

## **THE EMIGRANT EXPERIENCE: THE SCOTTISH DIASPORA**

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Report of a conference held at the University of Guelph, Guelph, Ontario,  
Canada, 16 October 1999.

'The Emigrant Experience: The Scottish Diaspora' conference was co-hosted by the interdisciplinary Scottish Studies Program of the University of Guelph and the Canadian educational and heritage organisation, the Scottish Studies Foundation. The papers presented dealt with a range of economic and social issues pertaining to Scottish emigration. Although the major focus of the papers was on Canadian examples, others examined Scots travelling to the United States, New Zealand and Europe.

The conference attracted over one hundred delegates. More than two-thirds of those present were interested members of the Scottish diaspora community in Canada. Around thirty delegates were professional academics. The majority of audience members were middle-aged or older. This surprised me at first as I am acquainted with academic conferences that typically attract a younger audience of postgraduates and scholars. However, on reflection, this composition of the audience, varying by both age and interest in the subject, was a central reason for the success of the event. The audience largely comprised the very people who organise and attend Scottish events such as Highland Games and Burns' suppers that are hosted throughout the Scottish diaspora. They are the resources who invest in the maintenance of Scottishness beyond Scotland. As such, they encompass an important constituency and audience for those studying the Scottish diaspora and presenting research on this topic, whether this is at conferences or in publications.

Scottish Studies is a rapidly growing subject in Canada. The University of Guelph has offered postgraduate study in this field since 1966. This

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University's association with the Scottish Studies Foundation has resulted in the latter raising funds to endow a Chair of Scottish Studies there.

Several key issues were raised. Firstly, and perhaps most pertinently, was the question of whether Scots abroad comprised a 'diaspora' at all. There seemed to be considerable reluctance amongst both delegates and presenters to assert that this is the case. Michael Vance (St. Mary's University, Nova Scotia) initiated debate by arguing that care should be taken when claiming a Scottish 'diaspora'. He argued that the term came replete with notions of a population being forcibly removed from a territory, and in Scotland's case, Vance explained, such experiences were the exception rather than the rule. Vance similarly questioned phrases like 'immigrant streams', 'flows' and 'currents' as they reduce the experiences of individual emigrants, representing migration as a mass phenomenon that is internally undifferentiated. The word 'diaspora' has attracted a good deal of recent academic discussion (e.g. Safran 1991; Clifford 1994; Cohen 1995). Michael Vance suggested there was much to be gained from Donald Akenson's (1995) approach that argues that a diaspora is a multipolar phenomenon, with one place of origin and distribution of people to multiple locations of emigration.

At the conference, the co-organisers believed that the term 'diaspora' was both little known and a piece of academic jargon. Their decision to purposely relegate 'the Scottish diaspora' to being the conference subtitle was a result of this position. The Scottish Studies Foundation had pressed for such a move, arguing that its members and other Scottish-Canadians were not comfortable or familiar with the term. However, I believe that 'diaspora' is a valuable concept for the examination of the Scottish international experience, an opinion supported by Ned Landsman (State University of New York, Stony Brook) who countered the prevailing opinion and suggested that a concept of 'diaspora' is a valuable way in which to understand the multiple experiences of migrants around the globe.

A second issue that was raised throughout the event was that of the construction of the romantic image of the Scottish emigrant. Michael Vance highlighted that the representation of the Scottish emigrant as a poor, evicted Highlander is largely inaccurate. However, this image remains pertinent to the transatlantic conceptualisation of Scottish emigration. Papers at the conference, in particular those by Stephen Duguid and Jack Little (both Simon Fraser University, British Columbia) and Ned Landsman, repeatedly asserted that this was not the case and that many Scots emigrating to Canada and other locations were neither poor, nor Highlanders. Yet this image persists and continues to form the popular understanding of the Scottish

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emigrant experience. Academics in Scotland have long argued against the romanticisation of Scottish history and have deconstructed the image of Scotland, its origins and effects (e.g. McArthur 1982; McCrone, Kendrick and Shaw 1989; Donnachie and Whatley 1992).

Rather than accept the popular representation of the Clearances as a singular, tragic event around which all Scottish migration was generated, Landsman usefully argued that population movement and migration should be understood as the norm, rather than the exception. In relation to Scotland, this would produce an understanding of Scottish people always on the move, both intra- and inter-nationally, challenging the popular conceptualisation of a massive forced removal from the land. As such, Landsman echoed Vance's argument for a more complex and nuanced understanding of emigration and the origins of the Scottish 'diaspora'. Duguid, Little and also Michael Michie (York University, Ontario), showed that rather than being evicted, many Scots chose to leave Scotland, and for a variety of different reasons, during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Having traced legal documents relating to disputes over tenancy agreements and land claims on the American frontier in the early nineteenth century, Stephen Duguid argued that Scots often travelled to the New World, not only with cultural capital, but with financial resources and a specific idea of their ambitions to be farmers in North America.

Although the romanticism attached to the Clearances was challenged throughout the event, another form of romanticised representation was common. Some of the presenters did appear to uncritically valorise Scottish emigrants as the world's foremost thinkers, politicians, authors, poets, ministers, workers and tradesmen. Such opinions were well received by the audience, many of whom were descended from Scottish emigrants. One of the best audience receptions was for Michael Newton (Edinburgh University) who analysed Nova Scotian Gaelic poetry, singing in Gaelic and thrilling what was, I believe, a non-Gaelic speaking audience. Michael Newton's scholarly examination of the understanding of the Canadian landscape by emigrants, as it was represented by poets including 'Big' Michael McDonald and John McLean, was elided in favour of a celebration of Gaelic song and poetry. While this is an important aspect of the cultural production of 'Scottish' identity in the diaspora, there are dangers in reifying these romantic constructions of landscape and identity that Newton aimed to critically examine. In a different manner, Ned Landsman's description of the successes of Scottish doctors, missionaries, educators and other professionals eventually over-powered the critical point he was attempting to make, namely that Scots have long been emigrants and that there is value in

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studying the movement of the Scottish population in instances other than the Clearances. Landsman's celebration of the Scottish Enlightenment and the emigration of professional Scots suggested a different kind of romanticism. Indeed, I suggest that Landsman's position, that these eminent seventeenth and eighteenth century individuals were typical emigrants, was undermined by those he selected to focus upon, namely educated and qualified professionals. Their experiences were certainly very different from those of the farmers, as studied by Stephen Duguid and Jack Little, who migrated to the United States in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

A question from the floor challenged Michael Newton for his sole reliance on male poets. Newton stated he had yet to discover women's songs and poems from Nova Scotian Scots. However, this raised a debate about the dominance of men and masculinity in the 'Scotland' and 'Scottishness' being presented. Within the romantic image he was challenging, Vance noted that men are active while women generally weep and lament. Throughout the conference this gendering of Scottish emigrants was apparent as papers repeatedly described men who chose to move from Scotland, men who negotiated land claims in the British colonies and men who made the decisions upon arrival in these new locations. Such an imbalance is partially due to the limitations of historical and documentary resources available; however, I suggest considerably more could have been done by the scholars, myself included, to rectify or at least highlight this imbalance.

As could be expected from a conference focusing on Scottish emigration, most of the presentations were historical in their context and scope. Fiona Black (University of South Florida) examined the trade in books from Scotland to Canada between 1752-1820. Her research of shipping records and Canadian book sale advertisements revealed that Bibles and children's books came overwhelmingly from Scottish ports, but philosophical texts and novels were shipped largely from London by large publishers based in the metropolis. In turn, Kathy Carter (High Point University, North Carolina) reviewed the political protests in North Carolina between 1765-1771 which became known as 'The Regulation'. Led by Scottish and Scotch-Irish (i.e. Ulster) Presbyterians, this precursor to the American Revolution challenged the colonial authorities on issues such as taxation, currency regulation and religious equality.

Despite the central focus by delegates on the history of Scottish emigration and historical instances of people leaving Scotland for locations all over the world, there were analyses of current diaspora issues. It was noticeable that the papers focusing on such current aspects of the Scottish diaspora were

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considerably more critical in their approach to issues of identity. Most papers assumed that to be 'Scottish' an individual has to either claim Scotland as a birthplace or have Scottish ancestry. In contrast, issues relating to how 'Scottish' identity is replete with assumptions of inclusion and exclusion were raised by Callum Brown (Strathclyde University, U.K.) and myself (Euan Hague, Staffordshire University, U.K.). Both Callum Brown and I had engaged with Scottish experiences that felt so unfamiliar and unusual that we were led to question our own 'Scottishnesses'. Brown's visits to the Shetland Islands made him feel an 'outsider'. In turn, my own encounters with the Scottish-American community had left me thinking about transnational performances of Scottishness. I realised that I understood and performed Scottish identity in a manner that was different to that understood by many members of the Scottish-American community.

Brown provocatively argued that the Up-helly-aa festivities in the Shetland Islands symbolically construct the islands as a separate nation, distinct from both Scotland and Britain. First visiting Up-helly-aa in 1993, Brown realised that despite being Scottish and this event occurring in Scotland, he felt isolated, excluded and excited by this 'alien culture' in his 'native land'. Determined to discover the origins of Up-helly-aa and its meaning to Shetlanders, Brown found out that the celebrations began in 1806 and took on their modern form in 1872. The first time a Viking ship was set ablaze, a scene now fundamentally associated with Up-helly-aa, was 1889. The portrayal of Vikings, he explained, was a way of mocking non-Shetlanders, in particular mainland Scots. To the Shetlanders, Scots are the outsiders in their community and Scotland is a different country. Up-helly-aa is one manner in which to assert this separatism symbolically.

Brown pointed to a specifically gendered demarcation of participation in Up-helly-aa. While men occupy the privileged position of performing the festival in that they dress up, parade and finally ignite the Viking ship, women, by contrast, watch the events and occupy traditional feminine roles like cooking food and providing refreshments for the revellers. Although such roles have been challenged by feminist protestors in the past, this division is largely accepted by those in Shetland. Brown's paper was taken from his book **Up-Helly-Aa** (Brown, 1999) which won the Frank Watson Prize at the conference for the year's best book about Scottish history. As such, Brown's work on the construction of difference within 'Scottishness' was recognised by the organisational committee. The acknowledgement was significant because in contrast to the majority of other presenters at the conference, he did not assume 'Scottishness' as easily identifiable, but instead recognised it as contested.

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Brown's paper on issues of Scottishness connected to my own paper that addressed the issue of Scottishness and race. Utilising over thirty newspaper reports about the Scottish-American and Scottish-Canadian communities that have appeared in British newspapers since May 1997, I questioned the commonsensical assumption of 'Scottishness' as tantamount to 'whiteness'. The British newspapers have represented the members of the Scottish diaspora in North America as either 'romantic buffoons' or 'white supremacists'. There are complex associations between Scottishness and whiteness that cannot be so simplistically assessed or displaced transatlantically. I argued that dismissing the equation between Scottishness and whiteness as merely a North American phenomenon of a few extremist enthusiasts sidesteps issues of race and Scottishness in an increasingly nationalistic and contested Scotland.

Between fifty and ninety million people worldwide claim Scottish ancestry. Many in this diaspora population, the vast majority of whom have been born outside Scotland, maintain connections with Scotland in a variety of ways. One such manner is by providing donations to the National Museum of Scotland. With this information, David Forsyth of the National Museum of Scotland began a slide show tour of the NMS exhibit 'Scotland and the World'. Explaining that emigration is central to the identity of Scotland, and that the country has a 'culture of mobility', Forsyth requested that the audience search through their heirlooms and memorabilia to discover items that could be displayed in the Edinburgh museum. He also remarked that there is no national centre for the collection of items and details about emigration in Scotland. Consequently, the NMS, in association with the National Library of Scotland, are now collecting together the genealogical information they have been sent over the past decades from all over the world.

Scottish identity, culture and Scotland itself have been fashioned by emigration, migration and transnational interaction between people and places. The conference made an effort to academically address this legacy in an international context. Such an assessment is important and not just for scholars. Scottish Studies is currently taught in a number of universities including in Canada at Guelph and Simon Fraser University, in Europe at Université de Stendhal in Grenoble (France) and Johannes Gutenberg-Universität Mainz in Gernersheim (Germany), in the United States at University of South Carolina, Old Dominion University (Virginia) and East Tennessee State University. There are also many departments in Scottish universities. Although the conference largely succeeded and was well regarded by delegates and presenters alike, I suggest that a more critical edge

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could benefit work within Scottish Studies, in particular a questioning of what 'Scottish' actually means. While 'Scottishness' is greatly invested in and performed by those claiming 'Scottish' identities, this question is little asked in Scotland, and less so within the diaspora.

Further, at Guelph it was readily apparent that academic examinations of Scotland, Scottish history and politics can move into a position that few other subjects manage to attain, namely developing a mutually beneficial relationship with wider, often non-academic communities to which the research pertains. Such work is still in its infancy and much still needs to be done. This conference, however, was an encouraging development, showing the potential and scope for international and interdisciplinary research on Scotland and Scottish identity. Papers at the conference challenged many myths, raised eyebrows, and provoked debate. The size of the task was made clear to me on the plane back to Britain. Returning from Canada, I read a book review published in the **Toronto Star** the day after the conference. The reviewer stated that it was a common experience for Highland Scots, due to the Clearances, to be forced to travel to Canada (Nickson 1999). This representation remains dominant throughout the Scottish diaspora and it is one that people studying Scotland, however they approach the subject, will continue to encounter for some time.

The next Scottish Studies Fall Colloquium at the University of Guelph will take place in October 2000. Further details are available by e-mailing [scottish@arts.uoguelph.ca](mailto:scottish@arts.uoguelph.ca).

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