

The Origins of the Agnews – heraldic clues

Sir Crispin Agnew of Lochnaw Bt, Chief of the Agnews

The conundrum.



Are the Agnews of Norman origin as contended in the Hereditary Sheriffs of Galloway or of Irish origin as postulated by Professor Brian O’Cuiv and Hector McDonnell who consider that the Agnews descend from the Irish O’Gnimhs?

The Editor of International Agnew Newsletter Volume 4, Issue 2, April 2013 wrote - “If we are to truly know who we are, and what are our origins, we must re-examine these issues. ...”. DNA may provide the solution in due course, but this article will look at some of the heraldic evidence, which might give a clue to the origins of the Agnews.

The Irish theme

Whatever the origins of the Agnews, there appears to be a strong tradition that the Agnews came from the north of Ireland or Ulster to Galloway and Lochnaw. Whether this was an Irish family moving into Galloway or a Norman family that moved from Normandy, to England, to Ireland and then to Scotland is part of the conundrum.

In about 1680, Sir George Mackenzie of Rosehaugh, the Lord Advocate and author of the *Science of Heraldry*, Edinburgh 1680, amongst other institutional legal text books, wrote in a manuscript now in the National Library:

“Agnew – the chief is Agnew of Lochnaw, whose predecessors came from Ireland, Rego Davidus 2do, being a son of ye Lord Agnew, alias Lord of Lorne. There he got the keeping of the king’s castell of Lochnaw, and was made Heritable Constable yrof”.

In Scotland oral genealogies are generally accepted as being reasonably accurate going back 200 years, but after that the historical figures and events in the genealogy are generally accurate, even though there may be omissions from the genealogy and historical time line. Applying that criteria to the note by Sir George Mackenzie written before 1680, it is clear that there was a family tradition around then that the Agnews came from Ireland in about the period 1329 to 1371 being the reign of King David II. It was therefore well within the time frame for being accepted as reasonably accurate as to the main events narrated. *The Hereditary Sheriff’s*, 2nd Edition, Vol 1 page 208 notes other recordings of this tradition, but as they are from sources later than 1680, they may all be based on Sir George Mackenzie’s manuscript note.

King David II reigned from 1329 to 1371. He was the son of King Robert the Bruce (reigned 1306 to 1329), who was Earl of Carrick before he was crowned King in 1306. Robert the Bruce’s brother Edward Bruce, was created Earl of Carrick, by his

brother about 1309/1314 and had himself proclaimed High King of Ireland about 1315.

The Earldom of Carrick is one of the historic seven earldoms of Scotland with the territory of the earldom extending in the south west of Scotland to include most of Ayrshire and bordered with the Gaelic district of Galloway – *Celtic Scotland*, W.F. Skene Vol 3. It is now a title held by Prince Charles, who in Scotland is Duke of Rothesay, Earl of Carrick, Baron of Renfrew, Lord of the Isles and Prince and Great Steward of Scotland.

The heraldic evidence



Sir George Mackenzie in the *Science of Heraldry* states that the Agnew arms are described as “Argent, three sinister hands coupé and erected in pale 2 and 1 Gules” – ie silver (argent), 3 left (sinister) hands cut at the wrist (coupé), 2 and 1 red (gules). These arms appear in the Hague Armorial Roll [c. 1590 at latest] in slightly different form, where the blazon is “Gules, three hands appaumé argent, that in dexter chief a dexter hand in bend, that in sinister chief a sinister hand in bend sinister and that in base a sinister hand in bend sinister.”

The “hands” are of course a well known heraldic symbol from Ulster, where it is now shown as a red right hand. However, the coat of arms of the O’Neills of Ulster who held the title High Kings of Ireland or Ulster was “Argent, a sinister hand coupé Gules”. Heraldically, these Agnew arms are closely connected to the coat of arms used by the O’Neills High Kings of Ireland because (i) it reversed the colours, (ii) the sinister or left hands are used. To a herald these Agnew are indicative of a cadet of the O’Neills. This would support some of the DNA evidence that there may be an O’Neill connection as the DNA may have “identified markers of Niall of the Nine Hostages, a fifth century king of Ireland.”

If the Agnews of Lochnaw are connected to the O’Neills as the three hand coat of arms might indicate, why did they not continue to use these arms? The answer may lie in the heraldic practice of adopting “arms of vassalage” where a family dependent on a more important family adopted a coat of arms that included a clear connection to their feudal overlord.



The Agnew coat of arms in current use is described as “Argent a chevron gules between two cinquefoils in chief of the second and in base a saltire coupé azure.” These arms first appear in the seal of Quentin Agnew of Lochnaw in 1487 and in the manuscript of Sir James Balfour Bt (c. 1630/54) and subsequently first recorded in the Public Register of All Arms and Bearing in Scotland in about 1672.



The coat of arms of the Earls of Carrick is “Argent a chevron gules” and the principle Bruce coat of arms is “Or, a saltire gules, a chief of the second”. It is



immediately obvious that the principle colour of the Agnew arms is “argent” just like the principle colour of the shield for the Earldom of Carrick and that principle “charge” in both is the red chevron. This suggests a heraldic connection with an Earl of Carrick. The saltire in base, now coupé [ie cut off at the ends], but not coupé in the seal of Quentin Agnew of Lochnaw, is suggestive of a Bruce connection as the saltire is the principle charge in the Bruce coat of arms.

These connections might suggest that the first Agnew from Ireland came over with a Bruce who was Earl of Carrick and settled in Scotland owing allegiance to the Earls of Carrick. This would fit with Sir George Mackenzie’s note that the Agnews came from Ireland at the time of King David II, who was a Bruce. It would appear that King of Tír Eóghain, Domhnall mac Brian Ó Néill requested Edward Bruce to come to his aid against the English and this was agreed provided O’Neill agreed that Edward Bruce should be recognized as High King of Ireland. In view of this O’Neill connection perhaps the Agnews sided with Edward Bruce in his claim to be High King of Ireland and came back to Scotland with him after his adventure in Ireland. Thus it can be argued that the present Agnew arms support a Brucian and Ulster connection.

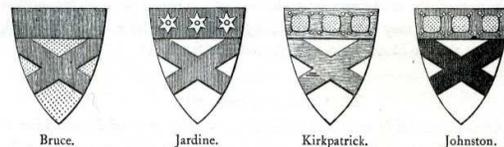
What may also be significant is the Agnew crest of an eagle issuant and regardant proper. Professor Brian O’Cuiv postulates that the O’Gnimh (or Agnew) family might be descended from Somerled, who later became Lord of the Isles in Scotland. A heraldic dynastic symbol of the descendants of Somerled is an eagle which appears in the coat of arms of many of his descendants; e.g. the Macdonalds and MacAllisters. The origins of Somerled are obscure, but it does appear that he does not have a connection to the O’Neills as High Kings of Ireland. If the eagle is significant it might point away from an O’Neill connection.

Alternatively, the first record of a Norman Agnew appears to be William des Aigneus who is second witness to a charter signed in Liddesdale between Randulf de Soules and Jedburgh Abbey c. 1200. (HM Register Ho. Crown Office Writs No 4). If he is the ancestor of the Agnews of Lochnaw, did his family move from Liddesdale (blue)



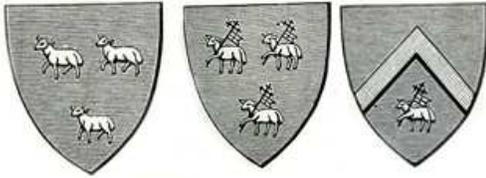
to Annandale (red), where the Bruces originally had their lands as Lords of Annandale, before moving with the Bruces when the Bruces became Earls of Carrick and then adopting arms of vassalage to the Earls of Carrick? The Bruces were also a Norman family and so a link up between the two Norman families in southern Scotland is plausible. However, the Scottish families that have a Brucian link in

Annandale all adopt a version of the Bruce arms with the chief and that was not adopted by the Agnews; e.g. Johnston, Jardine & Kilpartick as vassals of the Bruces, Lord of Annandale. This would suggest that the Agnews did not come with the Bruces from Annandale.



The heraldry of the Norman Agnews

The heraldry of the Norman Aigneaux or Agneaux (Agnews) generally includes three or sometimes one “lamb” as “agneau” [plural agneaux] means a lamb. There is no heraldic connection between the Agnew of Lochnaw coat of arms and the arms used by the Aigneaux or Agneaux families in Normandy. As a general rule



major Norman families that came from over Normandy to England or later to Scotland tended to use a coat of arms that was based on the coats of arms used by the family in Normandy. As there is no heraldic connection between the Normandy arms and the Lochnaw coat of arms, this tends to suggest that there is no connection between the two families, unless the Agnews were a minor Norman family and so did not bring their arms, but adopted arms of vassalage.

Conclusion

While the heraldic evidence supports an Irish origin for the Agnews, it is not conclusive, so the conundrum remains unresolved by the heraldic evidence.