THE SEARCH CONTINUES

The next family record

My father named his American home Ballymagauran and placed the name beside the door in gilded letters. He carried a place from Cavan into the lives of his children. Other families have preserved their connections in different ways. Together, those surviving connections give today's McGoverns and Magaurans something to investigate. The next useful piece of evidence may be in a public archive. It may also be in a box of papers that a cousin has never thought to open.

SOURCES

Patrick Woulfe, Irish Names and Surnames (1923), Mag Shamhradháin.

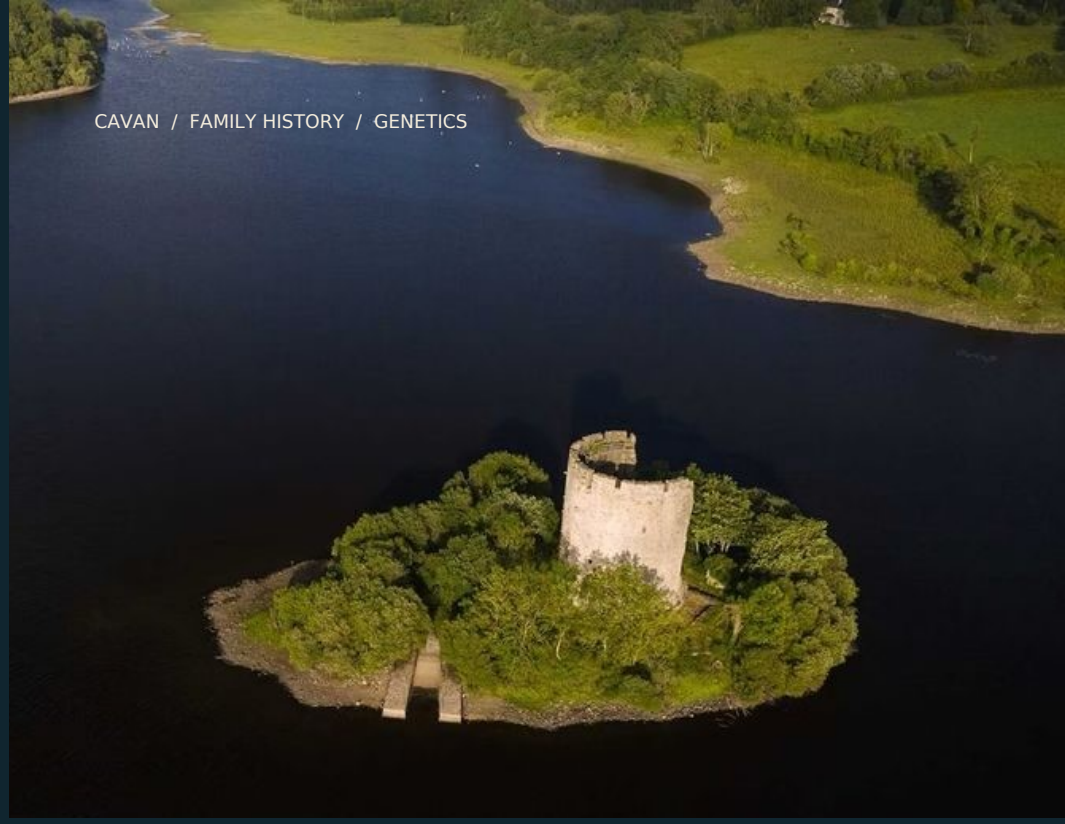
K. DePew, M. Gleeson, and B. Jaski, “Tracing the Sons of Brión,” Peritia 34 (2023), pp. 9–45; online 2024.

M. Gleeson and K. DePew, Uí Briúin genetic genealogy articles, Parts 1 and 2, FamilyTreeDNA (2024).

M. R. Griffin-Wilson, “Sidelights on History,” Proceedings of the Harvard Celtic Colloquium 2 (1982), pp. 75–87.

Family details: John Rady Magauran’s manuscript and family history. Images: existing McGovern Century and book artwork.

Clough Oughter Castle is a County Cavan landscape, not the Magauran chiefly seat.



CAVAN / FAMILY HISTORY / GENETICS

THE McGOVERN STORY

What DNA adds to a thousand years of records

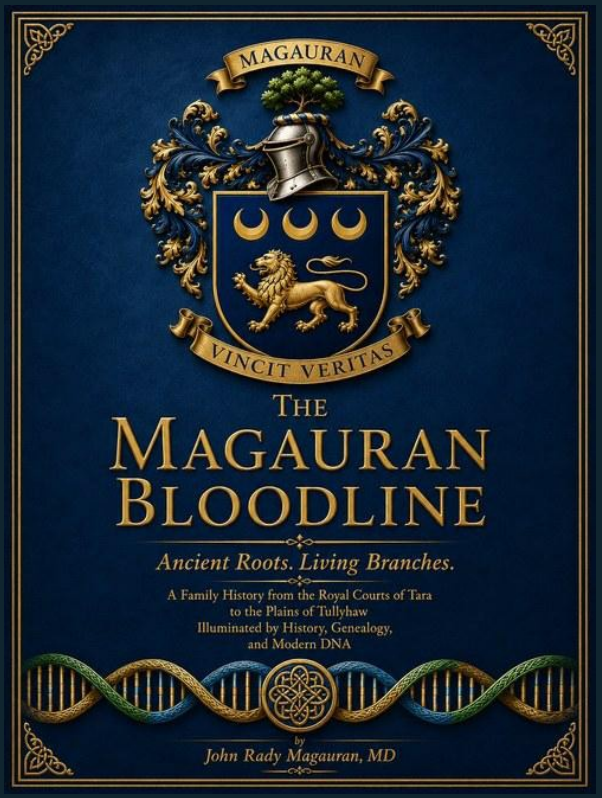
BY JOHN RADY MAGAURAN, MD

WHERE THE SEARCH LEADS

Back to Cavan

A search for a McGovern grandparent may begin with an immigration record or a cemetery inscription. Follow it back to County Cavan, and it may reach Tullyhaw, the territory of the medieval chiefs whose history survives in Irish annals and the Book of Magauran.

THE BOOK BEHIND THE ARTICLE



The Magauran Bloodline

By John Rady Magauran, MD

The Magauran Bloodline follows the family from the royal traditions of Tara to Tullyhaw and from Cavan to America. Its chapters examine the medieval poems, churchmen, conquest, family migration, and the genetic evidence considered alongside the written record.

EXPLORE THE BOOK →

The fireside image from the McGovern Century.

04 / YOUR FAMILY HISTORY

Your family history

For a descendant beginning today, the most useful first step is often close at hand. Record what older relatives remember. Identify the people in photographs while someone can still name them. Preserve the original documents and note where each piece of information came from.

Place deserves particular attention. A county is a beginning; a parish or townland can make a search much more precise. Alternative spellings deserve a place in that search as well.

For questions about a direct paternal line, Y-DNA testing may add evidence, especially when results can be compared with men whose family origins are documented. Its usefulness comes from that comparison with records and other families.

The paternal line is only one part of anyone's ancestry. Mothers and grandmothers, and family relationships formed through adoption, belong fully in the account. Their letters, work, migrations, and memories may explain more about a household's life than a genetic marker ever could.

CLOUGH OUGHTER CASTLE

County Cavan

The connection can change the scale of a family inquiry. Modern DNA research now provides another way to investigate how living families relate to that history.

For descendants, the question becomes personal. How much of this older story belongs to the branch our parents knew, and what evidence can help us find out?

The fields and townlands of County Cavan.

01 / THE SHARED HISTORY

The history within the name

McGovern and Magauran are among the English forms of the Irish name Mag Shamhradháin, meaning son of Samhradhán. In his 1923 dictionary of Irish surnames, Patrick Woulfe listed both spellings under the same entry and identified the family with Tullyhaw in northwestern County Cavan.

That makes spelling a useful starting point for research. A record filed under Magauran may concern the wider family a McGovern is investigating. The spelling alone cannot establish a relationship between two people, but it can suggest where to look next.

Tullyhaw gives that search a place. Ballymagauran, associated with the family's chiefly seat, gives it another. These names connect descendants with a particular landscape and with people who lived there long before the surviving records of most individual households begin.

Cobh harbor, County Cork, a point of departure from Ireland.

THE UNANSWERED CONNECTION

Following the family through the records

The episode also leaves a research question. In our branch, the documented pedigree reaches James Magauran of Creighan, born in 1806, whose father was Edward. The precise documentary connection from that family to a named chief of Tullyhaw remains to be established. Our genetic evidence helps direct the search; the missing record still matters.

Other McGovern and Magauran households may hold evidence relevant to questions like this. A family Bible, correspondence naming relatives, or a record identifying a place of origin can make an otherwise uncertain connection possible. Material that seems ordinary within one household may be unfamiliar to every researcher outside it.

03 / BEYOND THE ANNALS

When the records fall silent

An episode from my own family illustrates the distance that can separate a historical account from the lives of descendants.

A family-tree illustration from the book accompanies a story about a living household.

Griffin-Wilson knew that McGoverns and Magaurans still existed. Her conclusion concerned the chiefly line, which appeared to have ended as far as the documents showed. Soon afterward, she told Father Leonard Goode about her research and what she had concluded. He answered that the family was alive and flourishing. He had married Brendan Magauran and Muriel Dignam and baptized their twelve children.

Brendan and Muriel were my parents. The priest knew a living household that the medieval sources could not describe.

THE WRITTEN INHERITANCE

The family in the medieval record

A page from the Book of Magauran

Heraldic artwork and manuscript image from the McGovern Century.

The medieval family also left the Book of Magauran, a collection of poems associated with its chiefs. In a 1982 study, Margo Griffin-Wilson read those poems alongside the annals to examine fourteenth-century marriages, conflicts, and alliances. The poems preserve evidence of the relationships through which the family exercised power and maintained its position.

That history is available to a reader whose own family tree still stops in the nineteenth century. Establishing a connection to a particular chief is a further question, requiring its own evidence.

02 / THE EVIDENCE

What the genetic research found

The Y chromosome provides a way to study descent through fathers and sons. Inherited changes in its DNA distinguish branches of a paternal family tree. Researchers can compare those branches with relationships described in historical records.

DNA illustration from The Magauran Bloodline.

Kyle DePew, Maurice Gleeson, and Bart Jaski made that comparison in a study published in Peritia, the journal of the Medieval Academy of Ireland. They examined more than 350 Y-DNA results associated with a marker called A259 and compared the genetic pattern with genealogies of the Uí Briúin, an Irish dynasty traditionally traced to Bríón.

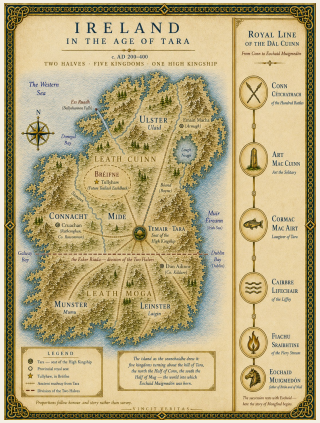
Their findings included a recognizable grouping of McGovern results within the wider Bréifne kindred. Relationships among several surname groups broadly agreed with the genealogical accounts. Other parts of the older pedigrees contained discrepancies requiring further investigation.

THE SCOPE OF A DNA RESULT

What a marker can tell us

This gives family historians evidence independent of the written pedigrees. A genetic pattern can support a proposed relationship or reveal that an inherited account needs reconsideration.

Its limits matter, too. DNA cannot supply a medieval ancestor's name by itself. Estimates of when branches divided can span several centuries. A connection to an old kindred therefore does not automatically establish descent from a particular named chief.



Ireland map illustration from the book; not a genetic distribution map.

There is also no reason to expect every person bearing the same surname to have an identical paternal history. Names and genetic lines can follow different paths across generations. Each family's evidence needs to be examined on its own terms.