

## THE ORIGINS OF THE MEEHAN SURNAME.

According to “Devenish, its History and Antiquities”, published by the Clogher Historical Society, the Meehan family were originally “herenachs” of Devinish Island, Lough Erne, Co. Fermanagh, Northern Ireland. “Herenach” is a term used to denote a family with a hereditary title to a church property. They are usually descendants of the family of the founder of the monastery or church, and caretakers of any relics or artifacts pertaining to the original founder.

The Meehan’s originated as the hereditary kinsfolk of St. Laserian, better known as St. Molaise of Devenish. This Molaise is reputed to be a relative of the legendary St. Columcille and, as his confessor, was instrumental in the latter's choice of Iona as a place of exile from Ireland. St. Molaise is the patron of Devenish Island, which he founded in the 6th century, and, in 543 A.D., the year of Columcille's exile, he is recorded as an aged hermit. The relic left to the custodianship of the Meehan’s is a manuscript, known as the Soiscel Molaise or St. Molaise's Gospels.

Most countries in the world that have produced the codex-form book have had a few highly valued and special examples, often holy books of saints or royal books of kings. These prized volumes would have received protective coverings created by skilled craftsmen and decorated with elaborate artwork. Almost all countries apply this attention to the book itself, the paper and the binding: all save one. Ireland seems to be the only country to have used book shrines extensively; a few shrines have been found in other countries, mainly of Irish workmanship during the middle ages when these shrines were popular in Ireland, and but a few that pre-date this period and have no Irish connection. These book shrines were known as “cumdrachs”

Thus the Meehan family originated as the guardians of the box, or cumdrach, of his manuscript of the gospels. This cumdrach is one of the greatest treasures of Ireland and the Meehan family was its custodians until the 19th century when the last Meehan of the hereditary line, a Protestant minister named Thomas, donated it to the Royal Academy, which later became the National Museum of Dublin.

The book shrine of the Soiscel Molaise is the second oldest existing cumdrach and bears an inscription that allows it to be dated within twenty-four years (1001-1025 A.D.) A description of the box in 1973 noted that one narrow side is missing and openwork silver plates are riveted to the remaining sides. That on the front contains a series of small panels forming an equal-armed ringed cross. Between the arms are four large panels depicting the symbols of the evangelists and around the edge there is a row of narrow panels” (Lucas 1973: 127).

As herenachs, the family had hereditary rights in perpetuity to land on the island and the monastery supported the family in return for access to the cumdrach of the patron on special feast days such as the Devinish Patron Day on 12th September. This was a local holiday, lasting all weekend, and endured until the 19th century, when, at the behest of a puritanical official guardian of morality, it was terminated as an occasion of rowdy drunkenness and debauchery.

The Meehan’s moved off the island to a domain of their own in Co. Leitrim and this they called Ballymeehan or the Town of the Meehans, a little south-west of Upper Lough Erne. At some point, a part of this large family moved off into the regions of Sligo and Donegal, where they remain to this day.

There are a number of legends associated with the Molaise cumdrach and various Meehans down the centuries. One such relates how the shrine was lost, and later found by a humble parish priest, who was given a vision of angels descending and opening the well of Molaise on the island, in the wall of which was hidden the box. He brought it to church, before the assembled members of two feuding factions, and made each swear peace on it under pain of insanity. It is reported that not a few left the church as raving lunatics!

Such was the hold of this tale on the imagination of succeeding generations, it is related by a local judge of the 19th century, that the cumdrach was often hired by the courts to swear in a Roman Catholic miscreant, who otherwise might have no trouble perjuring himself on the English King James' version of the Bible. In the 13th century there was a dispute between three Meehans - the abbot of Devenish, the bishop of the diocese of Devenish, and the local parish priest. The priest had the box in his possession but the other two were claiming priority to the precious object by way of status. The story highlights the differences between the traditional rule of the abbey versus the diocesan authority of the Irish church. Abhorring the scandal of two princes of the church engaged in public conflagration, the priest burnt the contents of the box to protect the tender consciences of his flock! The tale may be told as a guise to cover the reality of a manuscript that has been lost.

The box of the bookshrine is a classical house-shaped box. Made of yew, the original of which was covered in gold and silver, with a Celtic cross on the front, it is inscribed with the evangelists' symbols and a prayer request for the abbot who instigated its application in the 11th or 12th century. A side panel contains a small figure of an ecclesiastic with forked beard and holding a holy water sprinkler in his hand. Its lid is missing but would have been roof-shaped. Some side panels are also missing. One is reported as having been prised off by a current custodian and sold to a watchmaker in Sligo.

There is a coat of arms for the Meehans: a shield divided by a chevron and three bucks. It was granted to a Meehan by King James for his part in the Battle of the Boyne. The newly ennobled Meehan then fled to France to enjoy his new status and, as a consequence, there are probably French Meehans to add to the clans' world-wide dispersion.

Meehan, along with its variant Meighan, comes from the Irish O'Miadhachain and is a derivative of the word "miadhach" - meaning "honourable". Alternatively, it may derive from O'Maoithain and comes from the Gaelic word "maoth" which means "tender". While the name is prolific in east Connaught, Donegal and Fermanagh areas, it appears that a separate family adopted the name in the late Clare and Galway times. In Monaghan, and there alone, it has been anglicized to Meegan.

Compiled by Anne Smith.

Resourced from the following sites:

Surname: Meighan by Pat Traynor <[tray@jps.net](mailto:tray@jps.net)

Meehan Surname History by Aidan Meehan

<http://home.earthlink.net/~anderson207/Meehan> Hist.html

Cumdrachs and Polaires - Medieval Irish Book Shrines and Book Satchels by Harry Miller at

<http://www.eskimo.com/~hmiller/cumdrachs.html>