Scotland during this period (roughly 1650-1800), it is definite that the owner of the title 'Earl of Clanricarde' was residing in Ireland (or maybe England), but not Scotland.

The question to pose at the end of this Chapter is whether the connection of a family named McWilliam had become so attenuated that the relationship with Clanricarde was hardly seen to hold ? Although the name McWilliam (or MacWilliam) no longer appears as part of the nomenclature of the de Burgh, or Burke, style and title, there is good reason to believe that the origins of John McWilliam and his progenitors were part of the line of 'MacWilliam de Burgh Eighth' whose head was the Earl of

Clanricarde. John's family line would almost certainly have been a cadet, or junior, gradation of the clan; it was equally certainly a part of it. If the McWilliams transferred to Scotland for a few generations this could well have weakened the ties with the senior branch, but there is one rather compelling reason, to be advanced later, to make one believe that, though perhaps indistinct, the relationship was intact up to the time of the appearance of John. Once we arrive at John McWilliam we are on safe ground, of course, for the evidence becomes more abundant and reliable, allowing us to establish the sequence of events in the family confident of accuracy.

This is as good a place as any, perhaps, to record the fact that the members of the family being investigated in this Study seem to be entirely unrelated to the family of McWilliam that founded the well-known and prosperous Wine business in Australia. This is almost certainly true back to the end of the fourteenth century. Early in the next century

there lived at Galway Bay, an Irish Chieftainess, Grace O'Malley. She married Sir William Butler, son of the Earl of Ormond. Their first child was given the tribe name of MacWilliam - Mac the son of William... They (ie his progeny) went to Scotland to help the King in his wars with England. (Later the) families returned to Ireland. Alexander McWilliam and his wife Jane Millar came from Wigtownshire and settled in the new town of Larne.

There is no source reference in this article which is kindly lent from the file of McWilliam's Wines, nor are any dates of the movements to and from Scotland recorded. The name of the Scottish king is not given. From the little evidence available it seems that this family may have gone to Scotland round about 1400 and could have returned about the year 1750 from Wigtown. It should be noted that the town of Larne is in the far north-east of Ireland in county Antrim, almost as near to Scotland as one is able to stand and still be in Ireland. It was (and is) here in Larne, and Antrim generally from which most of the 'Wine' McWilliam family's progenitors came and in which their Irish descendants now live.

References

- (50) Edwards, R.Dudley. Page 23. See (13), page 13.
- (51) Gibbs, Vicary, Page 35. See (21), page 13.
- (52) Edwards-Rees, Desiree, Page 90. See (9), page 7.
- (53) MacCurtain, Margaret. Page 154. See (28), page 20.