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## Clan Associations and the Networked World

About 17 years ago, the worldwide web became a reality for the 'public' user and we were suddenly in a world of instant communication and abundant information. Over the next few years, the web first became a major new tool for reaching people and disseminating data, and then the home for hyperventilated opinions and the random thoughts of empty minds. There are now billions of pages of information on the web and millions more are generated every single day and the very real and growing problem is that it is becoming more and more difficult to find useful, accurate information in the rapidly expanding plethora of websites, many of which are started by enthusiasts who soon lose interest as they find that creating content is not as much fun as being able to say 'have you seen my new website'.

Right back at the start of all this – 17 years ago – Donald H MacLean of Chorley Wood foresaw that the technology would not only provide unprecedented access to information but would, at the same time result in information overload until such times as rationalisation occurred. Sensing the need to establish the Clan Maclean as a leading provider of electronically facilitated information, he created MacleanNet as an internet-based membership organisation to compliment the terrestrial CMAs, and maclean.org as the website to support it.

Since those early days, maclean.org has attracted around 5000 members to MacleanNet and many then joined a terrestrial CMA. But its real contribution has been as the first point of contact for anyone searching 'maclean' on the web – literally hundreds of thousands of visitors have viewed maclean.org and it remains the primary Maclean site on the web.

Over the years we have seen a growing number of Maclean websites – some start and then die almost immediately while others continue for some years before their founder or webmaster either lose interest or can no longer keep up with the demands of providing new content. Maclean.org did not escape this problem but the MacleanNet team kept one step ahead of the game and moved hosting service when needed, introduced new technologies as they became available, and have developed a clear-sighted focus on providing accurate, long lasting information about the clan. This, combined with the skills our webmaster at the time of the last Gathering, and now Ian McLean of Lancashire, our current webmaster, has kept maclean.org as the first search entry on most 'maclean clan' searches – and that means it is the first website that most people enter when they are searching for their Maclean heritage.

But the real question facing us is this: how can we build on that, how can we leverage maclean.org for the benefit of the wider clan?

This was one of the fundamental questions behind the Chief's request at the last Congress that I investigate the future of the Clan Associations in a networked world. It was a time when many terrestrial CMAs had yet to understand the potential of the web and regarded MacleanNet with considerable suspicion, claiming that it was the root cause of their inability to grow their membership. The research carried out showed that the CMAs (including MacleanNet) were simply 'membership organisations' and that

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members will join them if they see a benefit that is greater than the cost of membership and will leave them if the cost of membership exceeds the benefits provided. That is a simple, cold fact – and one even more in play as the world's economic woes kicked in less than six months after the last Congress.

The response to the findings was, to say the least, less than enthusiastic with some people claiming that this was all management speak and gobbledegook and that CMAs were really family and fraternal and couldn't be considered simply 'membership organisations' and that we should be focusing on the traditional offering of clan dinners, BBQs, and other events where we can celebrate our mutual heritage. You can understand, therefore, that when further research was proposed – such as actually asking members what they wanted and asking new members why they joined – it was met with a deafening silence with only three or four CMAs making any comment and the rest simply not bothering to answer even when reminded.

Despite this set back, more research was done as to what new and existing members were looking for when they contacted or joined a clan association. The overwhelming answer was that they were looking firstly, for accurate historical information about the clan, secondly, for genealogical help, and thirdly, other people who, like themselves, were celebrating for their Scottish heritage. All three things are, in the modern networked world, most easily facilitated via the web – via authoritative websites, genealogical databases and by the provision of contact details for local membership organisations - indeed, the web is now the FIRST place that people look for these things.

The future of our world wide clan must, in my opinion, be built on the firm foundation of (a) turning maclean.org into a clearing house for authoritative historical information by linking all the available information from all the other Maclean websites, (b) all Maclean genealogical information should be accessible via a single database, or at least, via a single reference webpage, and (c) for local CMAs to focus on what they do best: interacting with their members. There is nothing radical in this, but if we are to thrive and succeed, then we need to work more collaboratively with a global perspective that delivers the needs of our members via the most effective route. It is time for people to step away from their fear of the web and embrace it for what it can deliver.

I suspect that it is now time for us to rationalize our assets and combine our efforts for the benefit of our members – let's try and create a really authoritative set of historical information, perhaps by writing properly reviewed articles, perhaps by linking the Clan Maclean Heritage Trust's library to maclean.org (or, at least, its index), perhaps by making the archives readily available to researchers via the web. Let's link and amalgamate the various genealogical databases. Let's make it easier for visitors to reach the CMAs (perhaps by making membership application forms available for download). All this is possible, it just takes the will.

But none of this will happen unless everyone steps away from parochial self-interest and commits to working together – we need a team of people representing all the CMAs to assist in correlating and coordinating the information for maclean.org, we need people to check information for accuracy, and we all need to understand that what is published on the web is still subject to copyright law and that needs to be checked and plagiarism needs to be avoided – and that is why everything to be published on maclean.org has to be approved by me as I am the legal 'representative' of the domain and I don't wish to be sued.