

McMurtry

Scottish Origins of the McMurtry Family
of the Ottawa Valley, Toronto, Boston – and now Oshawa

Andrew McMurtry

In McMurtry History Update # 3: ‘McMurtry Irish Origins’, it was established that the last location in Ireland of the Ottawa Valley / Toronto and Boston McMurtrys was the townland of Ballynenagh, in the parish of Ardtrea, in the barony of Loughinsholin, located in southern Co. Derry (formerly Co. Londonderry), along the shores of Lough Neagh, the largest fresh water lake in the British Isles.¹ Since then, further DNA testing has established a match between these two families and a McMurtry family living in Oshawa that traces its history to Coleraine and the town of Kilrea, which is also located in the barony of Loughinsholin, just 20 miles north-east of Ardtrea along the River Bann. This family was the closest to the Ardtrea families both geographically and genetically.

William James McMurtry (1866-1947) relocated his family from March Township in the Ottawa Valley to Toronto in 1890. A mini biography for him in the 1911 publication *Greater Toronto and the Men Who Made It*, is one source for the origin of the family prior to Ireland. The bio tells us ‘on the paternal side a family whose estate in Ireland dates back 300 years, the family having originally came from Scotland.’² There were four major migrations of Scots to Ireland around this time. The first was the natural back-and-forth migration between Ulster and south-western Scotland that had taken place for many centuries. The second was the Hamilton & Montgomery planned settlement of counties Antrim and Down starting in 1606. After the Gaelic Irish earls abandoned their lands in what became known as the ‘Flight of the Earls’, the third wave of settlement was the official Plantation of Ulster, which commenced in 1609 after receiving approval from James I, King of England, Scotland and Ireland. Six counties were involved in the Plantation of Ulster: Donegal, Coleraine (later part of Londonderry), Tyrone, Fermanagh, Cavan and Armagh. The fourth migration, which may be the most pertinent, was the settlement near the River Bann close to Coleraine on the border of Co. Antrim and Co. Derry

organized by Randal McDonnell, the Catholic Earl of Antrim, who settled Protestant British settlers on his Irish lands in an effort to show his loyalty to James.

As it happens, the earliest record of any McMurtry in Ireland is the 1630 Muster Roll for North Antrim. We find John McMurtry, Thomas McMourtry, Gillaspy McMyrity and another John McMurtry all on lands in Dunluce and listed as the Earl of Antrim's British Tenants.

Randal McDonnell had always sided with the rebellious Irish Earls of Ulster against the English. However, when James VI of Scotland became James I of England, the McDonnells were suddenly transformed from rebellious outlaws into loyal kinsmen. They were granted all of the Glens and the Route, the whole Antrim coast from the River Bann to Larne, and the entire Antrim plateau. In 1620 Randal was made the first Earl of Antrim in recognition of his close standing with the King. As part of his duties as Earl, Randall was required to build and maintain castles in each of his baronies, so Randal spent time building onto Glenarm Castle and castles in Ballycastle. He also brought in Scottish settlers who were James I's first experiment in preparation for the Plantation of Ireland. The McDonnells of Antrim were Catholics, but most of the people who were brought over in the Plantation were Protestant lowland Scottish settlers.³

The second source that points to the family's Scottish origins is the Canadian census of 1871. As head of his household, the pioneer ancestor of the Toronto and Ottawa Valley families, James McMurtry, identified the family's religion as 'Church of Scotland / Kirk / Scotch Presbyterian, etc.' According to historian Bruce Elliot, 'in 1871 fewer than one-quarter of the Irish Protestants of Ontario were Presbyterian, a rough surrogate for descent from seventeenth-century Scots settlers in Ulster. The majority of Canada's Protestant Irish descend from Ulster's English planters and from English planters who once settled in reasonable numbers in various locations deep in what is now the Republic of Ireland.'⁴

As for the ethnicity of his father, James McMurtry declared on the census that the family was Irish and from Ireland. Professor Elliott points out that 'the lives of Irish Protestants were shaped by the experiences of their ancestors in all parts of Ireland over generations, and, for many of them, their identification with Ireland was all the stronger because of the privileged position they long enjoyed in that country's economy and political structures. Irish Protestants who emigrated before the twentieth century almost universally identified themselves simply as 'Irish' and are so recorded in census enumerations.' The above statement regarding 'privileged

position' would apply more to the Anglo-Irish than to Scots-Irish, who were for many years subjected to laws requiring them to take Anglican communion should they wish to hold public office.

If it is true that the Ottawa Valley / Toronto family's presence in Ireland dated back 300 years from 1911, they would have been located in Ireland from approximately 1610 to 1823 for a total of 213 years. This is 27 years longer than the Ottawa Valley / Toronto family has been in Canada (1823-2009), and 49 years longer the family has been in the USA (1845-2009). 213 years was a very long time for the Irish of Scottish extraction to have been in Ireland considering approximately 250,000 Ulster-Scots left for North America in the 1700's rather than live under the harsh restrictions the Penal Laws imposed on both Presbyterians and Catholics. As detailed in McMurtry History Update # 4: 'Religion and Politics in Ulster', a great many liberal Ulster Presbyterians were the leaders of the Society of United Irishmen seeking to unite Anglicans, Presbyterians and Catholics under one banner of Irishmen.⁵ There were Scots-Irish Presbyterians and Anglo-Irish Anglicans who came to identify more with Ireland than with the homeland of their ancestors becoming *Níos Gaelaí ná na Gaeil iad féin* or "more Irish than the Irish themselves."

The Ulster-Scots ancestry of the family was well known from the time of the family's migration to the United States and to Canada up until the mid 20th century. What has not been well known to current generations is the location in Scotland where the McMurtrys of the Ottawa Valley / Toronto / Boston and Oshawa once called home. Regrettably, no document survives that can tell us exactly where in Scotland the family was situated prior to their migration to Ulster. Thankfully, however, we have at our disposal 21st century methods of inquiry – genetic genealogy. In 2005, Peter McMurtry provided a DNA sample to the McMurtry DNA Project, which represented the DNA of the Toronto and Ottawa Valley McMurtrys. Samples were collected from over 50 McMurtrys living in various parts of the world. This scientific testing provided McMurtry genealogists with the ability to establish genetic matches, link previously unconnected families, and shed light on some of the long-standing mysteries.

As indicated, the initial testing determined that Peter McMurtry was an exact match with George McMurtry of California, whose family settled in Boston in the 1840's. Subsequent

testing established the match with Maurice McMurtry of Oshawa. The Scottish origin breakthrough occurred during a round of DNA testing that found that Peter, George and Maurice had the same DNA signature as two McMurtries whose ancestors were from the parishes of Kirkmichael and Dailly in the county of Ayrshire, located in the south-west Lowlands of Scotland, where the poet Robert Burns was born.⁶

It would be a reasonable conclusion that the Scottish origins of the McMurtry families of the Ottawa Valley / Toronto / Boston and Oshawa are in the adjoining Ayrshire parishes of Dailly and Kirkmichael. There are many McMurtry and McMurtrie families in the world today that trace their origins to Ayrshire.

George McMurtry, our American cousin, writes that his family travelled from Co. Derry, Ireland, to ‘somewhere in Ayrshire’ in the mid 1840’s before their voyage to America.⁷ It is not known exactly why they made this trip. This was about the time of The Great Famine and they might have been returning to their ancestral home to say their goodbyes to family members that they would likely never see again once they sailed for America. Whatever their reason for returning to Scotland, this visit strengthens the argument that the family’s origins are in Ayrshire.

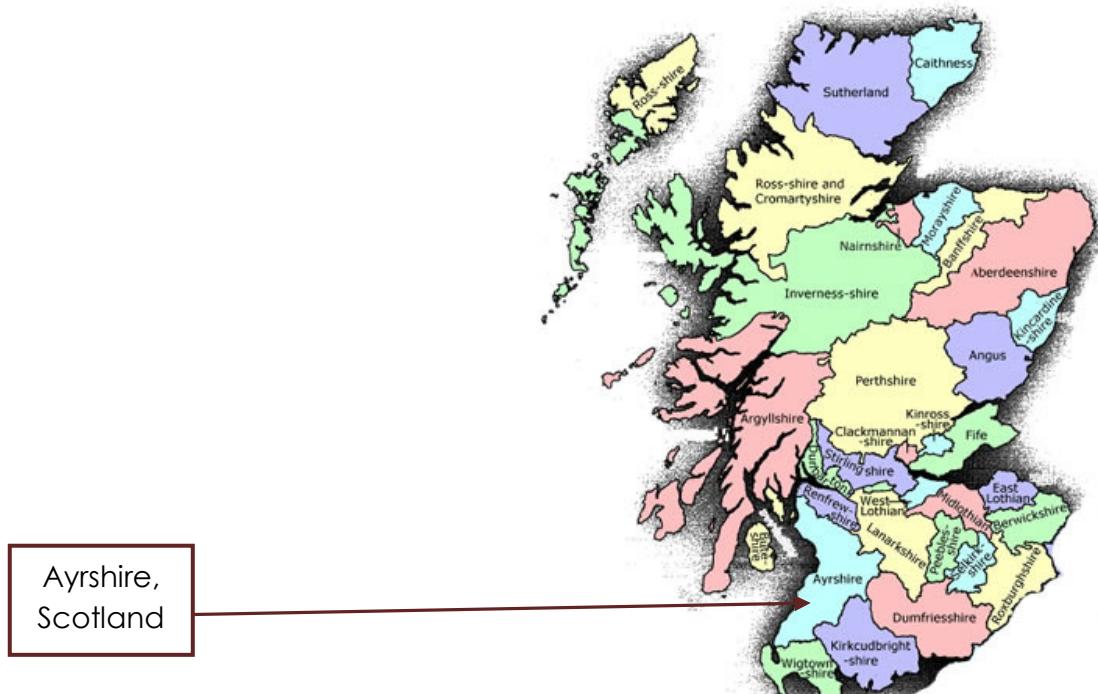
Tracing the spelling of the name to early periods in Ayrshire, we find a Robert Makmurtre listed in 1538 as the occupier of the farm of Balleballoch in Dailly Parish (now part of Barr parish). Makmurtre may or may not have been an early spelling of the family’s surname. The name evolved from the ancient Gaelic *Muircheartaigh* to *MacMuircheartaigh* through various incarnations to Makmurtre and other spellings. Makmurtre certainly evolved into MacMurtrie, which is the most common spelling in England and Scotland today. Then, in either Scotland or Ireland, the ‘trie’ became ‘try’ and MacMurtrie became MacMurtry. As with many Gaelic names using ‘Mac’ to mean ‘son of’, the ‘a’ was later dropped to arrive at the current McMurtrie and McMurtry in the United Kingdom, Ireland and parts around the world. While MacMurtry is known to be an indigenous Gaelic Irish name, Father Patrick Woulfe indicates it has been overshadowed in Ireland by those who brought the Scots Gaelic name from Scotland.⁸

George McMurtry wrote, ‘My Grandfather made a point of how to spell McMurtry when I was a boy and he insisted that I use the raised ‘c’ with two dots under the ‘c’ to designate that

the ‘a’ in MacMurtry had been dropped.⁹ Claude McMurtry of Toronto, father of Peter McMurtry, and son of William James McMurtry, would tell his children the family name was pronounced *Mack-Murtry* and not *Mick-Murtry*, which has evolved as the dominant pronunciation in North America.¹⁰

In conclusion, the way to describe the ancestry of the family may vary according to personal preference, geographical location or cultural affiliation. Appropriate terms can vary from Irish, Irish Protestant, Northern Irish, Ulster-Scots, Scots-Irish, Scotch-Irish, Irish Presbyterian, Irish Nationalist, Republican, Orange (as the citizens of the Republic of Ireland call all Irish Protestants, not as in Orangeman - unless that applies to your family), Scots, Scottish, Scots Gaelic, Celtic, or British.

These breakthroughs would not have been possible if it had not been for the tireless effort of Richard McMurtry of Ben Lomond, California, who spearheaded the McMurtrie | McMurtry DNA Project diligently recruiting 50 participants and skillfully interpreting all of the results.



End Notes

¹ Andrew McMurtry, *McMurtry History Update # 3*, 'McMurtry: Irish Origins' (August 2008)

² *Greater Toronto and the Men who Made It*, (Toronto: Inter-Provincial Publications, 1911), Pg. 131.

³ Robert McConnell, 'The Earls of Antrim', <http://www.dsolar.com/mcconnel/earls.html>

⁴ Bruce Elliott, *Encyclopedia of Canada's Peoples*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999)

⁵ Andrew McMurtry, *McMurtry History Update #4*, 'Religion and Politics in Ulster' (November 2008)

⁶ Richard McMurtry, 'Final Report on Genetic Analysis of the McMurtry Family'(December 2008)

⁷ George McMurtry, e-mail, Subject : CF-211 & CF-203, (Monday, April 25, 2005)

⁸ Patrick Woulfe, *Irish Names and Surnames*, (Irish Genealogical Foundation, 1992)

⁹ George McMurtry, April 25, 2005

¹⁰ Conversations with Peter McMurtry (Oct. 2008 & Jun. 2009). .