

A  
HISTORY AND GENEALOGY  
OF THE  
CONANT FAMILY

IN  
ENGLAND AND AMERICA,

THIRTEEN GENERATIONS, 1520-1887;

CONTAINING ALSO SOME  
GENEALOGICAL NOTES ON THE

CONNET, CONNETT AND CONNIT FAMILIES.

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The Conant family appears to be, primarily, of Celtic descent, for the name Conan or Conon, from which the name is derived, is found at a very early period among various races of Celtic origin, including the Britons, Welsh, Irish, Gaels and Bretons. Nobody knows when the Celts first settled in Britain, for at the beginning of authentic history the island was inhabited by them. When Britain was invaded by the Anglo-Saxons, these Celtic inhabitants retreated before them into Cornwall and Wales, where they retained their language and customs for a long time. Some crossed the English Channel southward and joined their kinsmen in Armoric Brittany.

Though Anglo-Saxon influence predominates, the English character of to-day is in no small degree an inheritance from Celtic ancestors. This influence is fully realized by Emerson, who says: "The sources from which tradition derives their stock are three. And first they are of the oldest blood of the world—the Celtic. Some peoples are deciduous or transitory. Where are the Greeks? Where the Etrurians? Where the Romans? But the Celts or Sidonides are an old family, of whose beginning there is no memory, and their end is likely to be still more remote in the future; for they have endurance and productiveness."

Whether the family was of the Breton or the Cornish branch of the Celtic race, it is impossible to say. As the name is somewhat Gallic in form, it is possible the family is descended from some Breton follower of William the Conqueror. At all events, they were settled in Devonshire as early as the beginning of the fourteenth century. Three hundred years later, in the very vanguard of English emigration to America, two brothers of the name left Devonshire for the New World, from the younger of whom nearly all the Conants in America are descended. The Conants have almost invariably married



into families of English descent, and moreover, into families long settled here, so that the branch of the family on this side of the ocean may be regarded as typically American.

Records remain to show that the name Conant, in very nearly its present form, has existed in England for over six hundred years, and a more extended search would doubtless reveal its earlier existence. This is, however, a very respectable antiquity for the name, when the difficulty of tracing any particular name, and the fact that surnames have been in general use for only eight hundred years, is considered. The orthography has varied considerably, the variation being principally due to the ignorance of clerks. In England thirty-two ways of writing the name have been found, as follows: Couenaunt, Conaunt, Cownat, Conat, Conant, Commant, Conante, Conannt, Conannte, Connante, Connannt, Conenant, Conenaunt, Counant, Connat, Connatt, Cornet, Conet, Conett, Connet, Connett, Counett, Conott, Connot, Connott, Coonet, Coonnet, Cunnet, Cunnant, Cunnatt, Cunnante, Conennte; and in America eighteen ways (nine of which are included among the foregoing), as follows: Conant, Connant, Camnant, Commont, Connontt, Connott, Connaught, Connunght, Connaught, Conet, Connet, Connett, Conat, Cunnet, Cunnant, Conit, Connit, Connitt; making forty-one variations in all.

In Devonshire, the old home of the family, though the name is written Conant, the common pronunciation is Connet or Cunnet. All descendants of Richard Conant, of East Budleigh, however, both in England and the United States, have so far as known adhered to the form *Conant*, generally pronounced Cō-nant, with the accent on the first syllable; a few families in the United States accent the last syllable.

The earliest example of the name with the final "t" yet found, occurs in the Patent Rolls\* of England, in the year 1277, when Solomon de Rochester and Thomas de Sodington were appointed to take the assize of novel disseizin arraigned by Robert Couenaunt against Filota, late wife of Richard Couenaunt, touching a tenement in Alton (or Alveton), Staffordshire. Four years later, a Robert Conet was a tenant of the

\* Patent Rolls, 5 Edward I, m. 9, dors. 72.

manor of Horncastle, Lincolnshire. In the year 1327 Alexander Conaunt\* was living in the Hundred of Exminster, Devonshire; five years later, Alan Conaunt† was living in the Hundred of Axminster; and in 1379 Hugh Conaunt‡ was living near Exeter. The three last named were probably of our family, as they lived within twenty-five miles of the home of John Conant, with whom we begin the Genealogy.

The name is derived from the Celtic Conan,§ formerly of Wales and Cornwall, and subsequently of Brittany. After the Conquest this name became common in England, and is frequently found in the Public Records, almost always in some family of Breton origin. Among the Breton followers of William who settled in Devon, was Judhael of Totnes, a relative of the Duke of Brittany. The King granted him 107 manors in Devonshire, and he also held houses in Exeter. Count Brian, of Brittany, was sent by King William to the relief of Exeter, then besieged by the English, in the year 1069. He defeated Harold's sons in battle and was granted large estates. In the time of William Rufus, Cono, a monk of Battle Abbey (whose name indicates that he was a Breton), was sent to Exeter to look after the property of that house, and under his care the settlement there grew into a separate priory.||

The surname of the descendants of Geoffrey de Dinan, a Breton who settled in the north-western part of Devonshire, became, in course of time, Dinant, a change analagous to that from Conan to Conant. These facts indicate the probability of a Breton origin of the name, a supposition rendered more likely by the fact that the name went through a somewhat similar change in Brittany.

Arthur, in his "Etymological Dictionary of Family and



Christian Names," says: "CONANT, (Welsh and Gaelic). Conan, a river, Coumant, a cataract in North Wales, from *cau*, a chasm, a deep hollow, shut up, and *nant*, a rivulet." As this derivation did not seem entirely satisfactory, efforts were made to obtain the true etymology, and the opinion of several eminent philologists was sought, with the following results:

W. M. Hennessy, Esq., of Her Majesty's Public Record Office, Dublin, writes: "Conan is not a very general name in the Calendar of Saints, only seven of the name (besides two Connans) being mentioned in the Martyrology of Donegal, which gives a very full list. *Conan* (which means 'little hound,' from *con*, the genitive form of *cu*, *an*, a diminutive particle) is, under the corrupt form *Cynan*, a very general name in Welsh Chronicles."

In this connection, the secondary meaning of the word (champion, great warrior, *vide seq.*) as suggested by Prof. Rhys, is worthy of note. In Irish Mythology, Conn (valor), son of Diancécht (god of the powers of healing), figures largely; and in the "Chronicles of the Four Masters" is represented as a descendant of Heremon, son of Milesius, and the 110th King of Ireland. He is known as Conn Ceadeatha, or Conn of the Hundred Battles, and was Monarch of Ireland in the second century. His posterity possessed the kingdom of Connaught, the name of which is derived from his name coupled with "iacht" or "iocht," signifying children or posterity. Hence Connaught, or Coniacht as it was anciently written, means the territory possessed by the descendants of Conn.

W. F. Skene, LL. D., Historiographer Royal of Scotland, writes: "Conan is a personal name belonging to names of Irish or Gaelic origin, and existed, both in Ireland and Scotland, at an early period. It appears in the Irish Calendar as St. Conan, (d. about A. D. 648) Bishop of Sodor and Man, and in Scotland several parishes were dedicated to him, as, for instance, Kilchonan, in the district of Atholl. It appears also at an early period as a Christian name in various Scottish families."

But more satisfactory and definite are the two letters following: M. E. de Kerlinou, of Vannes, in the department of

Morbihan, France, writes: "The name Conan is well known in Brittany; many of our sovereign dukes have borne it, and it is still frequently used as a baptismal name, or borne by a great number of families *which came originally from Great Britain*. Only one noble family of Brittany has borne the name Conan or Conen; it is still in existence; its arms are, 'Or and argent, a lion counterchanged, armed, crowned and tongued gules.' In regard to the etymology of the word Conan, I must first state that the name of Conan Meriadee,\* accounted first King of the Armoric Bretons, is written by ancient authors, Conus, Cono (Canao), Conn, Cann or Can, which is, according to one of our historians, only an abridgment or slight alteration of the name Conan. We find, also, Caton, Coton and Cathon, which are the same but more altered than Canao, Conn and Conan. This King died about A. D. 421.

"The radical *con* is not employed in modern Breton, but it is found in many names of ancient places, where it signifies *angle*

in the special sense of an angle formed by the meeting of two rivers, in French *confluent*, e. g., Mençon, Conlo, Condé, etc. In a figurative sense, *con* signifies a reunion, an assemblage, and our ancient traditions inform us that Conan Meriadec came from Great Britain and reunited under his sceptre, to his ancient subjects, who emigrated with him, the Celts and Cymri who inhabited Armorica. They took the name Bretons and the country of Arvor (my country) that of Little Britain. In a precise sense, *Con* or *Conan* (*an* is a simple plural) is more a title than a name. Many of our historians in speaking of him, say, 'the Conan Meriadec,' 'the Chief Meriadec,' following the meaning. *Con* in the Welsh and Cymric languages seems to have the meaning of *Brenn* (*chief*) in Celtic.

“At times he is called *Can*, or *Cau*, signifying *combat*, *Canao* (another plural), *the combats*. He is then the victor, the conqueror, the chief, the imperator of the Romans.

“Finally, at the Court of Assizes of Morbihan, an interpreter



of Finisterre, in translating a deposition, did not hesitate to employ the equivalent *Count* for the proper name *Conan*. Conan Meriadee, then, signifies the Chief Meriadee, or the Chief of many Chiefs, the Count. It is, perhaps, from this fact that French historians have taken the title Count of Brittany for our sovereigns who called themselves kings or dukes.

“As to the frequency of the name Conan among the families of the people, it is due to two causes: first, from its use as a Christian name among various patronymics; second, as a family name borne by all a clan, the same in Brittany as in Scotland.”

Prof. Loth, who is professor of Celtic at the Faculty of Sciences at Rennes, in the department of Ille et Vilaine, says: “Conant, in the 14th century, of the county of Devon, is an Armoric Breton or Cornish name, but surely it is not Welsh. It is almost certainly an Armoric name. The ordinary form in Armorica to-day is Conan; in the 9th century it was Cunan. It is the same name as the Welsh Cynan. We find in Wales, in an inscription of the 6th century, a genitive form, *Cunegni*,\* which presupposes for the same time a nominative form, *Cunagno-s*. The root is the same as in the name of the British King, *Cunobelinus*, of the British king in Gildas, *Maglocunos* (later Maelgwn), and probably as in the Welsh verb *cynu*, to raise, to exalt.”

The statement of Prof. Loth is very interesting, as Cunobe-



lin, who was King of Britain at the beginning of the Christian era, was the original of Shakespeare's Cymbeline, and Maglocunos was the fourth king after the renowned Arthur.

The conclusion, then, seems to be that Conan, the early form of Conant, is the equivalent of the Welsh *cân*, (a chief); Irish *ceun*; Saxon *cynig*, (a leader, a king); German *könig*; Dutch *koning*; Swedish *konung*; and also of the Oriental *khan*; all meaning *head, chief, leader or king*.