Marquis of Tarbert

No wonder I'm proud
of my family name

By John Marquis

THERE'S nothing quite like an attractive, memorable name to give you a leg-up in life. For 73 years, I've considered myself an extremely fortunate chap for two very good reasons.

Firstly, I was born on an autumn evening in 1943 as the all-clear sirens were sounding in my home village of Wigston Magna, Leicestershire. I've always considered this to have been a lucky omen, marking me down as a harbinger of better times to come.

Secondly, I was given the name John McLeod Marquis, a truly inspired choice by my parents, who like everyone else must have been preoccupied by wartime fears and privations at the time. They could have been excused for calling me something a little more prosaic.

Many times over seven decades of life, I've heard people exclaim 'Oh, what a wonderful name' when I've been obliged to fill in forms or sign cheques.

With its aristocratic connotations and its easy assumption of superiority, my surname has always seemed at odds with the modest reality, which was that the Marquises always had to work hard for their living, with no pretence of noble birth, and no time at all for airs and graces.

The names John and McLeod seemed to add a timeless stolidity, and a slightly exotic flourish, in the context of Leicestershire life during the austere early post-war era, when Sam Smiths, Sid Clarks and Alf Browns were more the order of the day. The three names, almost poetic in tandem, gave me (I thought) a cosmopolitan air. 'There's no doubt,' a friend once said, 'you have a moniker to die for.'

As a result, I've always rated my name as something special, and been eternally curious about what I've long imagined to be my surname's continental origins.

My father, Angus George McLeod Marquis (born Tarbert Loch Fyne 1901 - died Leicester 1982), always insisted the name was of Huguenot origin and that his forebears washed up in Kintyre after being driven out of France by the Catholics in the 17th century.

Various documents have turned up over the years to reinforce this theory, including several references to another John Marquis - this one a sea captain - who lived in Argyllshire during the 18th century and took the family name to America. He was invariably described as 'of Huguenot descent' by subsequent generations.

However, two of my nephews - both keen historians - have always been equally insistent that Marquis is not a Huguenot name at all, but derived from gaelic names dating back to the 14th, 15th and 16th centuries, and perhaps even earlier.

In an attempt to clarify the situation once and for all, I consulted Campbeltown-based historian and author Angus Martin, who revealed that the Marquises were not only gaelic but bardic, with one John McMarkish versifying his way through life as early as 1506, some years before persecuted French protestants turned up on British shores.

Though reluctant to relinquish all claims to a Huguenot background - they were, after all, extremely talented and creative people - I am consoled by the fact that I am more likely to be a product of a gaelic-bardic tradition, thus partly explaining why I spent half a century as a newspaper and magazine journalist.
‘Don’t worry,’ said my nephew Steve, ‘being Huguenot is good, but being bardic is even better.’
In fact, the Marquises evidently abandoned barding a few centuries ago to adopt a more practical approach to life on the rugged peninsula. By the end of the 1700s, they were chasing the Loch Fyne shoals, braving pitiless seas to bring home their silvery harvest.
They were well-known as fishermen in Kintyre for several generations. My great great grandfather, Alexander Marquis, cast his nets and hauled his pots for a living for many years, as did my great grandfather Dugald Marquis, who fell foul of the fishing laws in 1864 and served three months in jail for his sins.
Unperturbed, his son (also Dugald Marquis, my grandfather, born 1852) went to sea on clippers before also settling down to life as a Tarbert fisherman, producing seven children with two wives during the late 19th and early 20th centuries.
The first wife, Margaret Bain, bore him five children, one of whom, Sarah, lived to be 106, outliving eight of her 11-strong brood. The second wife, Mary McLeod, bore him two boys, the elder son being my dad, who was born in Bannockburn Buildings, Tarbert, in the first year of the Edwardian era and lived there for the first 20 years of his life. Both sons were given McLeod as a middle name, in honour of their mother, and presumably to establish their clan credentials.
Interestingly, Dugald and both his wives all lie in the same grave in Tarbert cemetery, united for eternity, the last of them - Mary - having died in the immediate post-war era. Early in the war, she used to visit our Leicestershire home in her widow’s weeds, when her extreme thrift and frugality went down in family folklore.
Once, the entire family turned out to search for a shilling she’d lost in the street. As they scoured the gutters and hedgerows, poor Mary - by then an old lady who looked every bit the Victorian she was - shuffled around, wringing her hands, muttering ‘I’d rather give it away than lose it’ over and over again to the distraction and exasperation of all.
In 1925, my father and mother (Mary Jordan, from Furnace, Argyllshire) left Scotland for Leicester in search of work and never returned to live, producing five sons whose progeny are now well-established in various occupations in the English Midlands, with one or two venturing to America and Australia to seek their fortunes.
If they were expecting streets paved with gold, and abundant supplies of milk and honey, they must have been disappointed because Leicester - though prosperous by standards of the day - was not entirely congenial for an exile from the north.
Dad himself often recalled the difficulties of immersing himself in an alien culture. It was not just a case of moving from Scotland to England, but a shift from the picturesque delights of a west coast fishing port to the less alluring vistas of a sprawling Midlands city.
Suddenly, he was a foreigner from a close-knit highland community adrift in an anonymous urban environment. Even his name was a problem. After his new colleagues had called him ‘Agnes’ and ‘Anguish’ a few times, he gave up Angus as a lost cause and said: ‘Och, for Christ’s sake call me Jock.’
And Jock he remained for the rest of his working life, which was mostly spent in foundries and on building sites during the Depression and the deprived wartime period. For many years, he had to contend with all the uncertainties of a working class existence in those turbulent days, hoping to catch the gaffer’s eye when unemployment was running high, and bringing home only a pittance when he was given a shift. It is hard to imagine in these relatively prosperous times how difficult life must have been.
When work dried up, he was forced to face the indignities of the means test, an experience he recalled bitterly in later years. He lived during an era when ‘success’ and ‘failure’ were

meaningless words. The exiled Marquises were in the business of survival, of getting from one week to the next, of scratching around to feed the meter, pay the rent man, and put basic food into growling bellies. Modern notions of austerity would have made him laugh.
As youngest of the brood, I benefited from the greater career opportunities available in the post-war years and ended up in the one job I wanted to do, working as a full-time staff journalist from 1961 until my retirement in 2009.
I always wondered where that very strong impulse to write came from. Now I think I have the answer. Whatever literary gifts I possess must have come from my bardic brethren. I owe them a huge debt because journalism gave me the kind of life my father could only have dreamt about.
Only once did he openly acknowledge the enormous disparity between the way he was obliged to live his life and the way I was able to live mine. When I covered the Olympic Games in Mexico City in 1968, he thought (wrongly) that he had seen me on television interviewing a British gold-medallist.
'I was very proud of you,' he said. I did not seek to disabuse him. It was enough, I think, that I was doing improbable things in exotic places, living the dreams he was never able to even contemplate. I'm glad he felt the way he did. And I know he told his workmates about his youngest son's global adventures, gleaning a smidgen of satisfaction along the way.
Exploring one's ancestry does, of course, have its hazards, one being the possibility of turning up misfits and miscreants in the family history.
The Marquises, though fundamentally of honourable stock, have produced one convicted poacher, one fishing law violator, and a smattering of liquor smugglers over the centuries, but I like to think their misdemeanours were the product of hunger and deprivation - simple raw need - rather than innate criminality.
Times were hard for working folk in Victorian times. It's difficult to make judgments at this distance in time. Sometimes, bending rules was a necessity to put food on the table. If the Marquises fell short from time to time, I like to think it was for the best of reasons.
Mostly, they were steadfast people of solid virtue. My Dad detested dishonesty with a passion. He was the most perceptive of men, and could spot a wrong 'un from 200 paces. 'It's all in the face,' he used to say.
With such a rich history, it's little wonder I continue to bear the Marquis name with pride, and have passed on the McLeod name to two of my children, hoping they will never lose sight of their highland heritage. My son, John Jnr, (born 1983) will therefore carry the full name through much of the 21st century, gleaning (I hope) the same pleasure from its romantic provenance.
Though it's nearly a century since my father turned his back on the family's fishing traditions in Tarbert to undergo an engineering apprenticeship on the Clyde, and seek a living elsewhere, the village is still considered a focal point in our history, and many times over the years my brothers and their children have holidayed there to mark their unbreakable connection with their past.
Between the 1940s and 1970s, my parents also visited Tarbert most summers, seeing friends and relatives and reminiscing about their childhood. I always marvelled at their ability to remember the intricacies of interlocking family relationships in Kintyre, knowing who married whom, where they lived, and the children they produced.
In the process I, as a boy, got to know James Marquis the baker, his wife and two lovely daughters, the fisherman John MacDougall (who married a Marquis) and their son Archie, among many more. Sometimes my brothers, all much older than me, would go out on the fishing boats with our cousins, returning with their catch in the early morning, a far cry from life in land-locked Leicestershire.

My Grandparents and John on holiday in Scotland, 1959

Over the years, the exiled Marquises felt a strong sense of responsibility towards those who remained in Tarbert. Whenever there was a wedding or funeral, a member of our family would try to attend. My brother Gordon, now 87, clearly recalls catching the train north for the funeral of ‘Skipper’ Marquis in the late 1940s, despatched by my father as a kind of emissary.

He was alarmed when he was suddenly, and unexpectedly, asked to be a pall-bearer. Being significantly shorter than the other five, he was obliged to support the coffin ‘like a waiter holding a tray’, a story he retells right up the present day, usually with accompanying gales of laughter.

For several summers we stayed in Tarbert with a lady I knew only as Mrs Black, a kindly soul who always made us welcome. I seem to recall that herring and oatcakes featured on the menu quite a lot. Porridge was, of course, the staple fare at breakfast-time. ‘Sugar on your porridge - whatever next?’ Mrs Black would say, genuinely perplexed.

When, with boyish innocence, I once remarked that her Scotch broth was ‘like water’, a chilly silence descended, broken only by my mother’s muttered apologies and gentle rebuke. I came to realise that criticism of Scotch broth was close to heresy in these parts, and that only southern softies would say such a thing. Broth and haggis were sacrosanct, the food of the gods, as far as the good folk of Kintyre were concerned.

One of my fondest memories is of walking down the hill into the village with my father to buy hot morning rolls, then taking them back for breakfast to be liberally laced with butter and chunky home-made marmalade.

A muscular lady called Bella, always dressed in neckerchief and dungarees, used to ride a horse and cart through the village, carrying visitors’ luggage from the Loch Fyne steamboat to their hotels and lodgings. Her raucous greetings echoed round the waterfront.

She was rated tougher than any man and, I’m told, had a free-ranging urban cow herd that roamed the byways, munching grass wherever they could find it, and often straying into people’s gardens to devour the flowers.

Bella, no doubt with a twinkle in her eye, used to say this was where Carnation Milk came from. Judging by my dad’s witty asides, wry humour was always a feature of Tarbert life. Despite the harsh aridity of his own life, he saw something to smile about in most things.

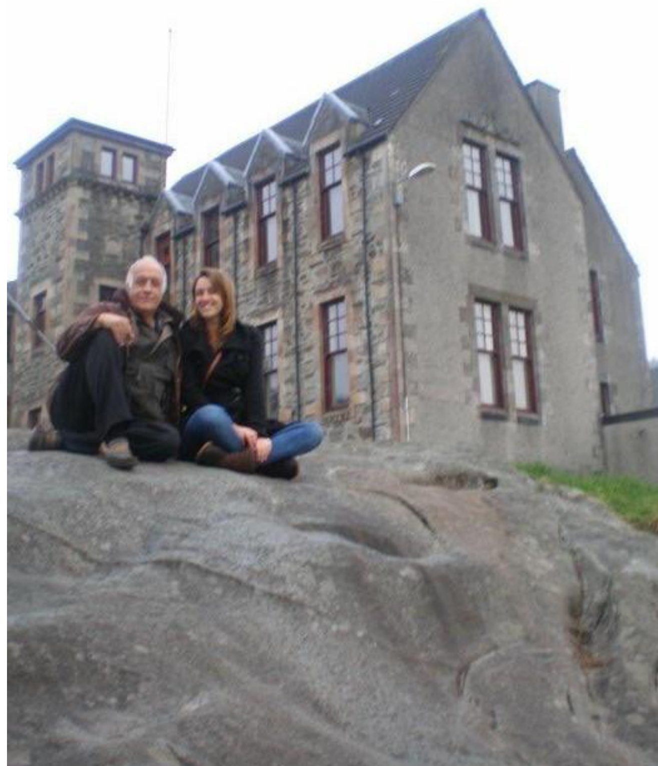
On sunny days, we would make for The White Shore, where we ate picnic meals and drank sweet tea. One or two large stones from the beach would later grace our Leicestershire rockery, solid reminders of our highland home, with sprigs of heather cut from the Argyllshire hills to provide a suitable backdrop.

Sometimes, we would lie on the slopes round Tarbert Castle, with its tales of Robert the Bruce and acts of derring-do. In the glorious summer of 1959, I recall sitting for hours sketching the noble ruin and being quite pleased with the result. That was the last Tarbert holiday I had with my parents.
During family conversations in Leicestershire, frequent references were made to Tarbert and its environs, with Dad recalling trips to Skipness, Campbeltown, Lochgilphead, Adrishaig and the Crinan Canal. This helped to fuel our thirst for more adventures in the Argyllshire hills.
Travelling by MacBrayne's bus over the Rest and Be Thankful from Glasgow was always a long anticipated delight, matched only by the long haul from Leicester on the overnight express, and the mounting excitement as we crossed the border at dawn for calls at Annan and Dumfries, where the steam locomotive's sulphurous fumes would waft along the platforms.
Dad also caught my imagination with tales of a lost village in the woods off the Lochgilphead road, a derelict remnant of the highland clearances. We always said we'd go in search of it, but never did.
At hogmanay, my mother would sip a sherry and have 'a wee greet' as she fondly remembered 'hame'. Jimmy Shand's Band, Kenneth McKellar and Andy Stewart provided music for all family festivities, belting out their melodies from a gramophone in the corner.
Both my parents lived into their eighties and, though exiles for well over half a century, never lost their highland accents or their sentimental nostalgia for the good old days in Scotland.
To the very end, the sound of bagpipes brought a tremor to my father's lips, and films of the highlands a tear to his eye. My mother never adjusted fully to what she regarded as English chilliness and reserve, and always said hearts were warmer north of the border.
It was for this reason, I believe, that my parents felt compelled to make their annual pilgrimages. England had provided them with a livelihood, but Scotland was where their hearts and souls resided.

MY mother and father, Mary (nee Jordan) and Angus Marquis

Unfortunately, in 1966, long after I'd left home to pursue my career, my father fell down a steep staircase in a Scottish guest-house and was crippled for life.
For the next 16 years until his death, he staggered around with a stick, never able to enjoy his retirement and suffering constant pain. Much of his later life was spent in a chair set at an oblique angle to the television, so that his view was partially impeded. Characteristically, he never complained.

Forty years after his departure from Scotland, the fall provided a traumatic postscript to his life of displacement and nostalgic reflection. As far as I'm aware, he never returned to his homeland after that. But the experience did nothing to sour his memories of the good old days.
In 2010, my wife and I called into Tarbert during a highland tour with our daughter Annabella, and we visited the Marquis graves. I showed them the various buildings where the family had lived, and the old Cadora cafe where we had eaten Italian-style ice-cream in the 1950s.
Then, as a finale, I took them to my dad's old school and showed them the huge boulder which he and his pals used to slide down as boys, forming a groove in the rock.
As I contemplated the scene, and tried to imagine in sepia tones my father as a small Edwardian boy in flat cap and breeches dashing through the school gate, a little girl materialised alongside me and gazed up at me quizzically.
'Do you realise,' I said, 'that my dad attended this school more than 100 years ago and used to slide down that big stone on his backside just for the fun of it?'
She pondered me for a moment more, as though I had just dropped in from Jupiter, then turned on her heels and fled, saying nothing.
My wife and daughter burst out laughing, as did I. 'She obviously thought you were a nutter,' said my daughter.
Thus ended my most recent pilgrimage to a beautiful place the Marquises will always call their spiritual home. One day I'll be back, just to see Tarbert one last time.



John and his daughter Annabella outside Tarbert School (2010), sitting on top of the rock my grandfather used to slide down, known locally as 'cumsliddie'.

* John Marquis began writing for a living when he was 17, working as a staff journalist on newspapers and magazines for nearly 50 years. He was an award-winning investigative reporter, an international sports writer, a controversial columnist and a senior editorial executive with several news organisations. He has travelled all over the world on assignments, and covered many championship fights during the Muhammad Ali era.
In the 1970s, as London Sports Editor of the Thomson group, he worked for several Scottish newspapers, including *The Scotsman* and the Edinburgh *Evening News*. He spent much of his career as Editor of a Cornish newspaper

group, and Managing Editor of *The Tribune*, the Bahamas' leading daily. He also worked for Reuters as a world desk sub-editor in Fleet Street and a freelance correspondent in the Bahamas. He has written several books, including an acclaimed account of the famous wartime murder of Sir Harry Oakes, the British Empire's richest man, and a profile of the infamous Haitian tyrant Francois 'Papa Doc' Duvalier. He and his wife Joan, who have eight children, live in a Cornish fishing village, where he continues to write as a hobby.