

ARE THOM(P)SONS REALLY MACTAVISHES?

by Tom Thompson

I will attempt to answer the questions regarding “Argyll or Dunardry MacTavishes” claiming the surname of Thomson. Sometimes, claims receive general credence with a very superficial examination of the evidence of which they purport to stand. I believe this applies to the MacTavishes. There is simply no supporting evidence for their claims.

George F. Black’s *The Surnames of Scotland*, remains the definitive work on Scottish genealogy. He states, “Many individuals of this name (Thomson) in Perthshire and Argyllshire are really MacTavishes. The surname in these districts is an Anglicized form of Gaelic Mac Thomais, ‘son of Thomas,’ or of Mac Thomaidh, ‘son of Tommie’”¹ As no examples, or other evidence, have ever been provided to show an evolution of MacTavish into Thomson, this statement must be questioned. In fact, the widespread use of the Thomson surname in these districts reflects the Scottish patronymic naming convention and the popularity of Tom/Thomas as a first name. George F. Black says “MacTavish, from the G. MacTamhais, a form of MacThamhais, ‘son of Tammas,’ the lowland form of Thomas.”² You will note a slightly different Gaelic spelling between the MacTavish and the Gaelic of Thomson in Perthshire. There is no mention of an Anglicized form for the surname MacTavish.

In the Acts of the Scottish Parliament, 1587; ‘...the roll of the clans that have captains, chiefs and chieftains whom on they depend, often times against the will of the landlords, as well on the borders as highlands, and of some special persons of branches of the said clans’ divided the ‘sons of Thomas’ into two separate entities: a highland clan MacThomas of Glenschee with a known chief, and a lowland (West March) clan/family of Thomsons (Thomesonis).

Another Act of the Scottish Parliament, 1594, again contains the same two clans. Neither Act has a reference to a Gaelic or English version of Mac Thomais/Tamhais/Tavish (or any other possible spelling) as a clan or as a family. In fact, the name MacTavish would not come into existence for another 200+ years.

Alastair Campbell wrote the following to Dugald MacTavish: “As regards septs, I would think you were justified in including the names in the “Official” Campbell list which in fact mean the same as MacTavish – or son of Thomas – but making it plain, if you can, that this ONLY applies to those who come from Argyll: it is patently ridiculous to suggest that all those who are sons of various Thomases or Thoms all descend from the same stock, when in fact, the name is to be found all over England, Wales, and Ireland, let alone Scotland, from a myriad unrelated forbearers of the name.*your forebears always considered themselves, were considered, and were proud to be, members of Clan Campbell as the arms of Dunardry testify.*”³ (Italics added for emphasis by me.)

Alastair Campbell states: “...According to *Ane Accompt of the Genealogie of the Campbells*, the Clan Tavish – not, be it noted, the Clan MacTavish – descends from Taus or Tavis Coir, illegitimate son of Colin Maol Math,...The name Tavis is anglicized as Thomas, and nearly all the names grouped together from the ‘official’ sept list mean either Thomas or ‘son of Thomas’....It is quite wrong to suggest that all Sons of Thomas derive from the Argyllshire MacTavishes. ...If the evidence for *Tavis Coir* is uncertain, we can be quite sure about Sir Thomas Cambel, who appears in 1292 among the list

¹ Surnames of Scotland, George F. Black, pub. Birlinn Ltd. Edinburgh, 2007, pg 769

² Ibid, pg 566

³ Alastair Campbell, private letter to Dugald MacTavish, 25 August 1992

of landowners in Balliol's new sheriffdom of Kintyre. ...He appears among 'the Barons of Argyll' at an inquest at Iverleckan in 1355 under the name *Doncanus MacThamais*.

It would seem highly probable that this Sir Thomas was the ancestor of the later MacTavishes of Dunardry, the chief family of the name in Argyll, if not the actual eponym from which they took their name; ...Sir Thomas was an important member of the Clan Campbell at a time when the Chiefship was not clearly established, and there is strong reason to think that the later MacTavishes took their name from him. ...In 1533, his grandson *Iain Makalister VcEwin McCaus and Dougal McAne* his son received a charter of feu farm from Archibald 4th Earl of Argyll ...extending to seven and a half merklands in Knapdale, Sire of Tarbert. ...In 1793, Lachlan MacTavish petitioned the Lord Lyon for arms...these arms are of considerable import. The first and principal quarter displays the Campbell gyronny. The boar's-head crest copies that of the Campbell Chief, and the motto is a direct response to his demand NE OBLIVISCARIS – 'Do Not Forget'. Heraldically speaking, the status of MacTavish of Dunardry as **member of Clan Campbell** could not be stated more clearly."⁴ MacTavish was a sept still.

Logically, it is impossible to believe that the Thomsons were MacTavishes due to the extremely limited number of MacTavish families. The Argyll Hearth Tax Roll of 1694 lists Donald MacCombis and a single tenant as living on Dunardry. If there was a MacCombis (MacTavish) clan, it would have consisted of only these two individuals. In fact, the tax roll has only a total of 17 MacCombis' in all of Argyll. The MacTavish spelling was not listed; however, there was a single Thomsons listed.

Dunardry could not support a larger clan either. E. F. Bradford documents that the Dunardry grant amounted to a total of 7 ½ merklands, approximately equivalent to 1300 acres, of which, only about 240 acres were arable, the remainder being mainly pasture with brushwood or moss. By 1775, it became difficult to make a decent living from cultivating poor or, at best, marginal land.⁵ Three tenant farm homes were pulled down as well as the main MacTavish home to make way for the Crinan Canal in 1795.⁶

Both *MacTavish of Dunardry* and the *Poltalloch Writs* support Alastair Campbell's account. The spelling progression resulting in the surname MacTavish is well documented in the Poltalloch Writs. "On 10 December 1533, the spelling was VcCaus, and VcKavissl In the Charter by Lord Lorne, the spelling was McCawis. Yet another variation appears in the 15 May 1669 Charter by the Earl of Argyll to Donald MacCawis, elder son of deceased John MacCawis, of Tonardarie. The 18 November, 1752, Precept of Clare by the Duke of Argyll to Dugald McTavish as son and heir of Archibald McCzawis.⁷ Dugald chose the Scotts/English surname McTavish. He did not choose Thomson, nor did he convert the English (already Anglicized as McTavish) name further into Thomson. It is impossible to anglicize an already anglicized surname! The Poltalloch Writs clearly indicate the Gaelic MacCawis was replaced by the 'set' surname of McTavish in common Argyllshire usage between 1700 and 1750. By this time, the Thomson surname had been 'set' for nearly 300 years and was in widespread use throughout the Lowlands and Perthshire.

The first ever MacTavish armiger (17 April 1793), Lachlan MacTavish, achieved personal arms as a landowner of Dunardry. Lord Lyon, John Hooke Campbell, did NOT matriculate Lachlan MacTavish as the Chief of the Name and Arms MacTavish and he was therefore, never a recognized as a Chief. It was not until 1997 that Edward Dugald MacTavish of Dunardry was recognized by the Lord Lyon as

⁴ A History of Clan Campbell, Vol I, From Origins to Flodden, Alastair Campbell of Airs, Unicorn Pursuivant (Edinburgh; Univ. of Edin. Press 2000) pg243-245

⁵ MacTavish of Dunardry, E. F. Bradford, pub. Orchard House, N. Yorkshire, 1991, Paraphrased pgs 1-7

⁶ ibid pgs 46-47

⁷ Poltalloch Writs, ed. By H.W. Forsyth Harwood, Vol XXXVIII, London, 1992, pgs 138-142

MacTavish of Dunardry and Chief of the Clan MacTavish - making him the clan's first chief, not the 26th as trumpeted by those who know better.

All persons who bear the **chief's surname** are deemed to be members of his clan - **that surname is MACTAVISH**. With this in mind and faced with the dearth of MacTavishes, Chief Dugald MacTavish boldly claimed:

1. That Thomson was Anglicized from MacTavish.
2. The Thom(p)son surname was synonymous with MacTavish.
3. "...Thomson of that ILK on the Border is regarded as a remotely connected or of indeterminate connection of the MacTavishes."⁸

By doing so, he availed himself of a huge pool of potential Thom(p)son clan members. His claims appear to be wholly intended to convince the uninformed public that the Thom(p)son family/clan cited in the 1587/1594 Acts, were really of MacTavish extraction. None of these points are supported by documentation. Perhaps, this is why the current Chief MacTavish posts "THOM(P)SON IS MacTAVISH" on his clan web page,⁹ and continues to use banners and logos of 'Clan MacTavish/Thom(p)son'. The old adage – "if you hear something often enough.....you'll believe it" comes to mind here.

Also, on the Chief MacTavish website, the Seannachie asserts: "Families in Skipness who were MacTavish, used the Thomson name interchangeably, as noted in the parish records."¹⁰ A pure fabrication. The Skipness parish records do NOT show MacTavish-Thomson names being used interchangeably. The 14 church records in the Skipness parish list 154 Thomson surnames in the marriage records in contrast to only 7 Mc/MacTavish marriages. Of these, there is ONE and ONLY ONE individual listed with both the Thomson and MacTavish surname – Archibald Thomson/McTavish m. Mary Livingston 22 Feb 1803. (He is later identified as Archibald Thomson, Jr. son of Archibald McTavish buried at Altagalvash Farm). A review of the grave records show 307 Thomson graves as compared to only 71 Mc/MacTavish, and no further combined names. The facts prove the surnames were NOT interchanged and that Thomsons vastly outnumber Mc/MacTavish in the Skipness area. The interchangeability claim appears to be an attempt to manufacture a MacTavish history where none existed previously.

Those individuals who are descended from the Argyll Thomsons may legitimately be septes of Clan Campbell or, possibly, Fraser or MacIntosh (as there was no Clan MacTavish). It is not my intent to disparage how the chiefs choose to identify their members; however, the intentional misdirection as it pertains to the Thom(p)sons is a very real concern and is a shameful action for one who should be a leader of his clan.

⁸ Attributed to Henry White by Frank Adam in his book; *Clans, Septs and Regiments of the Scottish Highlands*, rev. by Sir Thomas Innes of Learney. White has been recognized as an author but not as a reliable historian.

⁹ <http://www.clanmactavish.org>, website owned by Steven MacTavish

¹⁰ <http://www.mysite.verizon.net/resrz8zf/clanmactavishseannachie/id10.html>, his Seannachie