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Clan MacMillan International

Highland Bells - Na Belaich

In the Highlands the name Bell is the English-language equivalent of Mhaoil - the genitive form of Maol ("bald" in modern Gaelic, but originally "shaven-headed" and thus "tonsured") - which forms the stem of the two Gaelic forms of the surname MacMillan: Mac-Mhaoil-ain and Mac-Ghille-Mhaoil. This is because the Gaelic "mh" - the aspirated form of the letter "m" - is pronounced like the English "v"; as is the aspirated form of the letter "b".

So Mill / Mell / Maol / Mhaoil = Vaoil = Bhaoil / Baol / Bell / Bile.

The proof of what seems to the modern English speaker a rather incredible nominal transmogrification can be found in the second oldest genealogy of the MacMillans where the clan's eponymous, whose Gaelic nickname was Gille-maol, appears as Gili-bile. The gill of the name M'gill is another version of the same, and at least one example can be found of the equivalent form McBell (Malcolm, Daniel and Alexander McBell appear on a tax list for 1795 in Richmond Co., North Carolina). America also retains examples of the old Scottish spelling Beall, most notably in a prominent family from Fifeshire who were early owners of parts of Georgetown, in what is now the city of Washington DC (though recent DNA evidence suggests this particular Beall family were not MacMillan-Bells).

In Scottish records the name Bell can be traced back to the 13th century in the diocese of Dunkeld, where Cormac, the father of Gilchrist Maolan / Gillemaol, had been bishop between 1116 and 1132. A Master David Bell was a canon there in 1263, and Thomas de Perth, dictus Bell, was an "Official" of the diocese in the same year. William Bell, Dean of Dunkeld in 1329 was actually elected Bishop of St Andrews (the Primate of the Church of

Scotland) in 1332, though his appointment was never ratified by the Pope due to English pressure at the papal curia. Another Thomas dictus Bell was a canon of Dunkeld in 1340. In the circumstances it seems probable that these religious "Bells" were MacMillans.

The MacMillan sept of Bell seems to have been most numerous in the parish of Inverary. Local traditions attribute their presence there to the settlement of a MacGilveil/MacGilbile from Lochaber at the head of Loch Fyne, at a place called Badokennan. His descendants colonised the nearby Glens Shira and Aray, and the records of Inverary parish are rich in references to the Clann 'ic 'illemhaoil under a variety of spellings. The tenants of Drimfern in Glen Aray appear in the Register of Inventories in 1690 as Mcllveill, while their neighbours at Tullich can be found in the Hearth Tax records of 1694 as Mcllvoyle. Both families are recorded in the Old Parish Registers (from their start in the 1680s) as Mcllvoils, along with many others so named; and many MacMillans too; a distinction being traditionally kept in the area between the MacGhillemhaoils from Lochaber, and the MacMhaolains from Knapdale and Kintyre. The Old Parish Registers indicate a remarkable fading of this hitherto flourishing clan in the 1700s; which after two entries in the 1760s, disappears altogether. Even the most ruthless clearances of the next century failed to achieve so complete a wiping out of an ancient tribe. The records also reveal, however, an equally extraordinary blooming of Bells at exactly the same time; a name hitherto unknown in this Parish Register. The explanation is not far to find. The first of these Bell entries is the baptism in 1743 of a daughter Mary to Archibald and Christian Bell - a couple whose marriage can be found fourteen years before under the name of Mcllvoile. Other Bell families of the 1760s also appear in these registers in the 1750s bearing the ancient Gaelic form of MacMillan.



The sudden nature of the name-change indicates an arbitrary decision by the Minister or Session Clerk to do away with the old Gaelic name in the church records (this being in the period following the battle of Culloden, when many of the old ways of the Gaidhealtachd were under attack from government-supporting lairds and ministers). The MacIlvoiles' new name was however by no means as alien to the old one as others that were "Englished" at the same time, such as MacDhunnshleibhe (more usually found as MacLeay), which became Livingstone. In neither case was this

likely to have been of much concern to the contemporary clan members so re-christened, as Highlanders did not normally use surnames in the mid-eighteenth century.

The most concrete evidence of these Bells' connection with Clan MacMillan is to be found in the burial ground at Inverary. Among the many Bell gravestones there is one - pictured at left - commemorating Angus and his wife Ann Munro, farmers at Tullich. At the top of this handsome monument, erected in 1897 when Angus died in the 96th year of his age, the family have engraved their ancient clan name MAC ILLEMHAO

The Reverend Somerled's MacMillan-Bells

The clan historian, The Reverend Somerled MacMillan, makes a reference in the Bell section of his book "The MacMillans and their Septs" to distant cousins of his in Oban who were called Bell rather than MacMillan. In researching Somerled's family one discovers that the Bell connection was a lot closer to the late clan historian than he perhaps realised; he, no doubt knowing his own descent so well, probably never bothered to look at the records regarding his immediate ancestors.

Somerled's great-great-grandfather Donald, as a MacMillan living in the late 1700s on the borders of Lochaber, would probably have called himself - in so far as he ever used a surname - Mac'illemhaoil. The two children of Donald that we know of (Dugald and John) are both recorded in Oban in the mid-19th century with the name Bell, having been born, according to the census record, on the nearby island of Lismore. John's descendants continued to be called Bell, and they are the cousins in Oban to whom Somerled MacMillan refers in his book. Dugald's first two children however, who were born in Torosay on the island of Mull, were baptised there with the name McMillan; though back in Oban his younger son Donald was registered as a Bell. We don't unfortunately have a record of the surname with which his fourth son John was baptised - Somerled MacMillan's grandfather - but we do know that he was married in Oban in 1872 as a Bell, five years before Dugald himself died there, also as a Bell. When John moved to Glasgow, however, he preferred to be known by the name of MacMillan; presumably because he realised that his true clan identity would not be understood under the name Bell, as it would be back in Oban and Lismore. Somerled's father was, therefore, christened Samuel McMillan in 1880, as was Somerled himself in 1909 (he later preferring to use the Gaelic form of his Christian name).

An appreciation of Reverend Somerled MacMillan's family history is important because his own brief references to it have been erroneously used by some to suggest that Somerled was always a Bell and never really a MacMillan; and indeed that no Bells were ever MacMillans! A proper understanding of the use of (or more to the point, the non-use of) surnames in the Gaidhealtachd soon dispenses such a myth.

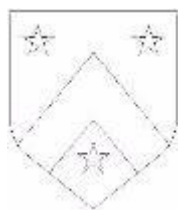
Bells outwith the Highlands The largest concentration of Bells in Scotland occurs in Dumfries & Galloway and the Borders where they are recognised as a clan in their own right. The two earliest pieces of evidence relating to the name Bell in these areas suggest that the ancestors of at least some of them could also have been MacMillans. The name Gilbert le fitz Bel, which appears in Dumfries in 1304, looks like the Norman-French equivalent of Gilbert MacBell/Mhaoil (just as Donald le fitz Can appears in English records standing for Gilbert's contemporary Donald McCan/Cahan). The arms - on a seal - of Robert Bell in Berwickshire in 1427, which pre-date all other known Bell coats of arms in Scotland, show mullets/stars where later there were bells, and make it the same design as the un-attributed MacMillan arms recorded in England (Burke, 1884, page 645) and the base for the MacMillan arms recorded in Scotland by Alexander Nisbet in 1722. The latter - i.e. with three plates put on the chevron of the basic design - are later associated with the MacMillans of Brockloch in Galloway (see in right sidebar). The existence of MacMillan-Bells in this area in the Middle Ages would make sense since by the 14th century there was a significant branch of the Clann an Mhaoil in Galloway & Dumfries - followers in the next century of the Earls of Douglas - from which evolved important septs that also became clans in their own right, such as the Millikens (of Blackmyre) and the Cannans (of Killochy). The Earls of Douglas were also the overlords of the Bells of Kirkconnell, the leading family amongst the 15th century "Border Bells", who in the next century were to be recognised by the crown as a clan in their own right. Their own traditions tell of a William Bell who came to Scotland from France with an Earl of Douglas, and in recent years DNA tests have shown that some descendants of the Bells of Blackethouse, the 16th century chiefs of the Border Bells, have a common descent with some Bells in England. Clan Bell of the Borders maintain a separate identity which is fully respected by Clan MacMillan.

Articles relating to the sept of Bell in *Clan MacMillan International Magazine*.

The Bells of the Appalachian Branch | Issue 14, May/June 2010
(../..../images/members/mag_archives/2010_14.pdf).



Balfour Seal



Bell seal 1427



MacMillan Arms recorded in England



(MacMillan crest - Scotland)

MacMillan in Scotland 1722



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