

A Chief for Clan Ewen? – Part II

From a Message by Thor Ewing (*Thor at HistoricalArts dot co dot uk*) to the EFA Forum (*EwingFamilyAssociation at GoogleGroups dot com*)

I have divided this message with subheadings which makes it look a little bit like an essay, but I hope it will help you to follow what I'm trying to say. Because of what's been said in earlier messages on this subject, I have found myself drawn into discussions touching American cultural identity, which is hardly something I feel qualified to speak about – if I am guilty of any 'howlers', please forgive me and perhaps recall the lines of Robert Burns:

O wad some Pow'r the giftie gie us
To see oursels as others see us ...

Clans and Clan Societies

Whilst there are clan societies which are similar to *Ewing Family Association (EFA)* or *Clan Ewing in America (CEA)*, these are not the same as the clans themselves. So, the *Clan Ewen Society* is an international organisation similar in setup to the *EFA* which has a membership open to anyone who is interested in Clan Ewen (or the Clans Ewen). Like the *EFA*, it has a committee (which I'm on) and periodic general meetings.¹

By contrast, a clan exists with no real formal organisation whatsoever, except that there is usually supposed to be a chief. At the moment, there are some Ewings in the *Clan Ewen Society* who are not members of *EFA*, and others (usually from the U.S.) who are in both. You can be in any number of such societies, but you can only be in a single clan.

Ewings who live in America can be seen as a branch of a particular Clan Ewen, and they are represented by the *EFA*. But this doesn't mean that *EFA* has any particular relationship with the *Clan Ewen Society*. This can all seem terribly confusing I know, but the easy way to see it is that *Clan Ewing in America* and the *Clan Ewen Society* are both clubs which were established about thirty or forty years ago, but our clan is a family or group of families which was established more than four-hundred years ago. You could go out and establish another clan society or surname-interest society tomorrow, but it wouldn't change the constitution of the clan one jot.

We have rightly moved the debate about the name of the *EFA/CEA* away from this subject heading. As a newbie to the *EFA*, I think it's best I keep out of that particular debate, but in that discussion the point was made that the word 'clan' is actually a real selling point which appeals directly to people's sense of their Scottish history. In a way perhaps, this issue of the clan and its chief might be an opportunity to find a resolution to the debate about the name of the *EFA*. It's clear that many members of the *EFA* are deeply attached to the idea of clanship, and feel the lack of it in the new-look *Ewing Family Association*. By setting up a formally-constituted clan through the court of the Lord Lyon, we will gain something real which preserves the link with our shared roots in the Scottish Clans. The organisation known as *EFA* or *CEA* would remain one way to maintain links with the wider clan.

¹ The *Clan Ewen Society's* periodic general meeting – its Annual General Meeting (AGM) – occurs annually. The *Ewing Family Association's* periodic general meeting occurs biennially at its gatherings.

Scotland and America

Under the name *Clan Ewing in America*, the *Ewing Family Association* was almost exclusively an American organisation and its membership still reflects this. Perhaps, some members would argue that it should remain an American organisation in the future. However, a clan as conceived in Scottish law is not like this. The clan to which we belong has no geographical boundaries. So the issue of the chiefship is not just for Ewings in Scotland, but for all Ewings of all nations. That means that this is not something which I believe the *EFA* should walk away from, because even if the *EFA* is still a largely American organisation it nonetheless represents a sizeable portion of the clan. What is more, the *EFA* is the only body representing Ewings anywhere, so as well as representing American members of an international clan, the *EFA* itself has *de facto* international importance. If there turns out to be a real demand for a specifically American 'sept' (this is the usual word for a distinct subsection of a clan), it might be possible for this to be established once the issue of overall chiefship has been settled.

It has been suggested that it would be possible for Americans to ignore the decision of Lyon Court, since it is a Scottish court with no legal jurisdiction outside Scotland. I don't think this can work. Lyon Court is the internationally recognised arbiter on matters associated with Scottish clans. Its influence is more-or-less as important in the U.S. as in the U.K. As an individual, perhaps you can say it doesn't count, that it doesn't mean anything to you. But in the long run, the official decision reached in Scotland will be the one that sticks. For many Ewings, both American and non-American, what might happen in Scotland with regard to their clan is important, and it's appropriate that the *EFA* should attend to the matter on their behalf. And although the Family Convention might be taking place in Scotland, it is actively seeking representations from prominent clansfolk wherever they are in the world.

On a completely separate subject which somehow fits under the same heading, I would question the assertion that the Ewings settled in America in order to escape from royalty. At the time most Ewing lines reached America, it was still a Crown Colony. There were certain advantages, such as lands ready for the taking, low taxation and fuller religious liberty, but freedom from royal authority was not among them. And one of these Ewing settlers brought with him a cherished possession in the shape of a sword which was passed down from father to son – the reason for its significance seems to have been that it had been the gift of a king and so conferred a vestige of royal sanction and recognition on its owners.

How does this square with our Covenanter history, when we seem to have sided against the notion of royal power? Well, perhaps it just shows a practical opportunist streak alongside the idealism. And certainly, there's room in a family for debate, as is shown by this discussion.

I would certainly be interested to learn more about the role of Ewings in the War of American Independence (as distinct from the Scottish Wars of Independence!) and the factors that motivated them in their struggle. But it's often too easy to project our own worldview onto even relatively recent events – many British people believe that Britain declared war against Hitler on moral grounds (it's pretty much what we're taught at school), which would be very nice if it were true.

It was American Ewings in particular who kept alive the oral tradition that we are descended from chiefs of the clan, so I cannot believe that this part of their past is unimportant to them. One thing I am sure of about our ancestors is that when they left Scotland they were not turning their backs on who they had been; if that had been possible for them, they could have stayed.

Ewings and McEwens

The Ewings seem to come more-or-less entirely from a single clan which was based near Loch Lomond in the 1500s. In the sixteenth century there seems to have been no hard-and-fast distinction between the names Ewing and MacEwen, so it's likely that some descendants of the same clan now go by the name of MacEwen/McEwan etc. Our clan, which can be traced securely to sixteenth-century Loch Lomond, is probably descended from the medieval Clan Ewen of Otter which lived on the shores of Loch Fyne (ours turns up at precisely the moment the other clan disappears).

However, the majority of Mc-/Mac- surnames (and likewise Ewan/Ewans/Ewen/Ewenson) seem to come from altogether different clans: Some come from another independent group based in Galloway (with the motto *Reviresco*); some are descended from Clan MacDougall; some from Clan Cameron. It's possible that there might also have been some descendants of Clan Ewen of Otter who did not recognise our chief as their own (there's no evidence for this, but it's a popular theory among MacEwens and it would be hard to disprove). The other MacEwen clans were largely Jacobites, at the other end of the political spectrum from the Covenanter tradition.

This raises the issue of whether our clan is defined to include any Mc-/Mac- Ewan/Ewen/Ewings who are descended from the same clan. In practice, it might be tricky for McEwans to unravel their roots (though I suspect Y-DNA studies will change this in the not-so-distant future) but for those who do and who discover that they once followed the *Audaciter!* banner, I believe it's important that our clan should extend the hand of welcome. It's possible that the name 'Clan Ewen' would be more inclusive than 'Clan Ewing', whilst still reflecting our clan origins. I'm not certain that we have to settle on a particular name, but I raise the issue because I believe that the people seeking to establish a new MacEwen clan would aim to make any distinction based on surname alone, whereas for me our clan is defined by shared descent from a particular historical clan.

Chiefship and Heredity

In general, I think the American cultural position on heredity seems very close to the British view. I don't think that heredity has many supporters on either side of the pond when it comes to positions of political power or business leadership. However, both cultures pass certain things down the family line, such as surname, wealth and citizenship. What we are suspicious of is where positions of power are passed on within the family. The chiefship of a clan is not really an issue of heritable power; the chief won't be imposing taxes on the clan or issuing directives; there's no question of despotism. The title of chief is primarily honorific, and it's an honour that reflects on the whole clan.

It's fair to say that if someone were creating the clan system today it would look very different. But the point is that we're not creating it today. It might seem quaint and old-world, but that's because it really is an ancient system, and that's precisely why it's cherished. So, whilst I understand (and to some extent share) reservations about inherited titles, I would argue that we cannot change the system and that it's not really such a big deal in any case.

At one time, I thought our best course might be to assert independence without actually appointing a chief. However, I'm not at all sure that the Lord Lyon would accept this, and in any case I now feel it would be practically unworkable. If there is one thing a clan chief can do, it is to stick up for the clan against encroachment from other clans. After taking part in the debate on the Clan Ewen Forum (<http://Groups.Google.com/group/ClanEwen>), I now have little doubt that the new pan-MacEwen clan

will try to assert a position as the only Clan Ewen, unless we have a chief of our own as a mark of our independence. It may well be that we will need a chief who is willing to be forthright in asserting that independence.

The question we're addressing here should not, I think, be whether the system of chiefship is a good one – it's what we've got and, if we are interested in our family as a clan, we have to work with it. But for those of us who are willing or eager to go along with the clans as they really are, the first question must be: "Should our clan continue to reflect our identity as an independent clan?" What I'm hearing both here and in private E-mails seems to me to provide firm backing for the idea that we have our own unique identity as a clan, and that we should not be lumped in together with unrelated families solely on the basis of a similar name.

The way the argument has centered on other issues suggests that our independence is taken for granted, and indeed it has certainly gone unchallenged in this debate. For me, the whole debate about the nature of clanship underlines the fact that this clan has an independent family tradition as feisty, forward-thinking and politically-aware. Personally, I feel sure that the formal acknowledgement of this in our own chiefship would in no way dampen this spirit, and you don't have to agree with everything I say to see the advantage of having our own chief. It may be that the alternative is not to remain chiefless and independent, but to accept a position in someone else's clan, with someone else's hereditary chief.

Thor Ewing is a writer, historian and historical performer in the U.K. He has published studies of Viking and Anglo-Saxon culture and translations of medieval Scandinavian and Celtic poetry. He joined the Ewing Surname Y-DNA Project in 2007 (he is JT in Group 2), and his own line comes through Lurgan, County Armagh, in Northern Ireland. He is webmaster for the Clan Ewen Society, and his recent New Notes on Clan Ewen² looks at how modern Ewings and MacEwens originate in the clans of medieval Scotland. His personal website is at <http://ThorEwing.net>.*



² Ewing, Thor. *New Notes on Clan Ewen*. Private Printing, 2009. www.clanewen.org/shop/newnotes.