

# The Romantic Myth of Scottish Clan Septs

by John Duncan of Sketraw, FSAScot (with permission); and adapted by Jim Strachan, FSAScot  
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Clan Strachan is listed on Sept Lists as a sept (or family) of the Tribe of Mar. *"It should also be said that the various Sept lists, which are published in the various Clans and Tartan books, have no official authority. They merely represent some person's, (usually in the Victorian eras) views of which name groups were in a particular clan's territory."*<sup>1</sup>

Many falsely believe that the medieval barony and parish of Strachan fell within the demesne of the Earl of Mar. Unfortunately, there is no charter or other evidence to support this assumption.

Instead, the lands of Strachan fell within the demesne of the Mormear of the Mearns. In the 12th-century, Máel Petair of the Mearns is said to have murdered King Duncan. He was summarily disinherited of his lands and title by King Edgar, Duncan's brother. Thereafter, the feudal overlord of Strachan, Durris, and Birse (all located south of the River Dee) was the Crown of Scotland. If further confirmation were needed, it was King William (the Lion) who granted the lands of Strachan to William Gifford in c 1185x97 – not the Earl of Mar.

It was not until c 1355, Adam de Strachan married Margaret Mar, a kinswoman (daughter or niece) of Earl Thomas Mar. With this marriage, Adam obtained the lands of Glenkindie ([Collections A & B: 618](#)). As a result of this marriage, the Strachan House of Glenkindie is confirmed as a vassal of the Earl of Mar. A 'vassal' is defined as: *A holder of land by feudal tenure on conditions of homage and allegiance.* Therefore, some erroneously believe that due to this marriage, Clan Strachan is a Sept of the Tribe of Mar.

Sept relationships are largely a Victorian-era romantic notion.

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<sup>1</sup> [www.scotarmigers.net/pdfs/info-leaflet-11.pdf](http://www.scotarmigers.net/pdfs/info-leaflet-11.pdf)

**Sir Thomas Innes of Learney**, GCVO WS (1893-1971) Lord Lyon King of Arms, 1945-1969, after being Carrick Pursuivant and Albany Herald in the 1930s, makes mention in the book, *Clan Septs and Regiments of the Scottish Highlands*, 1952, co-authored by Frank Adam that;

*'Septs must be regarded as a rather wonderful effort of imagination,' and 'The very word "sept" is delusive and no serious attention can now be attached to Skene's theories about septs.'*



He also states that some Clan historians could be found guilty of 'sept-snatching.'

**Sir Crispin Agnew of Lochnaw**, Baronet, QC, Rothesay Herald of Arms and Chief of Clan Agnew, also makes mention of Clan septs in his article, *Clans, Families & Septs*, dated 13 August 2001;

*'It should also be said that the various Sept lists, which are published in the various Clans and Tartan books, have no official authority. They merely represent some person's (usually in the Victorian era), views of which name groups were in a particular clan's territory.'*



Because one or two families (or sub-families) of a particular name group gave allegiance to another particular Clan, as this suited their needs at that time, it would be presumptuous to believe that the entire name group now owed homage and allegiance to, or was a sept of, that Clan.

We must remember, the House of Glenkindie was not the most senior House of Strachan. This honour goes to the Strachans of Carmyllie. Also, Glenkindie was not the most prominent House of Strachan. This honour goes instead to the Strachans of Thornton.

In 1355, there were five other noble Houses of Strachan in existence and all descendants from the ancient 'de Strachan' baronial line. Like most families today, each acted independently of the other. Of the six noble Houses of Strachan, Glenkindie was the only vassal of the Earl of Mar. Even if Glenkindie were recognised as the senior branch of the family, which it's not, it still would not technically result in a sept relationship in which all of Clan Strachan would be recognised.

In the 16th- and 17th-century, the senior House of Strachan, the **Strachans of Carmyllie**, over several generations, had signed several *Bonds of Manrent*, or personal service and attendance, in favour of their superior, Sir Thomas Maule of Panmure, and his heirs (*Registrum de Panmure*, ii: nos [275](#), [314](#), [317](#), [318](#)). As a result of these Bond of Manrent, one might suggest, and even make a stronger argument, that Clan Strachan should be a Family (or sept) of Clan Maule. However, this assumption again would be false for the same reasons discussed previously. That is, no other Houses of Strachan were vassals of Maule.

The short 'technical' answer is Strachan is not a sept of any clan, nor are any other clans a sept of Clan Strachan.

This fact fails to dampen the strong affection many Strachans have toward the Tribe of Mar, and Lady Mar herself. Many Strachans wear the Mar tartan, which outwardly demonstrates particular affection to the Tribe of Mar. Some may wear the Mar tartan, presumably to show their affiliation with the now-extinct Strachans of Glenkindie, while others likely wear the Mar tartan out of family tradition. It is the official position of the Clan Strachan Society not to deny the family relationship to those who wish to honour it, but to embrace the heritage and history of both the Mar and Strachan families as independent entities.

Equally, many Strachans, in Scotland and abroad, also wear the Deeside District tartan. These families also frequently have a long-standing family tradition of wearing this tartan, which perhaps dates back generations.

Naturally, people can wear whatever they want, and it is, after all, their choice. That said, according to The Scottish Register of Tartans, 'Traditionally people wear the tartan (if any) which relates to their surname. If there is no appropriate name tartan, look for a district tartan connected to the area where your ancestors lived.'

Today, it is highly recommended that those who wish to outwardly demonstrate their loyalty and affection to Clan Strachan, should most appropriately wear the Strachan tartan.

**Sources:**

<http://www.scotshistoryonline.co.uk/scottish-clan-septs.html>

<http://www.scotarmigers.net/pdfs/info-leaflet-11.pdf>

<https://www.tartanregister.gov.uk/FAQ>