

# Armorial Gravestones: Part III: County Antrim©

by Dr. G. Marie Agnew-Marcelli

## Introduction: Why More Armorial Gravestones?

This subject caught my attention some 3 years ago when I was reviewing sections in the Ordnance Survey Memoirs for the Parish of Templepatrick in County Antrim, a very old, long-settled area with a fascinating history. The texts of interest date to 1833-38 and read:

“The most prevalent names are those of Armstrong, Smyth, Jamieson, Blair, Galt, Neill, McIlwain, McNeely, Morton, Norton, Rowan, Rea, Reid, Johnston, Deboys, Shannon, Nesbitt, Humphrey, Agnew, Price, Gowdy, Gibson, Barron, Moore, Harper, McBride, Brown, Parker, Steele, Carruth, Lindsay, Allison, Gilliland, Saunders, Carson, Rusk, Millar, Irwin, Cochran, Williamson, McIlroy, Boyd and Bell.”<sup>1</sup>

This looked remarkably like a roll of most of the common Agnew family collaterals and all located in an area roughly 4 by 5 miles.

A few pages on, where *Accent and Character* are discussed, there is an even more remarkable statement:

“The only peculiarity they seem to have is an uncommon taste for having their coats of arms sculptured on their tombstones. There is scarce a stone in their burial ground which is not in this manner ornamented.”<sup>2</sup>

Any Agnew familiar with the major American Agnew genealogy, *The Book of Agnews, James Agnew of Pennsylvania, U.S.A.*<sup>3</sup>, is aware of the great emphasis placed on the fact that the progenitor is buried under a large table stone “cut with the Arms of Agnew of Lochnaw”. This has been assumed to be a unique circumstance supportive of authenticity.

Thus, to encounter an Antrim parish filled with Agnews and their frequent collaterals in which there is *scarce a stone in their burial ground which is NOT ornamented with coats of arms* surely would cause one to ponder that *presumed unique* stone in Pennsylvania.

The finding has led the Editor, the Webmaster and me on a very long search both electronically and on the ground. This series of reports in IAN is a summary of the result of these combined efforts.

As you now know, armorial gravestones are strongly linked to Scotland and the Scottish Reformation. Further they are far from unique or specific to the noble classes. In this report we will follow the phenomenon into Ulster looking for any specific additional developments and in the following we will examine it in the United States where it is literally being recognized as

---

<sup>1</sup> O.S. Memoirs of Ireland, Parishes of Antrim, Vol. 35. *Templepatrick and District*, 1996. P.118

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 123.

<sup>3</sup> Agnew, M.V. *The Book of Agnews*, James Agnew of Pennsylvania, U.S.A. Privately printed, Philadelphia, 1926.

these research reports are being published in IAN. This is a new source for genealogy and can have really surprising impact on long- accepted paper trails.

There is essentially no reference to the migration of armorial gravestone popularity to Ulster in *Scottish* sources I have seen to date.

In contrast, a publisher's description of *Old Families of Larne and District* <sup>4</sup>, fourth volume in the series of Gravestone Inscriptions of County Antrim, noted that this East Antrim area can rightly claim to be the cradle of the Ulster-Scots being for centuries the main arrival point for Scots migrants and immigrants into Ireland. Moreover, one of the distinctive features of East Antrim is the *intense Ulster Scots interest in armorial gravestones*. <sup>5</sup>

What is remarkable is “these are NOT OFFICIAL OR REGISTERED ARMORIAL BEARINGS but arms which Scottish families who settled in the area have claimed and used for centuries.”!

It must be noted that although some few may be entitled to differenced versions of arms of the family on their tombstone, most have no documented connections to the titled line. Indeed not a few have armorial gravestones with “invented” devices that bear no resemblance to those for recognized heads of the given family name. Few among the public are familiar enough with heraldic art to tell the difference.

#### EARLIEST EXAMPLES OF SCOTTISH INFLUENCE

It should not be assumed that the very early Scottish mortality symbols did not make their way into Ulster but they are certainly less common and only date from the earlier 1600's. The first known dates from 1627 and is built into the wall of Enniskillen cathedral in County Tyrone. It



commemorates an English family, the Coles<sup>6</sup>, but the form may derive from the Scottish stone masons who were known to have worked in the town.

Another thought-provoking and anomalous stone with Scottish type mortality symbols is reported by two Antrim historians of some note to be found in the parish churchyard at Carndonagh in County Donegal. It dates from 1637 and marks the grave for Torlagh Doharty, *a clearly Irish name!*

<sup>4</sup> Rutherford, George, and R. S. J. Clarke. 2004. *Old families of Larne and district: from gravestone inscriptions, wills and biographical notes*. Belfast: Ulster Historical Foundation

<sup>5</sup> This particular gravestone volume was so popular worldwide that it almost immediately went out-of-print and high priced used copies continue in demand. In response to unending requests for reissue, the Ulster Historical Foundation authorized an electronic Kindle version last year.

<sup>6</sup> [www.Hisoryfromheadstones.com](http://www.Hisoryfromheadstones.com) Wm Roulston *Tombstones of the Ulster Plantation*.

Stones with mortality symbols *combined with armorial devices* were common in Scotland [see for example Paper II Figures 16, 17, 19, 23, 28] also occurred at earlier dates in Ulster and are twice as common on memorials for clearly Scottish settlers as English. The particular examples noted here are from County Tyrone and are memorials for the Galbraith family in Aghalurcher and the Galbraiths of Old Leckpatrick, both Scottish families. In Antrim 2 excellent examples can be found at Templepatrick and images appear in Appendix B.

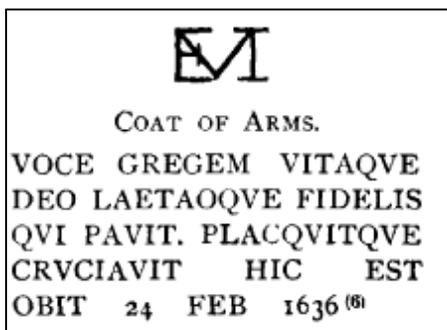
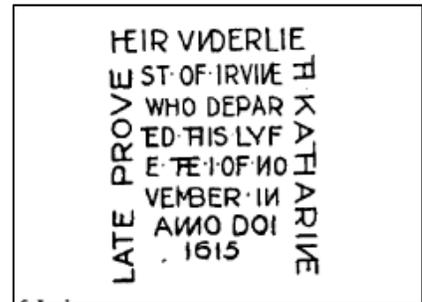
**EARLY ANTRIM – DERRYKEIGHAN**

In Antrim similar mortality/heraldic stones are found at Derrykeighan, an early Plantation settlement on McDonnell of Antrim estates in the north of the county. Unfortunately, many of these stones have been damaged and/or defaced so only general outline sketches are now available. The church site has undergone numerous assaults and is now a ruin and most of the old stones illegible as is evident from the picture at left.

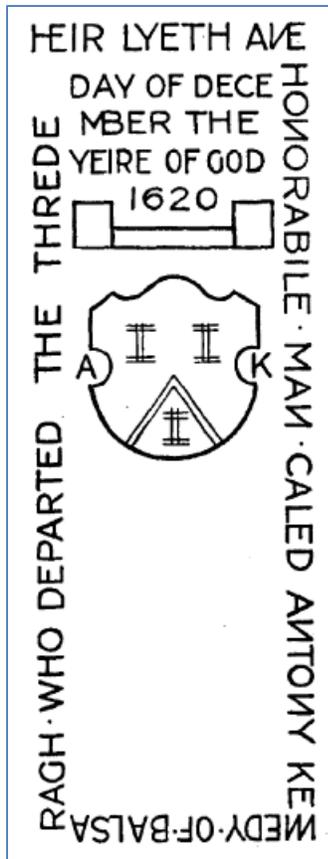


The following sketches will provide information on the memorials of early Scots settlers at this site. Many are Agnew collaterals and one early John Agnew is buried in the nearby Ballymoney graveyard.

The earliest stone dates from 1615, is broken and the two parts used to support another stone. It records the death of Catherine Peebles, wife of Thomas Boyd. They were among the very first Scottish Presbyterians settlers brought over from Irvine by Sir Randall McDonnell, First Earl of Antrim, to his huge Antrim estate. Thomas held large tracts of land and trusted estate management positions.

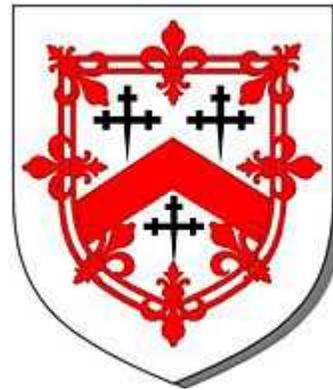


Another armorial stone from Derrykeighan is again largely undecipherable. It records the death of an unidentified curate of the parish in 1636.



Anthony Kennedy was a leading Scottish settler of the Antrim estate. His much damaged armorial flat tablestone is dated 1620. An 1899 a line drawing in the *Ulster Journal of Archaeology*<sup>7</sup> showed the details still distinguishable.

The arms on this stone were likely a variant of those for the Scottish Chief of the Name, i.e.;



### Typical Armorial Gravestones of County Antrim

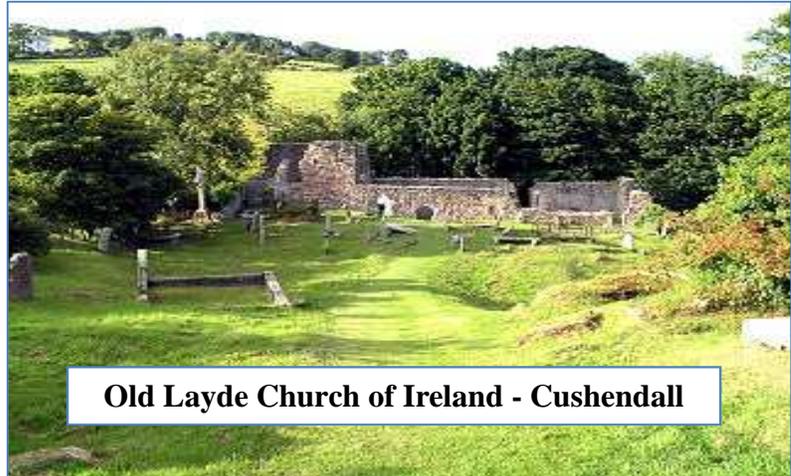
In general examples for this section will be selected from among the stones of common Agnew collateral families.

In most instances these will be rubbings or drawings from a series of papers by F. J. Biggers and H. H. Hughes, *Ármorial Sculptured Stones of The County Antrim*, which appeared in the *Ulster Archaeological Journal* from 1900 – 1903. Not all graveyards were covered but in 1900 stones retained far more detail than most of these same stones a century later. Where memorials can still be deciphered and where churchyards were not covered by Bigger and Hughes, these will be supplemented by digital photographs that Barb and Bruce Miers took over the past two years.

<sup>7</sup> Camac, Thomas. *The Parish of Derrykeighan (County Antrim) for Three Centuries*. *UJA*, second series, Vol . 5, No. 3 (May, 1899), pp147-161.

## Early Antrim – Layde Old Church

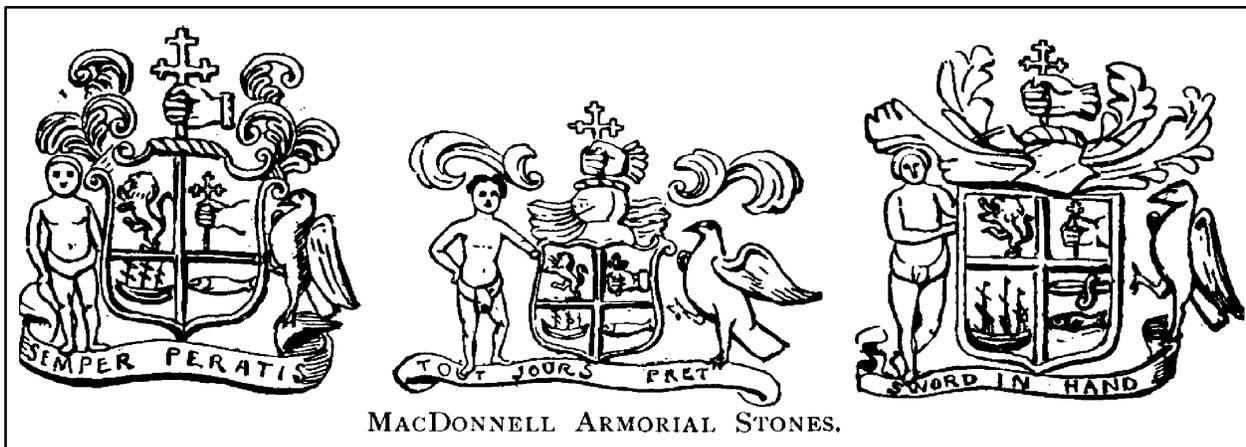
It seems most appropriate to start with *the real thing*, a graveyard where a genuinely titled family has interred its dead for centuries. Here amid the ruins of Old Layde Church in an Antrim Glen or the tumbling walls of Bunamargie Friary some miles up the coast looking out on the North Sea waters to Scotland – the McDonnell Earls of Antrim have buried their ancestors.



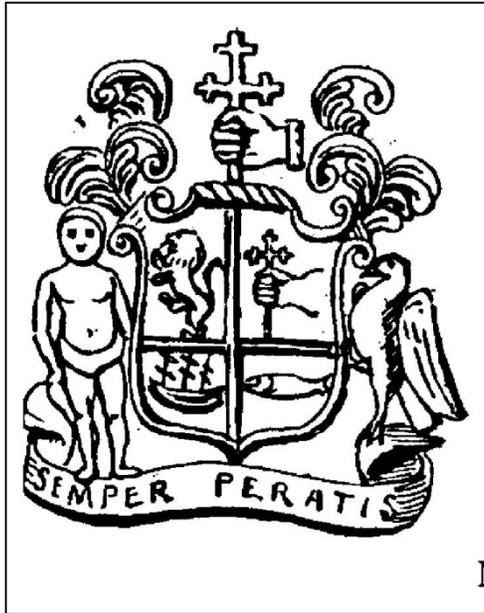
Wait, you say! What about the Agnew collaterals? Well, now we know from DNA that Agnew descendants out of Antrim are from two different haplotypes in about equal proportions, it is *possible*, even if *remote*, that among them there may be an O’Gneeve descendant of *the O’Gnimh*. If so, his ultimate ancestor about the time of deCourcy, was recorded as the MacDonald, Lord of the Isles.

At Layde Church are many McDonnells, direct descendants of the Earls. There are five gravestones carrying variants of the Antrim line arms. Of course there are also many ordinary folk, both McDonell and other names too.

Four of the McDonnell of Antrim stones display one of the following versions of honors and mottos. The remaining grave with an armorial is for a clergyman and, as is proper, carries no supporters.



Attention is directed to the differences among these arms. There are three different mottos. The leftmost has only a wreath and no helm below the basically same crest. The second and third have esquires helms above the wreath. Also the rightmost is differenced with a sword barwise in the sinister base quarter. And of course, we can be sure tincturings will differ among the three. And there may be other differences not shown in the drawings.



The Semper Peratis armorial reads:

MCDONNELL SEMPER PARATIS

To the Memory of

McColl McDonnell

Late of Kilmore

Who died 1716 aged 74.

Another inscription on this stone reads:

MCDONNELL

Here lieth the remains of Coll McDonnem of Kilmore, Glenariff

Who died 25<sup>th</sup> March 1719.

Son to Major General Sir Alexrd McDonnell (MacCollitto)

By his wife dtr of McAllister Laird of Loup

Sit Alexr celebrated in the wars of Montrose in Scotland, was slain 13<sup>th</sup> Novem. 1647 while 2<sup>nd</sup> in commd of the Royal Forces at Knocknanees and is buried in Clonmeen Co. Cork.



The Sword in Hand armorial reads:

MCDONNELL  
TOUT JOURS PRET

Here lieth the body of  
Captn Archd McDonnell  
Son to  
Alexr McDonnell Major Genrl & Knt of the field  
Who departed this life  
the Sepr 28<sup>th</sup> 1720 aged 73



The usual motto of this family is TOUT JOURS PRET and the arms therewith omit the sword in the 4<sup>th</sup> quarter of the shield. Two armorial stones use this version (texts omitted). All of the above inscriptions continue on to cover additional family members and later generations.

The Clergyman's grave displays the Tout Jours Pret arms *sans* supporters and carries the following text:

MCDONNELL P.P. I H S

Underneath are deposited the mortal remains of the Revd Daniel McDonnell PP of Layd and Ardclinis who departed this life the 9th June 1818 in the 84th year of his age, 63rd of his sacred ministry and 53rd of his parochial appointment

This monument has been erected by Daniel McCambride to the memory of his venerable uncle.  
REQUIESCAT IN PEACE AMEN

To reinforce further that these are *individual* arms (on right), the armorial recorded for the present Earl of Antrim appear to the right. Note a helm of nobility reflects of the higher status, and a marquis's coronet surmounts the wreath. The crest of a fisted right hand palewise is completely different from the hand holding a cross crosslet fitchee of the tombstone arms. Here again the motto is different.



Present Earl of Antrim



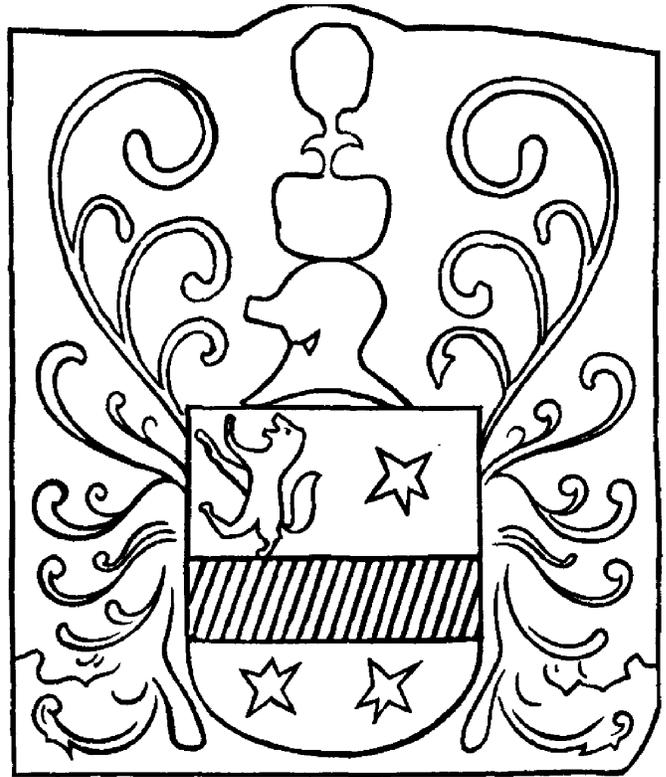
One of the most impressive monuments in the graveyard is that for a later and notable member of the same family. Rather than an armorial stone this is a highly decorated Celtic Cross that can be seen on the left of the general view of Layde churchyard. It includes a wide range of decorative elements but no armorial can be seen on the photograph and the authors do not mention shield or motto among the decorations listed.

MCDONNELL Erected in memory of James McDonnell of Belfast & Murlough in the county. A physican whose great abilities & greater benevolence made him venerated in the Glens of Antrim where he was born & in Belfast where he died AD 1845 in his 82nd year. In memory of Eliza, daughter of John Clarke Esq. of Belfast and wife of the said James McDonnell; she died AD 1798 also of Penelope, daughter of James Montgomery Esq. of Larne & second wife of the said James McDonnell, she died AD 1851 also in the memory of Michael, father of the said James & of Alexander, Father of Michael & of Coll father of Alexander & son of Major Gen Sir Alexander McColl McDonnell, Knight of the field, whose other son Captain Archibald McDonnell likewise rests in this churchyard.

## AND A FAKE? Unknown Armorial Stone at Layde

Finally this graveyard also contains the other end of the spectrum of armorial gravestones - a *fake unidentifiable armorial lacking any inscription whatsoever*.

Close to the east end of the MacDonnell burial-ground, and partly buried in the earth, is a very crude stone with no decipherable letters, but having armorial bearings cut deep upon its surface. These were much worn in 1899 but still distinct. The design can be readily discerned in the drawing made from a rubbing. The authors, who were well known historians, stated that “concerning these arms nothing is known, nor can John Vinycomb, M.R.I.A., throw any light upon them. If any reader of this journal could elucidate this knotty question, he would be doing good work.” However, over the following century not a single suggestion has appeared in the UJA whose columns have generally responded on even the most obscure queries.



Unknown Armorial Stone

But a word of warning - in Scotland we encountered some stones that had clearly been reused and questions were raised whether the armorial on *that* stone related to the original or the later burial. Similar examples will appear when we reach North America. One day a memorial inscription might appear on this stone and how far, here in the family burial ground of the leading family of Antrim, would speculation lead later family historians astray?

## A Study of the Stones

Having considered the oldest of Antrim's graveyards and examined how the preeminent titled family of the county employ armorials, we now turn to how these images have been used and misused on gravestones of the broad population over three centuries from 1600-1900. Material has been grouped in Appendixes because of the different media.

The first examples of the stones are drawn from a *groundbreaking series* based on rubbings of the individual stones laboriously gathered in the 1890's. In the absence of detailed and easy digital photographic images every stone became a slow hand replica. And there was still more hand work to ready each for publication.

Even in the 1980's Irish graveyards were not orderly sites but generally knee high in brambles and a minefield of tumbled and broken stones amid a tangle of brush, saplings and even full grown trees. Add to this the generally rainy weather combined with raw cold of much of the year in the North of Ireland, this could only be done by very devoted scholars intent on salvaging a disintegrating and neglected form of historical record. Research was done by two Antrim historians of some note. What they created was a priceless resource in a country ravaged by loss of historical records – and this was *prior* to the devastation yet to come in the Easter risings in 1916. Unfortunately, for reasons I have not determined, only part of the material was published over about 3 years in the *Ulster Journal of Archaeology* and then it stopped suddenly in 1903 with the final words “*to be continued*”.

The published rubbings only covered a part of Antrim graveyards. However, the past 20 years has seen a burgeoning interest in genealogy combined with Internet availability of ever more gravestone *inscriptions*. The discovery that a digital photograph of a full stone is not only faster than hand transcription it also reveals just how much “inscriptions only” missed. There is a parallel growth in photographing with websites devoted to a substantial portion of stones. Because it is faster and more useful to have a photograph Bruce and Barb Miers have been spending time in Antrim graveyards recording stones of interest to Agnews.

The remainder of this report consists of three Appendices, each consisting of illustrations combined with comments and caveats about the stones and the armorials.

Appendix A uses a wide sample of the Bigger and Hughes rubbings based on condition ca 1900

Appendix B samples photographs of a) armorial stones for which rubbings were published and seeing what damage the past century may have wrought and b) stones of note today that were not included 1901-3 reports.

Appendix C includes Bruce's photograph of the Thomas Agnew grave with its Lochnaw crest. In addition, a drawing of the arms from the 1811 Agnew gravestone at Kilwaughter is included. This grave has been inaccessible for decades and, while the *inscriptions* have been published, there has been no description of the armorial known. A blazoning has now been found and readers are in for quite a surprise when these are converted to a heraldic illustration.

## **SUMMARY**

The Scottish Phenomenon of sculptured gravestones did indeed translate to Ulster. Along the way the winged cherub heads that became so popular in New England largely disappeared from Antrim grave markers as did the grim Memento Mori symbols. Instead armorials flourished and became increasingly popular. This may have related to an intense urge among Ulster settlers to retain their pride in and connection with their Scottish origins. Certainly armorials on tombstones have become a distinctive mark of Antrim in the 17<sup>th</sup> and more especially of the 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries.