

REVIEW: A DANCE CALLED AMERICA

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James Hunter **A Dance Called America: The Scottish Highlands, the United States and Canada**, Edinburgh: Mainstream, £14.99, hb, 1994, ISBN 1851586393, 288pp

The history of a whole people's experience as grievous, complicated, and far-flung as the Highland diaspora never ceases to be written. More details are forever surfacing, from archives in the big houses, from the words of people whose grand- or great-grandparents saw their roofs or looms eaten up by flames in Sollas or Strathnaver, or remember a torch flashing or a thatched roof burning on Lewis in a last farewell to the emigrant boats in 1923 (Wilkie 1984, pp.72-74). The lines of communication are stretched and thinned, by absence, time passing, and the wish to forget the heartbreak or the atrocity. In the end the first-hand history reduces to a core of memoirs and stories, part history and part myth. They never die out entirely, and today the events of 1800 to 1870 remain strikingly near. At Dervaig on Mull, in 1989, Mary Morrison could still tell me what her father had told her about the pouring of the fresh milk onto the fires. He had seen this with his own eyes when his family and neighbours were evicted at Boreraig in Skye in the winter of 1853 (Craig 1990, p.28).

Recently some strikingly physical remains of clearance - a village emptied by an absentee owner in 1824 - have surfaced with the felling of Commission forests at Inniemore in Argyll. Although these were not a 'discovery' as reported in **The Guardian** for July 25 and **The Herald** for August 2 - I found them myself in April 1989, acting on a tip in a book on Morvern (Gaskell 1968), and identified at least eight houses with their walled kailyards and kilns for parching corn - it is good to know that Mary Cameron's village, which she commemorated in a tremendous lament

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(MacLeod 1863, pp.293-295), is now laid bare for all to see and may be turned into a heritage centre. All over the Highlands, these days, people will say to you, 'There was nothing like this before', by which they mean the public recognition of how their forebears struggled: for example, the clearing of Rossal in Strath Naver, razed by Patrick Sellar's 'fire brigade' in the summer of 1814, now left unplanted by the Forestry Commission and equipped with a path and good information boards beside the shells of the houses; the cairn honouring Donald MacLeod of Rossal, author of **Gloomy Memories**, the first book about the Clearances, beside the road on the left bank of the Naver; the cairn at Hallaig on Raasay with its verses from Sorley Maclean's great threnody for 'the grass-grown ruined homes'; the monument to the Battle of Braes south of Portree, with its inscription by Maclean, to mark the turning-point for the Highlands, the coming of secure tenure and government aid for the beleaguered croftlands; and the cairn at a bend in the road at Gartymore near Helmsdale marking the croft of John Fraser, joint secretary of the Sutherlandshire Association for land reform, a spearhead in the Crofters' War (MacPhail 1989, pp.92-93).

In print there was little work of substance between Alexander MacKenzie's **History of the Highland Clearances** (1883) and John Prebble's **The Highland Clearances** (1966). Since then the history has flowed strongly. James Hunter's **The Making of the Crofting Community** (1976) placed the Clearances in the development of the Highlands from the replacement of runrig by crofts to the depopulation by war and emigration in the first decades of this century. Eric Richards's two-volume **History of the Highland Clearances** (1982, 1985) narrated the events from a cool outsider's point of view and analysed what historians and commentators had made of them. Iain Fraser Grigor's **Mightier Than a Lord** (1979) and I M M MacPhail's **The Crofters' War** (1989) at last brought into focus the crofters' regrouping and fight-back against landlordism in the decades between the Potato Famine and the Crofters' Holdings (Scotland) Act. My **On the Crofters' Trail** (1990) recorded eyewitness Clearance memoirs that had passed down through the families. Now James Hunter's latest excellent book follows the Highland emigrants - many of them not forced but voluntary or semi-voluntary - to North America and traces their part in opening up the forests and prairies, maintaining a Gaelic life-style until they were more or less absorbed into the new (white) culture of that continent.

Hunter's method is to combine the skills of the historian and the traveller. He has visited many of the sites of the landfalls, battles, and early settlements where the Highland colonists carried on their farming and fur-trading, and he describes them exactly and sometimes vividly. In North Carolina he sees for

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himself that the soil in the counties settled by Highlanders in the middle 18th century was light and sandy, 'making it far easier to work by hand than the heavier soils to which immigrants from places like Argyll had been accustomed.' On Cape Breton Island he looks at the 'houses and barns tilted all awry as their timber slowly rots' and notes it as evidence of how short-lived was this colonisation of a rocky, Hebridean island: 'To be shown a typically wooded Cape Breton hillside by an old man who tells you how, as a boy, he helped to take several wagonloads of hay from that same piece of ground is as intensely depressing an experience as to see a previously well-working crofting township back in Scotland given over more and more to weeds and rushes.' Near the border between British Columbia and Washington State he enjoys the comfortable and good-looking haughland in a bend of the Spokane - 'clumps of pine trees interspersed with springy turf ... the calls and splashing sounds made by wild ducks ... on a sunny, windless morning' - and understands why this was the site of a favourite trading post for both the North West Company and their successors, the Hudson's Bay Company, in the heyday of the fur trade.

Moving in deeper, and fusing a sociologist's insight with a historian's ability to ferret out significant detail, he shows how closely some essential features of Highland culture were reproduced and deployed in building the economy of Canada. Thus Simon MacTavish, founder of the North West Company, son of a Jacobite soldier from Strath Errick and himself a loyalist (to the British Crown), drifted north from the Mohawk to the St Lawrence after the defeat of his party in the Revolutionary War, and married into a Québécois fur family to consolidate his business position; it was then 'to the Scottish Highlands, and primarily to his own connections there' that he looked for most of his associates. Soon at least fourteen of his relatives were installed in the upper levels of the Company. When he died in 1804, he was succeeded by his nephew, son of his sister and a tacksman from the country between Strath Errick and Strath Nairn: 'In the importance which he thus attached to kinship, it is not too fanciful to discern something of the continuing influence on Simon MacTavish of the clan-orientated community into which he had been born.' Again, apropos the economic and sometimes shooting war between the companies for control of the Red River - crucial artery in the water system linking Hudson Bay and the Great Lakes - Hunter comments that MacTavish's buccaneering methods can be understood as springing from the old lawlessness of the Highlands: his father 'had once ridden into Inverness with some twenty armed men and coolly set about abducting one of the Highland capital's principal residents.'

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As a Gaelic speaker, born in the Highlands and still living there, Hunter is both clear-eyed about the ways of his compatriots and sensitive to the whole life of the people he represents, their habits, their terrain, and their linguistic culture. Many of the Highland settlers in America had gone overseas to escape what two farmers from Reay in Sutherland called, in 1772, the 'arbitrary and oppressive' regime of their landlord and his factor (Cameron 1930, pp.6-22,91). Hunter notes coolly that many of them, at Cape Fear in North Carolina for example, promptly joined the ranks of the slave-owners. In 1790 several hundred of the black slaves there spoke Gaelic. (By a hideous irony, this itself was to become a strapping offence in Highland schools a few decades later.)

Perhaps the stories and songs of those slaves expressed their longing and harking-back to their old homeland in Africa, as did those of the Highland bards such as Bard Maclean from Tiree, whose 'Am Mealladh' and 'A'Choille Gruamack' are classic expressions of emigrant alienation and nostalgia (MacDonnell 1982, pp.68-73). Hunter adds richness and nuance to his chronicle by using creative texts to get as close as possible to people's experience, in keeping with his longstanding idea that in order to recover the emotions of 'the people upon whom estate managements imposed their politics', we must go beyond official documents and use the widest possible range of evidence (Hunter 1976, pp.4, 282). So he uses the Manitoba novelist Margaret Laurence and the Cape Breton novelist Hugh MacLennan to deepen his coverage of what Canadians now call 'the mosaic' - the racial mix - and he quotes a song written by a bard from Kintail in 1774 as evidence of how an immigrant could see 'America as a place of liberation', a place teeming with buck and doe, salmon and white fish, and 'every herdsman has his horse', in contrast to the Highlands where the landlords 'prefer gold to a brave man'.

This bardic eloquence was cut from the same cloth as many a letter written by crofters to their families back home, or by stay-at-homes to their relatives: for example, the Manitoba settler who wrote in 1883, 'We are not under bondage to any man, as we have been in Benbecula. I have also to tell you that I have sowed twelve bushels of potatoes, four bushels of barley, half a bushel of white beans, carrots, onions, and turnips, and to look after them coming up is a glory you would not believe' (Napier 1884, p.127); or a letter I found in Prince Edward Island that had been written from John MacIsaac from Ardnamonie in South Uist to his cousin Archibald, in 1841, with the endearing piety of its conclusion: 'continue attentive to the priceless Holy Religion and ever bear in mind if America is a very good place, the Kingdom of Heaven is infinitely better.' (Craig 1990, p.91)

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The beauty of history written in Hunter's way is that it attends to the whole gamut of human expression. How different from J M Bumsted's **The People's Clearance**, a book written to combat the mistaken tendencies of self-appointed people's champions which nevertheless announces at the start: 'Attempting to deal with the motivations of a population which largely lacked the skills of writing and the ability of fluent self-expression is no easy task.' (Bumsted 1982, p.xiv) When I first read that scarcely credible sentence, I set myself to collect examples of 'fluent self-expression' by Highland people on the subject of clearance and emigration and ended up with bulging dossiers of passages by turns caustic, tragic, vehement, lyrical, devout, and down-to-earth, in at least ten genres: spontaneous remarks, testimony or evidence, memoirs, myths or legends, seers' visions, poems, songs, laments, curses, and extempore prayers. It is because James Hunter is steeped in such a culture, and can marry it to his scrupulous skills as a historian, that **A Dance Called America** will be able to feed back into the society it sprang from and take its place on the shelves of a thousand homes as well as in the libraries of academe.

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December 1994