

TEC CORNELIUS AUBRENAN : The First Irish-born Immigrant in Canada

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by Louis Aubry a descendant

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My journey towards locating the birthplace of my ancestor, Pierre Aubry, formerly Tec Cornelius Aubrenan started in my youth. My father, Auguste Eugène Aubry, a well known wholesale tobacconist on Sussex Drive in Ottawa told his seven children that they were descendants of an Irishman Tadhg Cornelius Ó'Braonáin or Tec Cornelius Aubrenan, as the name was written when he set foot in New France or Canada.¹ The late Claude Aubry, who was the Chief Librarian of the Ottawa Municipal Library, also mentioned to me the fact that Tec Cornelius Aubrenan was the ancestor of most of the Aubrys in Canada and in the United States..

My research project really began when, as an MA student, I consulted Tanguay's *Dictionnaire des familles canadiennes*,² in the University of Ottawa Morrisette Library. Tec Cornelius Aubrenan was listed as born in 1632, married in 1670 (to Jeanne Chartier from Paris, France) and buried in 1687, at the age of 55, in Pointe-aux-Trembles.³

To learn more about the name O'Brennan or Ó'Braonáin, I consulted *Irish Families - Their Names, Arms and Origins* by the former Chief Herald of Ireland, Edward MacLysacht. Under O'Brennan, MacBrennan the author writes:

The principal O'Brennan sept was that of Ossory; they were chiefs of Ui Duach (mod. Idough) in the northern part of Co. Kilkenny. Their influence naturally waned as English power became

¹ His name appears in the 1663 Census as Thècle Cornelius Aubrenan, the only individual out of a population of 596 not born in France, who declares that he is unable to sign his name or country of origin (Marcel Trudel, *Montréal, formation d'une société; 1642 - 1663*). In the 1667 Census, he appears as Tècle Cornelius (Benjamin Sulte, *Histoire des Canadiens-Français*) and in the 1681 Census as Jacques Tecaubry

² Abbé Cyprien Tanguay, *Dictionnaire des familles Canadiennes* (Dictionary of Canadian (French) Families) 1608 - 1700. (1871), (Tanguay lived at 84 Guigues Street in Ottawa.)

³ There is conflicting information about the year of Tec Cornelius Aubrenan's birth. According to his burial record, he was 55 at his death, which would establish the year he was born as 1632. On the other hand, the census takers wrote that he was 25 on the 1663 Census and 29 on the 1667 Census, establishing 1638 as the year of his birth, while he was 45 on the 1681 Census, indicating a birth date of 1636.

paramount in Leinster, and though several O'Brennans retained some portion of their former estates, the seventeenth century reduced many of them to the status of raparee - indeed several famous or notorious bands of Tories in Leinster were led by Brennans, and in the next century, one of the most intrepid and chivalrous of all highwaymen, James Freney, was, he asserted, instructed in his calling by the last of these Tory Brennans An interesting account of the O'Brennans of Ossory will be found in the Journal of the the Royal Society of Antiquarians.⁴

The article, a paper that had been read by the author at a Royal Society meeting, was published in the first issue of the Journal, which I obtained directly from the Society. He writes:

Amongst the ancient tribe - districts of Ossory, not the least remarkable was that named H-Ui-Duach (Idough); the country of O'Braonain - a sept, who, to quote (Geoffry) Keating (Dublin, ed. 1723, Book 1, p. 112, "were distinguished by their military achievements, and were some of the most renowned champions of the time they lived in" The Norman men-at-arms could scarcely have penetrated the mountainous and boggy fastnesses of *Fasachdinin*. But when the Earl of Pembroke had succeeded, in right of his wife Eva, and his good sword, to the land of Leinster; or at all events in the time of his son-in-law William Earl Marshall, the *O'Broenains* were driven out of the lower and more fertile portions of *Ui-Duach*, and the manor of Odogh (the chief seat of which was placed at Three Castles in the present parish of Odogh) was established in the 'fair wide plain of the (River) Nore' But the O'Broenains were not extirpated or even subdued ; they retreated before the feudal tenants of the Earl Marshall to the hills around Castlecomer; 'where, in the desert of the Dinin,' surrounded by bogs and woods, they retained a stormy independence until late in the reign of the First Charles, when in 1635, a jury presented that the O'Broenains held their lands '*manu forte*' (*Calendar, Inquis. Lagenia. Com. Kilken. No. 64, Car. I*)⁵.

⁴ Edward MacLysacht, *Irish Families - Their Names, Arms and Origins* (Dublin; Hodges, Figgis, 1957).

⁵ James Graves, "The Ancient Tribes and Territories of Ossory," *The Royal Society of Antiquarians 1* (1849): 230-234.

Until recently, when it unfortunately disappeared, the most complete Web site on the Brennan family was Jim Brennan's "The Brennans of Idough, A Family History." The following information was taken from the page "Facts about the Brennan family";

- * The ancestors of the Brennan family are thought to have arrived in Ireland in the 5th century B.C. and settled in northern Kilkenny shortly after the time of Christ;
- * The Brennans are all descended from Cearbhall (pronounced Carroll), the most famous king of Ossory. Through various political machinations, he ended up as king of the Vikings in Ireland in 873 A.D.;
- * The name Braonan is generally interpreted as meaning sorrowful, although some might wonder whether a king of the Vikings was more likely to name his son after Braon, the Celtic god of war. Another meaning of the word is raven, 'one who delights in battle';
- * In 1637, the English sold the Brennan land to Sir Christopher Wandesforde. The Brennans responded by burning houses, leveling ditches and destroying crops.⁶

Jim Brennan had also included some interesting quotes about the Brennans:

- * The O'Brennan septs are and always have been mere Irish who illegally entered and intruded into the territory of Idough, anciently called 'O'Brennans' country,' holding its several lands and tenancies by a strong hand against all claims." (Quoted from English jury 1635.)
- * The O'Brennans, a sept of thieves without any right or title, ... were a perpetual disturbance to the peace of the county. (Quoted from English officials arguing in 1644 against the official return of the Brennan lands.)
- * The famous Tories, the Brannans, who had been guilty not only of burglary and robbery, but of murder also, who were under sentence of death and escaped by breaking Gaol, were made, among the rest, officers in the Catholic Army. (Quoting a Protestant archbishop, writing in 1691 about Ireland's Jacobite army that was defeated in another rebellion.)

The main feature of the Web site had been the integral publication of *A History of the Brennans in Idough, County Kilkenny*, by Thomas A. Brennan Jr. This book is now out of print but I received

⁶ As my ancestor was born in the 1630s, his father, Connor O'Braenain, could easily have been involved in this incident.

a copy directly from its author, a New York Lawyer and the current Honorary Brennan Clan Chief. This book informs us that a number of Brennans and Brannans (formerly O'Brennen, Ó'Braonáin) migrated to the United States of America from Ireland in the seventeenth century.

Of particular interest to me, because Tec Cornelius Aubrenan's father was Connor O'Brenan, was Chapter 111 in Part Five of the book, where one Connor mac Fírr O'Brenan is identified as possessing lands in Idough, as extracted from an inquisition held in Kilkenny City in 1635, "... (2) Of the lands of Clanvickelowe; (C) Cloneen - one half (held) by Connor mac Fírr O'Brenan and one quarter each by Piers Tallone and Gilpatrick O'Brenan of Clonneen." A footnote reads: "It is to be wondered whether Connor mac Fírr was yet another son of Fhearadhach mac Donnchadha, chief of Clanvickelowe earlier in the century."⁷ These are more clues that I will have to pursue.

The author found that "in Maryland during the second half of the seventeenth century (a time when the colony was still predominantly Catholic) were Eleanor Brenan in 1677, John Brannan in 1678 and Cornelius Brannon and Philip Brannan in 1699; Patrick Brannan was married there in 1719."⁸ As my ancestor is reported being in Montréal in 1661, which is earlier than any of these dates, he might have been the first Irish-born settler, not only in New France, but also in North America.

As for Canada, the author lists the number of Brennans found in the 1979 telephone directories of major cities as follows: 170 in Toronto; 148 in Ottawa; 116 in Montréal; 10 in Québec City; 13 in St-John, New Brunswick; 31 in Halifax; 33 in Winnipeg; 16 in Regina; 19 in Calgary; 35 in Edmonton; 53 in Vancouver; two in Whitehorse.⁹ To-day, there are 302 Brennans in the Ottawa-Gatineau telephone directory compared to the 148 in 1979. There are 78 Aubrys and 69 Aubreys most of whom are descendants of Tec Cornelius O'Brennan. Due to the strange spelling of the name O'Brennan - Aubrenan, Thomas A. Brennan Jr. could not have known about the thousands of North American descendants of another O'Brennan, Tec Cornelius Aubrenan (O'Brennan), who now bear his adopted name: Aubry.

⁷ Thomas A. Brennan, Jr., *A History of the Brennans of Idough, County Kilkenny (Lebanon, N.H. ; Whitman Press, 1979), p. 105.*

⁸ Brennan, p. 267.

⁹ Brennan, p. 285.

His arrival in Montréal as early as 1660 or 1661 is due to his having been among the men who were sent by King Louis XIV of France to settle in a new colony in New France. The historians, who wrote profusely about him here in Canada, presumed that his family was most likely involved in the battle against Cromwell in 1652, and that either he or his father would have been permitted to go to France. This presumption makes sense because a unilingual Tec Cornelius Aubrenan could not have survived in Montréal among some 600 French residents. Anne and David Kennedy recall in *An Outline of Irish History* that:

When Cromwell sailed for England in 1650 the war was virtually over although there were some pockets of resistance till 1652 when the Irish army surrendered. Some 30 000 of them were given leave to sail for France or Spain, and, with the fighting men out of the way, thousands of Irish men, women and children were transported to the West Indies.¹⁰

The main purpose of my research project, however, was to identify the birthplace of my ancestor. A key clue was found in his marriage record. Tec Cornelius Aubrenan and Jeanne Chartier were married in Québec City in Notre-Dame Cathedral. Romain Becquet, the notary, who drafted the contract on 6 September 1670 - four days before the church wedding, wrote “*Diasonny*” as his place of origin. The marriage certificate in the registry at Notre Dame de Québec reads as follows :

.... The tenth day of the month of September in the year 1670, after engagement and publishing the banns on the seventh and eight of the same month between Tec Aubrannan settler of l’Assomption River son of Connehair Aubrannan and Honoré Jeannehour (Connehour) his father and mother living in St-Patrice parish in the city of “*Diasony*” in Ireland and Jeanne Chartier daughter of Pierre Chartier and Marie Gaudon her father and mother, living in St-Honoré Parish in Paris.¹¹

The Priest, Henri de Bernières, who performed the marriage ceremony, wrote “*Diasony*” as his place of origin. Both the Notary and the Priest, being from France, wrote the name by sound. Tec Cornelius who could neither read nor write, could not help them, and the bride who did sign the documents,

¹⁰ Anne and David Kennedy, *An Outline of Irish History* (Belfast: C.J. Fallons (London) Ltd., n.d.), p.82.

¹¹ Translation by author.

could not spell the words that her husband-to-be uttered. I have in my possession photocopies of both documents.

At the research centre of La Société généalogique canadienne-française in Montréal, I came across an article by John P. Dulong, (1980). Dulong was not successful in establishing Cornelius' origin through his contacts in Ireland and writes:

Tec's birthplace is recorded as the parish of St-Patrice (St-Patrick), in the village of Diasony (also spelled Diasonyoen or Diasonyden), Ireland. He was born there some time between 1632 and 1638. There is some discrepancy about Tec's birthplace in Ireland. A search of Irish maps and gazetteers does not reveal a village named Diasonyoen or its variants. The priest who performed the marriage ceremony, Père Bernières, the Superior of the Seminary of Québec, may have misunderstood Tec's Irish (Gaelic) pronunciation of his place of origin and probably had to guess at how to spell it in French.

Dulong contacted the Ordnance Survey Office in Dublin and received from Mac an Baird, Ph.D., what he qualifies as three interesting educated guesses about Tec's birthplace and name which can guide further research. The one that Dulong retained was that:

Diasony may not be a village but a name that designates a larger unit. In Irish it was known as Deasumhain (pronounced Deasuin) and its classical spelling was Deasmhumhain. (Dulong claims that) this may have been the place name Tec spoke in Irish and Père Bernières wrote as best he could in French, mistaking the general area for a specific town.¹²

However, I came to a different conclusion. With my copies of the seventeenth century documents in hand, I started looking for a name in Ireland that was similar to Diasony, Diasony, Diasonyoen, Diasonyden. In the Irish section of The National Archives of Canada in Ottawa, I came across several volumes that had similar names in their D section. The one that struck me as most likely was Dysart and I extracted the following from *Topographical Dictionary of Ireland*:

¹² John P. Dulong, PhD "Tec Cornelius Aubry: An Irish Habitant in New France," *Michigan's Habitant Heritage* (October 1980)

“Dysart”, a parish, in the barony of Fassadining, county of Kilkenny, and province of Leinster, 2 1/4 miles (S.) from Castlecomer, on the road to Kilkenny; containing 2501 inhabitants. This parish is situated on the river Dinin; and comprises 2606 statute acres.¹³

According to the *Gazetteer of the British Isles*, “the Dinin River is an affluent of River Nore, in the County of Kilkenny, 4 miles above Kilkenny; 15 miles long.”¹⁴ Now, if one repeats *DYSART-ON-THE-DINEN* often, it sounds like *DIASONYDEN*, a variant of what the French Romain Becquet and Henri Bernières wrote.

In an article, based on a trip to Ireland in January 2001 with his 10- year old daughter, Avril, Jack Aubry a national reporter of *The Ottawa Citizen*, described how he tried to locate Tec Cornelius’ birthplace:

Our first stop upon arriving in Dublin was the Canadian Embassy. As the Citizen’s national reporter for aboriginal affairs in the 1990’s, I had met Ron Irwin, now the Canadian Ambassador in Ireland, when he was minister of Indian Affairs. Before our trip, I had contacted him and explained my mission, and he agreed to have his staff check out Cornelius’ pedigree. Irwin informed us the embassy’s research backed the claim that Cornelius was the first Irish settler in Canada. Later, Don Pidgeon, the official historian for the United Irish Society of Montreal, confirmed the finding.

Jack toured “Brennan country” with Maire Brennan Downey, the official secretary of the Brennan clan, and found that:

... there are so many (Brennans) in the northern region of County Kilkenny that nicknames have been added to the surname to differentiate between families. One of the Castlecomer nicknames is Brennan Con, which is short for Connor. This catches my interest because Cornelius’s marriage certificate indicates his father’s first name had been Connor.

¹³ *A Topographical Dictionary of Ireland*, (London: Samuel Lewis, 1837).

¹⁴ *Gazetteer of the British Isles*, (Edinburgh: John Bartholomew & Son Ltd., 1900).

While in Ireland, I was told at almost every turn that my chances of finding Cornelius's forebears were slim to nil. I consulted Mark Tottenham, director of the genealogy search team Eneclann at Trinity College, but he was not hopeful. To begin with, many Catholic churches -- and all the records of births, marriages and deaths they contained -- were destroyed during Cromwell's invasion. In County Kilkenny, the earliest extant parish records date back to 1754. To make matters worse, during Ireland's civil war in 1922, the Four Courts in Dublin, where the country's archives were located, were bombed. The Irish Times reported on July 3, 1922: "Alas, ... those precious records, which would have been so useful to the future historian, have been devoured by the flames or scattered in fragments by the four winds of heaven." Charred documents floated over the city for days and the provisional government asked Dubliners to return whatever records they found, "however fragmentary or damaged." When I visited the National Library of Ireland in Dublin, which has a room devoted for tracing family trees, researcher Eileen O'Byrne shook her head as she examined my copies of Canadian documents detailing Cornelius's past. "We are fortunate if we can trace someone's family back to the early 1800s. Anything before that and you have to be lucky," said O'Byrne. An afternoon at the library, and later at the National Archives, did not produce any leads. Avril ran family names through the computers, ... while I examined surveys, studies and census books dating back to the 1600s.

The invaluable *1659 Pender's Census* of landowners in Ireland revealed that O'Brennans had lived in several counties, especially Kilkenny, although there was no sign of Cornelius or his father, Connor.

On our last day in County Kilkenny, Maire brought us to the confluence of the rivers Dinen and Deen, what was probably known as Dysart-on-the-Dinen. This was my uncle Louis's best guess at Cornelius's birthplace: Say it enough times and it starts to sound like "Disasonnonny." We spotted a small cemetery on the river's edge.

The plots were immaculate and we soon learned that Dan Fitzpatrick, a widower who lives in a small cottage behind the cemetery, was responsible for their upkeep. When he was told about our search for Cornelius's birthplace, he immediately started talking about the Cornelius Brennans he had known. "Oh sure, it's a common name in these hills. I have a feeling your man

was from around here," he said, smiling. He added that two Cornelius Brennans were buried in that very cemetery.¹⁵

So far, there are two possible answers to the question about the birthplace of Tec Cornelius Aubrenan, the first Irish-born immigrant to Canada. The first is that he was from Deasunhaim, as suggested by John P. Dulong, following his enquiry at the Ordnance Survey Office in Dublin. The second is that, according to my research, he came from Dysart-On-The-Dinen, County Kilkenny. Although Jack Aubry was unable to verify that Tec Cornelius Aubrenan's birthplace was at Dysart-On-The-Dinen, he did get a strong sense of belonging there and perhaps that is as close as we shall ever get to solving the mystery.

Adapted from the Conference lecture.

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¹⁵ Aubry, Jack. *Searching for Tec: When Jack Aubry goes looking for his roots, he discovers Canada's first Irish Settler. The Citizen Weekly* (Ottawa), 1 July 2001. The complete article is available at www.bytown.net/brennan.htm