

ClanDonnell: A Storied History of Ireland

Preface

A young man left his home in Ireland in 1845 and sailed across the Atlantic Ocean to the United States. He was nineteen or twenty years old when he reached the Port of New Orleans, Louisiana. He became a citizen of the U.S. in 1853 and spent the rest of his life as an American. He married Nancy Barrett, he died in 1884, and his name was Edward John McDonnell. He was my great-grandfather.

I've always felt a connection to history – not so much the names and dates stuff that is so boring but rather what it is about our past that makes us who and what we are now. How did people live and what did they believe? How did these facts shape how we live and think today? On a more personal and specific level, why was I born an American and how did I end up with the last name “McDonnell”? These questions led me on a crusade to learn more about Ireland and the history of the Irish people. My quest led me, finally, to Ireland itself.

In the process, I collected many stories about the McDonnells in Ireland. There are indeed some fascinating stories about some fascinating people, and my collection grew to the point that I decided to share it. This book, as I originally contemplated it, would have been a somewhat random series of such stories. But I also researched the Irish clans: how they evolved into being, how they crashed out of existence, how they shaped the lives of ordinary Irish for over a thousand years, and how their influence shaped Irish character long after the clans ceased to exist. My research covered both Irish clans generally and the McDonnell clan in particular. Eventually, I decided to center my stories within the context of the McDonnell clan of Ireland. My book was now more structured, but the stories still floated around in a bit of a vacuum.

In assembling the stories, I discovered that the McDonnells have been in Ireland for a long, long time. I also realized that few histories of Ireland are written in a form that is enjoyable for the non-historian. There is a considerable void between what historians are prone to write and what everyone else wants to read. And so the stories of individual McDonnells became the stories of the McDonnell clans, and the stories of the McDonnell clans became the story of Ireland. Since many McDonnells freely traveled across the North Channel between Ireland and Scotland (and the Hebrides Islands in between), the stories of the McDonnells are also stories of Scotland.

This book is not my genealogy, although there is some genealogy in it. Nor is this the history of the McDonnell family, although there are a lot of McDonnells in it. Rather, it is a story of Ireland and, to a lesser extent, Scotland, told in a particular way – through the evolution of the McDonnell clan in Celtic Ireland and through the descendants of the McDonnell clans after the clan culture ended.

History for the Non-historian

This book is a history, but not for the historian. I avoided footnotes and references in order to help the story flow.¹ (fn1) You won't see too many charts and graphs either. You will see some facts, but I buried them in with the stories. Nevertheless, the factual statements I make are well documented.

In my research, I reviewed Irish annals and chronicles, some of which were written well over a thousand years ago, as well as sources, texts, and histories written centuries ago. I lost track of the hours I spent looking through archives, newspaper clippings, and manuscripts. Some of these were written in the Gaelic language of the Irish and others in English. Some of the English was written in hard-to-decipher Olde English. There was little consistency in spelling or in references to historical figures. Sorting this out was an arduous task.

You don't have to trust me on the accuracy of the information. I described the many sources in a readable section in the back. You are welcome to read these and check my facts. I will warn you, though. These old histories of Ireland can be extremely boring as well as confusing. I am a certifiable history nut and I still had a difficult time with some of this old data. I found great bits of information buried within footnotes. I also connected a lot of dots, with tidbits from one reference and another pieced together to figure out what really happened. I don't think some of these dots had ever been connected before.

I don't think clarity was considered a virtue in the nonfiction of earlier centuries, nor is it necessarily a virtue today. This seems especially true in references to individuals. I will give you one example. Walter Devereux figured (nefariously, I might add) in a number of stories involving the McDonnells of County Antrim. He was named by Queen Elizabeth as earl of Essex, a region within England, before he came to Antrim. One of the best sources on this Englishman, and on sixteenth-century Ireland, was written in the nineteenth century. This source first introduced him as Walter Devereux.

Several pages later, in the midst of a discussion about many other people, there was mention about "his Lordship" doing this or that. Later in the book, again after the introduction of many other people, come several references about what the earl was up to. Still later, I found great detail about the doings of Sir Walter. In yet another chapter, I read about Essex and his plans and actions within Antrim.

I had a very difficult time keeping all of the characters straight and my head was about to explode. I covered my desk with sticky notes trying to keep the cast of characters straight. I then realized that Walter Devereux, his lordship, the earl, Sir Walter, and Essex were all the same person.

Because I would prefer that your head not explode, I will try to keep my references to people and places consistent.

¹ This is a footnote. I put this footnote here to see if you would bother to read it. I promise not to add any more footnotes, and I mean it.

If you don't want to read the annals, sort through thousands of archives, or plow through old histories of Ireland, then trust me. The facts I've recounted in this book are well documented. When you see words and phrases such as "likely" and "probably" and "I suspect," these are signals that I am deviating from the recorded histories. I am thoroughly trained in the craft of logical thinking and my brain tends to operate that way anyway. I am reasonably confident that whenever I leap from the documented records to a conclusion, my conclusion is probably correct.

A Wee Overview

I'll tell you a little bit about the people who first came to Ireland – the Celts and the people who came before the Celts. I'll also tell you a little bit about the people who came after the Celts. All of this will introduce you to the clans. The Irish clan culture dominated life in Ireland for at least two millennia. The clan culture will be evident in the stories for nearly half of this book.

The McDonnell clans – by that name – first existed in Ireland in the twelfth century, which was when folks began taking last names. But these clans existed long before then under other names, and no clan existed forever. Some died out over time. Others morphed or mutated into other clans or grew to the point that they divided up into two or more clans. The clans were fluid family arrangements that simply changed after several generations.

There were many McDonnell clans in Ireland. Each one consisted of a group of people tied together by a common ancestry living in reasonable proximity to each other and operating under a single hierarchy. Each of these had clan chiefs, warriors with responsibility for protecting the members of the clan, and other individuals responsible for feeding the members of the clan and raising the children.

But while there were numerous McDonnell clans, only six were significant in their own right. The others were subgroups or septs or spin-offs of these six. The first one-third or so of this book is devoted to stories of these six clans – the McDonnells of Thomond, Antrim, Ulster, Connaught, Leinster, and Fermanagh. You'll find maps sprinkled throughout the book to locate these and other geographical regions of Ireland. These six clans originated from Celtic tribes from the mainland of Europe that migrated into the British Isles.

I'll start with the McDonnells of Thomond, the most literate and literary of the McDonnells who settled in what is now County Clare. I'll end with the McDonnells of Fermanagh, farmers and the most peaceful of the McDonnells.

In between, I will tell you the stories of mercenary warriors – the McDonnells of Antrim, Ulster, Connaught, and Leinster. All of these McDonnells descended from Celtic tribes that migrated from Ireland to Scotland and then from Scotland to Ireland. They can all trace their heritage to the same clan in Scotland – Clan Donald.

From there, I will continue the stories of these McDonnells during the time that the clans began to deteriorate as functioning groups and during the time the clans ceased to exist. This will bring us into modern times.

I've broken this lengthy book into many smaller, digestible sections, chapters, and sub-chapters. The first part of the book is devoted to the Celts and the McDonnell clans; the second to the end of the clan era, which coincided with the conquest of Ireland by the British; the third to the great famine and diaspora of the Irish; the fourth to the independence of most of Ireland and the troubles that plagued the Irish in the north; and the fifth, finally, to a random array of stories to wrap things up a wee bit.

I include many maps, photographs, and illustrations with the stories. Most are in black and white but some are in color. I include two maps which show the provinces and counties of Ireland. A black and white map is located in both the front and the back of the book for ease of reference. The map at the front of the book can be found opposite the title page and the second map is located on the very last page of the book. The color map is located in the color insert section. If you are not familiar with Irish geography, these maps will surely help.

As we go through these stories, you will meet McDonnells who were assassins and McDonnells who were victims. Some were fierce warriors and some grew crops and raised cattle. Some were poetic and some were illiterate. Some were wealthy and some died of starvation and famine fever. Most were buried in Ireland; others died while crossing the Atlantic Ocean or in quarantine stations in North America. Some of these folks made a mark on the world and others died before they could.