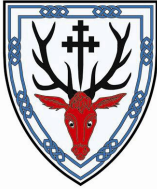


Are MacTavishes Thomsons?

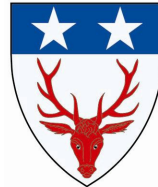
by John Hamilton Gaylor



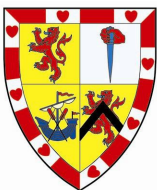
Clan Thomson Society

The granting of arms to Clan Thompson International, Inc., known also as the Clan Thom(p)son Society, has drawn wider attention to an anomaly created by our so-called clan system, one which had been in the making for a very long time. With or without an intrusive 'p', the name Thomson is one of the commonest in Scotland, and numerous bearers of the name have matriculated arms, all based on those of a shadowy 'Thomson of that ilk' recorded in Workman's Manuscript of c.1565, the same arms as those borne earlier by Henry Thomson of Keillour, Lord Lyon, 1496-1512.

'Thomson' is a simple patronymic which could and did arise anywhere during the surname forming period, and it is inconceivable that all Thomsons are related. It is only by the workings of the familiar legal fiction that they are so treated, and awarded similar arms. The effect has been to create a 'Name' typical of Lowland society, but deficient in never having had an identifiable chiefly line. Now, at long last, some Thomsons of the diaspora have formed a society with one of its aims being the acceptance of the name as a 'clan'. However, the apparent simplicity of this situation is disturbed by the existence of two Highland clans bearing names which mean 'son of Thomas', namely MacThomas and MacTavish. The first of these is part of the Clan Chattan confederation, and as an offshoot of Mackintosh¹, bears arms accordingly, so it need not detain us, but the second is armorially entangled with the Thomsons.

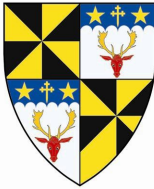


Thomson of Keillour



MacThomas of Finegand

The MacTavishes were one of the small satellite clans held in clientage by the great Clan Campbell. Their precise relationship with the Campbells is uncertain, but in 1793, arms were matriculated for Lachlan MacTavish of Dunardry. He bore the familiar Campbell gyrons, but sable and or rather than or



MacTavish of Dunardry 1

and sable, quarterly with a generic Thomson coat, but that of a cadet, perhaps an indeterminate one. It has been suggested that the arms so brought into being comprised impartible quarters, a coat compiled after the West Highland manner of combining totems on quarterly shields². It is an ingenious suggestion, but unlikely, since neither Campbell arms nor Thomson belonged to that tradition. Furthermore, the Lord Lyon of the day was John Campbell-Hooke of Bangeston, himself a cadet of Campbell of Cawdor, so it is a reasonable supposition that he was familiar with Campbell heraldry and its ways. That he awarded the Campbell arms to MacTavish (the reversal of the tinctures signified little; many Campbell cadets did the same) and differenced them by quartering was because he was satisfied that MacTavish's Campbell connections warranted it. What is curious is that he differenced the Campbell arms by quartering them with a coat which was very obviously a Thomson one. Were the MacTavishes Thomsons?

Eighteen Thomson arms were matriculated in the Lyon Register before those of MacTavish, seven of them during Campbell-Hooke's term of office (1754-1795), so it may be that he merely translated the name MacTavish from the Gaelic, arrived at Thomson, and awarded him arms accordingly. However, MacTavish's Thomson quartering looks strongly like a differenced version of arms that were undoubtedly Thomson ones, those of Charles Thomson of Caltonhill, matriculated in 1775.



Thomson of Caltonhill

There is such a strong resemblance to these and various other Thomson arms that it must be concluded either that Lyon accepted that MacTavish was a Thomson, or, which is more likely, that he accepted arms which MacTavish produced as having been in use for a long time, perhaps more than a generation. If the latter, there is a plausible explanation.

The status of the MacTavishes of Dunardry was such that they ought to have been armigerous, so, equating their name with Thomson and being ignorant of heraldry, they 'borrowed' a Thomson coat and used it. In due course, Lachlan MacTavish saw fit to formalise his armorial situation by matriculating his arms for

the first time in the life of the Lyon Register. As part of the process he would have had to produce evidence of any arms that had been in prior use and which he claimed as his own. Lyon was satisfied, and MacTavish of Dunardry became the legal bearer of the quartered coat of arms – first and fourth Campbell, second and third ‘Thomson’. This is suppositious, but some such process would explain why MacTavish was awarded completely inappropriate arms. Although his name could be translated as Thomson, he was not of the general Thomson agglomeration, and a Thomson coat of arms was inappropriate.

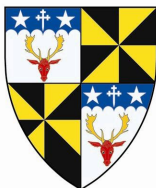
Had the MacTavishes been content to be seen as a sept of the Campbells, matters could have rested there, but they have long claimed to be a distinct clan, which has created difficulties in recent years, and more particularly, now that the Clan Thomson Society has been formed, and is in competition with the MacTavishes in recruiting Thomsons as members.

Thomsons are numerous and ubiquitous, while MacTavishes are few. It would only be by doing extreme violence to the legal fiction of the kinship of all persons bearing a surname in common that all Thomsons in Scotland, and their descendants, could be regarded as armorially dependent on a minor clan of Argyll; it would be a demographic absurdity. However, the reverse proposition, that all MacTavishes be part of the greater body of Thomsons, of the Thomson deme, is arguable, and supports Lord Lyon Campbell-Hooke’s conclusion when he recorded MacTavish’s arms in 1793. For the disinterested, this is a reasonable conclusion, but it does make MacTavish of Dunardry’s position difficult. As a clan chief, if he cannot claim the Thomsons as his own, he has few MacTavishes to constitute his clan, even under the modern definition of such a group. Furthermore, how does a small part of a very large ‘name’, that by any reckoning is not a clan or federation of clans, come to be a discrete clan?

In recent times it has been accepted that there may be more than one clan of the same name. Nicholson is a case in point, and their solution of the anomaly indicates a way to resolve the Thomson one: the chief of the Highland Nicholsons became Macneacail. If Thomsons in or from Argyll were assumed to be MacTavishes, and Atholl ones to be MacThomases, the remainder could be what they were already, members of the greater

Thomson Name. The armorial difficulty of the MacTavishes bearing Thomson arms would remain, however.

In 2003, MacTavish of Dunardry rematriculated his arms, but with the quarterings rearranged – first and fourth, MacTavish (or Thomson), with a minor change of tincture; second and third, Campbell. All that this change accomplished was to assert that MacTavish really was a Thomson cadet, whilst it would seem from the discussion of the name of Thomson on the Clan MacTavish website, that the real ambition was the absurd one of



MacTavish of Dunardry 2

subsuming all Thomsons as clan members, absurd because of the sheer number and ubiquity of Thomsons and the smallness of the MacTavish clan. There matters rest at present, with exchanges, direct and indirect, between MacTavish and the Clan Thomson Society becoming quite heated at times, coloured by amour-propre and the personalities of the protagonists. To the disinterested observer, the 2003 rematriculation looks like a mistake; better to have sought a revision of the arms matriculated in 1793 on the grounds that they were not the true and ancient arms of MacTavish, although reluctance to surrender arms that had been borne for over 200 years would have been entirely understandable. The end of the story is not yet in sight, and much will depend on the determination of Thomsons, supported by their clan society, to obtain acceptance of an elected chief of name and arms, and on the energy and imagination of MacTavish in fighting a rearguard action.



Suggested MacTavish

Before leaving the matter, it is worth looking in detail at MacTavish of Dunardry's arms, both as originally recorded and as recently rearranged. The original arms had the Campbell gyrons in the first and fourth quarters. The tinctures had been reversed, but that signified little, as many Campbell cadet arms had the same arrangement, and indeed, as at one period it seemed almost optional as to which arrangement was preferred. The second and third quarters contained typical Thomson arms – a field argent, a

buck's head cabossed, and a charged chief azure. The basic Thomson arms have a stag's head, not a buck's, but in the sixteenth century and for a long time after, the distinction was meaningless, and in terms of practical armory, that is still the case; it would be difficult to distinguish between them on flags fluttering in the breeze. The arrangement of the quarters confirmed either that MacTavish's descent was collateral with Campbell or that he was descended from them, with the latter more likely. The Campbell arms had necessarily to be differenced, and to do it by quartering them with other arms was both typical of Campbell heraldry and suitably unspecific as to the degree of relationship.

The MacTavish matriculation of 2003 reversed the quarters, yielding 'Thomson' in first and fourth, with Campbell in second and third. Instead of the arms being Campbell ones differenced by quartering, they have become Thomson ones quartered with Campbell, and the rearrangement is an unintended assertion that MacTavish is a Thomson cadet.



¹ See J.H.Gaylor, *Thomson, Thoms and MacThomas*, The Double Tressure No.17, 1995, p.81.

² See The Baronage Press website, <http://www.baronage.co.uk/2003b/tavish.html>, for a lengthy discussion of the MacTavish arms.