

Possible Clan Associations of the Robbs of Scotland

The surname Robb is one of scores of surnames (e.g. MacRobb, Robison) derived from the personal name Robert, and many of these derivatives also have patronymic forms (e.g. Robertson, Robson, MacRobb). The particular version that resulted in the modern surname Robb was probably “Rob”, a pet name for Robert. But which Robert, or Roberts, of the tens of thousands living at the time when hereditary surnames were first adopted?

When one thinks of Scottish surnames, one thinks of the clans, and the most authoritative and comprehensive source on the clans that I have found, is Frank Adam, *The Clans, Septs and Regiments of the Scottish Highlands* (see list of [SOURCES](#) below). The surname Robb, *per se*, occurs in this book only in an appendix that associates sept surnames with that of clans to which the septs were attached: Robb is said here to have been a sept of the McFarlanes.

However, the book has a special chapter with sections for each of the principal clans, which touch on the high points of their origins, history, location(s) and traditions. More to the point, we find here an alternate rehearsal of the associated sept names, often together with some circumstantial detail. The sept name, “Robb”, does not appear in the section on the McFarlane clan, and the sept-clan index in the appendix is evidently *not* an index to the book as a whole; thus there is no comprehensive index. In fact, the chapter covering individual clans is quite possibly not even the compilation of Mr. Adam at all, but an interpolation by the modern editors of his work. Consequently, I have carefully scanned the sections for *all* the clans looking for the sept name, Robb, without finding it anywhere.

The Bain *Clans and Tartans* book incorporates a similar sept-clan index. Here Robb is said to be a sept of both clan McFarlane and clan Robertson. Again, there is no discussion of the sources for this index, although it is said to have been “carefully compiled.” A version of this Bain index is published also with the *Bartholomew Clan Map*.

Considering other surnames derived from Robert, Adam also reports sept associations with the clans Robertson, Drummond (but only in the form MacRobbie), Gunn, and Innes.

The variant MacRobbie alone has been identified with a particular group of individuals living in the same area and presumably related by blood. This group of MacRobbies was a sept of the Robertsons, but at one point they “followed” the Drummonds, who were next door neighbors of the Robertsons, and the MacRobbies’ actual landlords.

The clans Gunn and Innes were smallish northern clans with a proclivity for spinning off sept surnames by attaching “son” to the given names of original clansmen: e.g. Jameson, Robson, Wilson, Georgeson. They do not, therefore, seem a promising source for a sept of “Robb”s.

That leaves only clans Robertson and McFarlanes as likely sources for highland Robbs.

Clan McFarlane was so given to banditry and predations on its neighbors that it began to be proscribed as early as the reign of Elizabeth. McFarlanes are to be found in the records throughout the history of Scotland nonetheless, but the clan would have ceased to be able to provide any kind of stable alliance or protection to a sept of Robbs from an early date.

The Robertson clan was a different story. The Robertsons were a prominent central highland clan closely allied with the royal Stewart clan from whom all the Scottish kings and pretenders came. This clan held together and escaped overt proscription until 1746 (when all the clans were disbanded as political entities) even though they played an active role in every royalist uprising. The territory of the Robertsons is not far from that of the McFarlanes, and it wouldn't be a stretch to imagine that at least a rump of the orphaned Robb sept attached themselves to the Robertsons. Perhaps even more likely, though, the surname may have evolved independently and naturally from Robertson -> MacRobert -> MacRob -> Rob(b), with the final “b” added to mark it as a surname. Thus the Robbs

who emerged as a sept of the Robertsons may well have been of a wholly different blood, and clan culture, from the Robbs associated early with the McFarlanes, and then dispersed.

A Smattering of Actual Robb Emigration Data

I've sampled and analyzed two sets of primary data to try to shed further light on this question. David Dobson has compiled (considering his many books altogether), a comprehensive set of Scottish records documenting Scottish emigrations to America. He has captured, in particular, the forced transportation to America of (mostly highland) clansmen who fought for the royalist (Stewart) cause during three epochs: the English Civil War, the 1715 Scottish rising on behalf of the Stewart Pretender, James Edward, and the final Scottish rising for James' son Prince Charles Edward ("Bonny Prince Charlie").

The other set of data comes from the IGI, published on film, and electronically by the LDS (the Mormon church). This data for the period 1550-1750 in Scotland consists primarily of marriages and christenings extracted from Scottish parish registers by Mormon researchers as part of their project to offer re-baptism into the Mormon Church to all the dead. Although most of these researchers have been poorly qualified amateurs, and the IGI is replete with mistakes and duplication, nevertheless the work in Britain is founded largely on primary data that can be readily confirmed by more careful researchers, especially where LDS films of the original records are available.

I found transportations as Jacobites (royalist rebels) of Robertsons, Robbs and MacFarlanes for both 1716 and 1746, but a substantial number (21) only for the Robertsons in 1716. Just three Robbs were transported in the aftermath of the 1715 risings: James, Thomas and John were transported to South Carolina, all on the same ship, and sold there as indentured servants. There was only one McFarlane for 1716, and only a couple for each of these names for 1746. I focused on 1716 Robertsons with relatively uncommon given names (e.g. Leonard) and traced several of them to a couple of small villages in Perthshire in the Robertson territory. I was also able to find a James Robb from one of those small villages, and a John and Thomas from another small Perthshire village, all of the right age to have participated in the 1715 rising. I therefore suggest that these Robbs were representative of a sept of the Robertsons, extant at least as late as 1715, and staunch Catholic royalists at that date.

In general, in the IGI data, I found the many Robb entries, going back to the 1500s, pretty well dispersed over the Scottish territory, but clustered to a fair degree in the two substantial settlements of Edinburgh and Glasgow, particularly Glasgow. This is consistent with the hypothesis that one of the principal bodies of Robbs was a sept of the McFarlanes and was early dispersed with them.

Surname distribution maps for Robbs in Great Britain tell a broader story. Robbs are found concentrated not only in Lanark (where Glasgow is located), but also in largely rural Aberdeen in the northeast, and surrounding counties.

And the accumulating DNA evidence in the Family Tree ROBB DNA Project is pointing to at least two major [genealogical patrilineages](#) of Scottish ROBBs, one, I think, centered on Lanark, and the other on Aberdeen. I have discussed these patrilineages and the DNA evidence at much greater length on my ROBB surname page.

The First Four Robb Families Into Pennsylvania

These were headed by:

William¹ of ChesterCoPA, who appears on the tax rolls of New Garden Township by the end of 1720, and who settled thereafter in LondonGrove Township

John¹? of Sadsbury, ChesterCoPA, then of CumberlandCo, who appears first on the Sadsbury tax list for 1726

William¹ of Drumore Township, in LancasterCoPA, who appears there first in 1748, and was the father of the John Robb who married Barbara McKnight and removed to WashingtonCoPA about 1781, where he died about 1804.

Joseph¹ of Chanceford Township in YorkCoPA, who was there by the early 1760's, and who also removed to WashingtonCoPA, where he died about 1811.

Male Robb descendants of all four of these families have been tested on their Y-chromosome STR DNA and we know that they all belong to the same [genealogical patrilineage](#). Although the first three of these families were most likely Scotch-Irish—that is they came to Pennsylvania from Scotland with a sojourn in Ireland in between—there is one piece of credible evidence that Joseph¹, at least, came directly from Scotland—from Aberdeenshire.

The two Williams died within five years of each other, and seem to be of the same generation; thus they can be no more closely related than first cousins. It's quite likely that John¹ of Sadsbury is either the oldest son, or a younger brother, of William¹ of Chester. I happen to be descended from Joseph¹, the last of these four immigrant patriarchs to arrive in Pennsylvania. Most likely the first three families immigrated from Scotland by way of Ireland, and so were Scotch-Irish, but there is one piece of fairly credible evidence that my ancestor, Joseph¹, came directly from Scotland—somewhat anomalously from Aberdeenshire, on Scotland's far northeastern coast.

The immigrant patriarch of the fifth and last Robb family to arrive in Pennsylvania during the colonial period is known to have been a merchant who lived not far from Belfast in County Down, and who had merchant, if not also family, ties back to Glasgow. His descendants too have been DNA tested and found to belong to a different patrilineage from the first four colonial Robb families, and another descendant of this line has also been traced back to Glasgow as far back as the early 1800s.

A [map of the distribution of Robbs in Scotland by county](#) shows two large concentrations with some diffusion outwards into adjacent counties. One of these groups, which presumably represent two different patrilineages, is centered in Aberdeenshire; the other in Lanarkshire, whose seat is the major port city of Glasgow.^[1] These Robb groupings in Great Britain correspond nicely to the first, and predominant patrilineages of Robb immigrants to the 13 British colonies that later became the United States. And the lesser concentrations of Robbs, extending outwards from these centers, and perhaps for the Lanark contingent, backwards in time, encompass the counties of Stirling and Perth, where, respectively the McFarlane and the Robertson clan territories lay.

¹ These surname distribution maps, produced from Archer Software's British 19th Century Surname Atlas, though based on the 1881 UK Census, are, thanks to the glacially slow pace of internal migration in Britain, remarkably indicative of the areas where the predominant patrilineage group(s) if each surname originated. This ROBB map has been adjusted for county population to wash out the population magnet effect of Lanark's major port city, Glasgow.

What About The Scottish Robbs: Were they Diehard Jacobites or What?

In trying to understand the attitudes underlying the virtual civil war in Scotland between Catholic royalists and Protestant unionists (and this was not strictly a highland-lowland division), I came across this sentence in Adam (he is discussing the reputation of a notorious highland chieftain of the clan Gunn): “About the middle of the fifteenth century the chief of the clan was George, who lived in what the dismal jimmies of modern degeneracy have termed barbaric pomp in his castle at Clyth.”

Suddenly it became clear to me what these diehard royalists were really fighting for. Or rather, against: namely, what they saw as the killjoy Puritanism of the English and Scots Presbyterians, and especially of the rival clans who embraced it in order to gain advantage in the new order of things. Of course these Scottish puritans saw themselves as fighting for decency and godliness, and, the more worldly and Anglicized of them would have added: civilization.

At any rate, it is crystal clear that the ones who settled in Drumore Township of LancasterCoPA, at least, were part of this new order of “dismal jimmies,” because they were wholehearted adherents of the Reformed Presbyterian Church (they were otherwise known as the “Covenanters”) from their earliest days in the New World. In fact, the oldest son, John² (*William*¹) Robb was a ruling elder (lay deacon) of the principal first Reformed congregation in America, ministered to by the first Reformed minister, the itinerant Rev. John Cuthbertson, and John made his house in Lancaster County available to Cuthbertson for performing marriages and christenings.

The Reformed Presbyterians were ultra-conservative “people of the book” who believed that the Bible alone represented God’s Word. They were strict Calvinist predestinarians, close in theology to the original New England Congregationalist Puritans, and not so different from them in church practice either while ministers were lacking on the frontier (the Congregationalists acknowledged only grudgingly any authority outside their own individual congregation, which hired and fired its own ministers). But the early generations of Reformed Presbyterians of the 1700s may have been even more closely analogous to the Leiden, then Plymouth Colony, Separatists, in their rejection of any civil (governmental) authority to regulate their lives. Really, the American frontier was one of the few places in the world that might be accomodative to these hardheaded and principled people.

The Robb families (or family) who settled first in ChesterCo, seem to have been of a different, more secular, temper, though I still think they were probably of the same blood, and there is no reason to doubt that they shared the common attitude of most of the Scotch-Irish toward civil authority.

On the whole, I think it most likely that the Robbs who came early to Pennsylvania are descended from a line of Saxons who made their way by boat to the coasts of Aberdeen, some of whose descendants found their way in time west to the port city of Glasgow. It is known that a couple of Robbs emigrated to the colonies as merchants or merchant factors—one to Virginia before the Revolution, and one to Philadelphia on the eve of it, but given that the Drumore Robb family were such uncompromising, conservative, Presbyterians, it is likely that they emigrated first to Ireland, probably between 1670 and 1690 when the more rigorous of the Scottish Covenanters were persecuted by the Restoration kings and their Scottish henchmen. We will probably never know for sure, because the Irish records are scant, and the evidences for direct Scottish emigration to America extant in the British Isles have been pretty thoroughly picked over by Mr. Dobson without profit to our inquiry.

Two Red Herrings & the McKnight (MacNaughtan) Connection

It has been supposed by some, despite the absence of support from the Scottish authorities, that the Robbs may have been allied with the MacDonalds, or, alternatively, the MacGregors, during their clan days.

The MacDonald connection is easily accounted for, and as easily dismissed. The John² (*William¹ of Lancaster*) Robb plantation in WashingtonCoPA (called “Omi”) was flanked on both sides by lands of John MacDonald, who was the principal landowner of Robinson Township (the present town of MacDonaldPA is named for him). However, to my knowledge, there aren’t even any intermarriages between Robb descendants and MacDonalds—not, at least for several generations—and I’ve encountered no other connection between these names anywhere I’ve looked.

The MacGregor connection is even more tenuous. It is true that the lands of the MacGregors adjoined those of the MacFarlanes. On the other hand, it was the MacGregor clan that produced the romantic and legendary hero Rob Roy. I suspect it is this latter circumstance, not the former accident of geography, which has prompted the unfounded family speculation that was passed down to me by my father, that the Robbs were somehow connected with the MacGregors.

But there is another argument from geographical propinquity that cannot be so easily dismissed. The MacFarlane lands were bordered even more closely by those of the clan MacNaughtan (other variants of this surname include McKnight). The MacNaughtans were loyal supporters of the Catholic Stuarts and were dispossessed of their lands for it in 1691 after the accession of William & Mary in 1688. What became of them? The line of the MacNaughtan chiefs eventually migrated to Ireland, but I find two MacNaughtans, Duncan and Malcolm, captured at Preston in 1715 and transported to America the next year, one in the same ship that took the three Robbs to South Carolina (Is there any significance to this? Does it cast doubt on my hypothesis that these transported Robbs were from an independent sept of the Robertsons, based in Perthshire?). In fact, the IGI shows most Scottish MacNaughtans resident still in Argyllshire. The only early entry is for a 1571 Malcolm of Dunareve (the district of one of clan's castles).

But what gives this possible Robb-MacNaughtan(McKnight) connection legs is that these surnames seem to intertwine on the early Pennsylvania frontier.

John² Robb, the son of William of LancasterCo, married Barbara McKn[ight] in 1757 in LancasterCoPA. The Rev. Cuthbertson, who recorded this marriage, wrote or abbreviated this surname variously as “McK[n[ight]]” “McN[aught[an]]”, and he was ministering to men named James McKnight and Neal McKnight in the same period when John² Robb came of age and was married.

Meanwhile John¹ Robb, of Sadsbury, then of Cumberland County (carved out of Lancaster in 1750), had his 1761 will witnessed by two McKnights. Although John¹'s wife was not mentioned in the will and so presumably had died, one would expect a Scotch-Irish frontiersman of this period to look first to close kinsmen, and especially in-laws, or failing that, to close and trusted friends in his near neighborhood, as witnesses to his will. We know that John¹'s wife was named Mary, from a deed in which she is a co-grantor: I think she was born Mary McKnight.

Finally, in the first WashingtonCoPA will book we find the 25Feb1781 will of James McKnight, which names wife Barbara (with the same less-than-common forename as John²'s wife, Barbara McKnight), and two grown sons, but makes John Robb Senior and Andrew Reed co-executors. Although the relationship to this John Robb is not specified, he was almost certainly the John² Robb, whom it can be shown had removed within the same year to fledgling Washington County, and who was therefore most probably McKnight’s son-in-law. Two other Reeds are witnesses to James McKnight’s will, and it is likely that his wife, Barbara, was a Reed. Earlier, there had been Reeds, as well as McKnights and Robbs in Drumore township when its population numbered in the 100s, and

in Scotland, the principal group of Reids were a sept of the Robertson clan. It's conceivable that the MacFarlane Robbs (neighbors of the McNaughtans) were related to the Robertson Robbs, and that when they were dispersed with the MacFarlanes (if they indeed were) that some took refuge with McKnights, and others with Robertson Robbs, and that a three-way "allied family" connection resulted. And if it were precisely this subset of interrelated people who had also drifted into one of the big cities, say Edinburgh or Glasgow, in order to better their economic lot, it was the port cities who were most exposed to the new wave Protestant religion, as well as to the imaginative lure of opportunity abroad. It could be just a coincidence that these three names intertwine on the Pennsylvania frontier, and that at least two of the first three Robb families appear to have inter-marital connections with McKnights, but

Unfortunately, this McNaughtan connection theory flies in the face of what the DNA evidence suggests: that these colonial Pennsylvania Robbs of Patrilineage 2, who were originally of Germanic descent planted themselves first in Aberdeen, on the other side of Scotland.

Whatever their ultimate origins may have been, if the descendants of William Robb of Lancaster are intolerably anxious to find a definitive Scottish clan identification, they might just as well adopt the McNaughtans, since they have as much of their blood as they do of the Robbs.

SOURCES

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Iain Moncreiffe, the “Albany Herald,” had a hand in revising one of the more recent editions of this standard work

David Dobson, *Directory of Scots Banished to the American Plantations, 1650-1775*

(Baltimore: GPC/Clearfield, 1983) on FACD 268

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Fitzroy MacLean, *A Concise History of Scotland* (London:Thams & Hudson, 1970)

Iain Moncreiffe, *The Highland Clans* (New York:Clarkson N. Potter, 1967)

Bartholomew Clan Map (Edinburgh:John Bartholomew & Son, no date)

Includes what is apparently a version of the same clan-sept index found in *The Clans and Tartans of Scotland International Genealogical Index* of the LDS Church - chiefly Scottish parish records of baptisms and marriages

Bryan Sykes, *Blood of the Isles* (Bantam, 2006)

METHODOLOGY

History books tell us stories about the past. If these stories are well-written and resonate with what we would like to believe, we tend to swallow them whole. Yet the truth about the past can only be painstakingly reconstructed by working our way back through layers of interpretation to the original facts and their context. The primary facts survive, where they survive at all, only in documents contemporary with the events they record, and we desire further that these records be set down by reliable and unbiased persons—we are looking for the equivalent of eyewitness testimony.

The next best thing to such documentary evidence is near contemporary histories or chronicles, written by people who lived not too long after the events in question, when they may have had access to oral accounts or other direct or indirect evidence, now vanished; unfortunately, we cannot expect citation or even attribution in such sources. This sort of evidence is of less weight than what original records can provide, amounting, as it does, to hearsay.

Finally, it is worth taking into consideration the opinions of scholars, even those of old-fashioned amateur scholars who didn't bother to tell us anything about their sources, or to give us the full reasoning behind their conclusions. The evidential value of such “informed” opinion can vary from totally misleading and essentially worthless, to highly plausible and probably true.