

The Origins and Ancestry of Somerled

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Source: *The Scottish Historical Review*, Oct., 1966, Vol. 45, No. 140, Part 2 (Oct., 1966), pp. 123-142

Published by: Edinburgh University Press

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25528658>

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The origins and ancestry of Somerled

In 1164 Somerled king of Innse Gall¹ and *regulus* of Argyll was defeated and killed at Renfrew at the head of an invading army of Islesmen and Scandinavians from Dublin. As the founder of a new dynasty of Hebridean sea-kings and ancestor of the MacDonalds, kings and lords of the Isles for many centuries, he is a figure of the greatest importance in Scottish history. Yet his origins and ancestry remain obscure. It would appear that before he wrested the South Isles from his brother-in-law Godfrey, king of the Isles and Man, he ruled as a semi-independent chieftain in Argyll, which then extended northwards to the borders of Ross. Already before 1134 he was of some importance for it must have been before that date that his sister married Malcolm MacHeth,² and one may conjecture that he aided King David at the battle of the Standard in 1138, for Ailred of Rievaulx writes: 'The men of Lothian formed the third rank, with the islanders and the men of Lorn.'³ Beyond these details, little is known for certain of his beginnings.

Clan Donald tradition as narrated in the books of Clanranald⁴ and by the Sleat sennachie Hugh MacDonald⁵ (both in the seventeenth century) and by later writers represents Somerled as being descended from an ancient Gaelic princely family of the line of Colla Uais, long settled in the Isles and Argyll, but dispossessed in the generations immediately preceding Somerled by MacBeth and

1 Literally 'The Foreigners' Isles', i.e. The Western Isles of Scotland.

2 MacHeth, claimant either for the Scottish crown or for the earldom of Moray, was imprisoned in Roxburgh in 1134 and not released until 1156.

3 The principal sources on Somerled are contained in *Early Sources of Scottish History 500-1286*, ed. A. O. Anderson (Edinburgh, 1922) and *Scottish Annals from English Chroniclers 500-1286*, ed. A. O. Anderson (London, 1908); see also C. M. Macdonald, *The History of Argyll* (Glasgow, 1950), where a list of references is given on p. 298; E. MacNeill, *Phases of Irish History* (Dublin, 1919), 194-221; I. F. Grant, *The Lordship of the Isles* (Edinburgh, 1935); A. A. M. Duncan and A. L. Brown, 'Argyll and the Isles in the earlier middle ages', *Proc. Soc. Antiq. Scot.*, xc (1956-7); *Regesta Regum Scottorum*, i, ed. G. W. S. Barrow (Edinburgh, 1960); W. F. Skene, *Celtic Scotland* (Edinburgh, 1886-90); and A. Macdonald and A. Macdonald, *The Clan Donald* (Inverness, 1896-1904).

4 A. Cameron, *Reliquiae Celticae*, edd. A. Macbain and J. Kennedy (Inverness, 1892-4), ii, 148-309.

5 *Highland Papers*, ed. J. R. N. Macphail (Scottish History Society, 1914-34), i, 5-72.

W. D. H. SELLAR is a graduate of Oxford and Edinburgh universities, and has just completed a legal apprenticeship in Edinburgh. He is grateful to Dr John Bannerman for kind assistance with the spelling of the Gaelic names in this article. In some cases he has preferred to use accepted anglicisations rather than the more correct Celtic forms.

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Donald Bán, by the Danes and the Norwegians. Gilla-Brigte, the father of Somerled, is given the sobriquet 'na h-Uamha'—'of the cave'—from the belief that once he had to conceal himself in a cave in Morvern to escape his enemies. From Morvern the young Somerled leads the Gael in a victorious assault on the Scandinavian yoke and re-establishes himself in the principality of his forefathers. These sources are not reliable, but they cannot be ignored. In later stages of Clan Donald history where facts can be cross-checked with contemporary evidence, the Clanranald historian and Hugh MacDonald are frequently wrong in matters of detail, yet in their narration of the general trend of events they are usually correct. They represent the oral tradition of the seventeenth century, a tradition passed on in the case of MacVurich, the Clanranald historian, through generations of hereditary sennachies for upwards of four hundred years. Their account of the origins of Somerled is verifiable inasmuch as he does appear to have risen from obscurity and to have carved out for himself a principality in Argyll and the Isles, defeating the Norse king of Man and the Isles; but as regards other elements of the story, his place as the deliverer of the Gael from the Norwegian, and his descent from Colla Uais, there is more doubt. The alleged descent from Colla Uais is the subject of this article.

The traditional genealogy of Somerled has been preserved in at least fifteen old accounts.¹ The most outstanding feature of these pedigrees taken as a whole is their unanimity in descending Somerled through some eleven to thirteen generations from Colla Uais, legendary high king of Ireland and one of the three traditional founders of the Irish kingdom of Oriel (Airgialla) in the fourth century A.D.² This genealogy is obviously several centuries too short and it has therefore been distrusted by some,³ and attacked by others.⁴ However the most remarkable use to which the pedigree has been put is its 'extension' by some more recent Clan Donald historians. According to their theory a 'Fergus son of Erc' who appears in the pedigree nine generations above Somerled is identified with the traditional fifth-century founder of the Dalriadic monarchy of that name. His pedigree is then traced back to Colla Uais regardless of the fact that the Dalriadic Fergus' traditional pedigree is well known⁵ and is in no way connected with ancient Oriel—he descends, through Cairbre Riada from Conaire Mór, a legendary high king of

1 See below, pp. 125-6.

2 For a recent and very critical account of the legendary origins of Oriel see T. F. O'Rahilly, *Early Irish History and Mythology* (Dublin, 1946), 221 ff.

3 Duncan and Brown, *Argyll and the Isles*, 195.

4 Notably Eoin MacNeill ('Chapters of Hebridean History', *The Scottish Review*, xxxix [1916], 254-76), who favours a Scandinavian origin for Somerled.

5 See among others Anderson, *Early Sources*, i, cliii ff.

Ireland who flourished at the time of Christ according to the sennachies. A further elaboration of this theory identifies the Fergus of the pedigree with that Fergus son of Eochaid who ruled in Dalriada (778–781) and then traces him back through known Dalriadic kings to Fergus son of Erc and so to Colla Uais! It is difficult to know how this preposterous fiction first gained credence, yet it has been widely followed,¹ and even some of those who do not believe it (such as Eoin MacNeill² and D. W. Hunter Marshall³) appear to have been misled by it. The alternative theory of the Scandinavian origin of Somerled is based negatively on a criticism of the original pedigree together with the fact that Norwegians undoubtedly were in the Isles in the centuries before Somerled, rather than on any positive assertion. I believe that a close study of the original pedigree will show a strong probability in favour of its authenticity.

The fifteen old accounts of this pedigree above referred to are contained in:

1. *The Book of Ballymote* (1384–1405), facsimile edition, ed. R. Atkinson (Dublin, 1887), 116b.
2. *The Book of Lecan* (early fifteenth century), facsimile edition, ed. K. Mulchrone (Dublin, 1937), 81b.⁴
3. *An Leabhar Donn* (mid-fifteenth century), Royal Irish Academy, MS. 23 Q 10, fos. 29rd, 29re, 29vb, 29vd; 43rc and 43re.
4. National Library of Scotland, Adv. MS. 72.1.1 (1467), fo. 1 vd.⁵
5. *Monro's Western Islands of Scotland* (1549), ed. R. W. Munro (Edinburgh, 1961), 92–93 and 144–5.
6. *The Annals of Clonmacnoise*, trans. C. Mageoghegan (1627), ed. D. Murphy (Dublin, 1896), 209.
7. G. Keating, *The History of Ireland* (c. 1634), edd. D. Comyn and P. S. Dinneen (Irish Texts Society, London, 1902–14), iv, 34–35 and 105.
8. *The O'Clery Book of Genealogies* (mid-seventeenth century), ed. S. Pender in *Analecta Hibernica*, xviii (1951), nos. 301, 303, 1698, 1706.
9. *The Genealogies of Duaid MacFirbis* (1585–1670), Royal Irish Academy, MS. 23 P 1, fo. 341a.⁶

1 The first appearance of the theory would seem to be in *A Historical and Genealogical Account of the Family of MacDonald* (Edinburgh, 1819), 1–4. It is developed in *Clan Donald*, i, 18–35 and iii, 178, and appears also in A. M. W. Stirling, *Macdonald of the Isles* (London, 1913), 257, and Lady Macdonald of the Isles, *The House of the Isles* (Edinburgh, 1925), 18–25, to name but a few.

2 *Scottish Review*, xxxix, 272–3.

3 *The Sudreys in Early Viking Times* (Glasgow, 1929), 2–8.

4 Skene's rendering of the pedigrees in the Books of Ballymote and Lecan in *Celtic Scotland*, iii, 466 is not reliable: he confuses the two pedigrees and transcribes some names incorrectly.

5 This is the MS. referred to by Skene in *Celtic Scotland*, iii, 50–62 and published in *Collectanea de Rebus Albanicis* (Iona Club, 1847), 357–62. Contrary to general belief much of the genealogical portion is still readable. This MS. is cited henceforth by the customary short title 'MS. 1467'.

6 This MS. is a transcript made by O'Curry in 1836. It is described in the *Catalogue of Irish MSS. in the Royal Irish Academy*, fasc. 15, ed. E. Fitzpatrick (Dublin, 1935), no. 583.

10. *Leabhar Cloinne Aodha Buidhe* (1680), ed. T. O. Donnchadha (Dublin, 1931), 52.
11. Roderick O'Flaherty, *Ogygia seu Rerum Hibernicarum Chronologia* (London, 1685), iii, p. lxxvi.
12. 'MS. 1700' (c. 1700), as in *Clan Donald*, i, 526-7.¹
13. The Red Book of Clanranald (late-seventeenth and early-eighteenth centuries), in National Library of Scotland, Adv. MS. 72.1.50, fos. 27v and 28r.²
14. *The Black Book of Clanranald* (late-seventeenth and early-eighteenth centuries), in *Reliquiae Celticae*, ii, 148-309.
15. *An Leabhar Muimhneach* (eighteenth century) ed. T. O. Donnchadha (Dublin, 1940), cxxxv.³

Of these pedigrees, no. 11 is written in Latin, nos. 5 and 6 in phonetic Gaelic, the remainder in Gaelic; nos. 4, 5, 12, 13 and 14 are Scottish in origin, the remainder Irish—although in view of the close relations between the Western Isles and Ireland from early times until the seventeenth century the exact place of origin of the texts is of little significance.

A detailed criticism of all these sources would take too long and is in any case outwith the writer's powers. Therefore, a brief account must suffice. The *Book of Ballymote* and the *Book of Lecan* have long been recognised as among the greatest compilations of medieval Irish genealogy. *Lecan*, indeed, was written and supervised by a professional genealogist, Gilla Isu MacFirbis (d. 1418), and it is one of the earliest and most authoritative compilations of Irish genealogical material extant.⁴ *An Leabhar Donn* ('The Brown Book'), which is as yet unpublished, also appears to date from the fifteenth century—it is a composite manuscript containing sections of various provenance.⁵ The Clan Donald pedigrees here referred to come from two of these sections, the first of which takes the pedigree down to John lord of the Isles in the later-fifteenth century, and the second to Donald lord of the Isles in the earlier part of that century. *MS. 1467* is famous as the oldest known collection of the genealogies of the Scottish clans. It will be convenient to consider the texts of these four genealogies together, along with nos. 8 (O'Clery) and 9 (MacFirbis), both compilations of the seventeenth century. The *O'Clery Book* was written by Cú Choigríche O'Clery (d. 1664), a

1 I have been unable to trace the original of this MS.

2 Part of this MS. is a transcript of the Red Book of Clanranald made about 1897; see *A Descriptive Catalogue of Gaelic MSS. in the Advocates Library*, ed. D. Mackinnon (Edinburgh, 1912), 125.

3 Although this list of sources is longer than any previously published, there is no reason to believe it to be complete: a search through the texts referred to in *A Guide to Irish Genealogical Collections*, ed S. Pender (*Analecta Hibernica*, vii [1934]) might produce more.

4 *Irish MSS. Commission: Catalogue of Publications 1928-57* (Dublin, 1957), 9.

5 *Catalogue of Irish MSS. in the Royal Irish Academy*, fasc. 27, edd. K. Mulchrone and E. Fitzpatrick (Dublin, 1943), no. 1233.

noted historian of his day and one of the compilers of the *Annals of the Four Masters*,¹ while the *Book of Genealogies of Duaid MacFirbis* (1585–1670), also as yet unpublished, is the life work of the last and most celebrated of all Irish genealogists.²

The Clan Donald genealogies in the *Book of Ballymote* and the *Book of Lecan* appear to be independent of each other.³ *Ballymote* gives twelve generations from Colla Uais to Somerled and takes the pedigree down to John, the lord of the Isles who died in 1387⁴; and this is followed by the pedigrees of Clan Dougal,⁵ Clan Rory and Clan Alexander.⁶ Clan Dougal is descended from Ranald son of Somerled. *Lecan*, on the other hand, gives fourteen generations from Colla Uais to Somerled, takes the pedigree down to Ranald, Godfrey and Donald sons of John (d. 1387), gives fuller accounts of junior branches of the clan, arranges them in a different order and adds new lines. Clan Dougal is here descended from Dugald son of Somerled. The other four sources mentioned above owe much to *Lecan* or its original both in content and lay-out. Yet they all have variations and additions of their own and should not be regarded as mere copies of the earlier book: thus *MS. 1467* brings the Clan Dougal down from Ranald, and adds early Clanranald material; *An Leabhar Donn* gives the pedigree of MacDonald Galloglass and of a clan of Irish MacDougals who descend from Ranald, while retaining the Scottish MacDougals descending from Dugald; *O'Clery* brings down the pedigrees to his own day with the chieftains Sir James of Sleat and John of Moydart II of Clanranald; and *MacFirbis* adds great quantities of material. It would seem therefore that later compilers preferred *Lecan* to *Ballymote*, which indeed has at least one obvious mistake in its main pedigree,⁷ and on balance the *Book of Lecan* must still be regarded as the best authority of the fifteen listed above.

To deal with the other pedigrees briefly, nos. 6, 7, 10, 12, and 15, i.e. *Mageoghegan*, *Keating*, *Leabhar Cloinne Aodha Buidhe*, 'MS. 1700' and *An Leabhar Muimhneach* ('The Book of Munster') give isolated pedigrees which carry no special weight.⁸ *Monro* is valuable as a

1 See below, p. 134

2 MacFirbis belonged to the same family as the compiler of the *Book of Lecan*.

3 Despite Skene in *Celtic Scotland*, iii, 466.

4 This is the date given in *The Annals of Ulster*, edd. W. M. Hennessy and B. MacCarthy (Dublin, 1887–1901).

5 Generally styled 'Clan Somhairle' in old pedigrees.

6 That is the descendants of Alexander, elder brother of Angus Og MacDonald of the time of Robert Bruce.

7 See below, pp. 130–1.

8 *Mageoghegan's* pedigree is his own, and is not part of the annals of Clonmacnoise proper; *Keating* has no particular authority as a genealogist; *Leabhar Cloinne Aodha Buidhe* is a late O'Neill book and the pedigree it contains is obviously garbled; *MS. 1700* appears to follow *MS. 1467* or its original; and *An Leabhar Muimhneach* has little authority for genealogies outside Munster.

sixteenth-century Scottish account apparently uninfluenced by earlier written pedigrees. The *Books of Clanranald*, although late, represent the only surviving accounts known to have been officially compiled by and for MacDonalds. Finally there is the account of Roderick O'Flaherty (1629–1718), the very last and one of the greatest in the line of scholars who flourished for over one thousand years in Celtic Ireland. His *Ogygia seu Rerum Hibernicarum Chronologia* is a prodigy of learning which seeks to synchronise the varied historical accounts of previous writers and contains a remarkably accurate account of the Scottish Dalriadic monarchy. The end of the line of scholars which culminated in MacFirbis and O'Flaherty and the dispersal of their libraries in the Cromwellian wars and their aftermath was an irreparable loss not just to Irish but also to European culture.

At this point it may be helpful to give a tabular statement of the pedigree in its most elongated form, subject to the variations and omissions noticed below¹:

Colla Uais
 Eochu (or Eochaidh)
 Erc
 Cárthend
 Erc
 Fergus
 Godfrey
 Maine
 Niallgus
 Suibne
 Meargaige
 Solam
 Gilla-Adomnáin
 Gilla-Brigte
 Somerled

It will be convenient to consider first the names and historicity of the pedigree from Somerled back to Godfrey son of Fergus. 'Somerled' itself, Gaelic 'Somhairle' or anglicised 'Sorley', is a Norse name meaning 'Summer Warrior', that is Viking. Originally it was not a personal name at all: in 954/962 a fleet of 'Somarlidiorum' were slain in Buchan.² However by the end of the tenth century it appears as a personal name: one prominent early bearer of it was Earl Somerled of Orkney, the son of Earl Sigurd the Stout.³

¹ The pedigree given is that of the Book of Lecan, the original spellings being 'm gillabridi m gillaadamnain m solaim m meargaigi m suibne m niallgusa m maine m gofraigh m fergais m eircc m carthaind m eircc m eathach m colluais'.

² Anderson, *Early Sources*, i, 468–9.

³ *Ibid.*, i, 542, 551–2; see also M. D. Legge, 'The father of Fergus of Galloway', *ante*, xliii (1964), 86–87.

Somerled's father is given in all the genealogies as 'Gilla-Brigte'¹ (servant of St Bride) and his grandfather as 'Gilla-Adomnáin' (servant of St Adomnan). By the contemporary annals of Ulster,² Somerled is styled 'Mac Gille-Adhamhnain', and by the annals of Tigernach³ Gilla-Brigte's son. There is no necessary contradiction here—if 'Mac-Gille-Adhamhnain' is taken as a surname rather than as an indication of immediate paternity, there is confirmation of the pedigree.⁴ Martin Martin, writing c. 1695,⁵ describes the gravestone still legible in his day of the first prioress of Iona, by tradition a daughter of Somerled,⁶ as being inscribed 'Behag nijn Sorle vic Ilvrid priorissa'.⁷ Taken together all these references place beyond doubt the historicity of both Gilla-Brigte and Gilla-Adomnáin. According to Clanranald tradition it was Gilla-Adomnáin who lost the heritage of his forebears. His son Gilla-Brigte sought refuge among his kinsfolk the Maguires and MacMahons of Oriel before returning to Scotland.⁸ There is also a later tradition, the origin of which I have been unable to trace, that Gilla-Adomnáin's daughter married a King Harald of Norway.⁹ This cannot be confirmed but it is quite plausible. Harald 'Gille' king of Norway (1130–6) was born and raised in Ireland or the Sudreys. He claimed to be the son of King Magnus Bareleg by a Gaelic mother, and therefore to be a half-brother of King Sigurd Crusader. About 1128 he presented himself to Hallkel Huk, a Norwegian baron who was then in the Sudreys. 'There came out from Ireland to him the man who was called Gillacrist, and who professed to be a son of King Magnus Bareleg. His mother accompanied him and said that he was called Harold by a second name. Hallkel received these people, and conveyed them with him to Norway; he went at once to King Sigurd with Harold and Harold's mother.'¹⁰ Sigurd subjected Harald to trial by ordeal to prove the truth of his story. He 'commanded him to walk upon nine red-hot plough-shares, contrary to ecclesiastical censure, but divinely aided, as it is believed, he appeared un-burnt'. On Sigurd's death he succeeded to half the Norwegian kingdom; and then six years later he was slain and was succeeded by his sons Sigurd and Ingi. However he had also left a

1 In O'Clery he is given the epithet 'na mBó' i.e. 'of the cattle'.

2 Anderson, *Early Sources*, ii, 254.

3 Ibid.

4 Already in twelfth-century annals 'MacLochlaind' appears as a surname.

5 *A Description of the Western Isles of Scotland circa 1695*, ed. D. J. Macleod (Stirling, 1934), 290–1.

6 Hugh MacDonald in *Highland Papers*, i, 11; *Reliquiae Celticae*, ii, 157.

7 i.e. 'the Prioress Bethoc daughter of Somerled son of Gilla-Brigte'. James MacDonald in his *General View of the Agriculture of the Hebrides* (Edinburgh, 1811), 705 read the inscription as 'Behag Niin Shorle vic Ilvrid Priorissa'.

8 *Reliquiae Celticae*, ii, 155.

9 *Clan Donald*, i, 36; iii, 178. The first notice I can find is in J. Johnstone, *Antiquitates Celto-Normannicae* (Copenhagen, 1786), 152.

10 Anderson, *Early Sources*, ii, 171–2.

son Eystein in the West. In 1142 'Eystein came from the west, from Scotland; he was a son of Harold Gilli. . . . Sigurd and Ingi were then east in the land. Then men went between the kings and brought it about that Eystein should have a third part of the kingdom. No ordeal was demanded of Eystein, to prove his paternity; but that was believed which King Harold had said of it. King Eystein's mother was called Biadok; and she came to Norway with him.'¹ The name 'Biadok' may be the same as the Gaelic 'Bethoc', the name also of the only recorded daughter of Somerled mentioned above. Thus the Norwegian tradition blends with the Scottish in that a King Harald, living at the right point in time, is known to have had a son by a Scottish wife who may have borne a name which occurs in the women of Somerled's family. In addition to this, given the conditions of the early-twelfth century, it is most likely that Harald's Scottish wife would come from the Western Highlands or Islands.

The next name, 'Solam' (i.e. Solomon), is a rare one to find in Gaelic genealogy, but is not unknown: it occurs several times in Clan Aedhagáin pedigrees² and was also the name of one of the scribes of the Book of Ballymote. Among parallel names used in the British Isles connected with Christian tradition may be mentioned the British king of Powys defeated in the battle of Chester early in the seventh century, Selim (Solomon) ap Cynan,³ Noah and Peter, two Dark Age princes of Dyfed,⁴ and Paul, an eleventh-century earl of Orkney.⁵ More obvious examples are the names Constantine and David in Cornwall and Scotland. That the name Solomon should occur is a pointer to the authenticity of the genealogy: it is an unlikely name to have been used by a forger.⁶

So too with the next name, which I render 'Meargaige' in my tabular statement. As this was evidently a most unusual name and has been the subject of much confusion, I give all the variants of it known to me in the order of sources as above:⁷ 1. Indergi (gen.)⁸; 2. Meargaigi (gen.); 3. Mergaige (gen.)⁹; Mergaide (gen.)¹⁰; 4. Mergad (gen.); 5. Mearghaighe, Mearhaighe; 6. Meargaye; 7. Meadhruidhe (gen.); 8 Merguidhe (gen.); 9. Mergaidhe (gen.);

1 Anderson, *Early Sources*, ii, 204-5. Anderson suggests 'Blathoc' for Biadok, but 'Bethoc' is also possible.

2 E.g. *The O'Clery Book*, nos. 1681-95.

3 J. E. Lloyd, *A History of Wales* (London, 1911), i, 181.

4 *Y Cymmrodor*, viii, 86; ix, 171.

5 Anderson, *Early Sources*, ii, 4-7 inter alia.

6 G. Henderson (*The Norse Influence on Celtic Scotland* [Glasgow, 1910], 38-39) is, I think, unduly sceptical about the use of 'Solomon'. However his suggestion that the name may represent the Norse 'Solmund' remains a possibility.

7 I have indicated those preceded by the word 'Mac' by adding '(gen.)' after the name.

8 Rendered as 'Imergi' by Skene in *Celtic Scotland*, iii, 466.

9 Four times. 10 Twice.

10. Merga; 11. Mergagius; 12. Mergadh (gen.?) ; 13. Mearaghach; 14. Medraige (gen.); 15. Meadhraidhe (gen.). Thus the Book of Ballymote, the earliest authority, gives a name different, though not dissimilar, from that in all the others. It may be noted here that in two other points also the Book of Ballymote differs from the other genealogies: near the beginning of the genealogy from Colla Uais down it omits a name 'Cárthend' found in all the others; and near the end of the genealogy down from Somerled it makes Angus Og of Isla¹ the son of Donald son of Ranald son of Somerled, thus omitting Angus Mór of Isla, the father of Angus Og and son of Donald. The clear inference is that this particular pedigree was slackly copied, and my suggestion is that the copyist wrote the name 'Indergi', which he did know, by mistake for the name 'Meargaigi', which he did not.²

Recent Clan Donald historians³ have attempted to identify Meargaige, whose name they render incorrectly 'Mearrdha' and 'Imergi', with either 'Maccus', king of very many islands, reported by English chroniclers to have rowed King Edgar on the Dee about 973,⁴ or with a King 'Iehmarc' who submitted to King Cnut along with a King Maelbaeth, and a king of Scots c. 1018/1031, according to the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle.⁵ I believe both these identifications to be groundless. On the one hand the names are not comparable when the name in the pedigree (corrected as above) is considered, and on the other Maccus can clearly be identified with Maccus son of Harald of Irish annals,⁶ king of Man and the Isles and brother of Godfrey son of Harald, while Iehmarc is probably Echmarcach king of Dublin.⁷

The name Meargaige and its variants is indeed a most uncommon one. Nothing like it is to be found, for example, in the indices to the *Annals of Ulster* or to the *Corpus Genealogiarum Hiberniae*.⁸ It is therefore of interest to note the appearance of a similar sounding name, 'Margad', from the eleventh century to the thirteenth century in Norse sources relating to Britain. In Niall's saga,⁹ in the account of the battle of Clontarf in 1014, Murchad son of Brian Bórama is called Margad. Similarly in the Norwegian account of the battle of

1 The contemporary of King Robert Bruce.

2 The similarity in the script of the Book of Ballymote between the letter 'M' and the letters 'IN' may have contributed towards this mistake.

3 *Clan Donald*, i, 526-7; iii, 178; Stirling, *Macdonald of the Isles*, 257; Macdonald, *House of the Isles*, 18-25; I. F. Grant, *Lordship of the Isles*, 164.

4 Anderson, *Early Sources*, i, 478-80.

5 *Ibid.*, i, 547-8, 590-2; *English Historical Documents*, i, ed. D. Whitelock (London, 1955), 231.

6 Anderson, *Early Sources*, i, 478-80. See also *The Annals of the Kingdom of Ireland by the Four Masters*, ed. J. O'Donovan (Dublin, 1851), s.a. 972 and 974 (recte 974 and 976).

7 Anderson, *Early Sources*, i, 590-2.

8 Ed. M. A. O'Brien (Dublin, 1962-).

9 *The Orkneyingers' Saga*, trans. G. W. Dasent (Rolls Series, 1894), 352.

Largs in 1263, Murchad MacSween is called Margad.¹ The name also occurs in Harald Hardradi's saga, where a King Margad is represented as ruling in Dublin between 1047 and 1061 (the dating is Anderson's),² and in the saga of Svein Asleif's son,³ who flourished in the mid-twelfth century—'The Ultimate Viking' of Eric Linklater. Thus 'Margad' was used at least from the eleventh century to the thirteenth century as a Norse synonym for 'Murchad'.⁴ Is it possible that it became a name in its own right and that subsequent copyists ignorant of its Gaelic origin retransposed it as 'Meargaige'? The matter is for Celtic and Scandinavian philologists to decide.

The next in line, 'Suibne', bears a common enough Gaelic name, but the name beyond his, 'Niallgus', is of more interest. While 'Niall' is a common name, 'Niallgus' is most uncommon: in the indices to the *Annals of Ulster* and the *Corpus Genealogiarum Hiberniae*, volume i, it occurs only twice and three times respectively—and the two entries in the *Annals* and one of those in the *Corpus* may indeed refer to the same man.⁵ In point of rarity here again is a name unlikely to have been inserted by a forger; and in point of time of use the entries in the annals accord well enough with the place of the Niallgus of the genealogy.⁶

'Maine' is a not uncommon name,⁷ but the next in the pedigree, 'Godfrey son of Fergus', is of unusual interest. There are several reasons for splitting the Clan Donald descent at this point and then considering the two parts separately. In the first place the pedigree is many generations too short, and if genuine it is reasonable to assume that up to a point it is correct in detail, but beyond that point it contains only a vague tradition of affiliation or descent. Now the Norse name Godfrey could hardly occur in the sixth or seventh generation below Colla Uais, and therefore it has to be considered as the eighth name above Somerled. Secondly, as will be seen, the traditional genealogies of Oriel include Erc, who appears immediately above Fergus in the pedigree, but they do not include

1 *The Saga of Hacon*, trans. G. W. Dasent (Rolls Series, 1894), 348, 349, 354, 363, 391.

2 Anderson, *Early Sources*, ii, 194.

3 *Ibid.*, i, 590–2.

4 Anderson (*ibid.*) is puzzled by 'Margad', but elsewhere (*ibid.*, ii, 194) he identifies the name with 'Murchad'.

5 The Ulster annals are:

758 Niallgus, son of Boeth, king of the Decies of Bregia, died.

812 Coscrach, son of Niallgus, king of Garbhros, died.

Professor K. H. Jackson has kindly suggested that this Garbhros is the one in Co. Sligo.

6 Calculating back from Somerled at thirty years per generation—and (as will be seen) this is probably an underestimate—Niallgus must have flourished in the tenth century.

7 In the Books of Clanranald 'Maine' is misplaced and appears as the name above Fergus instead of below Godfrey. In Mageoghegan the name 'Cathwaye' is inserted between Godfrey and Fergus. 'Maine' is unaccountably rendered 'Racime' by Monro.

Fergus. Third, the Clan Donald regard Godfrey as a particularly important ancestor. Thus the poet O Gnímh (c. 1580) speaks of the Clan Donald chieftains as Gofraidh's descendants,¹ and MacVurich pauses at Godfrey and says that there are many other branches of this tree which he will not now enumerate.² Monro is even more explicit: his genealogy reads, 'vic Racime vic Gothofreid fra quhom they wer called at that tyme Clan Gothofreid, that is Clangotharay in hybers leid, and they wer werey grate men in that tymes of zeire: and ay one called Clangotharay quhill Donald Gorme quhome I last made mentione'.³ That is, Monro says, the Clan Donald were also known as Clan Godfrey until as late as the time of Donald Gorm of Sleat, who was killed before Eilean Donan in 1539, only a decade before Monro wrote. A further possible reference to a 'Clan Godfrey' is contained in *Leabhar Chlainne Suibhne* where it is said that Eoin an Engnamha, a thirteenth-century MacSween chieftain, was the foster-son of 'MacGofradha of the Isles'.⁴ Later Clan Donald tradition records that Kenneth MacAlpin married the daughter of Godfrey son of Fergus.⁵

Fourth, there is the statement in O'Flaherty's *Ogygia*⁶: 'By Achaius, his son, Colla Uais, king of Ireland, had three grandsons, Eric, Fiachra Tort and Brian. . . . The son of Eric, eldest of the three grandsons of Colla Uais, was Cárthenn, whose sons were Forgo . . . Eric, Amalgad . . . and Muredach. . . . From the same Eric, son of Cárthenn, Godfrey traces his descent, although with many generations omitted—fifteen, more or less. From Godfrey descend many noble families in Scotland, and from there in Ireland.' The fifteen generations appear to be an estimate rather than a statement of fact.

Fifth, and most significant, there are two entries recorded in the annals of the Four Masters and nowhere else:

836 Gofraidh mac Fearghus, tóiseach Oirgiall, went to Alba to strengthen the Dál-Riada at the request of Kenneth MacAlpin.
853 Gofraidh, mac Fearghus, tóisech Innsi Gall, died.⁷

1 P. Walsh, *Irish Chiefs and Leaders*, ed. C. O'Lochlainn (Dublin, 1960), 72 ff.

2 *Reliquiae Celticae*, ii, 659, addenda.

3 Monro, *Western Isles*, 93; 'hybers leid' means 'in the Irish tongue'.

4 P. Walsh, *Leabhar Chlainne Suibhne* (Dublin, 1920), 11. Walsh suggests that 'MacGofradha' is MacQuarrie of Ulva, but this is not at all likely.

5 *Clan Donald*, iii, 178. The origin of this tradition is not clear.

6 1685 edn., iii, p. lxxvi (my translation).

7 These annals seem to have escaped the notice of many Clan Donald commentators, including Eoin MacNeill (*Scottish Review*, xxxix), although they are mentioned in C. M. MacDonald, *History of Argyll* (Glasgow, 1950), 47-48 and 73. In his *Sudreys in Early Viking Times*, 2-8, D. W. Hunter Marshall devoted a chapter to Godfrey son of Fergus; but in this he was unfortunately misled by the bogus association with Fergus son of Erc of Dalriada and so missed the crucial significance of the Oriell-Innse Gall connection. He was also, I believe, mistaken in his opinion that Godfrey's date is too early for a mixed Celto-Norse marriage (see below, p. 135).

When these annals are compared with Clan Donald tradition the conclusion that both refer to the same Godfrey son of Fergus is irresistible. On the one hand the annals tell of a lord of Oriel (or to be more exact of the people known as the Airgialla) named Godfrey son of Fergus, who went to Scotland to reinforce Kenneth MacAlpin; and seventeen years later a man of the same name dies as a ruler in the Western Isles. The genealogies and clan traditions, on the other hand, tell of a man named Godfrey son of Fergus, descended from the kings of the Airgialla, who ruled in the Western Isles, whose daughter married Kenneth MacAlpin, and whose descendant in the eighth generation was Somerled; he was a figure of great importance and his descendants were known as Clan Godfrey until the sixteenth century. The combination of names, places and time in the two accounts are such that it can hardly be doubted that the same man is the subject of both.

Unfortunately the annals of the Four Masters are a seventeenth-century compilation, and although its compilers were four of the greatest Irish scholars of their day, drawing on materials many of which are now lost (such as part of the annals of Tigernach—blank from 766 until 874), its authority is not irrefutable.¹ It is therefore possible to question the authenticity of the Godfrey son of Fergus annals, although in the absence of evidence to the contrary there is a presumption in their favour. Possible criticisms are that the annals were misplaced, that they were concocted to flatter the Clan Donald, and that they are anachronistic in content. The association with Kenneth MacAlpin (843–858) is sufficient to repel the first objection. As to the second, if it were a concoction it is remarkable that the connection between Godfrey and Somerled is nowhere pointed out in the annals. Indeed the learned compilers seem to have been singularly ignorant of Clan Donald history. They make no mention, for example, of the death of Somerled in 1164, but in 1083 they record the death of Somerled, son of Gilla-Brigte, king of Innse Gall, thus apparently misplacing the annal by eighty-one years.² Another illustration is the record in 1490 of the slaying of Angus Og, master of the Isles—he is called John Og by the Four

¹ P. Walsh, *The Four Masters and their Work* (Dublin, 1944).

² In his notes to *The Chronicle of Man and the Sudreys*, ed. Dr Goss (Manx Society, 1874), P. A. Munch made use of this misplaced annal to add two names to the Somerledian genealogy. He suggests that Gilla-Adomnáin, father of Gilla-Brigte and grandfather of Somerled, was himself the son of a Gilla-Brigte and grandson of a Gilla-Adomnáin, and he speculates on the possible identification of this last Gilla-Adomnáin with the Earl Gilli of the Hebrides, brother-in-law of Earl Sigurd of Orkney, who figures in Niall's Saga (see Anderson, *Early Sources*, i, 497 ff.). This theory, which is repeated in I. F. Grant, *Lordship of the Isles*, 146–9, and in R. L. Bremner, *The Norsemen in Alban* (Glasgow, 1923), 172 ff., besides resting on an apparently misplaced annal, runs contrary to all the genealogies. It is discussed in Henderson, *Norse Influence*, 37–39.

Masters.¹ On the third count it may be objected that no ruler of Oriel bearing the name of Godfrey son of Fergus is recorded, that the use of the Norse name Godfrey is very early and that the expression 'Innsi Gall' is anachronistic. In fact few early rulers of Oriel are recorded, and those that are did not all belong to one dominant dynasty but were drawn from many tribes. There never was a well-developed over-kingdom of Oriel as there was, for example, in Leinster or Meath.² The expression 'tóiseach Oirgiall' may mean no more than 'a nobleman of the Airgialla', and may have been consciously used by the Four Masters in that sense. Similarly the expression 'Innsi Gall' may have been used in a consciously anachronistic manner for the sake of clarity, if indeed it was not already in use by 853.

The name Godfrey son of Fergus, like Somerled son of Gilla-Brigte, shows a son with a Norse name and a father with a Gaelic, and therefore suggests intermarriage. Such a match by the mid-ninth century was not uncommon, and although the beginning of the century is an early date, it is not in the least impossible or even unlikely.³ Written records recount Viking attacks on Ireland and the Hebrides from the last decade of the eighth century onwards. However, Arbman has written: 'The most important event of this stage of the Viking raids is not in fact mentioned by the Chroniclers; they probably did not know of it and would not have included it if they had known. It is the settlement of the Atlantic Islands by the Vikings, which we learn from the archaeological material. . . . The grave at Lamlash in Arran stands alone from the eighth century . . . but in the early ninth century Scandinavian graves become quite common in the Scottish Isles. This large scale colonisation was connected with the activity in the Irish Sea about A.D. 800.'⁴ It would therefore have been quite possible for Godfrey's mother to have belonged to a settled Viking family. If this be so, she is most likely to have come from one of the Scottish islands, a fact which could explain Godfrey's later association with this area.

To turn to the credit side, there are factors which indirectly tend to confirm the authenticity of the annals. The Four Masters must have had access to information now lost on the northern Uí Maic Uais, from whom (as will be seen) Godfrey claimed descent, for in this same year (853) as they alone record Godfrey's death, they

1 For Angus's career, see MacDonald, *History of Argyll*, 238-66.

2 J. Hogan, 'The Ua-Briain kingship in Telach Oc', and L. P. Murray, 'The Pictish kingdom of Conaille-Muirthemhne', both in *Féil-sgríbhinn Éóin mic Néill* (Dublin, 1940) at pp. 408 and 448.

3 See the marriages of the descendants of King Cerball of Ossory: Anderson, *Early Sources*, i, passim; J. I. Young, 'A note on the Norse occupation of Ireland', *History*, xxxv (1950), 11-33; A. Walsh, *Scandinavian Relations with Ireland in the Viking Period* (Dublin, 1922).

4 H. Arbman, *The Vikings*, trans. and ed. A. Binns (London, 1962), 51, 52.

alone also record the death of Mael-caurarda, lord of the Uí Maic Uais of Oriel. He, at any rate, can be firmly identified: other sources record the death of his father Mael-Bresail king of the Uí Fhiachrach Airdshratha in 792, and of his two sons Mael-ruanaid lord of the Uí Maic Uais in 872, and Mael-Pátraic king of Oriel in 885; Mael-Pátraic's son Aed, king of the Uí Fhiachrach Airdshratha was killed in 910.¹ Again, there is independent evidence which points to an ancient alliance between Dalriada and Oriel. The 'Senchus Fer n-Alban' in the Book of Ballymote describes the early Dalriadic colony in Scotland: 'The fighting-strength of the army of the tribe of Angus, five hundred men. The fighting-strength of the tribes of Gabrán, three hundred men. . . . Now the three parts of Dalriada are the tribe of Gabrán, and the tribe of Angus, and the tribe of Loarn Mór. . . . The fighting-strength of the tribe of Loarn is seven hundred men; but the seventh hundred is composed of the people of Oriel.'² Again, in the annals of Ulster, 727: 'The battle of Irros-Foichne, and there some men of the Airgialla fell; (it was fought) between Selbach and the family of Eochaid, Donald's grandson.'³ Irros-Foichne has not been identified⁴; Selbach was of the tribe of Loarn, Eochaid of that of Gabrán. A. O. Anderson believed the above to show that the tribe of Loarn had a right to military service from some of the Airgialla.⁵ Kenneth MacAlpin was not, of course, of the tribe of Loarn, but as king of Dalriada it may be taken as certain that he could draw on Loarn's levies. Geography, too, supports this connection, for ancient Oriel extended northwards into modern County Derry, and for centuries it is likely that only the small strip of land between the rivers Bush and Bann separated Irish Dalriada from some of the northern Uí Maic Uais.⁶

It will be appreciated from the above examination of the names from Somerled back to Godfrey and his father Fergus how well such extraneous evidence as survives ties in with the pedigree and clan tradition. Of the nine names concerned, four (Gilla-Brigte, Gilla-Adomnáin, Godfrey and Fergus) are vouched for in Irish annals, and of the remaining five, three (Solam, Meargaige and Niallgus) are most uncommon and unlikely to have been inserted by a forger. Further, the notices in the annals about Godfrey son of

1 Hogan, *Ua-Briain kingship*, 442.

2 Anderson, *Early Sources*, i, clii.

3 *Ibid.*, i, 223.

4 Professor Jackson kindly suggests that the correct form is probably 'In Ros Foichne'.

5 Discussed in *Adomnan's Life of Columba*, edd. A. O. and M. O. Anderson (Edinburgh, 1961), 37, 57. Professor Jackson (*Eng. Hist. Rev.*, lxxviii, 317-20) has shown that the Andersons were mistaken in believing that the 727 annal referred to *two* tribes of the Airgialla.

6 See map below, p. 138. Incidentally Pompa or Bebona daughter of Loarn is said to have married Sárán, a descendant of Colla Fochrích, brother of Colla Uais—see Anderson, *Early Sources*, i, 4 for authorities.

Fergus not only confirm his existence and give his date but also clinch the Oriel-Innse Gall connection, a connection further supported by the *Senchus Fer n-Alban* and the annal of 727. Even the traditions about the marriages of the daughters of Godfrey and Gilla-Adomnáin are seen to be at least plausible, although they would be more convincing if some earlier source for them could be found. In respect of length too, accepting the Four Masters' date for Godfrey's death, the pedigree is credible: eight generations in 311 years gives a long average of nearly thirty-nine years, but this is not unusual in a Gaelic genealogy.¹ Accordingly there is a strong case for believing the pedigree from Somerled back to Fergus to be authentic in detail.²

The same cannot be said of the pedigree from Fergus back to Colla Uais: as only four names at most appear between these two, the genealogy is obviously many generations too short. If there is any truth in it all, it must be regarded merely as a pointer to the tribe or people of the Airgialla from whom tradition recorded Godfrey son of Fergus as having sprung, and this is what I believe it to be. The fullest accounts give the names back from Fergus as Erc, Cárthend, Erc, Eochu and Colla Uais: in some accounts Erc the father of Cárthend is omitted; in only one is Cárthend omitted; no other names appear. Thus there is considerable agreement and no necessary contradiction between the pedigree sources.³ Further tradition as to the place of origin of these early ancestors has been preserved in the Books of Clanranald. In the Red Book the ancestors of John lord of the Isles (d. 1503) are referred to as being styled O Colla and dwelling on the banks of the river Bann, while the

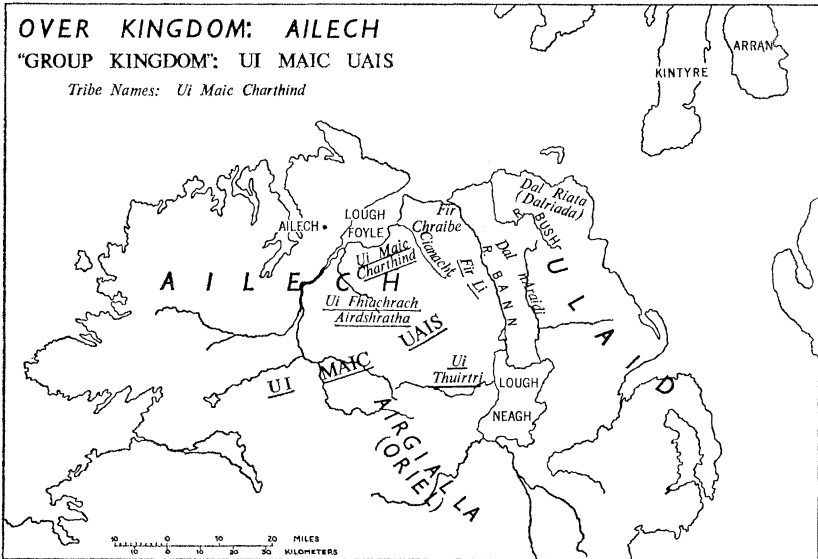
1 Many well-authenticated Gaelic pedigrees show similar long averages: among the O'Donnell chieftains, from Egnéachán (d. 1208) to Aed Og (d. 1537) gives 329 years for eight generations; among the O'Neill chieftains, from Brian (d. 1260) to Conn Baccach (d. 1559) gives 299 years for eight generations; among Somerled's own descendants, from Somerled (d. 1164) to John lord of the Isles (d. 1503) gives 339 years for eight generations, while from Somerled to the fifth earl of Antrim (d. 1775) gives 611 years for fifteen generations. O'Rahilly (*Early Irish History*, 213) calculates the fourteen generations from Eogan son of Niall of the Nine Hostages to Domnall O'Neill (d. 980) at nearly thirty-seven years each. Even longer averages than the above can be found among the Macleods of Harris and Dunvegan, especially through the younger sons of Ruaidrí Mór (d. 1626).

2 If the Four Masters' annals are accepted, the case is virtually conclusive.

3 The fullest accounts are the Book of Lecan, Mageoghegan, MacFirbis, O'Flaherty, and perhaps O'Clery, where Erc son of Cárthend has been added in the margin. The Book of Ballymote gives only Erc and Eochu. The other sources all omit Erc father of Cárthend. The misplacement of Maine in the Books of Clanranald has already been noted (see above, p. 132, n. 7). Among variants may be noted 'Crimhthann' for 'Carthain' in a MS. of *An Leabhar Muimhneach*, and 'Carran' in the Black Book of Clanranald (a variant which misled MacNeill), and 'Thola Craisme' for Colla Uais in Monro. MSS. 1467 and 1700 add the epithet 'Figli' or 'Feligh' to Eochu. 'Eochu' itself is sometimes rendered 'Eochaidh', 'Ethoy' or 'Achais'—the names 'Eochu' and 'Eochaidh' being early confused in Irish (see O. Bergin, 'Varia II', *Eriu*, xi [1932], 136-49).

Black Book includes a poem by O'Henna on John's ancestry which contains the lines:

Six from Suibne before mentioned to King Colla,
Wine they had on the banks of the Bann in angular cups.¹



The northern Uí Maic Uais in the ninth century. Tribes claiming descent from Colla Uais are underlined.

What is known of early Irish tribes or peoples claiming descent from Colla Uais? Hogan has shown² that the over-kingdom of Oriel in the Dark Ages contained among its component elements the smaller 'group-kingdom' of the northern Uí Maic Uais, a group of peoples living in the modern counties of Tyrone and Derry and claiming descent from Colla Uais.³ The most important of these peoples were the Uí Fhiachrach Airdshratha who take their name from Ardstraw in Western Tyrone, and the Uí Thuirtri whose original seat appears to have been to the West and North West of Lough Neagh. Among lesser peoples were the Fir Lí, described in early genealogies as living between the Camus and Moyola rivers, to the west of the river Bann in County Derry,⁴ and the Uí Maic Chárthind of Lough Foyle who gave their name to the barony of Tirkeeran in County Derry. The northern Uí Maic Uais appear to have retained some sense of corporate identity until immediately

1 *Reliquiae Celticae*, ii, 265, 209.

2 Hogan, *Ua-Briain kingship*, 406-19.

3 They are called the northern Uí Maic Uais to distinguish them from other peoples to the south in Magh Breg and West Meath also claiming descent from Colla Uais.

4 *Book of Lecan*, 80 ra.

appears that in the sixth and seventh centuries the Uí Maic Chárthind were of no little importance, although in the years of fuller records they were insignificant. The only possible early notice I can find of one of the tribe is the death recorded in the annals of Ulster for 668 of Fergus son of Muccaid, who would appear to be the Fergus son of Colmán Muccaid, alias Muccaid, of the genealogies. There is the difficulty that Cárthend is sometimes assigned to the line of Fiachra Tort, but on this Hogan concludes: 'All the early sources are, however, quite explicit in stating at the outset that from Cárthend son of Erc was derived Cenél Maic Cárthind Locha Febail.'¹ The Fir Lí on the other hand are derived from Fiachra Tort, except for a passage in the Book of Lecan.² This passage derives the Fir Lí from Erc son of Cárthend son of Erc, although it then almost immediately refers to Cárthend as son of Fiachra Tort. Hogan comments: 'This passage is typical of the confusion which characterises the Uí Maic Uais genealogies. Erc and Fiachra (Tort) are made to change places, and the Cárthend in question above, who was a son of Erc, thus becomes a son of Fiachra (Tort). There can be no doubt that in the genealogical tradition the Fir Lí belonged to the line of Fiachra (Tort).'³

When these details, confused though they are, of the traditional origin of the northern Uí Maic Uais and the first steps in their descent from Colla Uais are compared with the names of the Somerledian pedigree, it at once becomes apparent that it was from this group of peoples that the Clan Donald believed themselves to descend, although from which people within the group is not so clear. The Uí Fhiachrach Airdshratha and the Uí Thuirtri may be excluded as they do not descend from Cárthend. Nor do the Fir Lí, unless the stray Lecan pedigree was followed.⁴ The obvious contenders are the Uí Maic Chárthind of Lough Foyle, though there is the complication that the main branch of the Uí Maic Chárthind descends from Amalgaid son of Muiredach son of Cárthend,⁵ while the Clan Donald pedigree descends from Erc son of Cárthend. However there is some evidence for the existence of an Erc, son or grandson of Cárthend, even if his descendants are nowhere given. Thus the poem 'Airgialla a h-Eamain Macha' gives an Erc as a son of Cárthend,⁶ and the fullest version of the descendants of Cárthend includes an Erc as son of Cárthend's son Tigernach.⁷ I would suggest therefore that the correct reading of the early part of the genealogy is that it represents a tradition that Godfrey son of Fergus

1 Hogan, *Ua-Briain kingship*, 411, n. 4.

2 *Book of Lecan*, 80 ra. 3 Hogan, *Ua-Briain kingship*, 412, n. 5.

4 The late tradition that Somerled's ancestors dwelt on the banks of the Bann cannot carry much weight.

5 *Corp. Geneal. Hib.*, i, 143.

6 Walsh, *Uí Maccu Uais*, 57.

7 *Corp. Geneal. Hib.*, i, 143.

belongs to a tribe now forgotten, a junior branch of the Uí Maic Chárthind, descending from Erc son of Cárthend.

Whether this tradition has a genuine basis in fact is impossible now to determine, but it deserves sympathetic consideration on two counts. The first count is that such small evidence as survives lends credibility to the pedigree. The annal of 836 linking Godfrey son of Fergus with Oriel and the record of a Dark Age alliance between Dalriada and Oriel indicated in the 'Senchus Fer n-Alban' and the annal of 727 have already been considered. So far as geography is concerned the tribes of Oriel indicated by the names in the Somerled genealogy (whether Fir Lí or Uí Maic Chárthind) are situated conveniently near to Irish Dalriada, the sea and the Scottish islands. On the second count, if the genealogy above Fergus was tacked on at random from some old Irish tract, why was this particular one chosen? If the idea was to ennoble Clan Donald by a stirring pedigree, why was undistinguished Oriel chosen? If a tradition survived of an Airgiallan descent, why was the pedigree traced to Colla Uais and not to one of his brothers, whose descendants as the Maguires and the MacMahons (with whom indeed the father of Somerled was said to be associated) were of far greater prominence in the Middle Ages than those of Colla Uais? And if the pedigree was to be traced to Colla Uais, why was it not traced to the Uí Thuirtri or the Uí Fhiachrach Airdshratha instead of to a minor tribe? The obvious answer to all these questions is that the genealogy was not uplifted at random but has an old and genuine basis.

To conclude, a critical analysis of the traditional Gaelic pedigree of Somerled, so far from showing it to be false, discloses evidence which favours the authenticity of the pedigree, in detail back to the beginning of the ninth century, and in outline to a time before the fifth-century Dalriadic colonisation of Scotland. The strength of the argument lies not in any one fact or line of approach that places the matter beyond doubt, but in the collation of many scattered pieces of information which, taken together, combine to form a remarkably composite and credible picture. The remote ancestry of Somerled is seen to be traced from a tribe which was probably a junior branch of the Uí Maic Chárthind belonging to the northern Uí Maic Uais of Oriel originating in County Derry. There is some evidence that a tribe of Oriel was early associated with Scottish Dalriada and it may have been this very one. Be that as it may, the nearer ancestry of Somerled is traced to Godfrey son of Fergus of this tribe, a powerful ninth-century chieftain noticed in the annals of the Four Masters, who links Derry and Dalriada, Ireland and the Isles, and whose name has Norse associations also. From him in the sixth generation descends Gilla-Adomnáin, whose existence is confirmed by the annals of Ulster, and whose grandson Somerled

was. The names of the intervening generations are not noticed in the scanty annals of the times, but they are such that it is unlikely they were merely invented. The clan tradition that the daughters of Godfrey and of Gilla-Adomnáin married Kenneth MacAlpin and Harald king of Norway respectively are at any rate plausible, the former being supported by the association of Godfrey with Kenneth recorded in the annals of the Four Masters, and the latter by the Norwegian account of the Scottish wife of Harald 'Gille'. In the light of the above it seems likely that there is justification also for the further tradition that those between Godfrey and Gilla-Adomnáin were men of some substance, and that it was Gilla-Adomnáin who lost the heritage of his forebears and Somerled who recovered it.