



HOW DO YOU SPELL "MACMILLAN"?

"Children of the Tonsured Servant"

In the modern spelling of Gaelic, "MacMillan" is spelt, "Mac Gille Mhaoilain", or simply "MacMhaoilain". Literally translated, they mean "Son of the Tonsured Servant" or, "Son of the Tonsured One". Our patronymic is a reference to a twelfth-century cleric of the Celtic church, GilleChrist Mac Cormac, Progenitor of Clan MacMillan. Because of his adherence to older Celtic ways at a time when the Roman Catholic Church was gaining prominence in Scotland, especially his wearing the distinctive "Tonsure of John" or mhaoil iain (patron saint of the Celtic Christians) he received the nickname Gille Mhaoilain, or "Tonsured Servant". His oldest son Malcolm is given the designation "MacMolini" (an attempt to spell MacMhaoilain in Latin) in the Book of Deer, where his and his father's names are recorded.

The Basic "Mhaoil" Sound

The Gaelic sound "Mhaoil" is very hard to duplicate in English, and even harder to spell. Meaning "bald", it is the same as the first word in "Mull of Kintyre". Because of this difficulty several different spellings have appeared over the years. In Britain "MacMillan" or "Macmillan" became standard when English transliterations of Gaelic names became the fashion. One exception to this is the name "Bell", which was sometimes taken by Highland MacMillans (of no connection with the Lowland Bells) --a crude Anglicizing of the basic "mhaoil" sound in our Gaelic patronymic.

Thus, in Canada and the United States several spellings of the one common name have survived to this day: MacMillan, MacMullen, MacMillin, MacMullin, and even MacMillian! MacMillan's Cross at Kilmory Knap, erected for or by our Twelfth Chief, Alexander MacMillan of Knap, reads at the base, "Haec est crux Alexandri MacMullen".

One general observation may be made. The "i"-spelling often indicates a more English-influenced background, where the name lost its Gaelic "mull" sound. Thus MacMillins with Galloway roots in the U.S.A. often spell their name "McMillin". On the other hand, families with a strong or relatively recent Gaelic past, or perhaps with less educated or literate predecessors, often use a "u" spelling of some sort, especially in Cape Breton and Florida. Many of our ancestors were illiterate, even if they could speak English, and their name was spelt according to the hurried interpretation of some anonymous clerk!

"Mac" and Mc"

Often the spelling of a name may indicate something of the family's background, but this is not always true, and varies from place to place. In Cape Breton, they used to say that the "Mc's" were Catholic, the "Mac's" Protestant, but this is not always so. In New Brunswick, they say the "Mac's" are Scottish; the "Mc's" are Irish. In fact all Irish MacMillans are "Ulster Scots" or "Scotch-Irish" descendents of Scottish clanfolk who emigrated to Ireland as early as the fourteenth century, but more often in the seventeenth century.

"Mc" is merely an abbreviation of "Mac", and means the same thing ("son of..."). In the early records, just about everyone appears as a "Mc". Later, many families adopted the fuller "Mac" spelling --sometimes one brother would, another would not. Most genealogists pay limited attention to this variation.

Another variation is the lack of capitalizing the second "M". At one time the significance of Mhaoilain or Gille Mhaoilain was misunderstood as referring to a bald ancestor in general, rather than a specific Founder of the Clan. When Gillechrist An Gille Mhaoil's distinct identity was rediscovered, most (but not all) families began to capitalize "Millan" or "Mullen" because it referred to a proper name (Like "MacDonald", "son of Donald").

Whatever the spelling of the name, all "Children of the Tonsured Servant" are of one stock, and belong to the Clan "MacMillan"! That spelling is the official one for the Clan, but not necessarily its members, because it is used by our Chief.

