



The official newsletter of the

Curtin Clan

Member of the Clans of Ireland Ltd

OUR COAT OF ARMS

by Theodore A. Curtin

The Coat of Arms used by the Curtin Clan Association is one granted to an illustrious member of an ancient sept of Thomond, the area of Ireland now largely occupied by County Clare. Thanks to the research of Neal Curtin, our Founder Emeritus, we know that these arms were granted by the Ulster King of Arms to "Hugh Buidhe McCurten, Chief of His Sept" in 1732. A sept was a division of a tribe headed by a hereditary king in ancient and medieval Ireland. The spelling of the family name has varied through the ages. In Co. Clare it derived from MacCruitin, which can be literally translated as "son of the hunchback," as the Irish word *cruitin* meant "hunchback". The word *cruitin* itself is derived from *cruit*, meaning "harp". The Irish obviously envisaged a hunchback having a back curved like a harp. We are indebted to our learned member Brian MacCurtain for this data on the origins of the name.

The MacCruitins were

hereditary historians to the O'Briens, kings of Thomond. The family is well documented from the 14th century, and are generally described as *ollamh*, the highest rank of the learned professions. Some of them were also distinguished musicians as well as historians. Their home territory was around Ennistymon, in present Co. Clare.

Heraldry, the science that deals with describing coats of arms, came into prominence after the Norman conquest of England in 1066. Warriors had long used banners and symbols on shields and outer clothing as identifying marks in battle. These became known as "arms", and kings appointed specialists to catalog them and, later, to certify and grant them. These specialists were titled "King of Arms", and in later centuries, the Ulster King of Arms had this authority in all of Ireland. A coat of arms was granted only to a male, and only directly descended males could use them. However, the members of the Curtin

Clan Association decided to adopt Hugh Buidhe's arms as a known and distinctive unifying symbol.

"Coat of Arms" is the proper modern term to describe the whole set of armorial symbols, usually consisting of a shield surmounted by a crest. Note that "crest" refers only to the small symbol on top of the shield, not to the whole device. Heraldry has its own language, part Norman French and part old English, used to describe these devices. The description itself, a sort of shorthand, is called the Blazon. Here is ours:

BLAZON - Vert in front of a lance Or a stag trippant Argent attired Or between three crosses croslet of the second Or, two and one, and as many trefoils slipt of the third Argent, one and two. Crest: in front of two lances in saltire Argent headed Or an Irish harp Sable. No motto recorded.

GLOSSARY AND MEANINGS

COLORS

Argent - silver (sometimes white) - sincerity, peace.
Or - gold - generosity, elevation of the mind.
Sable - black - constancy.
Vert - green - hope, loyalty in love, joy.

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FIGURES or CHARGES

Stag - skilful, politic, lover of harmony. NOTE: In Ireland, the stag was one of the most ancient of charges, and was regarded as the most handsome. The stag represents the very ancestors of the Celtic race. Trippant means "walking." At-tired means "decorated."

Trefoil slipt, or Shamrock with stem - perpetuity, longevity.
NOTE: The shamrock, because of its association with St. Patrick, has Christian significance. It has become a symbol of the Irish.

Crossed crosslets (cross with each arm also crossed) Christian significance or Crusades.

Lances - devotion to honor, knightly service. When in pale, or vertical denotes military strength and fortitude; when in saltire, or crossed like an X, denotes resolution.

Harp - the symbol of Ireland for centuries. It also signifies a well-composed person of tempered judgment and contemplation. NOTE: The harp symbolizes the soul of Ireland, as is brought out in the two songs I suggested as possible Clan songs, The Minstrel Boy and The Harp That Once Through Tara's Halls. Brian Mac-Curtain has suggested the connection of the harp to the family name.

Neal's research also found that there is only one other coat of arms in Ireland with a black harp, and that is the arms of the President of the Republic!

Thus, in modern English, the Blazon coat of arms used by our Clan Association is described as:

On a green shield, in front of a vertical gold lance stands a walking silver stag with gold antlers, between three gold crossed crosslets, two above and one below, and three silver shamrocks with stems, one above and two below.

The crest is: in front of two silver, gold-headed lances crossed like an X there is a black Irish harp.

In some versions of the arms, the crest sits on a little twisted ribbon in green and silver. This is the torce, or wreath, always in the main colors of the arms. We have added a ribbon below the

shield inscribed with the name, in the old spelling of the Co. Clare MacCruitins.

All of this gives us a range of possible interpretations, all of them complimentary. We must note the connections to the ancestry of all Celts, to the soul and spirit of Ireland and to Christianity, and to the military virtues. It well could be that Sir Thomas More wrote The Minstrel Boy about an ancient MacCruitin. *"The minstrel boy to the war has gone, in the ranks of death you will find him. His father's sword he has girded on, and his wild harp slung behind him."*