



Clan MacEwen

Ancient Clan History

The ancient Clan Ewen or MacEwen of Otter, Eoghan na h-Oitrich, which once possessed a stronghold of its own, was one of the earliest of the western clans sprung from the Dalriada Scots. These Scots were among the assailants of the Roman province in Britain, but they did not finally settle in Argyllshire till the beginning of the sixth century. The year 503 is usually said to mark the commencement of the reign of their first king in Argyllshire; but little of their history is known prior to the foundation of the Scottish Monarchy in the middle of the ninth century. Skene thinks they came more as colonists than invaders. The first leaders were the three sons of Ere -- Lorn, Fergus, and Angus. These were the representatives of three or four tribes who frequently fought among themselves, and against the Britons and Saxons. Historians are of opinion that from 736 to 800 they were partly, if not wholly, subject to the Picts.

St. Columba, who was one of them, established the monastery of Iona in 563 A.D. He was sprung from the Royal House of the Northern Hy Neill, while in the female line he was connected with the Kings of Dalriada. According to Skene, the last of the old abbots of Iona of whom there is any notice died in 1099, and thereafter, for upwards of sixty years, there is an unbroken silence regarding the Monastery. The Celtic Church had to give way before the invasion of one of the religious orders of the Roman Church. In the twelfth century, Somerled, who had Iona for one of his possessions, attempted to restore the old abbey and offered it to the Abbot of Derry, but the Abbot of Armagh and the King of Ireland disallowed the proposal. In 1166, on the succession of his son Reginald, the monastery was re-built on a larger scale. Reginald is said to have been "the most distinguished of the Galls and of the Gaels for prosperity, sway of generosity, and feats of arms"; and the Church benefited largely by these qualities. Adopting the policy of the Scottish Kings he introduced to his territories the religious orders of the Roman Church. He founded three monasteries--one of Black Monks in Iona, in honour of God and St. Columba; one of Black Nuns in the same place; and one of Grey Friars (Cistercian or White Monks) at Saddell in Cantire.

It is of this later Roman Catholic Benedictine Monastery and Nunnery, [Skene's "Celtic Scotland," Vol II.] and not of the Columban buildings, that the present ruins are the remains. The Western Celts continued to be Roman Catholics till the Reformation. But the original Celtic Church in Columba's time was not the Romish Church as represented at the present day. Columba stands forth as the great founder of the Ionian Church, whence radiated the light which penetrated to England and a great part of the continent of Europe. Somerled, Regulus of Argyll, was the leader of the Scots in the middle of the twelfth century. He was a son of Gillebride, and grandson of Gille-Adamnan. Gillebride had been driven from the Scottish Dalriada by the Norwegians, and applied for help to his Irish kindred. He returned to Scotland with his son Somerled and a band of followers, who encountered and defeated a large force of Norwegians, and seized their territories.

In 1153 the Scots rose against Malcolm IV., but Somerled was detached by an offer of the Isles, while some of his chiefs were imprisoned in Roxburgh Castle. In 1164 he again rose and landed at Renfrew, but he was defeated and slain. He had married a daughter of Olave, the Norwegian King, and left four sons, Dubhgal, Reginald, Angus, and Olave. The eldest succeeded to his father's possessions on the mainland, while the second, Reginald, received the Isles, with the title of King of the Isles. Up to 1222 Argyll maintained semi-independence of the Scottish Crown, and it was not till 1266, in the reign of Alexander III., that the Hebrides and the Western Isles were annexed to the kingdom.

Hill Burton says the Celtic races were Christian when they first settled in Scotland, and had a literary language and a written literature in their own tongue, and were in a higher stage of civilization than the Picts, the Britons, or the Saxons. As to their religion, we know they were under the spiritual sway of Iona. Whatever the cause, there can be no doubt of their success; they came, they saw, they conquered, they settled and spread, and eventually gave their name to the kingdom--Scotland.

