

## Worst In-Laws Ever

By David K. McDonnell

Sometime in the fourteenth century, the six sons of Alexander McDonnell and an unknown number of gallowglass made their way across the North Channel from Scotland into Ulster. Over time, the brothers established themselves in several regions within Ireland. At least initially, they settled in Ulster as a gallowglass unit within the O'Neill clan.

“Gallowglass” is the Anglicization of the Gaelic *gallóglai*gh, usually translated as “foreign soldier”. I may actually mean “soldiers from the Innes Gall”, a name used in the era for the Inner Hebrides Island.

Three things distinguished the gallowglass from ordinary warriors. First, fighting and training for fighting were all that the gallowglass did – they were professional soldiers. Second, they were extraordinarily good at fighting with multiple weapons and even without weapons. Third, they were indeed “foreign”.

Gallowglass warriors descended from the Celtic and Viking warriors who settled in the western Highlands and the Hebrides Islands. Being dispersed throughout this region, they developed an autonomous nature and eventually evolved into permanent mercenary armies. They were available for service for whatever lord could command them.

The gallowglass became nearly indispensable to Irish clans and kingdoms because of their prowess and courage in battle. The McDonnells, in turn, were a seafaring clan with strong ties to Ireland, Scotland and the Hebrides. They were able to establish strong ties with the gallowglass, and transport them to whichever clan or kingdom were willing to hire them. This made the McDonnells extremely powerful in the era.

Gallowglass warriors were most often retained for a limited duration – the time it takes to maneuver and fight a battle, or perhaps an entire campaign. There were times, however, when a clan retained a unit of gallowglass on a permanent basis. And that is what the six sons of Alexander McDonnell and their unit of gallowglass became – a permanent unit within the O'Neill clan of Ulster.

Ireland was nominally a province of England then, but outside of the Pale, authority remained in the ancient Irish kingdoms and in the Irish clans. Ulster remained especially independent of English authority.

Niall of the Nine Hostages was a high king of Ireland in the late fourth century. He acquired his epithet by obtaining hostages from nine satellite kingdoms with the promise that the hostages would remain safe so long as the satellite kingdoms remained subservient. The sons and other descendants of Niall established a dynasty that lasted for over a millennium in Ireland. These became known as the Ui Néill. The Ui Néills were of Gaelic ethnic-tribal origin. The Gaels were the last of the Celtic ethnic groups to arrive in Ireland, but they became the most

dominant. Their language, Gaelic, became the dominant language in both Ireland and Scotland. The O'Neills were the most dominant Gaelic clan in the northern third of Ireland. Whenever there was a high king of Ireland, it was almost always an O'Neill. Brian Boru of Thomond was one of the exceptions.

The O'Neills were a large enough and powerful enough clan to have several branches, with several northern branches in Ulster and several southern branches in the midlands of Meath and Roscommon.

There was a large branch of the O'Neills in Tyrone. In Gaelic, this region is called Tir Eoghan, which means "Land of Eoghan." Eoghan was a son of Niall of the Nine Hostages. In Gaelic, Tir Eoghan is pronounced "teer-oh-yen" and was Anglicized to "Tyrone."

The eldest of the six sons of Alexander and Juliana McDonnell was John McDonnell. The annals called him John Dubh, and he likely had black hair. English documents refer to him as "Black John." I don't know if that was done as a translation or to describe his personality. It may be both. Having been driven and shamed from his native Scotland, John was probably a bitter man.

Black John offered his services and that of his gallowglass to the O'Neill clan in Tyrone. The head of a gallowglass unit in Ireland was usually referred to as the "captain" or "constable" of the gallowglass. Black John became the captain of the O'Neill gallowglass in Tyrone, and this became a hereditary position.

This gallowglass unit was sometimes known as Clan Eoin Dubh, or Clan Black John. Their home was in Dungannon at Cnoc-na-Cluith, which means "Hill of Sport," and is Anglicized as "Knocknacloy." Dungannon remained the home of the McDonnells and the gallowglass for several generations. Knocknacloy today is an "area of special scientific interest" in Northern Ireland due to its unique drumlin hills and species-rich grasslands. It is in County Tyrone, near the southwest corner of Loch Neagh.

Black John was killed by Manus McMahon in 1349. Manus was the son of a lord of Oriel, an ancient kingdom that included the modern counties of Louth and Monaghan. I would recount the circumstances of his killing if I had a clue as to what they were.

Black John's son Somhairle became captain of the Tyrone O'Neill gallowglass. Somhairle married an O'Reilly whom he later "repudiated." Marriage repudiation was a permissible Celtic practice and stems from the notion that a marriage is a contract between a man and a woman. Either party could repudiate the marriage if it was discovered that the other came into the marriage with a false promise or warranty. This ease of marital breakup explains why so many Irish had several marriages during a lifetime. One must wonder what the O'Reilly woman did or didn't do, or what Somhairle thought she did or didn't do, to warrant the repudiation.

From what happened soon after, the repudiation probably did not have anything to do with the O'Reilly wife. Rather, Somhairle wanted to marry the daughter of Brian McMahon. I don't know the relationship between Manus McMahon, the man who killed Somhairle's father,

and Brian McMahon, the man who would become Somhairle's father-in-law, other than that they were of the same family. Nor do I know the cause of any ill will between the McDonnells and McMahons. Somhairle and his McMahon bride may have had a Romeo and Joliet type of relationship in which they were in love while their families were in a feud.

There is some evidence that the marriage was suggested by Brian McMahon and that it was he who induced Somhairle to repudiate his first marriage. Brian McMahon was the newly crowned king of Oriel. Oriel was a loose confederation of nine smaller kingdoms within Ulster, and the kingship often passed from family to family. Brian may have sought the marriage of his daughter with Somhairle to cement an alliance with the O'Neills. If this was McMahon's plan, he didn't follow through very well.

Soon after the wedding, the McMahons hosted a feast in Oriel. The feast lasted several days, and vast quantities of alcoholic beverages were consumed. Somhairle became extremely drunk and perhaps passed out. The annals described Somhairle's condition as "overwhelmed by the aroma of the wine."

Brian McMahon had Somhairle's legs bound by chains and his hands bound by rope. Somhairle was carried by the McMahons to a nearby lake and thrown into the water. Somhairle, both drunk and shackled, drowned.

The killing of Somhairle may have been Brian McMahon's plan all along, or something may have happened at the feast to provoke his anger. Whatever the cause, he made his daughter a widow during her wedding celebration. John and Somhairle, father and son, were each killed by a McMahon. Somhairle's death was in 1365, sixteen years after his father's.

An O'Neill bard wrote this about the death of Somhairle:

*This is the lake wherein was put an innocent one,  
Somhairle of the sharp-pointed spears,  
'mid merriment, and noise, and laughter.  
For it was wine 'neath which he was submerged.*

This is another poetic version of these events, which may have been written by the same bard:

*Woe the world and the land and water wherein  
Was submerged the noble and well-born offspring –  
To-wit, one who was to be king of Innse-Gaul,  
Namely the son of John the Black son of Alexander.*

Somhairle had a son named John. Although not stated in the chronicles, his mother was probably the repudiated O'Reilly. Somhairle also had an uncle, Charles, who was another constable of the Ulster gallowglass. There is no evidence that John or Charles were at the festivities at Oriel. They probably weren't invited to the wedding. But they soon heard about the

killing of Somhairle and were not at all happy. Nor were the Ulster gallowglass or, for that matter, the O'Neills.

The O'Neills assembled a force of their army, together with the Ulster gallowglass under John McDonnell's command, and marched towards the McMahan stronghold. Charles McDonnell, Charles' son Alexander, and their gallowglass were within this army as well.

In any event, the O'Neill army and McDonnell gallowglass, together with a force of allied McMahons, approached the McMahan stronghold. The McMahons heard that they were coming and quickly got out of town. The O'Neills and the McDonnell gallowglass pursued and caught the McMahons at the River Erne, likely within present-day County Fermanagh. There the McMahons were routed. Whatever the McMahons were carrying with them and whatever they left in Oriel was taken by the O'Neills and McDonnells. (The annals described this as a "loss of movables.") Also taken were Brian McMahan's wife and daughter (Somhairle's widow). Brian McMahan survived that initial encounter, but he was forever after banished from Ulster. He did not survive his return.

The historical records are vague in their description of the McMahan home, which I believe to be in the modern town of Monaghan. There are many lakes around Monaghan, so I cannot state with certainty in which lake Somhairle drowned. My best guess is that it was either Convent Lake or Peters Lake. These are the lakes nearest to the McMahan stronghold in Monaghan, which was the most probable location of the family feast. Convent Lake was located near St. Louis Convent, which is in Monaghan. Most of the lake is underground beneath structures and parking lots in the town. What's left is connected to Peters Lake in the center of town. Somewhere under this water are the remains of Somhairle McDonnell.

I took a photograph of Peters Lake and included it in my book, *ClanDonnell: A Storied History of Ireland*. It is the likely spot of the drowning of Somhairle McDonnell.

John McDonnell became high constable of Ulster, but his tenure lasted for only one year. He was killed in 1365 in a battle against the O'Connors. Upon the death of John, Charles McDonnell became high constable of Ulster. Charles was the youngest of the six sons of Alexander McDonald who made the journey from Scotland into Ulster. Upon Charles' death in 1368, his son Alexander became constable.

Alexander was constable of the O'Neill gallowglass about the time that Brian McMahan crept back into Monaghan. Although only a few years had passed since being chased out, McMahan must have thought it was safe to return. Perhaps he thought that young Alexander would not be as fervent in his desire for revenge as his predecessors. Brian McMahan was mistaken on both counts.

The chief of the O'Neill clan assembled a large army to, once again, drive McMahan out of Monaghan. As the armies of O'Neill took position and became ready to do battle, McMahan offered a peace. Under the terms offered by McMahan, the O'Neills would receive Oirghialla kingdoms and the McDonnells would receive a large cash payment. On these generous terms, the O'Neills agreed to the peace.

But someone forgot to send the memo to Alexander McDonnell and the Ulster gallowglass. Alexander, the gallowglass, and a few battalions of allied soldiers attacked the encampment of Brian McMahon. It was a relatively small force of gallowglass attacking the entrenched position of the entire army of Brian McMahon. It turned out to be a disaster for the McDonnells. Alexander was killed, as were many of his gallowglass warriors.

With Alexander McDonnell dead, Brian McMahon made peace with the O'Neills, but it didn't last long. Two years later, the O'Neills and McMahons again fought a war and a great number of McMahons were killed. A number of them were reported as having been drowned. The circumstances surrounding the drownings are unknown. I will hazard a guess – gallowglass units and primitive justice were involved. Brian McMahon survived this defeat but was murdered by one of his own men within a few years.