

The origins and ancestry of Somerled: Gofraid mac Fergusa and ‘The Annals of the Four Masters’

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The origins and ancestry of Somerled (later Somhairle) son of Gillabrigte (†1164) the ancestor of Clann Domhnaill and of many of the other famous Highland Scottish families (known collectively as Clann Somhairle) are wrapped in obscurity. For a long while sober historians took the view, expressed by A. A. M. Duncan and A. L. Brown in 1957, that we should probably distrust the accounts of Somerled’s descent given by Macdonald family historians; his father, we know, was Gillabrigte, but the rest of his ancestry is known only from late sources, and we have no reliable account of his rise to power.¹ In 1966, however, in an influential article, David Sellar restored some credibility to the received pedigree and its assertions about the family’s history.² It is my intention in the present paper to suggest that the defence of this pedigree was ill founded but that an examination of how parts of the pedigree came to be constructed can reveal considerable information about how views of Clann Somhairle and its place in the world changed through the course of the later Middle Ages.

In his seminal article Sellar identified fifteen accounts of the pedigree, surviving from the eighteenth century or earlier.³ The four earliest witnesses to the pedigree are as follows.

1. ‘The Book of Ballymote’ (1384–1405), 116b.⁴
2. ‘The Great Book of Lecan’ (early fifteenth century), 81b.⁵
3. *An Leabhar Donn* (mid-fifteenth century), folios 29rd, 29re, 29vb, 29vd, 43rc and 43 re.⁶
4. Edinburgh, National Library of Scotland, MS. Adv. 72.1.1 (A.D. 1467), folio 1vd.

Sellar also took serious note of two mid-seventeenth-century collections because

¹ A. A. M. Duncan & A. L. Brown, ‘Argyll and the Isles in the earlier middle ages’, *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland* 90 (1957) 192–203, at p. 195.

² W. D. H. Sellar, ‘The origins and ancestry of Somerled’, *Scottish Historical Review* 45 (1966) 123–42.

³ Sellar, ‘The origins’, pp. 125–6.

⁴ *The Book of Ballymote*, facs., ed. Robert Atkinson (Dublin 1887).

⁵ *The Book of Lecan*, facs., ed. Kathleen Mulchrone (Dublin 1937).

⁶ Dublin, Royal Irish Academy, MS. 23.Q.10 (\$\$\$\$), fo 29rd, 29re, 29vb, 29vd, 43rc and 43re.

of the authority of the compilers. These are the O'Clery Book of Genealogies⁷ and 'The Genealogies' of An Dubhaltach Mac Fhirbhisigh (1585–1670).⁸

The earliest of these witnesses to the pedigree is that in the 'The Book of Ballymote' which takes it back from Eoin (John), Lord of the Isles (*ca* 1346–87), to Colla Uais, the legendary ancestor of Uí Maicc Uais, one of the major lineages within the Airgialla grouping of peoples in north-central Ireland. Since Sellar wrote his article, an even earlier manuscript-witness to the pedigree has come to light in 'The Ó Cianáin Miscellany'.⁹ Kenneth Nicholls identified the significance of this witness and informed Sellar who kindly told me. I was then able to obtain a transcript from Katharine Simms. This pedigree seems to have been compiled in either 1344 or 1345 at the beginning of the reign of Eoin, 'First Lord of the Isles', although it is not a pedigree of Eoin himself but of his cousins Toirdhealbhach and Eoin mac Alaxandair. It has fourteen generations filling the gap between Colla Uais and Somhairle which, on the basis of a 20–30 year generation, would place the *floruit* of the apical figure between 744 and 884, approximately a half millennium later than the period in which the Irish genealogical tradition places his career.¹⁰ Although the pedigrees in 'The Great Book of Lecan' were transcribed in the time of the sons of Eoin I, and are thus later, they have been regarded as reflecting the textual tradition more accurately than those in 'The Book of Ballymote', on the grounds that independent witnesses tend to confirm the version in 'The Great Book of Lecan' cases of dispute. The version in 'The Ó Cianáin Miscellany' pedigree seems to support this view.

A twelve-, rather than fourteen-, generation gap between Somhairle and Colla Uais seems, however, to have been presumed by the poet who composed *Ceannas Gaidheal do Chlainn Cholla* for the second Eoin of Islay, at the end of the fifteenth century.¹¹ Since this poem, recorded in 'The Black Book of Clanranald', clearly derives from the circle of the chiefs of Clann Domhnaill in the fifteenth century, it should perhaps be given as much weight as all the Irish compilations put together at some distance from the centre of the Lordship. It should also be

⁷ Edited by S. Pender in *Analecta Hibernica* 18 (1951), §§ 301, 303, 1698 and 1706.

⁸ The autograph manuscript of Mac Fhirbhisigh's *Leabhar mór na ngenealach* is Dublin, University College, MS. Additional 14. For a complete text, see §§§, ed. & transl. Nollaig Ó Muraíle (§ vols, Dublin 2003/4).

⁹ Dublin, National Library of Ireland, MS. G.2, folio 26v.

¹⁰ For an account of the legendary history of these peoples see Francis John Byrne, *Irish Kings and High-kings* (London 1973), pp. 114–18.

¹¹ My thanks go to Wilson McLeod who drew my attention to this poem and who demonstrated to me that it is Eoin II rather than Eoin I who is the honorand. The best edition of this text appears in *Seosambh Laoide*, ed. A. Mac Colla (Dublin 1914), pp. 50–1.

noted, however, as B. T. Hudson has pointed out, that a specifically MacDonnell source (a pedigree drawn up by an Ó Gnimh for Randall MacDonnell, Viscount Dunluce, in or shortly after 1618) presents a pedigree which is significantly different from the Ó Cianáin/Lecan pedigrees. Though relatively late, when compared with other texts, this is one pedigree which we know certainly to have been drawn up in the circle of a chieftain of Clann Somhairle, rather than by an Irish scholar.¹² We should also be aware that the family of Ó Gnimh was a segment of Clann Somhairle and not Johnny-come-latelies (like the family of Mac Mhuirich). We are left, therefore, with a number of competing versions of the pedigree (see figure 1).

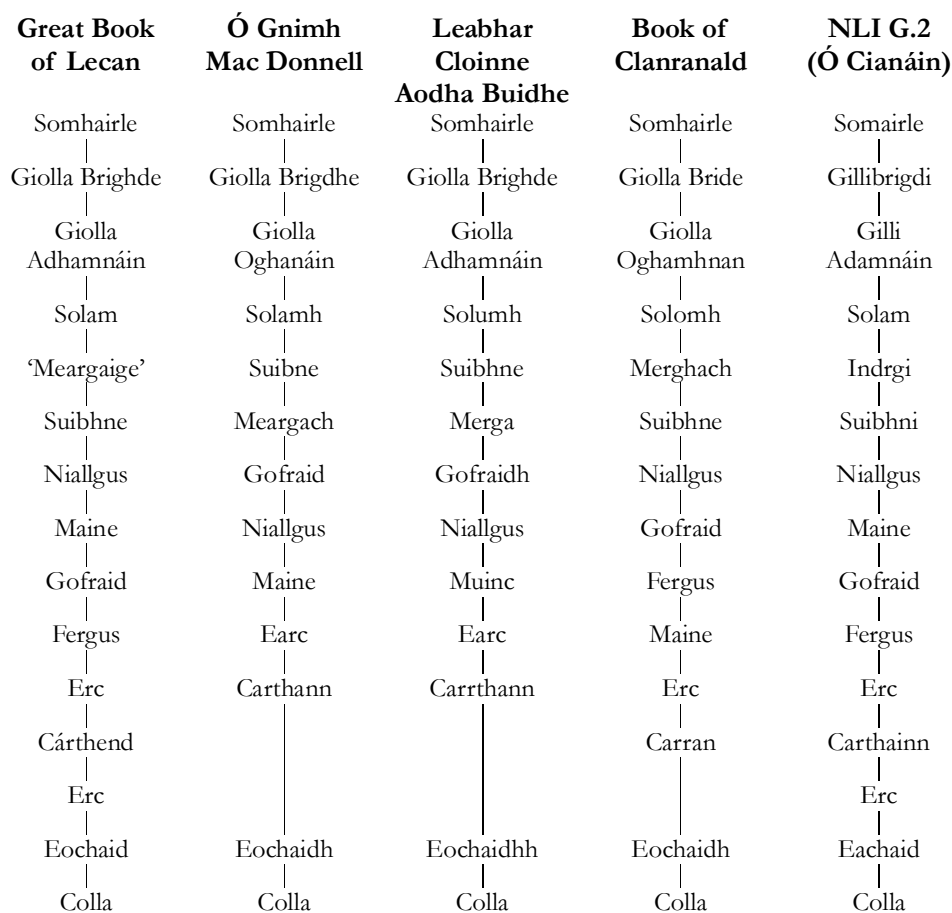


Figure 1: The pedigrees (with normalisation of common names)

¹² Benjamin T. Hudson, *Kings of Celtic Scotland* (Westport, CT 1994), pp. 40–2, citing B. Ó Cuív, ‘Some Irish items relating to the MacDonells of Antrim’, *Celtica* 16 (1984) 139–56.

With the exception of ‘Meargaige’, and its analogues, the names are all well attested and perfectly acceptable early mediaeval names. Sellar has suggested that the one problematic name may be a re-gaelicisation of the Old Norse form (*Margaðr*) of the Gaelic name Murchad.¹³ In the absence of other suggestions this seems a reasonable hypothesis, although we should not discount the possibility that it is a ghost-name deriving from an epithet misconstrued as a patronymic.¹⁴

In ‘The Annals of Tigernach’¹⁵ we find Somhairle’s father named as Gilla Brigte and in ‘The Annals of Ulster’ Somerled is called ‘mac Gilla Adamnáin’; this might, as Sellar has suggested, reflect usage as a lineage-name rather than as a simple patronymic.¹⁶ We can, therefore, tentatively accept the first two generations above Somhairle as accurate. Beyond that we are unable to go with confidence, although the appearance of Solamh in the fourth position in all versions of the pedigree might incline one to accept that that name is also in its correct position. The names above Gilla Adamnáin, with the possible exception of ‘Meargaige’, are mostly unusual but acceptable mediaeval Gaelic names; but, until we get back to the legendary characters at the higher end of the pedigree, none is clearly identifiable as a historical personage. If Sellar is held to be correct, however, in suggesting that ‘Meargaige’ represents *Margaðr* (Murchad) we might note that a Murchadh Mac Shuibhne was active, in the Norwegian interest, on the western seaboard in the 1260s, his grandfather being the eponym of the family known as Meic Shuibhne (MacSween).¹⁷ Might the ordering of the names in the Ó Cianáin/Lecan pedigree, where Meargaige is the son of Suibhne (who is the father of Solamh in Ballymote, the Ó Gnimh pedigree and, implicitly, in *Ceannas Gaoideal do Chlainn Cholla*) have been influenced by a knowledge of this man?

One pairing of names which will immediately strike any reader with even a passing knowledge of early mediaeval Scotland is that of Fergus son of Erc. A Fergus son of Erc is well known as a legendary founding father of Dál Riata and ancestor of all subsequent Scottish kings. His death is noted in ‘The Annals of Tigernach’.¹⁸

¹³ Sellar, ‘The origins’, p. 132.

¹⁴ Another possibility might be that this name represents a gaelicisation of the Welsh name Maredudd (< Old Welsh *Margetiud*).

¹⁵ W. Stokes (ed.), ‘The continuation of the *Annals of Tigernach*’, *Revue celtique* 18 (1897), \$\$\$–\$\$\$, at p. 195.

¹⁶ *The Annals of Ulster*, edd. and transl. W. M. Hennessy & D. MacCarthy (4 vols, London 1873–1901), II.145 (s.a. 1164).

¹⁷ W. D. H. Sellar, ‘Family origins in Cowal and Knapdale’, *Scottish Studies* 15 (1971) 21–31, at p. 21.

¹⁸ W. Stokes, (ed.), ‘*The Annals of Tigernach*, the third fragment’, *Revue celtique* 17 (1896) \$\$\$–\$\$\$, at p. 124. This annal corresponds with that for A.D. 501 in ‘The Annals of Ulster’.

Fergus Mór mac Earca cum gente Dalriada partem Britanniae tenuit et ibi mortuus est.

‘Fergus Mór mac Earca, with the *gens* of Dál Riata, held part of Britain and died there.’

Most calculations would give this Fergus son of Erc a *floruit* in the late fifth century.¹⁹ The appearance of Fergus son of Erc in the pedigree of Clann Somhairle suggests that at some stage the kindred, or perhaps an antiquarian genealogist, had wished to present the Clann as close kin to, or of equal nobility with, the kings of the Scots. It is particularly noteworthy that it is the names of Fergus and the younger Erc which are the additional names in ‘The Great Book of Lecan’ and its family and which are absent from ‘The Book of Ballymote’, and the Ó Gnímh pedigree. Sellar, however, pointing to the fact that the pedigree of Fergus son of Erc of Dál Riata differs considerably from that of Clann Somhairle, rejected this notion and focused instead on the overlapping pairing of names in the pedigree of Gofraid son of Fergus.²⁰

As we have seen, the pedigree tracing Somhairle’s descent from Colla Uais is, in all versions, many generations too short. Sellar has proposed that we should consider the possibility that the pedigree could be split into two parts, one ascending from Somhairle and one descending from Colla Uais, and that within each half the number of generations was more or less correct, but that at an uncertain moment a lacuna in the transmitted pedigree had been closed simply by making the last of the known descendants of Colla Uais’ the father of the first of Somhairle’s known ancestors.²¹ Sellar has made the further suggestion that Gofraid mac Fergusa was the last historical ancestor of Somhairle and that the names above Fergus in the pedigree belong to the legendary past. In part this argument is based on the fact that this legendary part of the pedigree can be recovered from independent witnesses relating to the descent of other early historical lineages.²² An examination of the various versions of the pedigree seems, however, to favour a tripartite construction. One portion descending from Colla Uais to Erc mac Cárthainn, one ascending from Somhairle to Solamh, and a middle portion which is extremely fluid. Instinctively one might suppose that the lacuna between the known seed of Colla and the known ancestors of Somhairle has not simply been closed up but has been filled in various ways by figures

¹⁹ For a summary of the early references to this man and their chronological implications see John Bannerman, *Studies in the History of Dalriada* (Edinburgh 1974), pp. 73–5, and D. N. Dumville, ‘Ireland and North Britain in the earlier Middle Ages: contexts for *Míniugud Senchusa Fher nAlban*’, in *Rannsachadh na Gàidhlig 2000*, edd. Colm Ó Baoill & Nancy R. McGuire (Aberdeen 2002), pp. 185–212 especially 185–94.

²⁰ Sellar, ‘The origins’, 124–5.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 132.

²² *Ibid.*, pp. 139–40.

thought to relate in some way to the lineage. Of these intermediate characters only one, other than Fergus mac Eirc, has a demonstrable manifestation outwith the pedigrees, and the rest of this paper will be concerned with the suggestion that Gofraid mac Fergusa, of the Lecan/Ó Cianáin group, can be identified with a real historical personage with a *floruit* in the mid-ninth century.

Sellar listed five reasons for considering Gofraid to be an historical figure inhabiting more or less the correct position in the pedigree of Somerled.

1. Gofraid is in origin a Scandinavian name (Old Norse *Godrøðr*) and unlikely to belong historically to the part of the pedigree set largely in pre-Christian and certainly before the Viking-Age.
2. The pedigree of Uí Macc Uais includes, as we have seen, Erc but not Fergus.
3. Clann Domhnaill regarded Gofraid as a ‘particularly important ancestor’. Sellar has cited Ó Gnímh (about 1580) calling Clann Domhnaill ‘Gofraid’s descendants’ and Monro in 1549 claiming that Clann Domhnaill was called ‘Clangotheray’ until the time of Domhnall Gorm (slain in 1539).²³ He has also pointed to the possibility that the ‘Mac Gofradha of the Isles’ mentioned in *Leabhar Chlainne Shuibhne* was a member of this lineage.²⁴
4. The statement by Roderick O’Flaherty in his *Ogygia* that Gofraid traces his descent from Colla Uais and, significantly, that ‘from Gofraid descend many noble families in Scotland, and from there Ireland,’²⁵ implying that Gofraid was a significant apical figure in the genealogical superstructure.
5. Gofraid mac Fergusa appears outside the genealogical literature in two annalistic entries, both in ‘The Annals of the Four Masters’, *s.aa.* 835 and 851.

It is on this fifth point that I now wish to concentrate. The final sentence of annal 835 reads:²⁶

Gofraid mac Fergusa, toiseach Oirgiall, do imtict go hAlbain do nirtugad Dhail Riada, tre forcongrad Chionate mic Ailpin.

‘Gofraid son of Fergus, chief of Oirghialla, went to Alba, to strengthen Dál Riada, at the

²³ Sellar, ‘The origins’, pp. 132–3.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 133 citing Paul Walsh, *Irish Chiefs and Leaders* (Dublin 1960), 72–77 and *Monro’s Western Isles (1549)*, ed. R. W. Munro (Edinburgh 1961), p. 93, and *Leabhar Chlainne Shuibhne*, ed. Paul Walsh, (Dublin 1920). For the identification see also D. Meek, “‘Norsemen and Noble Stewards’: the MacSween poem in The Book of the Dean of Lismore’, *Cambrian Medieval Celtic Studies* 34 (1997) 1–50, at p. 8, in conjunction with ‘The Annals of Ulster’ 1247 and S. Duffy, ‘The Bruce brothers in the Irish Sea world, 1306–29’, *Cambridge Medieval Celtic Studies* 21 (1991) 55–86, at p. 68.

²⁵ Roderick O’Flaherty, *Ogygia seu Rerum Hibernicarum Chronologia* (London 1685), p. lxxvi (Sellar’s translation).

²⁶ *Annals of the Kingdom of Ireland by the Four Masters*, ed. & transl. John Donovan (2nd edn, 7 vols, Dublin 1856), I.452–3.

request of Cinaed son of Alpin.’

The final sentence of the entry for 851 reads:²⁷

Gofraid mac Feargusa, toisich Innsi Gall, décc.

‘Gofraid mac Fergusa, chief of *Innsi Gall*, died.’

Sellar has noted that this Gofraid mac Fergusa sprang from the Airgialla, one of whose leading kindreds was Uí Maicc Uais, and went to precisely the area which Clann Somhairle later dominated. The conclusion is inescapable that the man referred to in these chronicle-entries is the same as the Gofraid mac Fergusa who appears in the pedigree of ‘The Great Book of Lecan’.²⁸ Unfortunately this chronicle is a compilation of the seventeenth century and, although its compilers were extremely competent scholars by the standards of their day, one cannot help being cautious, at least, of using them to verify events not noticed in surviving earlier chronicles.²⁹ Sellar was aware of these problems and considered three potential obstacles to taking the chronicle-references to Gofraid at face-value.³⁰ These are:

1. That the annal-entries were inserted into the chronicle in the wrong chronological sequence.
2. That they were concocted at a relatively late date in the interests of Clann Domhnaill.
3. That they are anachronistic in content.

In face of these potential criticisms he produced three defences:

1. The reference to Cinaed son of Ailpin is sufficient to repel the first objection.³¹
2. The Four Masters seem to have been remarkably ignorant of the history of Clann Somhairle, since they placed Somhairle’s obit under the year 1083 (81 years too early) and confused Aonghus Óg (†1490) with Eoin Óg.
3. On the third count it may be objected that no ruler of Oriel [the Airgialla] bearing the name Gofraid son of Fergus is recorded, that the use of the Norse name Gofraid 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 was never a well-developed over-kingdom of Oriel as there was, for

²⁷ *Ibid.*, I.486–7.

²⁸ Sellar, ‘The origins’, p. 134.

²⁹ Paul Walsh, *The Four Masters and their Work* (Dublin 1944).

³⁰ Sellar, ‘The origins’, p. 134.

³¹ *Ibid.*

example, in Leinster or Meath. The expression “tóiseach Oirgiall” may mean no more than ‘a nobleman of the Airgialla’ and may have been used in a consciously anachronistic manner for the sake of clarity, if indeed it was not already in use by 853.³²

In the remainder of his article Sellar developed a context for Gofraid’s migration and background and concluded that in the absence of compelling evidence to the contrary we should accept the entries in ‘The Annals of the Four Masters’ as broadly reflecting ninth-century reality, even if the exact wording of the entries might have been recast in more recent times. The historicity of Gofraid mac Fergusa thus established has been widely accepted, albeit with varying degrees of caution, by subsequent writers.³³

More than thirty years on, however, we should perhaps look again at Sellar’s defence of the veracity of the these notices of Gofraid mac Fergusa. I shall begin with his first argument, that the connexion with Cinaed son of Alpin demonstrates that the chronicle-entries have not been misplaced. Since most of the annals in the ninth-century section of this chronicle are dated up to two years too early, we should take the two entries relating to Gofraid mac Fergusa as standing at 835×7 and 851×3. The first entry, which is the one mentioning Cinaed, is immediately problematic if taken as a contemporary record. No contemporary source gives us an exact date for Cinaed’s accession to kingship (of either Dál Riata or the Picts) but his death is recorded in Irish and Welsh chronicles at 858. King-lists give Cinaed a reign of sixteen years, which would place his accession in 842.³⁴ The earliest witness, ‘The Chronicle of the Kings of Alba’, which seems to date, in part, from the mid-tenth century, states that Cinaed ruled the Picts for sixteen years but that he had also ruled in Dál Riata for two years before that.³⁵ This still takes us back only to 840, later than the date

³² Sellar, ‘The origins’, p. 135.

³³ For example, Alfred P. Smyth, *Warlords and Holy Men* (London 1984), pp. 190–1; A. Jennings, ‘An Historical Study of the Gael and the Norse in Western Scotland from c.795 to 1000’ (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Edinburgh 1993), pp. 148–79; R. Andrew McDonald, *The Kingdom of the Isles: Scotland’s Western Seaboard, c. 1100–c. 1336* (Phantassie 1997), pp. 30–1, and, more cautiously, Barbara E. Crawford, *Scandinavian Scotland* (Leicester 1987), pp. 47–8, and Michael Lynch, *Scotland: a New History* (London 1991), p. 41. A more sceptical view was taken by D. Ó Corráin in a review of Bannerman’s *Studies* published in *Celtica* 13 (1980) 169–82, at pp. 177–8, and by Hudson, *Kings*, pp. 40–2.

³⁴ Dauvit Broun, *The Irish Identity of the Kingdom of the Scots* (Woodbridge 1999), p. 148. For the texts of the king-lists and a full discussion see Marjorie O. Anderson, *Kings and Kingship in Early Scotland* (2nd edn, Edinburgh 1980).

³⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 249–50. An edition with translation has also been published by B. T. Hudson, ‘The Scottish Chronicle’, *Scottish Historical Review* 77 (1998) 129–61. For a judicious account of the text see

presented in ‘The Annals of the Four Masters’. The earliest source which would allow us to have Cinaed reigning as early as the alleged advent of Gofraid on the Scottish scene is the so-called ‘Chronicle of Huntingdon’, ‘which is,’ in the words of Dauvit Broun, ‘the return made by the canons of St Mary’s, Huntingdon to Edward I in 1291’.³⁶ This text begins with a short narrative about the death of Alpin, Cinaed’s father, which it dates 834, and about the vengeance wrought by the son which led to the destruction of the Pictish kingdom. This account gives Cinaed a total reign-length of twenty-eight years and has his reign beginning on the death of his father. The Chronicle then continues with a regnal list which clearly belongs to a group descending from a common ancestor composed in or after 1286.³⁷ None of the other members of this family, however, gives Cinaed a reign longer than sixteen years. In fact, the date 834 for the beginning of this sequence was probably reached by adding up the regnal years in a defective king-list belonging to the group designated X by Marjorie Anderson.³⁸ This group in its turn, she argued, was derived from an exemplar produced during the reign of Alexander II (1214–49).³⁹ The false calculation was thus not derived from the exemplar produced in or after 1286, and the adding of additional years to three reigns in ‘The Chronicle of Huntingdon’ itself seems to have been motivated by the need to reach a date 834 calculated from a defective version of the king-list produced in or after the reign of Alexander II.⁴⁰ Thus we can be fairly certain that a *floruit* for Cinaed mac Alpin as early as 835×837, the date demanded by the first of the entries on Gofraid mac Fergusa in ‘The Annals of the Four Masters’, is unlikely to have been imagined by anyone before the thirteenth century.

To summarise, it does not seem probable that a synchronism of a narrative statement relating to Cinaed son of Alpin with an incarnation-date as early as 834×837 would have been made before the thirteenth century, and indeed it is far more likely that such a synchronism would have been made after the dissemination of the date 834 for the accession of Cinaed in the work of John of Fordun in the years around 1380. Since we have already seen that a version of the pedigree of Clann Somhairle containing Gofraid mac Fergusa (that in ‘The Ó

D. N. Dumville, ‘The Chronicle of the Kings of Alba’, in *Kings, Clerics and Chronicles in Scotland, 500–1297: Essays in Honour of Marjorie Ogilvie Anderson on the Occasion of her Ninetieth Birthday* (Dublin 2000), pp. 73–86.

³⁶ Broun, *The Irish Identity*, p. 138. The text is published in *Chronicles of the Picts, Chronicles of the Scots and Other early Memorials of Scottish History*, ed. William F. Skene (Edinburgh 1867), pp. 209–13.

³⁷ Broun, *The Irish Identity*, p. 138, n. 37, and Anderson, *Kings*, pp. 71–2.

³⁸ Anderson, *Kings*, pp. 217–18.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 52.

⁴⁰ *Ibi.*, pp. 217–18

Cianáin Miscellany') was in existence in the mid-fourteenth century, we are left with the conclusion that the information contained in the annal, that is to say the paternity of Gofraid and his descent from the Airgialla, cannot, with certainty, be held to be independent of the pedigrees of Clann Somhairle, as Sellar had supposed.

Turning to Sellar's second defence, that the Four Masters did not show a particular interest in the history of Clann Domnaill, we must concede this to be the case, for the confusion of Aonghus Óg and Eoin Óg, characters from the relatively recent and well recorded past, is otherwise inexplicable. However, the misplacing of the obituary of Somhairle himself, in 1083 instead of 1164, should cause us to consider whether the chroniclers may have been using sources that showed some sort of bias. While it is common for annalistic entries to be a few years out either individually or in sequence, it is hard to explain how this obituary could have come so far out of sequence by accident. The other information recorded under the year 1083 seems to be in the correct place. Somerled's death in 1164 was recorded variously by contemporaries.⁴¹ It is hard to accept, indeed, that one or other of the sources used by the Four Masters did not include the correct date, and one can only conclude that the notice of Somerled's death was entered under the year 1083 because this was the date given for the event in what the compilers regarded as a more reliable source.⁴²

This hypothesis, of course, begs the question how this source itself came to date Somerled's death to 1083. The most plausible answer seems to be that it, in its turn, relied on a source which did not include incarnation-dates and that it was part of a relative chronology, a king-list, (for example) or synchronism, stating, or encouraging the inference to be made, that x happened so many years after y , and which was, subsequent to its composition, attached to a sequence of incarnation-dates at the wrong point. Since there is no clear reason why this should have happened with the Four Masters' obituary of Somerled, which is a simple statement of death attempting no linkage with any places or personages, the attachment to an absolute chronology must (*ex hypothesi*) have happened at another point within the relative chronology. Can this point be identified?

In attempting to link the Four Masters' obituary of Somerled to another anomalous entry in the same chronicle, one is inevitably drawn to the notices of Gofraid mac Fergusa, who is otherwise known only from the pedigree of Somerled's own descendants. The suspicion that the three entries might be drawn

⁴¹ W. Stokes (ed.), 'The Continuation of the *Annals of Tigernach*', *Revue celtique* 18 (1897) \$\$\$-\$\$\$, at p. 195; *The Annals of Ulster*, edd. & transl. Hennessy & MacCarthy, II.145 (*s.a.* 1164).

⁴² Indeed the Four Masters did use 'The Annals of Ulster' among their various chronicle-sources.

from the same source is encouraged by the fact that all three are the final sentences in fairly lengthy annals. This suggests the possibility that they belong to the same editorial phase in the compilation of ‘The Annals of the Four Masters’. If we take Gofraid’s obituary date, *s.a.* 851, but accompanied by other events which can be dated in 853, and add to it the eighty-one years necessary to ‘correct’ Somerled’s death-notice we find ourselves at 932 *recte* 934. Turning to ‘The Annals of Ulster’, under the year 934 we find the following entry.

Gothfrith b. Hímar, rí crudelísimus Nordmannorum, dolore mortuus est.

‘Gothfrith, grandson of Ímar, most cruel king of the Northmen, died of sickness.’

The Four Masters themselves recorded this event *s.a.* 932 [*recte* 934] in their chronicle.

Gothfrith, tighearna Gall, d’écc.

‘Gothfrith, lord of the Gaill, died.’

Chronicum Scotorum, s.a. 933 [*recte* 934], notes this event.⁴³

Gothbrith rí Gall ó galor rodocráidh do béc.

‘Gothfrith, king of the Gaill, died of a most grievous disease.’

‘The Annals of Clonmacnoise’, *s.a.* 929 [*recte* 934] have the same hin hostile language.

‘Godfrey, king of Danes, died a filthy and ill-favoured Death.’

The notice of the death of Gofraid mac Fergusa in ‘The Annals of the Four Masters’ is preceded, sixteen annals earlier, by the notice of his arrival in Alba. If we look back sixteen years from 934 in ‘The Annals of Ulster’ we find ourselves at 918. Here we come to a long entry describing the doings of the Gaill.⁴⁴

Gaill Locha da Cáech do dergiu Erenn, .i. Ragnall rí Dubgall, 7 na da iarla, .i. Oitir 7 Graggabai, 7 sagaith dóoib iar sin co firu Alban. Fir Alban dono ara cenn-somb co comairnechtar for bru Tine la Saxanu Tuaiscirt. Dogensat in genti cethraictha dibh, .i. cath la Gothbrith ua nÍmair ...

‘The Gaill of Loch dá Cháech, i.e. Ragnall, king of the Black Gaill and the two jarls, Oitir and Gragabai, forsook Ireland and proceeded against the men of Alba. The men of Alba, moreover, moved against them and they met on the bank of the Tyne in Northumbria. The heathens formed themselves into four battalions: a battalion with Gothfrith grandson of Ímar ...’

⁴³ *Chronicum Scotorum*, ed. & transl. William M. Hennessy (London 1866), p. 201.

⁴⁴ *The Annals of Ulster (to A.D. 1131)*, I, edd. & transl. Seán Mac Airt & G. Mac Niocaill (Dublin 1983), p. 369 (918.4).

This is the first mention of Gofraid ua Ímair in any of the chronicle-sources and it reports his moving with an army from Ireland into northern Britain. The hypothesis which I propose is that the entries in ‘The Annals of the Four Masters’ relating to Gofraid’s arrival in Alba, his death, and the death of Somhairle derive ultimately from a synchronism which contained the information, in some form or other, that Gofraid died sixteen years after he came to Alba and two-hundred and thirty years before the death of Somhairle. It may have contained other information but need not have done so. This synchronism was then tied to an absolute chronology, perhaps as late as the compilation of ‘The Annals of the Four Masters’ in the 1630s and probably after the production of John of Fordun’s chronicle (about 1380). Then, or later, a patronymic was provided for Gofraid, derived from Clann Domhnaill pedigrees. The synchronism itself probably derived from an earlier chronicle ancestral to or identical with ‘The Annals of Ulster’ (which was itself used by the Four Masters).

The question remains why a chronicler or synchronist in the late Middle Ages or the early modern period would wish to identify the Gofraid in the pedigree of Clann Somhairle with Gofraid ua Ímair. Linked to this is an equally interesting question: who was the Gofraid in the pedigree of Clann Somhairle? It is harder to arrive at an answer for the first of these questions, but the second should be achievable. Sellar drew our attention to the importance of Gofraid as an ancestor-figure outwith the pedigrees, referring to Ó Gnimh’s poem *Treisi an eagla iná an andsacht* and to Monro’s account of Clann Domhnaill, both from the sixteenth century. We can also demonstrate Gofraid’s importance at an earlier period by looking at two thirteenth-century poems concerning Clann Domnaill. The later of these is the well known address to Aonghus of Islay (*ob* 1296?)⁴⁵ In Stanza 29 Clann Somairle is described as having sprung from Síol nGofraidh – the seed of Gofraid. The earlier poem is less well known. *Dombnall mac Raghnaill rosg mall* is an unpublished poem surviving in a manuscript in the National Library of Scotland.⁴⁶ This seems to be a praise-poem for the eponym of Clann Domhnaill, and if this is correct, it must date from the earliest years of the thirteenth century or the very late twelfth century. In this poem the honorand is described as the descendant of Gofraid. Also notable in both these poems are the other ancestral figures who appear. Although Colla Uais appears together with other legendary characters from Irish prehistory, the more recent figures are, in the poem for Aonghus, Turcuill, Íomhair and Amhlaóimh, and in the poem for Domhnaill,

⁴⁵ *Irish Bardic Poetry*, ed. & transl. Osborn Bergin, (Dublin 1970), pp. 169–74.

⁴⁶ MS. Adv. 72.2.2 folio 16. I am grateful to Wilson McLeod for drawing my attention to this poem and for providing me with a photograph and partial transcript.

Amhlaíbh Fionn. This suggests that in the thirteenth century members of Clann Somairle saw their recent heritage as coming from the Gaill.

Such a possibility should not surprise us. Contrary to the image, projected by recent clan-historians, of Clann Somhairle as Gaelic nationalists liberating the Isles from Scandinavians, it is quite explicit in our two extended narrative accounts from the thirteenth century, *Orkneyinga saga* and ‘The Chronicle of the Kings of Man and the Isles’, that the early leaders of Clann Somhairle saw themselves as competitors for the kingship of the Isles on the basis of their descent through their mother Ragnhilt from her father Amlaíb Derg, king of the Isles, *circa* 1113–54. The claim of Clann Somhairle to royal status was based on its position as a segment of Uí Ímair, the dynasty which had ruled Dublin, the Isles, and Northumbria for much of the tenth century but which by the late twelfth century was confined to the Isles. These dynasts’ main competitors in this conflict were their maternal uncle Gofraid mac Amlaíb and his descendants. ‘The Chronicle of the Kings of Man and the Isles’, composed in 1257 at Rushen Abbey on the Isle of Mann but with continuations into the fourteenth century, is, in its original portion, effectively the official history of that Gofraid’s branch of the dynasty.⁴⁷ This view of the claim of Clann Somhairle to the kingship is also found in that seventeenth-century work, ‘The Book of Clanranald’.

The ‘Chronicle of the Kings of Man’ takes as its starting point for its dynastic history not the time of Ímar (†873) or Amlaíb Cuarán (†981) but the reign of the more recent Gofraid Crobán, who is held to have ruled from 1079 until his death in the plague of 1095. Gofraid was a member of a cadet-branch of the dynasty who came to power through a violent *coup d’état*, and his choice as the apical figure for the dynastic historians probably reflects the desire of his own descendants to exclude any of their surviving collateral kinsmen from the succession. As ‘King Orry’, Gofraid has survived as an extremely potent figure in Manx legend into the present; a prehistoric chambered cairn just north of Douglas is said to be his tomb, and he is accorded the stature of a giant. Gofraid Crobán’s position as the apical figure of the dynasty of the Isles in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, and his genealogical place as the great-grandfather of the sons of Somhairle, seem to make it more than likely that he is the Gofraid of the thirteenth-century poetry and that Síol nGofraidh was originally the name of the dynasty descended from him, including the segments represented by Clann Somairle and the rulers of Mann.

How then did Gofraid Crobán become Gofraid ua Ímair and later still

⁴⁷ *Cronica Regum Mannie et Insularum: Chronicles of the Kings of Man and the Isles*, ed. & transl. George Broderick (2nd edn, Douglas 1996).

Gofraid mac Fergusa? We shall probably never know the full details of this evolution but we can probably guess at some of the stages. Gofraid Crobán in one pedigree is the grandson of an Ímar, if not the Ímar; but this is not all.⁴⁸ On the one hand the general anxiety within Gaelic political ideology about claiming descent through the female line may have led genealogists of Clann Somhairle in the later Middle Ages to invent or simply assume a patrilineal link to the Gofraid who appeared in their dynastic poetry. On the other, it may have been a conscious rejection of Gofraid Crobán which led the *seanchaidh* to seek out another Gofraid in the chronicle-record to whom they could create a link. For chronological reasons, this identification must have preceded the notion that Gofraid was a contemporary and ally of Cinaed son of Alpin. This latter transformation may have had a specific, local motivation or it may have reflected more general cultural trends. Perhaps we might imagine an explicitly anti-Gaill sentiment creeping into the historiography, but it is difficult to know when we might expect this to have occurred and whether we should attribute such sentiments to the political situation in Scotland (for example during the conflict with Norway in the 1260s) or to the development of a literary tradition in Ireland, whence most of the poets and genealogists seem to have come. It is clear that in the early twelfth century both the *Cocad Gaedil re Gallaib* and *Caithréim Chellacháin Chaisil* reflected, or perhaps sought to create, a more ethnocentric view of Uí Ímair than contemporary notices of tenth- and eleventh-century events might be held to encourage one to take, and it is possible that such attitudes eventually permeated Scottish Gaeldom as well.⁴⁹ This said, the descent from Colla appears in the earliest dynastic poetry, and it may be that the exile overseas of Colla Uais provided a juncture at which pedigrees of the Gaill might be attached to the main Gaelic stem in a more conciliatory fashion. A more extensive publication of the Gaelic genealogical texts relating to both Scotland and Ireland may at some point shed light on such processes, but at present we can only speculate.

It would not be unreasonable to suggest that Gofraid mac Fergusa was created and appeared for the first time in the fourteenth century when Clann Domhnaill was closely associated with the Bruce cause. The synchronism linking Somhairle to Gofraid ua Ímair may have had its origin somewhat earlier among the *seanchaidh* of Clann Somhairle, as indeed the linkage with Cinaed son of Alpin may have done. This fabrication, like the presumably independent claim that Gofraid was a

⁴⁸ For a pedigree of Gofraid see *Early Welsh Genealogical Tracts*, ed. P. C. Bartrum (Cardiff 1966), p. 152.

⁴⁹ Kathleen. Hughes, *Early Christian Ireland: Introduction to the Sources* (London 1972), pp. 288–300.

son of Fergus mac Eirc, is evidence that the Lords of the Isles wished to be seen to have been involved in 'Project Scotland' from its inception.⁵⁰

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⁵⁰ I should like to thank Dauvit Broun for reading this paper in draft and for providing helpful comments and advice.