

Was there an Irish eponym for the Scottish Kennedys?

Iain Kennedy

© November 5th, 2012

Although my Origins article states that there is no known eponym for the Scottish Kennedys, the full story is more complex. To understand why we must travel to the province of Ulster. In the first millenium the Uí Néill confederation ruled much of the northern half of Ireland – there was even a Northern and Southern branch with the latter reaching almost down to the modern Tipperary/Offaly border. The surnames which arose amongst the Uí Néill were documented in the Irish genealogies. By far the largest collection of these, the *Leabhar mór na nGenealach*, was published in printed book form a few years ago and edited by Dr. Nollaig Ó Muraíle¹.

At the suggestion of the publishers De Burca Books, Dr. Ó Muraíle compiled a number of name indexes to the work (the original actually had its own index but only of personal names). One of these particularly caught my eye, entitled *Anglicised Surnames*. To my surprise Dr. Ó Muraíle had nominated two distinct branches as being anglicised as Kennedy. One, uncontroversial, is the Uí Briain branch² which later took Nenagh in Tipperary as its base; this is the Uí Chinnéidigh/Kennedy branch most people think of as Irish since they spread down to the Waterford coast and hence link up with the ancestors of President John F. Kennedy.

The other suggestion is more controversial; that a tribe of Uí Chinnéidigh amongst the Uí Néill confederation also anglicised their name to Kennedy³. This implied to me that there is evidence of them surviving into modern times, however in discussing this with Dr. Ó Muraíle it appears that this is not the case. However others have suggested to me that there is some deep connection between the Scottish Kennedys and a native Ulster branch. Unfortunately it is very difficult to prove one way or another due in part to the paucity of records in Ulster in the relevant timeframes. There is also a danger that the debate can descend into arguments about whether the Ulster Uí Chinnéidigh were a tribe only or whether this counts as a ‘surname’. The distinction is not always clear; we know O’Neill is a modern surname and Uí Néill was a (much bigger) tribal name⁴ but for some of the less well documented families there may never be enough records for us to be sure. Later records from Donegal suggest that it was quite common for settlers to ‘go native’ by learning Irish and converting to the Catholic faith; and of course then adopt native naming practices. There are quite a few records in counties such as Antrim and Donegal from around the time of the Ulster plantation that sound like native Irish Kennedys but at the same time we know that Scottish Kennedys were given land in these places including Donegal. What is really needed is some kind of continuity through the preceding centuries up to the early 1500s to make the case (I feel the Elizabethan Fiants are too late to be of great significance), and this we don’t have – yet. No-one has ever suggested Kennedys were galloglas but this is another factor to examine if only to eliminate it as a

¹ *Leabhar mór na nGenealach: The Great Book of Irish Genealogies*. Dubhaltach Mac Fhirbisigh. Edited by Nollaig Ó Muraíle. (Dublin, 2004).

² LGen 646.1, see Appendix B.

³ LGen 130.15, see Appendix A.

⁴ They have different eponyms though, so O’Neill is not here a simple English version of Uí Néill.

migration mechanism. We also know that the Carrick Kennedys had alliances with the MacDonells of the Glens of Antrim in the 1500s⁵ so there may have been some Antrim settlement before 1600.

The ‘Leabhar mór’ genealogy, which was written up in the mid-1600s, is not the oldest surviving form of the pedigree which I am looking at here since it also appeared in the Books of Lecan and Ballymote and Laud 610. These pedigrees tell us that the Uí Chinnéidigh were descended from Fergal mac Maíle Dúin, who died in AD 722. Tracking forward to the eponym might take us up to the late 800s but this is still strikingly early for a surname eponym, in Dr. Ó Muraíle’s opinion.

Acknowledgements

I acknowledge the helpful discussions of Dr. Ó Muraíle and both John McLaughlin and Bernard Morgan in putting these thoughts together.

Appendix A. The pedigree LGen 130.15

130.15 Genealach Chinél Diarmada mec Conchabhair

Baigheall, athair Chinnedigh, o ttáid Uí Chinnedigh, agus Maolpádraig, athair Chorráin, o ttáid Uí Chorrain, agus Mhóthla, o ttáid Uí Correighe no Uí Corraighthe, mec Dhiarmada m. Conchabhair m. Fearghaile, RE 10

Translation:

the genealogy of Ceinéal Diarmada [=the kindred of Diarmuid] s. Conchabhar Baoigheall f. Ceinneidigh, from whom are Uí Cheinneidigh, and Maol Padraig f. Corran, from whom are Uí Chorrain, and Mhóthla, from whom are Uí Choirreighe or Uí Chorraighthe, sons of Diarmuid s. Conchabhar s. Fearghal, KI 10

Appendix B. The pedigree LGen 646.1

646.1 Dond-Cuan mac Cendedigh, tra, se mec les .i. Conaing, o ttáid Muintir Chonaing, Riacan, o ttáid Uí Riacan, Longargan, o ttáid Uí Longarcain (germani fuerunt), Cendedigh, o ttáid Uí Cendedigh, Celeachair, o ttáid Uí Celeachair mc Duinn-Cuan, agus Congalach (ní fargaib-sén síol).

[Donn Cuan s. Ceinneidigh had six sons;

Conaing, from whom are Muintir Chonaing, Riacan, from whom are Uí Riacain, Longargan, from whom are Uí Longarain (they were sons of the same parents), Ceinneidigh, from whom are Uí Cheinneidigh, Ceileachair, from whom are Uí Cheleachair s. Donn Cuan, and Conghalach (he left no seed).]

⁵ See for example NAS GD25/1/841 Contract between Gilbert Earl of Cassillis and Angus Maconel of Dunivaig and Glens, 27 Feb 1575.