

Of the Forge or the Forest?

A John McDonald, baptised at Strathdon, Aberdeenshire on 17 September 1769, the son of George McDonald of Invernochty shows up as the 'father' in two entirely different families. These are not two sequential families the product of first and second marriages. These two families both came about in the early nineteenth century in villages 30 miles apart. They are clearly 2 families, not one with two different women as the mother and headed by two different men, both named John McDonald. But which was the son of George?

The two families in question were both from East Scotland, one was of Fern or Fearn in the county of Angus and the other; Banchory Ternan, Kincardineshire. The latter being 30 miles from Strathdon and the former over 50.

Registration of Births, Deaths and Marriages did not begin in Scotland until 1855 and before that parish registers of baptisms, banns, marriages and burials is to be relied on as the main source of personal records. Whilst there appear to be quite extensive baptism records that have survived to this day the same cannot be said of banns and burials.

So, whilst I can find records for the baptisms of the various children which confirms that the mother of the children born in Fearn was Betty Stewart/Stuart and the mother in Banchory Ternan was Elspet McHardie, I have no idea where or when they wed their respective John Macs.

Both couples appear in the 1841 census. John and Betty were at Roughmont in the parish of Fearn while John and Elspet were at Morefield in the parish of Old Machar, Aberdeenshire. I believe this last couple are the same who baptised their children in Banchory Ternan. Their daughter Isabella was in Old Machar in 1841 with her husband while their daughter Mary married late in life at Old Machar in 1838.

Ten years later in the 1851 census I have only been able to identify one of the four. John of Fearn was at Hilton Roughmont with his youngest child, Isabella b.1820. In the 1841 census 'place of birth' was simply recorded as within the county, or not. If the person was foreign born sometimes the country was recorded but in 1851 the recording was more precise and John of Fearn was recorded as having been born in Strathdon.

The link to Strathdon John comes from this 1851 census record and the 1861 death record of a John McDonald, son of George McDonald, a shepherd and Anna McCook. It is beyond doubt that this John McDonald is the husband of Betty/Betsy Stewart as this is recorded on the death record. At the time of death John was living at Seafield in St Vigeans, the same address given by his daughter Isabella in the census held just a few months after he died. Isabella's husband reported his death.

It seems to me the confusion with the blacksmith, John McDonald of Old Machar via Banchory Ternan has come about perhaps in part because of an 1827 marriage record of a Betty Stewart and John McDonald at Longforgan, Perth, Scotland. It seems some researchers concluded there was just one John who first married Elspet and then Betty but this is not supported by the evidence. In 1841 there was

also a 65yo Elspet McDonald in the census living alone at Strathdon so maybe this is also why this family has been brought into the frame. But it seems abundantly clear there were two Johns, one a Forester and the other a Blacksmith. It is Forester John who hailed from Strathdon.

Out of the two families I have been able to track 4 of John and Betty's children and 2 of John and Elspet's. Their records appear to support the above. See the table below.

Name	Birth/Baptism	Marriage	Census 1841	Census 1851	Census 1861	Death/Burial	Comments
John McDonald – the forester and husband of Betty Stewart. All children born/baptised between 1800 -1820 at Fearn, Forfarshire (or Angus), Scotland							
John	√	X	√	√	X	√	In the census he is recorded as an Ag Lab ('41) and Road Contractor ('51). In 1851 census it says he was born Strathdon, Aberdeen. His ages in the census were 60yo and 73yo. His 1861 death record describes him as 91yo at death and a 'Forester, latterly a day Labourer'. He was the widower of Betsy Stewart, and his parents were George McDonald, a shepherd and Anna McCook. His death was reported by David Gordon, son in law. Died same address as the Gordons in 1861 census.
Betty Stewart	X	X	√	X	X	X	Apart from baptisms of her children only record of Betty is 1841 census which record her age as rounded down to 55, meaning she was 55-59 years old giving her an estimated birth year of 1786-1781. She was born 'Scotland' which means she wasn't born in the county of Angus. No record of her in 1851 census so presume she had died by then. No marriage or burial records found.
<i>Children</i>							
James b.1800	√	√	√	√	√	√	Death record; 61yo in 1861. Father an Ag Labourer. Mother Betty Stewart.
Ann b.1803	√	??	√	√	√	√	Death record; 80yo in 1893. Father a Forester. Mother Betsy Stewart.
Barbara b.1805	√	?	√	√	√	√	Death record; 77yo in 1883. Father a Ground Officer. Mother Betsy Stewart.
John b.1807	√						
George b.1809	√						
Mary b.1816	√						
Isobel b.1820	√			√	√	√	1851 census was with father. Death record: 89yo in 1909. Father an Estate

Name	Birth/Baptism	Marriage	Census 1841	Census 1851	Census 1861	Death/Burial	Comments
							Labourer. Mother Betsy Stewart. Husband was David Gordon.

John McDonald – the blacksmith and husband of Elspet McHardie. All children born/baptised between 1796-1816 at Banchory Ternan, Kincardineshire, Scotland							
John			√				1841 census gives his place of birth as within the county of Aberdeenshire. Age 75-79 giving estimated birth year 1761-1766. No occupation recorded.
Elspet McHardie			√				1841 gives her place of birth as within the county of Aberdeenshire. Age 70-74 giving estimated birth year 1766-1771
<i>children</i>							
Jean b.1796	√						
Margaret b.1797	√						
Mary b.1802	√	√	√	√	√	√	Death record: 69yo in 1880. Father a Blacksmith. Mother Elspet McHardy
Charles b.1803	√						
Peter b.1805	√						
John b.1806	√						
James b.1810	√						
Isabel Duncan b.1812	√	√	√	√	√	√	Baptism record: father described as 'Blacksmith at Crathis'. Death record: 66yo in 1885. Father a Blacksmith. Mother Elspet McHardy
Duncan b.1816	√						

The George McDonald family of Strathdon

There are a number of other children baptised at Strathdon and Corgaff by a George MacDonald in the 1760-70s. Unfortunately, the mother's name was not recorded so these baptism records establish no link with Anna McCook, the mother of John who died in 1861.

Date	Baptismal name	Baptised by
18 Apr 1767	Barbara	George McDonald in Invernaughty
17 Oct 1768	William	George McDonald in Invernaughty

5 Apr 1769	Elizabeth	George McDonald in Drummaline
17 Sep 1769	John	George McDonald in Invernaughty
20 Sep 1771	Robert	George McDonald in Finnilost
10 Sep 1775	Jean	George McDonald in Finnilost
9 Apr 1777	James	George McDonald in Bochorach

Of the above I have ruled out Elizabeth from this family on the basis that her father must be a different George. It just defies explanation for how one person could be baptising 3 children at under 6-month intervals. It is more probable that George of Drummaline (Drumallen) was a different man.

I've determined that James bpt 1777 is of the same family. In the 1851 census he is living at 6 Church Street, Edzell. Next door at No.7 is the spinster Barbara McDonald of Strathdon, aged 84. She is recorded as 'Dependent on Relatives'. Those relatives must surely include her neighbour (and brother), James McDonald of Strathdon aged 74. And, in any event James' death record in 1863 confirms his mother's maiden name as McCook, which I think provides confirmation if there was any needed that the John McDonald who died at St Vigeans in 1861 was of this Strathdon family.

I am guessing Robert, bpt 1771 and Jean bpt 1775 were also of this family. I can find no record of the place Finnilost, though there is a place named Lost and a property named Finnylost all near the Doune of Invernochty. Post 1855 Scottish death records for either Robert or Jean should establish a mother's name ruling them in or out of this family, but I have yet to establish when these two died.

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