

TYPES OF ERROR IN CLAN HISTORY AND GENEALOGY

A. Introduction.

The relative lack of relevant contemporary historical records for early clan history and genealogy leads to later sources, such as clan traditions and genealogies, being used to shed light on the past. In using such sources, it helps to be aware of the various errors from which they can suffer. Such a consideration applies not only to the later sources but also to any historical records, as well as to the published versions of those sources and records and to books of clan history.

What follows is a list of various types of error, but it is not meant to be exhaustive (the errors are simply those that the author has recognised during his studies): it would be a fool's errand to try to classify all types of lie (here listed under section 2.2 Errors of Contention) and there must be many other types of copying error than those given here under section 1.1.3. The errors listed on the following pages have here been classified under the following categories:

- 1 NATURAL ERRORS (Accidental errors)
- 1.1 INTERNAL ERRORS (Errors of Transmission)
- 1.1.1 Housekeeping (or *Genealogical Tidiness*: reducing the amount of detail borne by tradition)
- 1.1.2 Carelessness
- 1.1.3 Copying Errors.
- 1.2 EXTERNAL ERRORS (Errors of Scholarship)
- 1.2.1 Errors of Interpretation
- 1.2.2 Errors of Synthesis
- 2 UNNATURAL ERRORS (Deliberate Errors / Fraud)
- 2.1 ERRORS OF PREVENTION (Economy with the Truth)
- 2.2 ERRORS OF CONTENTION (Untruths)
- 2.2.1 Misrepresentation
- 2.2.2 Pedigree-Faking

The classification is arbitrary and the taxa are not all mutually exclusive (the 1.1.1 Housekeeping errors include some deliberation). Section 2 (deliberately kept at a high level for 2.1) has mostly been included for 2.2's items. Readers can no doubt produce other errors and their own classifications.

The need for brevity and clarity means the author can do little more than name an example for each error-type listed, but he hopes to illustrate some of the types in future papers. In those cases where there is sufficient 'proof' (whether historical or not), he has taken a term from taxonomy and treated one example as a 'type specimen'. As a natural consequence of his original area of interest, MacLeods and their neighbours preponderate in the examples given, for which the author apologises, but he makes no apology for the whimsical nature of some of the names he has given to the error-types! Many of the neologisms in this paper involve adding a new meaning to an old word in an effort to avoid the use of Latin-, or Greek-, based polysyllabic terms, even when such words already exist. Thus, 1.1.3's 'Skipping' covers the error that has at times been referred to as a 'homocoteleuton'¹ and 2.2.1's 'Swapping' covers the 'error' that is often described by terms involving the word 'equivalent'.

B. Types of Error.

- 1 NATURAL ERRORS (Accidental errors)
- 1.1 INTERNAL ERRORS (Errors of Transmission)
- 1.1.1 Housekeeping (or *Genealogical Tidiness*: reducing the amount of detail borne by tradition)

Adoption

in which a client clan's traditions are taken over by (and applied to) the host clan.

Example: the 'Camerons' fought in the Clan Battle at Perth by their adoption of the MacMillans.²

Cooking (or Baking)

in which 'ingredients' (two or more men) are fused into one composite character, the 'cake'.

Example: the Knock MS's John of Ardnamurchan (and his son).

Degeneration

in which relatively insignificant generations are lost from a lineage.

Example: the Black Book of Clanranald's genealogy of the Campbells.³

Parallel-Lines

in which separate lineages become confined exclusively to separate lands.

Example: the MacLeods of Eddrachillis and the MacLeods of Assynt.⁴

Sibling-Rivalry

in which the ordering of brothers changes according to the status of their issue, whilst those without issue are either made junior to the rest or dropped from the account altogether.

Example: the three sons of John Riabhach MacLeod of Assynt.

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1.1.2 Carelessness

Back-dating⁵

in which the local foundation of a family is assigned to an earlier time.

Example: An Gobha Gorm as the first of twenty-five generations of Murrays in Lewis.⁶

Betterment

in which a person's (genealogical) status is improved.

Type Specimen: Coinneach a' Bhlair MacKenzie of Kintail's first wife, Finvola MacDonald, daughter of Gilleasbaig of Lochalsh (son of Alexander, Lord of the Isles and Earl of Ross), becoming a daughter of the Lord of the Isles.⁷

Bothers-in-law

in which a wife becomes her brother's daughter, so brothers-in-law become son- and father- in-law.

Type Specimen: Angus Dubh Mackay of Strathnaver's wife, Elizabeth, sister of Donald of the Isles, becoming Donald's daughter.⁸

Conflation

in which two consecutive homonyms are treated as one.

Type Specimen: Sir Robert Douglas's treatment of Malcolm Garbh MacLeod of Raasay (son of Alexander son of Malcolm) and his son Malcolm Og (father of Alexander) as just one man.⁹

Confounding

in which significant ancestors ('founding fathers', or 'founders') are confused with each other.

Example: the origin of the MacAulays in Lewis.

Contamination

in which similar events are confused with each other.

Example: the Gairloch murders and the Isay massacre.

Misdirection

in which cardinal points are confused with their opposites.

Type Specimen: Ane Descriptione of Certaine Pairts of the Highlands of Scotland's "North end".¹⁰

Nominal-Dominance

a trick of the mind in which a name is replaced by one with more resonance to the narrator.

Type Specimen: J. P. MacLean's "MacLeans of Skye" in place of 'MacLeods of Skye'.¹¹

Patrification

in which a man becomes his father by the loss of '[X] mac' (or '[X/the] son of').

Example: "Duncan Mac William Dou vic Leod" (the maternal grandfather of Murdoch MacKenzie of Fairburn) becoming "William Dow MacLeod".¹²

Sons-and-Lovers

in which an heiress becomes the wife of one of her descendants who is a founder.

Type Specimen: the 'heiress' of Coigeach (i.e. Margaret daughter of Torcall Conanach 'MacLeod') becoming the wife of her grandson, Sir George MacKenzie, first Earl of Cromartie.¹³

Unhappy-Endings

in which a byname is applied to the wrong man.

Type Specimen: amongst the MacLeods of Raasay, the byname 'Garbh' originally pertained to the survivor of the Isay massacre but came to be applied to his grandfather instead.

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1.1.3 Copying Errors.

Dittography

in which a scribe inadvertently repeats text that he has already copied.

Example: the “1685” (likely *recté* 1695) Geanies genealogical chart’s two consecutive generations of Sigifrid Prince of Sogne.

Double-Booking

in which a man appears more than once in a list because he appeared in more than one of the sources from which the list was compiled.

Example: 1492.05.12’s Duncan Lauchlansoun / Duncan Maklauchlane and Johne Duff Makalester / Johne Dow Makalester.¹⁴

Misreading (or Mistranscription)

in which a scribe with an unclear exemplar misspells a word or number in his copy.

Example: the Sleat Historian’s account of the early Clan Ranald.

Mixed-Doubles

a trick of the mind in which a number that includes an immediate repetition of one digit has the repetition applied to an adjacent digit instead.

Type Specimen: Alexander Mackenzie’s “1773” in place of Sir Robert Douglas’s “1733”.¹⁵

Skipping

in which a scribe commits a ‘skip’ by returning to his exemplar at a point that matches, but differs from, the point where he left off, causing either the omission of text (a normal, forward ‘skip’) or the duplication of text (a ‘back-skip’).

Example: Sir Robert Gordon’s account of the three sons of Torcall Dubh MacLeod of Lewis.¹⁶

Step-One

in which a generation, or step, is lost (usually from a lineage) by a second step becoming a gloss (often a byname) on a first step.

Example: the Black Book of Clanranald’s *aonghus cruim*.

Step-Two

in which a generation, or step, is gained (usually by a lineage) by a gloss (often a byname) on a first step becoming a second step.

Example: Dean Monro’s Anald.

Transposition

a trick of the mind in which the order of two digits within a number is reversed.

Type Specimen: Sir George MacKenzie’s “1506” in place of ‘1056’.¹⁷

1.2 EXTERNAL ERRORS (Errors of Scholarship)

1.2.1 Errors of Interpretation

False-Majeure

in which an authority’s erroneous interpretation persists because others fail to challenge it.

Example: Donald Gregory’s account of the Isay massacre.¹⁸

Mistranslation

in which an erroneous interpretation is given because the source material has been mistranslated.

Example: Donald Gregory’s mistranslation of “oy” for Torcall Cononach’s maternal kin.¹⁹

Misunderstanding

in which an erroneous interpretation is given because the source material has been misunderstood.

Example: Alexander Mackenzie’s misunderstanding of the accounts in Sir Robert Douglas’s *Baronage* (e.g. the account of the MacLeods of Hamer).²⁰

Overnaming

in which a patronymic surname is treated as a patronym.

Example: 1506.11.19’s “Johannes Alexandri Johannis de Ardnamurchane”.²¹

TYPES OF ERROR IN CLAN HISTORY AND GENEALOGY

1.2.2 Errors of Synthesis

Booklore

in which published information is erroneously brought to bear on an account.

Example: Camden's *Olavus* replacing *Olbhar* as the ancestor of the MacLeods.²²

Clutching-At-Ancestraws

in which a lineage is lengthened by uncritically adding an inappropriate ancestor.

Example: the addition of Finlay Morrison in Taransay of c.1560 as the ancestor of the Morrisons in Berneray.²³

Linearchy

in which each generation in a lineage is assumed to have represented the senior line.

Example: Alexander MacSommarli (fl.1355) being treated as a *younger* brother of a generation in MS 1467's lineage of *Clann Somairle*.²⁴

Misidentification

in which two different persons are treated as one.

Example: MacKay of Blackcastle's misidentification of Iye (eponym of the Strathnaver Mackays) with Ymar, elder son of the Gilchrist mac Ymar McAy (of the Kintyre Mackays) of 1329.03.21.²⁵

2 UNNATURAL ERRORS (Deliberate Errors / Fraud)

2.1 ERRORS OF PREVENTION (Economy with the Truth)

Refusal

in which embarrassing or contradictory evidence is ignored or omitted.

Type Specimen: Sir Robert Douglas's omission of Malcolm Camachasach MacLeod of Raasay's second marriage.²⁶

Removal

in which embarrassing or contradictory evidence is removed or destroyed.

Type Specimen: the erasure from the Kilbride MS of Leod's six descendants.²⁷

2.2 ERRORS OF CONTENTION (Untruths)

2.2.1 Misrepresentation

Bastardization

in which a man is made illegitimate only because of antipathy on the part of the writer.

Example: the Sleat Historian's treatment of John Brayach MacIain of Ardnamurchan.²⁸

False-Assertion

in which an untruth is baldly stated as a truth (often to avoid an otherwise necessary explanation).

Type Specimen: Alexander Pope's assertion that "Aulver is the same name with Leander".²⁹

Miss-Naming

in which, without any new evidence, formerly anonymous daughters miraculously acquire a name.

Example: 'Isabel', the spurious sixth daughter of Sir Roderick MacLeod of Harris.

Opportunism

in which evidence is changed or invented for personal gain.

Type Specimen: Sir George MacKenzie's treatment of the first Torcall MacLeod of Lewis.³⁰

Simplification

in which evidence is changed or invented to avoid problems.

Type Specimen: the affiliation of John Garbh MacLeod of Raasay in Douglas's *Baronage*.

Swapping

in which a Gaelic name is swapped for a non-Gaelic one (usually Biblical, Classical or Germanic).

Example: Biblical *Zachary* replacing Gaelic *Sgàire*.³¹

Wishful-Tinkering

in which evidence is changed or invented in order to fit a theory.

Example: *Mairi nighean Alasdair Ruaidh*'s "Olghair is Ochraidh" being changed to "Olghair mac Ochraidh" in order to misrepresent it as "referring to Olaf the Black, son of Godfrey".³²

2.2.2 Pedigree-Faking

Gluing

in which two unrelated lineages are stuck together by a spurious ‘glue’ generation.

Example: “Aongusa” in the lineage of Ruaidhri (Mor) MacLeod of Lewis.³³

Misaffiliation

in which a lineage is traced back to an ancestor or ancestors from whom it does not descend.

Example: the MacLeods’ Norse ancestors being traced back to the Irish mythical ancestor Fergus lethderg in the (now lost) Kilbride MS genealogy of the MacLeods.³⁴

Padding

in which a lineage is lengthened by the insertion or addition of any number of spurious generations.

Example: the ‘foreign’ generations common to the lineages of the MacCabs, Beattys and Tobins.

Regeneration

a type of padding in which the effects of a prior degeneration are countered by the invention and insertion of any number of spurious generations.

Example: “Iamar oig” in the (now lost) Kilbride MS genealogy of the MacLeods.³⁵

Younge

in which a ‘younger uncle’ (i.e. one younger than the father) is used to reverse the seniority between two branches of a family whilst maintaining the relative ages of the ancestors. There are two types:

Younge-back – the senior branch is moved backwards a generation to a position junior to the junior branch (elder brother becomes younger uncle)

Example: Duncan Dubh in *Ane Accompt of the Genealogie of the Campbells*³⁶

Younge-forth – the junior branch is moved forwards a generation to a position senior to the senior branch (younger uncle becomes elder brother)

Example: Tormod (ancestor of the MacLeods of Waternish) in the MacLeods’ Bannatyne MS.³⁷

ABBREVIATIONS USED IN THE END-NOTES

Douglas (1798)	Sir Robert Douglas of Glenbervie (1798) <i>The Baronage of Scotland</i> .
Gordon (1813)	Sir Robert Gordon of Gordonstoun (1813) <i>A Genealogical History of The Earldom of Sutherland, from its Origin to the Year 1630</i>
MS	Manuscript
PSHS	Publications of the Scottish History Society (followed by series number / volume number)
TGSI	Transactions of the Gaelic Society of Inverness (followed by volume number & years covered)

¹ For example, P. C. Bartrum (1966) *Early Welsh Genealogical Tracts*, pages 61 (*sub item 47*), 106 (*sub item 18b*) & 154 (note to item 18b).

² Graeme M. Mackenzie, “*The Rarest Decision Recorded in History: The Battle of the Clans in 1396*” (*TGSI LIX 1994-1996* (1997) pages 420-487).

³ Alexander Macbain & Rev. John Kennedy (1894) *Reliquiae Celticae Vol. II*, page 301.

⁴ Quite how the MacLeods of Eddrachillis came to be given a descent from a younger son of Malcolm MacLeod of Lewis (fl.1511) is unclear, but (as geography would suggest) they were really a branch of the MacLeods of Assynt.

⁵ This is closely related to (and in effect it is a subset of) 1.1.2’s Confounding because it is the result of a local founder being confused with an earlier ancestor (often the original founder of the family).

⁶ William Matheson, “The Pape Riot and its Sequel in Lewis” (*TGSI XLVIII 1972-1974* (1976) pages 395-434) page 399.

⁷ (PSHS 4/22) Jean Munro & R. W. Munro (1986) *Acts of the Lords of the Isles 1336-1493*, pages 244 (B42), 304 & 307; Aonghas MacChoinnich, “‘Kingis rabellis’ to ‘Cuidich ’n Righ’? Clann Choinnich: the emergence of a kindred, c.1475-c.1514” (Steve Boardman & Alasdair Ross (2003) *The Exercise of Power in Medieval Scotland c.1200-1500*, pages 175-200) page 194; Cromartie MS in William Fraser (1876) *The Earls of Cromartie, Vol.II*, page 475; 1669 MS in (PSHS 1/33) James Toshach Clark (1900) *MacFarlane’s Genealogical Collections Vol.I*, page 60; Ardross MS in (PSHS 2/12) J. R. N. MacPhail (1916) *Highland Papers Volume II*, page 21.

⁸ (PSHS 4/22) Jean Munro & R. W. Munro (1986) *Acts of the Lords of the Isles 1336-1493*, pages 30-31; Gordon (1813) page 303.

⁹ Douglas (1798) page 386. The error is compounded by the account’s mistaken application of the byname ‘Garbh’ to Malcolm’s grandfather.

¹⁰ (PSHS 1/52) Sir Arthur Mitchell (1907) *Macfarlane’s Geographical Collections Vol.II*, page 185; “North” should be ‘South’ per page 533’s “Southsyd” under the (related manuscript of) *Noates and Observations of dyvers parts of the Hielands and Isles of Scotland*.

¹¹ J. P. MacLean (1889) *A History of the Clan MacLean*, page 285.

¹² 1669 MS in (PSHS 1/33) James Toshach Clark (1900) *MacFarlane’s Genealogical Collections Vol.I*, pages 85 & 83; Alma B. Calderwood (1993) *Acts of the Lords of Council, Vol.III 1501-1503*, page 87, records on 1501.12.10 “Duncane William Dowsone, in Glenelg”.

¹³ Andrew Lang (1898) *The Highlands of Scotland in 1750 from Manuscript 104 in the King’s Library, British Museum*, page 35.

- ¹⁴ William Matheson, "Genealogies of the Mathesons" (*TGSI XLVII 1971-72* (1972) pages 172-217) page 173.
- ¹⁵ Alexander Mackenzie (1889) *History of the Macleods*, page 410; Douglas (1798) page 387.
- ¹⁶ Gordon (1813) page 276. Compare (PSHS 2/12) J. R. N. MacPhail (1916) *Highland Papers Volume II*, page 279, and *Miscellanea Scotica Volume II* (1818) 'Supplement to the History of the Feuds and Conflicts among the Clans', page 27.
- ¹⁷ William Fraser (1876) *The Earls of Cromartie, Vol.II*, pages 504-505.
- ¹⁸ Donald Gregory (1836/1881) *The History of the Western Highlands and Isles of Scotland*, pages 211-212.
- ¹⁹ Donald Gregory (1836/1881) *The History of the Western Highlands and Isles of Scotland*, page 210 footnote 1; Duncan Warrand (1965) *Some Mackenzie Pedigrees*, page 7; Mairi Robinson (ed. 1985) *The Concise Scots Dictionary*, pages 466 & 448.
- ²⁰ Alexander Mackenzie (1889) *History of the Macleods*, pages 262-264; Douglas (1798) page 383; Dr Donald MacKinnon & Alick Morrison, *The MacLeods The Genealogy of a Clan Section Two*: 1st edition (1968) pages 102-111 (especially page 106 footnote 3 & page 107 footnote 5) and 2nd (no new date given, but the MacLeods of Luskintyre have their own chapter) & 3rd (1999) editions pages 106-115 (especially page 110 footnote 3 & page 111 footnote 5). Douglas numbered not the heads of each family but the generations and gave not a genealogy of the family but an 'expanded lineage' of its then head. Moreover, Douglas's accounts of the MacLeods of Harris and their cadets were evidently based on (a version of) the Dunvegan Memorial MS of 1767, which thereby gives the *floruit* for each of the then heads; Douglas died in 1770 but his work was not completed and published by his successors until 1798, misleading Mackenzie (in a variation of error-type 1.2.2's Booklore) to give a spurious *floruit* of 1798 to some heads of families (for the MacLeods of Hamer, his Norman MacLeod, "alive in 1798", had died in 1781).
- ²¹ K. A. Steer & J. W. M. Bannerman (1977) *Late Medieval Monumental Sculpture in the West Highlands*, page 113; PSHS 4/22 Jean Munro & R. W. Munro (1986) *Acts of the Lords of the Isles 1336-1493*, pages 233 & 284.
- ²² William Matheson, "The Ancestry of the MacLeods" (*TGSI LI 1979-1980* (1981) pages 68-80) pages 71-72.
- ²³ Alick Morrison, "The Grianam Case" (*TGSI LII 1980-1982* (1983) pages 20-89) page 83. Compare: Alick Morrison (1956) *The Clan Morrison Heritage of the Isles*, pages 25-26 & 26-27; Alick Morrison (1961) *An Ribheid Chiuil*, pages 9 & 104 end-note (2); and the Late Rev. Dr Donald MacKinnon, D.Litt., and Alick Morrison, M.A.(Hons) (1970) *The MacLeods – The Genealogy of a Clan Section Three*, pages 256-257.
- ²⁴ Hector McKechnie (1938) *The Lamont Clan 1235-1935: Seven Centuries of Clan History from Record Evidence*, page 381. Presuming that he was one of the *Clann Somairle*, Alexander, a baron, was probably the Chief, which would imply that at least one of the generations in MS 1467's lineage was a younger brother.
- ²⁵ Angus Mackay (1906) *The Book of Mackay*, pages 16-18.
- ²⁶ Douglas (1798) page 386; Rev. Donald MacKinnon, *Clan MacLeod Magazine, No.19, 1954*, page 150, *sub* 'The MacLeods of Raasay'; Dr John MacInnes, "Gleanings from Raasay Tradition" (*TGSI LVI 1988-1990* (1991) pages 1-20) pages 5-6.
- ²⁷ W. F. Skene in The Iona Club (1847) *Collectanea de Rebus Albanicis*, page 362, end-note 5: "This genealogy appears to have contained the names of Leod's descendants for six generations; but they have been carefully erased from the MS., probably by some partisan of the head of that branch of the Clan whose pretensions to the seniority it overthrew."
- ²⁸ (PSHS 2/5) J. R. N. MacPhail (1914) *Highland Papers Volume I*, page 60; K. A. Steer & J. W. M. Bannerman (1977) *Late Monumental Sculpture in the West Highlands*, page 113.
- ²⁹ Alexander Pope (1866) *Ancient History of Orkney, Caithness, & the North*, page 131.
- ³⁰ William Fraser (1876) *The Earls of Cromartie, Vol.II*, page 511; William Matheson, "The Ancestry of the MacLeods" (*TGSI LI 1979-1980* (1981) pages 68-80), pages 320 & 324-325.
- ³¹ William Matheson, "Notes on North Uist Families" (*TGSI LII 1982-1983* (1983) pages 318-372), pages 335-336.
- ³² J. Carmichael Watson (1934/1965/1982) *Gaelic Songs of Mary MacLeod*, page 58, l.698 (& pages 59, 125 & 128); Alick Morrison (1986) *The Chiefs of Clan MacLeod*, page 4: "Thus when the bardess referred to 'Olgair mac Ochraidh' she was referring to Olaf the Black, son of Godfrey."
- ³³ Royal Irish Academy MS 23H22.
- ³⁴ The Iona Club (1847) *Collectanea de Rebus Albanicis*, page 361.
- ³⁵ The Iona Club (1847) *Collectanea de Rebus Albanicis*, page 361.
- ³⁶ 'Ane Accompt of the Genealogie of the Campbells' in (PSHS 2/12) J. R. N. MacPhail (1916) *Highland Papers Volume II*, pages 83-84; Alastair Campbell of Airds (2000/2012) *A History of the Clan Campbell, Volume I From Origins to Flodden*, pages 15 & 70.
- ³⁷ Alick Morrison (1986) *The Chiefs of Clan MacLeod*, pages ii-iii, 44 & 53.