

The McMaster Family Name

By David K. McDonnell (© David K. McDonnell, www.clandonnell.net)

McMaster has a somewhat atypical origin, as Gaelic names go. It literally means 'Son of the Master'. Before the 12th Century in Europe, few people had last names - their only name was the one given them by mom and dad at birth. After all, why have two names when one will do?

When folks in and around the 12th Century began taking last names, many took last names corresponding to their occupation (i.e., Carpenter, Smith) or to their locale (Brook, Hill). Others took their father's first name, followed by 'son'. Johnson was the son of John and Robinson the son of Robin, with these last names carried on for generations as the family last name.

The Irish and the Highland Scots almost universally took the name of their clan or their clan chief as the family last-name and added the 'Mac' ('son of') or 'O' ('descendant of') prefix. And so the descendants of Brian, a high king of Ireland, took the last name O'Brian, and members of the clan led by Donnell took the last name McDonnell, 'Mc' being a shorthand version for 'Mac'.

McMaster is different, though, and thus is a bit unusual. Somewhere in the 12th Century, there was a man who was a 'master'. Master of what, who knows? But his sons took the last name 'McMaster' or 'Son of the Master', and this became the family surname for generations thereafter.

McMaster is also a bit unusual in that it was not a clan name. There was no 'Master' or 'McMaster' clan. Those with this name were members of a clan by yet another name. This was not especially common practice among Irish or Highlanders. But it makes perfect sense if your ancestor was a master, even if you've long since forgotten what he was the master of.

McMaster, of course, is the English spelling. Many Gaelic names were converted to English, with the conversions by people with various levels of literacy in either Gaelic or English. This means that most Gaelic names are spelled many, many different ways in English.

In Gaelic, the name was spelled MacM[·]aiǵister or MacM[·]aiǵster. It may be difficult to see in this font, but there is a dot over the second M and the g. The 'dot over' is a pronunciation device in the Gaelic language - an M without a dot over it is pronounced differently than an M with a dot over.

Eventually, the 'dot over' became replaced with the letter 'h' (all of which is explained in my book *ClanDonnell: A Storied History of irelandl*). With the 'h' and absence of dots, the name was often spelled McMhaighister or McMhaighster.

So how would you pronounce this in old Ireland? The 'Mac' or 'Mc' comes out 'Mock' or 'Mahk]. Note that it would not be pronounced 'Mick' or 'Mack'.

With the dot over the 'M', the second 'M' is pronounced more like the English 'W'. The 'ai' is a long 'a', as in 'tray'. The 'g' with the over-dot is similar to the English 'ch' sound, only with a 'g' (which

almost sounds like a "j"). The final syllable 'ster' is close to the English pronunciation of 'ster', but following the 'gh', would sound more like 'hter'.

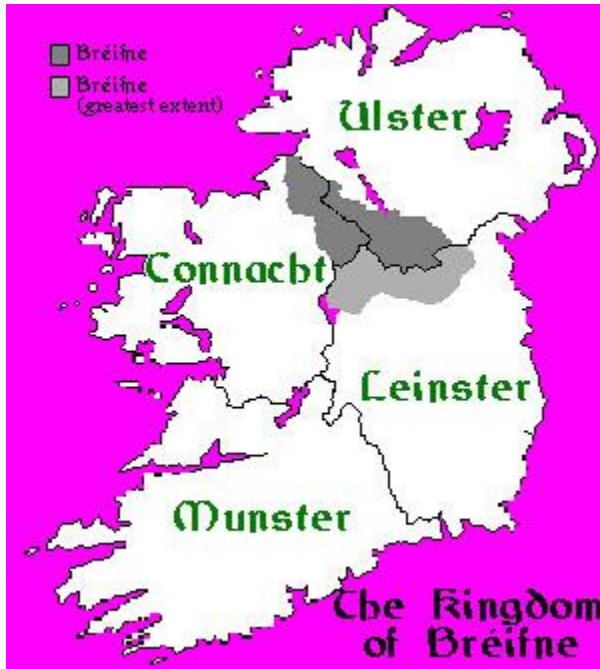


MAC AN MÀISTIR

Spit it all out, and it sounds like 'Mock-WAYJ-shter'. And of course, any English speaker seeing the name spelled out would ignore the Gaelic pronunciation of 'M' or 'Mh' and would pronounce it with an English 'M'. And the English speaker wouldn't know what to do with the "gh" and would probably ignore it. So the name would be more often pronounced 'Mock-MAY-shter', and would soon evolve into 'Mick-MASS-ter'.

I'm not a big fan of family crests or coat of arms, since they are often historically inaccurate. They do sell well on the internet and at tourist sites. I like the one shown, however, since it used the historical spelling of McMaster (although it ends in 'ir' instead of 'er'). The 'an' means 'the', and the name shown means 'Son of the Master'.

So where did the McMasters come from?



My brief research suggests two sources. There are early references to the McMasters in Breifne - an ancient kingdom which includes all or parts of Counties Cavan, Leitrim, Fermanagh, Sligo and Roscommon. Someone in this region must have been a master at something, since there were people in the region named McMaster.

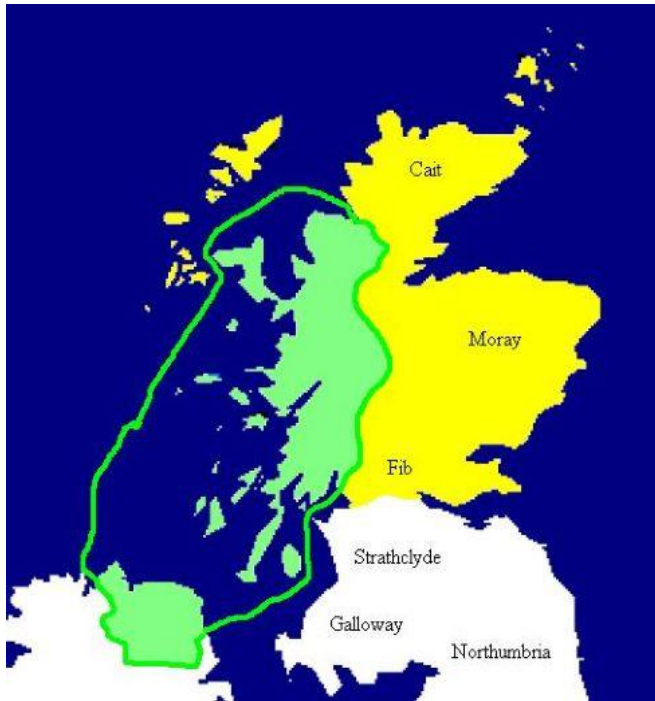
This map on the left shows the ancient kingdom of Breifne as the shaded area.¹

The other source of the name comes from the McInnes clan. The McInnes clansmen (like ClanDonnell) were Dal Riata tribesmen who originated in Ireland, then migrated to the Hebrides Islands and Scotland. Many of them migrated back into northern Ireland. The Dal Riata² treated the North Channel as a local highway and were as much Scottish as Irish. In

fact, since the Vikings established settlements in the Hebrides and along the Irish and Scottish coast, the Dal Riata were almost as much Norwegian as Irish and Scottish.

¹ Map courtesy of Ua Ruairc of Breifne by Dennis Walsh, <http://freepages.genealogy.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~ruairc/ocastle.htm/>

² The Dal Riata area of influence nearly 2,000 years ago is shown in green on the map on the next page.



The McInnes clan settled on Ardgour on the Ardnamurchan Peninsula, a beautiful and mountainous region on Scotland's western shore. Clan members were seafaring people. I strongly suspect that one member of the clan was a ship's master, and from that his sons took the last name "McMaster". Since sons often took the vocations of their fathers, there were likely several generations of McMasters who served as ship masters for the McInnes clan. And, since they took pride in their work (and pride in their ancestors), they kept the name "McMaster", while everyone else around them took the name "McInnes".

This is an educated guess, but I'm going for it.

Sometime in the 15th Century, the McInnes clan and the McMasters were expelled from Ardgour³ by the MacLean clan. The MacLeans were within the umbrella of clans under the authority of the Lord of the Isles of Clan Donald.



All of this was a bit ironic, since the McMasters found haven in northern Ireland, within the lands controlled by ClanDonnell. (For reasons which remain quite mysterious, the clan in Scotland was known as ClanDonald and the same clan in Ireland was known as ClanDonnell). The story of the Lord of the Isles, ClanDonald and ClanDonnell is also told in my book, *ClanDonnell*.

³ The photograph is of the lighthouse on Ardnamurchan, courtesy of Visit For William, <https://visitfortwilliam.co.uk/visit-ardnamurchan-in-lochaber>

ClanDonnell in Ireland eagerly accepted the McMasters and other Highland Scots in the 15th and 16th Centuries. Many McMasters settled in County Antrim and in County Down, and remnants and descendants of these families remain today.



McMaster Street in Belfast, County Down