

County Down pre-1830 and the McKernan Family

The Penal Laws in Ireland from 1690 to 1830 banned the practice of all religions except the Anglican Church of Ireland. Roman Catholics held Masses and baptisms, marriages etc in secret and many kept no records for fear of being caught. It ended with the Catholic Emancipation Act in 1830. Some Catholics did convert to the Church of Ireland to retain their property or job. Many Presbyterians or Methodists attended the Church of Ireland. After the Church of Ireland was dis-established as the State Religion in 1869, Church records were sent to the Public Records Office on Dublin. The Records Office was burnt during the shelling of the Four Courts in 1922 to at the start of the Irish Civil War and the records were destroyed. Many CoI Churches had not sent records or had copies and these survive however the majority are offline and held by the RCB in Dublin.¹

Thomas **McKernan** was born presumably in 1791 based on the 1851 Scotland Census. His birthplace of **County Down** is given based on the location of others with the same surname. We believe his father was James McKernan, possibly born around 1770 in County Down. Pure hypothesis. Griffith's Valuation (started 1847) lists a McKernan family in **Croggs**, an Electoral Division of Warrenpoint, in the Civil **Parish of Clonallan**, in the Barony of Iveagh Upper, Upper Half, in the County of

¹ <https://www.ireland.anglican.org/.../online-parish-records>

Down. This is likely the closest we will come to finding the origins of this particular family.

The lack of records mentioned at the outset accounts for the brick walls and dead ends we find in the Hannan-Lewsley Tree which includes these families: On the Hannan side; **McKernan** (Down), **Murray** (Down) and on the Lewsley side; **Lewsley** (Antrim), **McCann** (Armagh), **Steele** (Fermanagh), and **Lynch** (Antrim). We have very little information and none at the moment that is definitive beyond what the censuses state. It is not unusual for those records to be incomplete and or incorrect. The farthest we have been able to go back with at least a sense of plausibility is circa 1790 give or take ten years.

Some time between the birth of their twin daughters in 1832 and 1851, when they appear in the Scottish Census, they moved from Down to Aberdeen. Thomas, a Hand Loom Weaver (linen), is listed as head of household, age 60, living at 1 Don Street in Woodside, Old Machar Parish. His nineteen year old twin daughters, Mary and Margaret are living with him. His son Bernard is not. We don't see Bernard again until the 1861 Scottish Census when he is thirty years old. He is a "laborer" living in his father's home at 17 Wellington St. in Aberdeen, near the Merchant's House, with his sister Margaret.

His other sister, Mary, Margaret's twin, was a lodger at 184 Seagate Stewart Land, Dundee. She was a mill worker and is erroneously listed as age 23 . We feel confident this is her because she married and had children in Dundee starting around 1855 when her first son Neil Hannan was born. She is our second great grandmother.

Bernard stayed in Aberdeen, married a local woman, Ann Gibb McDonald and raised a family there. We know nothing further about Margaret beyond the 1861 census when she was living with her father and brother, and was likely keeping house for them as no employment is listed.

A great deal happened in Northern Ireland in the twenty year gap between the 1830s and 1850s when we don't know much about the whereabouts of the McKernans. There were a number of reasons that could have made them move to Scotland. They were Catholics living in a Protestant region, there was the Famine, and there were ongoing tensions with the British. They were not monied, likely uneducated or barely so, and were at the mercy of nature and circumstances like so many others in that place and time.

The surname McKernan is of Irish origin and is most commonly found in Northern Ireland, particularly in County Down and County Armagh. It is an anglicized form

of the Gaelic name Mac Thighearnáin, which means "son of Tighearnán." The name has been present in Ireland for centuries.

During the latter part of the 18th century, County Down had a population of approximately 170,000 people. The majority of the population lived in rural areas and were engaged in agriculture, particularly the cultivation of flax for linen production. The towns of Downpatrick and Newry were the largest in the county, with populations of around 3,000 and 2,000 respectively. The county also had a significant Presbyterian population, who were primarily located in the eastern part of the county. The Church of Ireland was the established church, but Catholics made up a significant minority. In the latter part of the 18th century, Ireland was under British rule, and sectarian divisions between Catholics and Protestants were significant.

The population of County Down grew significantly during this period, from 120,000 in 1801 to 195,000 in 1831. The majority of the population were employed in agriculture or the linen industry, with only a small percentage involved in other professions such as law or medicine. There was a significant class divide in County Down, with a wealthy land-owning elite and a large working-class population. Tenant farmers faced challenges

such as high rents, poor living conditions, and limited access to education. Wealth was concentrated in the hands of a small minority, with just 34 individuals in the county owning land worth more than £500 per year in 1790. The county also had a significant military presence, with several barracks and military outposts located throughout the region.

County Down was one of the main centers of the linen industry in Ireland during the 18th century, with towns like Banbridge and Lisburn producing large quantities of high-quality linen cloth for export. Agriculture was also an important part of the economy, with farmers producing crops such as potatoes, wheat, and oats, as well as raising livestock like cattle and sheep. The construction of the Newry Canal in the late 18th century helped to improve transportation and trade links within County Down and beyond. In 1788, the county had a total of 47 corn mills and 84 flax mills, demonstrating the importance of agriculture and linen production in the local economy. By 1790, the county had 89 market towns and fairs, facilitating the trade of goods and services.

In 1790, the county had a total population of 126,229, with approximately 68% living in rural areas. In 1796, the majority of the population in County Down were rural farmers or laborers, with only 1,767 families residing in

towns or villages. The county was divided into four baronies, each with its own unique social and economic characteristics. In 1787, the average life expectancy for men in the county was 38 years, while women could expect to live to the age of 42.

According to some estate records, the average rent for a farm in County Down during the late 18th century ranged from £5 to £20 per year, with larger estates commanding higher rents. The price of land varied widely depending on the location and quality of the soil, but it was generally more expensive in the east of the county, closer to Belfast and the coast.

Additionally, land prices and rent prices were influenced by the political and economic climate of the time. For example, during times of war, such as the Napoleonic Wars (1803-1815), demand for agricultural goods increased, leading to higher land and rent prices. Conversely, during times of peace or economic downturn, land and rent prices tended to decrease.

The late 18th century was a period of political turmoil in County Down and throughout Ireland, with many people agitating for greater rights and representation. The United Irishmen, a revolutionary organization committed to Irish independence, had a significant presence and were

involved in several failed uprisings during this period. The county was also home to several prominent political figures, including Henry Joy McCracken and Robert Stewart, who played key roles in the struggle for Irish independence. Down was also a stronghold of the United Irishmen movement,² with many prominent leaders and members hailing from the area. The county played a significant role in the Rebellion of 1798, with numerous battles and skirmishes taking place in the area.

The Act of Union, which united Ireland and Great Britain into a single political entity, was passed in 1800, ending the period of direct rule from Dublin and bringing about significant changes to the political landscape of County Down and Ireland as a whole. Following the Act of Union, County Down was represented in the British Parliament by two Members of Parliament, who were elected by a small number of wealthy landowners, basically elected through a system of patronage and bribery. Business as usual.

This was the world Thomas McKernan and Mary Murray were born into in County Down in the last years of the 18th century.

² The United Irishmen movement emerged in late 18th century Northern Ireland as a republican society advocating for equal rights and an end to British rule, bringing together both Catholics and Protestants in pursuit of Irish independence. Inspired by the American and French revolutions, they organized rebellions in 1798, but were ultimately suppressed, leading to the Act of Union in 1801, which merged Ireland with Great Britain.

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