

American Political Leaders of Scottish Descent

By John King Bellasai*

Here in the States we are slogging through a very long political primary season in the run-up to our general election for President, which will occur in early November. For sure, everyone in Scotland by now knows that the identity of the two frontrunners—Hillary Rodham Clinton, the Democrat, and Donald Trump, the Republican. Despite vigorously contested primary fights in which they are both currently engaged, against strong opponents, Clinton and Trump are heavily favored to receive the nominations of their respective political parties and go on to face each other in the general election this fall.

Less well known is the fact that like over nine million other Americans, both Trump and Clinton have Scottish roots. In *The Donald's* case, the Scottish connection is very recent—through his Scots-born mother. In Hillary's case, her Scottish connection is a double one and slightly more removed—through a Scottish great-grandmother as well as through a Scottish fifth-great-grandfather. In this respect, Trump and Clinton typify two common patterns among Americans of Scottish descent—those with very recent immigrant antecedents and those whose Scottish roots in America go back many generations, to the days of steady Scottish immigration in the 19th century, or even earlier.

In her autobiography, *Living History*, Hillary Rodham Clinton describes her maternal grandmother as “one of nine children from a family of French-Canadian, Scottish and Native American ancestry.” Though of English and Welsh extraction on her father's side (the Rodham's hailed from Durham in the north of England), on her mother's side, Clinton's grandmother, Della Murray, was born in Detroit in 1902--the daughter of Daniel Murray, who emigrated to Detroit, on the U.S. side of the border, from neighboring Ontario, Canada, some time before 1900. Going back yet another two generations, one of Clinton's great-great-grandparents was Mary Anne Frances McDougall, born in Windsor, Ontario in 1823 and living in Detroit until her death in 1898. This Mary Anne Frances McDougall was herself the granddaughter of George McDougall, a Scottish immigrant to Canada in the mid-1700's.

Trump, the billionaire business mogul known to millions as the host of the TV reality show, *The Apprentice*, before his celebrity fame launched him into politics, is openly proud of his Scottish as well as German ancestry. As he proclaims on the website of *his Trump International Golf Links, Scotland*, located in Aberdeen-shire, “My mother, Mary MacLeod, was from Stornoway on the Isle of Lewis. She grew up in a simple croft until she landed in Manhattan at the age of 20 and her first language was Gaelic.”

Scottish ancestry for American presidential candidates is commonplace, and 26 of the 44 Presidents of the United States have been of Scottish, or Ulster Scot, descent. In the last 40 years, unsuccessful presidential candidates of both our major political parties, as well as a number of independent candidates for president, have been of Scottish descent. These have

run the gamut from Republicans Mitt Romney, John McCain and Newt Gingrich, to Democrats John Kerry and Walter Mondale, to Independents Pat Buchanan and George Wallace.

Among the 25 U.S. Presidents of Scottish descent, most descended from Ulster Scots (usually referred to here in the States as “Scots-Irish”), who had emigrated to America in the early to mid-18th century, from Tyrone or Antrim, in Ulster. This was the case for Andrew Jackson (in office 1829-37), James Knox Polk (1845-49), James Buchanan (1857-61), Andrew Johnson (1865-69), Ulysses S. Grant (1869-77), Chester Arthur (1881-85), Grover Cleveland (1885-89 and 1893-97), Benjamin Harrison (1889-93), William McKinley (1897-1901), William Howard Taft (1909-13), Warren G. Harding (1921-23), Harry Truman (1945-53), Lyndon Johnson (1963-69), Richard Nixon (1969-74), Jimmy Carter (1977-81), and Bill Clinton (1993-2001).

In other cases, however, the Scottish ancestry of American presidents derived directly from Scotland. Thomas Jefferson’s mother, Jane Randolph, though born in London was reputedly descended from Thomas Randolph, a hero of the Scottish Wars of Independence, Earl of Moray and Chamberlain of Scotland under his uncle, King Robert the Bruce. (Jefferson alluded to the Randolph family’s proud claims of descent from Scottish kings in his writings, though at the same time he admitted not to know how much credence to put in them.) In any event, Jane Randolph was the source of her son Tom’s famous flaming red hair. (Jefferson, primary author of the American Declaration of Independence, was the 3rd President of the United States, 1801-09.)

Our 5th President, James Monroe (1817-25), a protégé of Jefferson’s, descended for certain from a Ross-shire born great-great-grandfather, Andrew Monroe, who emigrated to Virginia in the mid-1600’s. Jean Stobo, the maternal third-great grandmother of Theodore (“Teddy”) Roosevelt, our 26th President (1901-09), came to America from Scotland with her parents in 1699. The famous Woodrow Wilson, our 28th President (1913-21), was openly proud of his Scottish descent from his maternal grandparents, Thomas Woodrow and Marian Williamson, who had both emigrated to America from Scotland in the 1830’s. Our longest serving President, Franklin Delano Roosevelt (1932-45), known simply as “FDR”, had a Scots-born great-grandmother, Elizabeth (Murray) Robbins, the daughter of James Murray of Ewe, Dumfriesshire. John Wilson, the great-grandfather of Ronald Reagan, our 40th President (1981-89), emigrated to America from Paisley in Scotland in 1832. George H.W. Bush, our 41st President (1989-93), and George W. Bush, his son, our 43rd President (2001-09), both descend from Catherine Walker (nee’ MacLelland), who had emigrated to America from Scotland 100 years earlier.

Last but certainly not least, Barack Obama, our 44th (and current) President, is also of Scottish descent. Though of Kenyan ancestry on his father’s side, his mother, Anne Dunham, was the product of many generations of antecedents in America going back to colonial times. Among her forebears was William McCurry, her fifth great-grandfather, a resident of Augusta County, VA in 1745--himself the son of John McCurry, born in 1725 (birthplace unknown) and almost

certainly a Scottish immigrant to America during the first wave of heavy immigration, primarily to the southern colonies of Virginia, the Carolinas and Georgia.

This first wave, mostly from the West of Scotland, occurred in the unsettled century of political upheaval that gripped Scotland in the years between the Battles of Dunbar and Worchester (1650 and 1651, respectively) and the Battle of Culloden in 1746—a century that saw many captured Scots sent by the British Government as indentured servants to America. At the same time, many more of their countrymen were emigrating by choice, all to find their fortunes in a new land.

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