

Nicholson Family Tree DNA Project

This is an update to the article on DNA testing which appeared in the October 2005 issue of Scorrybreac. To summarize, the earlier article had been prompted by Clan member Phillip Nichols of Detroit, Michigan. Phillip had used DNA testing to help to trace his family back to Virginia in 1712 and was keen to encourage other Clan members to join the project.

At that time there were 66 participants in a Nichols family tree project, and 19 in a similar Nicholson project (the precise spelling is not important). At the latest count, these are now 128 and 52 members respectively, so the interest is clearly growing.

Murray Nicolson

Every male has a Y-chromosome in the genes of every one of the cells in his body that he received from his father, who in turn received it from his father, and so on back in time. These Y-chromosomes only change very rarely through mutations, and so two males who have the same ancestor 500 or 1,000 years ago will almost certainly have an identical Y-chromosome. DNA testing has been developed in the last 10 years to allow comparisons of Y-chromosomes for genealogical family tracing. If two males chosen at random, even from the same geographical area, compare their DNA readings from the Y-chromosomes, it is very unlikely they will match. However, if they have the same surname, the likelihood will be much higher because of the tradition in Western society to retain only the male surname through many generations—*pace* our female readers—we know that gender equality may soon erode this custom! The common ancestor may be many generations ago, but the DNA will still match if there is one.

As a result, many Surname DNA projects have begun and these are growing rapidly. Launched in April 2000, Family Tree DNA is a company in Texas that performs these DNA tests. Their website is at <http://www.familytreedna.com>. You pay a fee that depends on the number of markers that are tested. The larger the number of markers, the greater the confidence there is a unique match. The test is simple—you scrape a little brush that is provided along the inside of your cheek, pop it in a sealed test tube and mail it off to the laboratory. The results are provided a few weeks later and can be added to the databases for comparison with other people of the same surname. Clearly, the more participants there

are in the Surname database the greater the chance a match will occur.

The results of course ought to be backed up by traditional genealogical research for verification. One such interesting match has already occurred. Our long-time Clan MacNicol member Burke Nicholson of Balvenie, who recently passed away after reaching his 90th birthday, found a near-exact match with Guy Mc Nicoll of Quebec (35 out of 37 markers). The Quebec descendants of Duncan and Kathryn Mc Nicoll can document their male ancestor's birthplace to Inveraray, Argyllshire in Scotland, with his last place of residence before emigration to Canada being Comrie in Perthshire—coincidentally where my brother David now lives. The Atlanta Nicholsons, on the other hand, could not verify the exact locality, town, or region of their ancestor, Duncan Nicholson, who emigrated from Scotland to North America at the end of the 18th Century. Because of the difference in surnames between Mc Nicoll and Nicholson, no link would ever have been anticipated. However, it now appears that one family changed their surname to the more common anglicised version Nicholson, and that they indeed have a common ancestor in Scotland, with a 90% probability of this occurring no more than twelve generations ago, either in Argyllshire or Perthshire.

Speaking personally, I hope to use the same process to solve a mystery in my own genealogy that has existed for 30 years. In tracing my family, I found two Nicolsons (Nellie and Alexander) who married in 1891 in Edinburgh. Both of their separate families have been traced back to the same village of Pittenweem in Fife in Scotland, but we have never been able to prove they are actually connected to a common ancestor away back in the 1700s. DNA testing has now provided a tool that might solve the mystery. I just have to find a male from the other side willing to participate!

If you are interested in seeing the current state of the DNA results for Nicolson, go to the website <http://freepages.genealogy.rootsweb.com/~weldonnicholsondna/dnanicholson.html>

The DNA tests are not cheap, they vary from \$149 for the simplest 12-marker Y-DNA test and \$259 for a 37-marker test. But you might be as intrigued as I am!

