

The Neill Family Tradition: An Assessment of the Oral History and Research Findings

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September 2026

My great-grandfather, William John Neill, was born in Belfast in 1875. Shortly before his death in 1935, he shared with my grandmother an account of his family's Irish origins. Decades passed before she was asked about this discussion. Now, more than ninety years later, the family tradition can be evaluated through genetic testing, digitized historical records, and genealogical databases. This evaluation was made possible by the collaborative research conducted through the Cenél Eóghain and O'Neill FamilyTreeDNA projects, particularly the contributions of Dwayne O'Neill and Ed Kane.

Overview of the Neill family tradition

The essential elements of the oral tradition are that the family was originally O'Neill and descended from Niall of the Nine Hostages through early kings, namely Domnall O'Neill. The family originated in Tyrone and had a strong social connection to Shane "the Proud" O'Neill, whose murder was still recalled with emotion centuries later. Despite being O'Neill, it was said *not* to descend from either the ruling Tyrone or Clandeboyne. There was little regard for Hugh O'Neill, Earl of Tyrone, whose actions were seen as the downfall of Gaelic Ireland. During the subsequent Plantation of Ulster, the family became Protestant and later joined the Quakers. The prefix "O" dropped while was still in Ireland. One generation might have lived in England; one generation might have been a minister. There was no steady ancestral home after Tyrone and no known collateral branches. William's father, John Neill, was remembered as a Belfast sea captain who ran ships through the Federal blockade of Southern ports during the American Civil War.

Purpose of the assessment

The purpose of undertaking this assessment now is to pause and synthesize the many advances in understanding produced through the FamilyTreeDNA projects, to correct my own mistakes, and to consider the direction of future research. In doing so, I am mindful of a recent observation from Maria Popova, creator of *The Marginalian*: "Certainty is the dominant addiction of the modern mind."

A recurring theme of the project research is that families and kinship groups can be created and redefined in ways that transcend strict biological descent. In medieval times, the Uí Néill encompassed at least two distinct Y-DNA lineages, one of which was associated with the Three Collas. Later, the Royal O'Neill line of Cenél Eóghain carried Y-DNA that did not descend from the earlier Cenél Eóghain paternal lineage. In the modern period, I find the same phenomenon in the Quaker Neill family of Tullylish, whose identity was formed within the Religious Society of Friends.

At certain moments, political, religious, or social necessity appears to have outweighed biological descent, allowing a family or kinship group to redefine itself. Embracing uncertainty, contrary to the modern impulse, may bring us closer to the historical truth.

Structure of the assessment

The scope of the assessment aligns to the Cenél Eóghain FamilyTree DNA projects, beginning with Eóghan mac Néill, son of Niall of the Nine Hostages, and extends to Jon Patraic Neill.

The modeled lineage from Eóghan mac Néill to Jon Patraic Neill is shown in Figure 1 below. The rows comprise the generations, using known names and DNA haplogroups. The columns are the generational number, estimated or historical year of birth, year they flourished (age 30), then religion, location, and name or haplogroup. Generations are set at 28 years, working backwards from historical data.

The table is structured chronologically into three sections for discussion. First, purple covers the early Cenél Eóghain. The middle section in green covers the medieval era. Finally, the modern era is in amber. Ranges for the sections were refined to align with haplogroup formation. There are a total of 57 generations.

Figure 1.

Modeled Lineage of Eóghan mac Néill to Jon Patraic Neill

Gen	Born	flourished	Religion	Location	Ancestor
1	*	430	Pagan, Catholic	Inishowen co. Donegal	R-S588 Eoghain
2	409	439	Pagan, Catholic	Inishowen co. Donegal	R-FGC80436 Eochaidh
3	437	467	Catholic	Donegal	(unk.)
4	465	495	Catholic	Donegal	(unk.)
5	493	523	Catholic	Donegal	(unk.)
6	521	551	Catholic	Donegal	(unk.)
7	549	579	Catholic	Donegal	(unk.)
8	577	607	Catholic	Donegal	R-BY35717
9	605	635	Catholic	Donegal	(unk.)
10	633	663	Catholic	Donegal or Tyrone?	(unk.)
11	661	691	Catholic	Donegal or Tyrone?	(unk.)
12	689	719	Catholic	Donegal or Tyrone?	(unk.)
13	717	747	Catholic	Donegal or Tyrone?	(unk.)
14	745	775	Catholic	Donegal or Tyrone?	(unk.)
15	773	803	Catholic	Donegal or Tyrone?	(unk.)
16	801	831	Catholic	Donegal or Tyrone?	(unk.)
17	829	859	Catholic	Tyrone?	R-BY55263
18	857	887	Catholic	Tyrone?	Glundub?
19	885	915	Catholic	Tyrone?	(unk.)
20	913	943	Catholic	Tyrone?	(unk.)
21	941	971	Catholic	Tyrone?	(unk.)
22	969	999	Catholic	Tyrone?	(unk.)
23	997	1027	Catholic	Tyrone?	(unk.)
24	1025	1055	Catholic	Tyrone?	(unk.)
25	1053	1083	Catholic	Tyrone?	(unk.)
26	1081	1111	Catholic	Tyrone?	(unk.)
27	1109	1139	Catholic	Tyrone?	(unk.)
28	1137	1167	Catholic	Tyrone?	(unk.)
29	1165	1195	Catholic	Tyrone?	(unk.)
30	1193	1223	Catholic	Tyrone?	(unk.)
31	1221	1251	Catholic	Tyrone?	(unk.)
32	1249	1279	Catholic	Tyrone?	(unk.)
33	1277	1307	Catholic	Tyrone?	(unk.)
34	1305	1335	Catholic	Tyrone?	(unk.)
35	1333	1363	Catholic	Tyrone?	(unk.)
36	1361	1391	Catholic	Tyrone?	(unk.)
37	1389	1419	Catholic	Tyrone?	(unk.)
38	1417	1447	Catholic	Tyrone?	(unk.)
39	1445	1475	Catholic	Tyrone?	(unk.)
40	1473	1503	Catholic	Tyrone?	(unk.)
41	1501	1541	Catholic	Loughinsholin Tyrone (now Derry)	R-BY76660 Arte O'Neill ?
42	1529	1569	Catholic	Loughinsholin Tyrone (now Derry)	Melaghlin McArte O'Neill ?
43	1557	1597	Catholic	Loughinsholin Tyrone (now Derry)	Bryan McMelaghlin McArte O'Neale ?
44	1585	1625	Catholic, Protestant	refugee (1603) ; prob. Fermanagh	(unk.) O'Neale
45	1613	1653	Protestant	refugee (1641) ; prob. Oriel co. Armagh ; England?	(unk.) O'Neale or Neale
46	1641	1681	Quaker	co. Antrim, prob. Kilraghts	John Neill of Kilraghts ?
47	1669	1709	Quaker	co. Antrim, prob. Kilraghts	Thomas Neill of co. Antrim ?
48	1697	1737	Quaker	co. Antrim	(unk.) Neill
49	1725	1765	Quaker	co. Antrim	(unk.) Neill
50	1753	1793	Quaker, Wesleyan Methodist	co. Antrim	(unk.) Neill
51	1781	1821	Primitive Wesleyan Methodist	Ballyboley co. Antrim	James Neill
52	1809	1849	Primitive Wesleyan Methodist	Ballyboley co. Antrim, Belfast	Samuel Neill
53	1843	1883	Primitive Wesleyan Methodist	Belfast, Brooklyn	John Neill
54	1875	1915	Presbyterian	Belfast, Cedar Rapids	R-FTC78015 William John Neill
55	1908	1948	Presbyterian	Cedar Rapids, Detroit	Donald George Neill
56	1936	1976	Presbyterian	Cedar Rapids, Sarasota	John Peter Neill
57	1962	2002	Catholic, Quaker	Cincinnati, Rockville	Jon Patraic Neill

Early Cenél Eóghain era (purple)

The identification of Eóghan as R-S588 and the framework for matching Eóghan's sons in the historical record to haplogroups was developed by O'Neill and Kane. Project data evidences the Neill tradition of descending from O'Neill (BY76660) and from Eóghan's father, Niall of the Nine Hostages (ZZ87).ⁱ

Directly under S588, haplogroup FGC80436 comprises the BY35717 branch (line 8) of Trainor, O'Neill and Megraw and a branch containing two important families of the medieval O'Neill polity, O'Devlin and McCann. FGC80436 is associated with Eóghan's son Eochaidh.ⁱⁱ Haplogroup FGC80436 was identified as a result of project research that resulted in the hypothesis that these two branches shared a common ancestor.ⁱⁱⁱ

Eochaidh's son Dae was one of two grandsons of Eóghan called a *king* in traditional genealogies. Dae was slain while attempting to expand beyond Inishowen in Donegal into Uí Mic Carthaind, modern Tirkeeran in co. Derry.^{iv} This was in the Airgialla kingdom, and further research is needed to better understand the presence of this lineage in multiple Airgialla territories.^v

Medieval era (green)

The striking feature of the medieval era is that no new branches formed, meaning the data represent a single surviving lineage of father-to-son. It is assumed the lineage migrated after the battle of Cloitech in 789 when control over Tyrone was gained.

The proposed BY55263 identity of Niall Glúndub (line 17) remains unsettled.^{vi} While multiple potentially surviving lineages from Glúndub are now documented from the historical record,^{vii} the table below shows alternate explanations of his DNA remain viable. New Y-DNA data indicates Z1513 formed earlier and differently than once believed, requiring reassessment of possible Glúndub ancestry.

Table 1. *Strengths and Weaknesses of Competing Explanations of Niall Glúndub's Identity*

Royal O'Neill Z1513	Cenél Eóghain O'Neill FGC80436	Main royal stem S603	Aed Findliath lineage S7814
(+) Traditional identity supported by Y DNA data indicating earlier formation date	(+) Cenél Eóghain O'Neill Y DNA lineage consistent with oral traditions	(+) Traditional genealogy of royal stem	(+) Traditional genealogy that Glúndub was brother of Domhnall
(–) Flaws with traditional genealogy and need to disprove early DNA conclusions	(–) Lack of historical record beyond Lochlainn O'Neill	(–) Lack of method to prove the lineage died out beyond lack of Y DNA	(–) Lack of supporting Y DNA

The royal line of Cenél Eóghain succession is well-documented^{viii} and the S603 main royal stem through Niall Frossach has corresponding DNA identified.^{ix} However, descendant lineages are unidentified for a sequence of kings: Aed Oirdnide, Niall Caille, Aed Findlaith, Niall Glúndub.

Modern era (amber)

The identification of a common, inferred O'Neill ancestor in Loughinsholin ca. 1500 is evidenced by the origins of BY76660 testers. This O'Neill had nine grandsons with surviving lineages originating from two or more sons.^x Loughinsholin was part of Clandonnel in Tyrone before the Plantation, now in co. Derry. Loughinsholin was unique in that Clandonnel was a Clandeboye branch and Tyrone was their overlord for this territory.

An English document referring to an unspecified branch of O'Neill allied with sons of Shane "the Proud" matches family tradition. Shane's son Con McShane was relocated to Clabby Manor in Fermanagh where in 1609 he received a royal pardon from wartime activities. Concurrently, only Bryan McMelaghlin McArte O'Neale [Brian mac Maoilseachlainn mac Airt Ó Néill] was pardoned in both Tyrone and Fermanagh and granted land (a knight's 'manor') in Armagh. Arte had sons Melaghlin and Eóghan and grandsons Bryan and Hugh Boy, or unknown other grandsons and great-grandsons.^{xi}

This Bryan is *not* identified in the Royal O'Neill family tree by Desmond O'Neill, meaning his lineage is unaccounted for. 'Brian', 'manor', and 'Shane the Proud' are keywords from Neill family tradition. There are generational gaps that make a firm identification of Bryan as a Neill ancestor impossible, but there is a high likelihood of descent from his grandfather, Airt Ó Néill. This data and the Protestant timeline supports BY76660 formed ca. 1500. Further, it is possible BY76660 formed from the branching of Airt's two surviving sons.

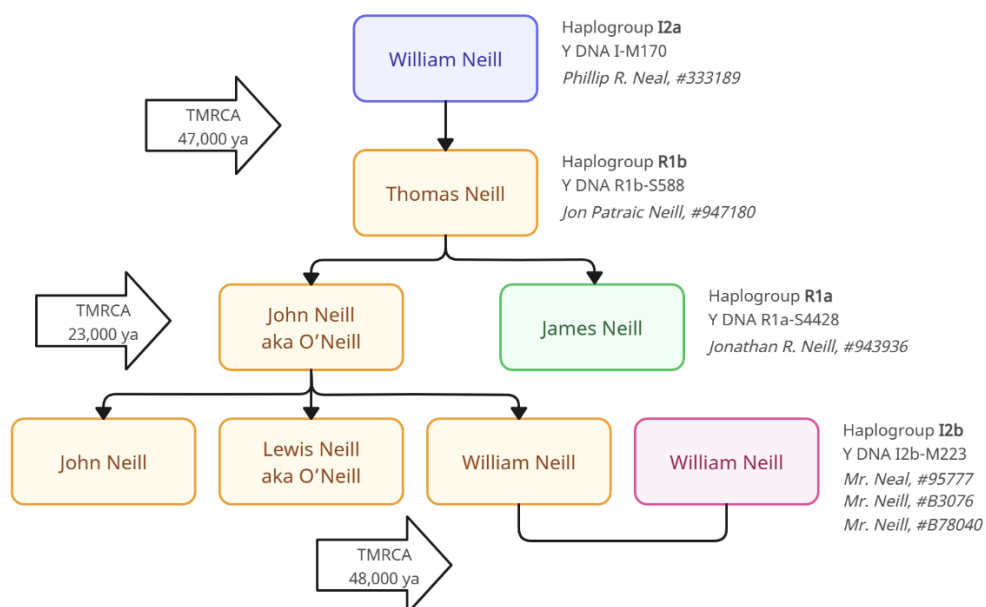
After 1601, favorable treatment for supporting McShane and opposing the earl^{xiii} came from the English pardons and token land grants.^{xiii} Here, in a brief, post-war window it seems when the Neill lineage (BY76660 > FTC78015) became Protestant, likely through marriage. His son did not join the unified O'Neill at the outbreak of war in 1641, and his grandson was a Quaker.^{xiv} Meanwhile, in 1659 there were six Irish residents and no O'Neill left on Bryan's land grant from 1611 in Drumilt townland, Loughgilly parish, co. Armagh.^{xv}

The Religious Society of Friends came to Ireland in 1654. The first generation of Neill Quakers comprised Thomas Neill in Fermanagh (later Gloucester, England) and John Neill in Kilraghts, co. Antrim who attended Ballinacree Meeting. In the next generation, Thomas of co. Antrim was likely John's son, while Thomas of Gloucester was the father of John Neill of Lurgan Meeting.^{xvi}

The nexus of Quaker Neill's geographical presence was John of Lurgan Meeting. He was born circa 1672 in Fermanagh, resided in or near Loughgall parish, co. Armagh in 1690, married at Lurgan Meeting, co. Armagh in 1694 while his father lived in Gloucester, England, and he wed a woman from the very small Ballinacree Meeting in co. Antrim where John Neill of Kilraghts also attended.^{xvii} A lease from 1718 and 1730 in Clare, Tullylish parish, co. Down, proves his identity as *John O'Neill, father of Lewis O'Neill*.^{xviii} His sons John and Lewis emigrated to Virginia, and son William appears to have remained in Clare, co. Down, with later descendants migration to Belfast in the mid-1800's.

Further, James Neill of Tullylish parish, co. Down, was the ancestor of the Quaker Neills of Moyallen Meeting,^{xix} and he was believed for generations to be the brother of John of Lurgan Meeting. Data indicate James's Y-DNA was a Neal family from England. *In 2022, I made the mistake of claiming descent from James that is now disproven.* Yet, it seems from the historical paper trail over several generations that this was considered as one family from the very beginning, suggesting the bonds of the Religious Society of Friends were as strong as bloodline. The traditional Neill genealogy is shown in Figure 2, with a Y-DNA overlay. There was likewise a long-standing claim that William was the father of Thomas, disproven by the paper trail and Y-DNA and the lack of an ongoing relationship. A later William (red) was likewise disproven, and while there was no paper trail to support this relationship, he nonetheless has strong autosomal DNA ties to Neills and to the Quaker community.^{xx}

Figure 2. Traditional genealogy of Lurgan Meeting Quakers, with Y DNA juxtaposition



The recent Neill lineage likely followed the co. Antrim family associated with Ballinacree Meeting, rather than the Clare, co. Down descendants of Lurgan Meeting. The Quakers in co. Antrim slowly diminished and gave way in the later 1700's to Wesleyan Methodists, consistent with family oral tradition.

James Neill leased a farm in Ballyboley townland, co. Antrim in 1816, and appears to be the father of Samuel Neill who married Sarah Jane Percy, born 1813 in Ballyboley. Her father was a local school master. James Neill was likely a lifetime Wesleyan Methodist, and possibly he or his son was the Neill minister of oral tradition.^{xxi} Samuel and his son John had children baptized in the established church—the Church of Ireland—consistent with the practice of Primitive Wesleyan Methodists.^{xxii} Evidence from Methodist records is still needed. Belfast directories show Samuel in 1839 as a grocer and then in 1841 as a publican (pub owner). He was insolvent during an economic downturn in 1844. John was in the 1863 directory at 6 Ship street as 'seacaptain'.^{xxiii}

Conclusion

Additional Y-DNA testing is needed to confirm this assessment and identify whether additional Neill or O'Neill branches exist in the lineage between BY76660 and FTC78015.

End Notes

- ⁱ Dwayne O'Neill & Edward Kane, *The Cenél Eóghain and the R-S588 Haplogroup*, 2025.
- ⁱⁱ *ibid.*
- ⁱⁱⁱ Jon Patraic Neill, Dwayne O'Neill, & Stanley R. Megraw, *Niall Glúndub's Y-DNA and the Royal Succession AD 905*, 2024.
- ^{iv} Jon Patraic Neill, *Early Cenél Eóghain in Donegal: The Sons and Grandsons of Eóghan mac Néill, 465–600*, 2026.
- ^v Jon Patraic Neill, *Research Direction On Binnigh, Eochaidh and Their Brothers From Bredach : Geographical Reckoning and Targeted Sampling*, 2026.
- ^{vi} Jon Patraic Neill, Dwayne O'Neill, & Stanley R. Megraw, *Niall Glúndub's Y-DNA and the Royal Succession AD 905*, 2024.
- ^{vii} Jon Patraic Neill, *The Dynasty of Niall Glúndub*, 2026.
- ^{viii} Dwayne O'Neill, *Cenél Eóghain Kingship and Succession Fergal 710 – 722 CE to the 13th C Royal O'Neills*, 2026.
- ^{ix} Edward Kane, *S588 > S603 > FGC57760: With a Focus on Conchobar Son of Fergal (Fergus)*, 2026.
- ^x Jon Patraic Neill, Dwayne O'Neill, & Stanley R. Megraw, *Niall Glúndub's Y-DNA and the Royal Succession AD 905*, 2024.
- ^{xi} Jon Patraic Neill, *Who Was Bryan McMelaghlin McArte O'Neale in Tyrone, Fermanagh, and Armagh?: Evidence from 1608—1611*, 2025.
- ^{xii} Jon Patraic Neill & Dwayne O'Neill, *Opposition of O'Neill Septs to the Earl of Tyrone in 1600 as Evidenced in Genealogical, Y-DNA and Archival Sources*, 2025.
- ^{xiii} Jon Patraic Neill, *O'Neale in Fermanagh: Chronologies and Annotated Bibliography*, 2025.
- ^{xiv} Jon Patraic Neill, *Oral Tradition of William John Neill (1875-1935) Family Origins*, 2024.
- ^{xv} Jon Patraic Neill, *Neill Families in Ulster During the Seventeenth Century*, 2026.
- ^{xvi} Jon Patraic Neill, *Seventeenth-Century Founders of the Quaker Neill Kindred of Lurgan Meeting in County Armagh, Ireland*, 2026.
- ^{xvii} Jon Patraic Neill, *Seventeenth-Century Founders of the Quaker Neill Kindred of Lurgan Meeting in County Armagh, Ireland*, 2026.
- ^{xviii} Jon Patraic Neill, *Neill of Tullylish Parish in County Down, Deeds and Conveyances: Evidence from 1712—1870*, 2025.
- ^{xix} Jon Patraic Neill, *Neill of Tullylish Parish in County Down, in the Belfast News-Letter: Evidence from 1738—1799*, 2025.
- ^{xx} Jon Patraic Neill, *Seventeenth-Century Founders of the Quaker Neill Kindred of Lurgan Meeting in County Armagh, Ireland*, 2026.
- ^{xxi} Jon Patraic Neill, *Seventeenth-Century Founders of the Quaker Neill Kindred of Lurgan Meeting in County Armagh, Ireland*, 2026.
- ^{xxii} Jon Patraic Neill, *Chronicle of the Neill Family, Volume One*, 2019.
- ^{xxiii} Jon Patraic Neill, *Samuel Neill of Belfast and Ballymacarrett in PRONI Directories: Evidence from 1805—1890*, 2025.