

THE AMBIGUOUS LEGACY OF EMIGRATION

James Hunter

In a crofting township towards the north end of the Isle of Skye, I was scheduled some years back to attend a public meeting held on a January evening of the sort that makes it certain Skye will never rival Florida as a winter destination for vacationers. It was, as it had been since three p.m., pitch dark; a gale howled off the nearby ocean; the rain was ice-cold, needle-sharp and unrelenting.

Out of the storm, and into the township's community hall where people were gathering, there stepped an elderly crofter. With water cascading from his clothing, he looked at me in a less than friendly fashion. 'You're the man,' he said accusingly, 'who's always writing about the Highland Clearances.'

I admitted as much – several of my books having touched on the grim period, in the nineteenth century, when thousands of Scots families, often by way of prelude to their emigration, were ejected forcibly from their homes.

'Well,' said this wet, wind-battered crofter, 'my only regret about the Highland Clearances is that the [expletive deleted] landlords didn't finish what they started. If they had, I might be growing oranges in California.'

Had things gone differently for my own family, if they'd done what many other Scottish families did, they might easily have become Americans – or

*James Hunter, chairman of Highlands and Islands Enterprise and the author of several books on Highlands and Islands history, was the keynote speaker, earlier this year, at the annual meeting of the Caledonian Foundation USA in Williamsburg, Virginia. This article is extracted from what he had to say. His ten books (published by Mainstream) include **A Dance Called America: The Scottish Highlands, the United States and Canada.***

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Australians, Canadians, New Zealanders or South Africans. But they didn't. So, like that disgruntled crofter, I'm not an orange-growing Californian but a Scot – a Scot who lives in Scotland, a Highlander who works in our Highlands and Islands.

I'm glad, indeed I'm proud, that's so. However, my being a Highlander who's resident in the Highlands makes me, I reckon, something of a statistical anomaly. If it were possible (which it isn't) to take everyone living in the Highlands and Islands at the time, say, of the Battle of Culloden in 1746 and to trace each of those folk's descendants, more (and I think lots more) such descendants would be found outside our part of Scotland than would be found within it.

No-one knows the exact number, but it's certainly the case that, since Culloden, hundreds of thousands of people have left the Highlands and Islands. It's also the case that most Highlands and Islands emigrants were glad to have had the chance to set up home elsewhere.

Sometimes that's not appreciated in Scotland. Often in Scotland we dwell on the negative aspects of the emigrant experience; on the often dreadful circumstances in which the decision to leave was made; on the pain of parting from friends, neighbours and homeland; on the hazards of pioneering on some distant frontier. And because, in Scotland, we focus on those things, we're prone to imagine our emigrant kin as deeply unhappy people forever wishing themselves back home. Nothing, as my historical writings emphasise, could be further from the truth.

Last year I was taken to see a tombstone adjacent to Old Bethesda Presbyterian Church in North Carolina's Cape Fear River country. This tombstone commemorates Colin Bethune who came, very probably, from the Isle of Skye – source of many of the Cape Fear country's eighteenth-century settlers and a locality where Bethune, or Beaton, remains a common name. His place of birth, however, mattered less to Colin than the country where he'd settled. 'Colin Bethune,' his tombstone reads. 'Died 1820, aged 24. An honest man. A native of Scotland by accident, but a citizen of the U.S. by choice.'

Something of the emotions behind that most assertive of inscriptions became clear to me as a result of what I was shown of Old Bethesda's surroundings by my good friend, Dr Alex C. McLeod. Alex, who lives in Nashville, Tennessee, was raised in Old Bethesda's vicinity. By profession, Alex is a

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physician. He's also president of the Associated Clan MacLeod Societies on whose behalf I'm presently writing an account of our worldwide Highlands and Islands diaspora as exemplified and illustrated by the history of this single clan.

Alex's great-great-great-grandmother, Effie MacLeod, sailed from Skye in August 1802. Effie, like thousands of Skye folk before her, was bound for the Cape Fear River country where, in time, she was joined by her husband, Murdoch.

With this emigrant couple's present-day descendant, Alex McLeod, I visited the site of Murdoch's and Effie's homestead. That site is now part of Fort Bragg Military Reservation. Murdoch's fields, it follows, have reverted to forest and nothing remains of the log cabin in which he and Effie lived. All that's preserved of their presence is the tiny family graveyard in which those Skye-born pioneers were buried more than 150 years ago.

Nearby, however, you can still find the house which Effie's and Murdoch's son, John McLeod, built at the time of his marriage, in 1831, to Flora Johnson. Exploring this house in the company of John's great-great-grandson, Alex, I was immediately impressed by its spaciousness. In the early 1830s, when John and Flora McLeod were starting life together, and beginning to raise a family of seven boys and six girls, John's cousins back in Skye would have been inhabiting single-roomed, thatched and perennially damp hovels of the kind then standard in the Highlands and Islands. John McLeod, in contrast, owned a one-and-a-half storey, timber-framed home which ran to six sizeable rooms. And at a time when his Skye relatives would have been the wholly insecure tenants (if they were lucky) of four or five acres of inferior soil, John McLeod was the outright possessor of 2,000 acres of North Carolina farmland. On this farmland, John pastured a large herd of cattle; on it, too, he grew maize, cotton and tobacco.

Still in North Carolina and still in Alex's company, I also visited the houses built by John's son, Alexander, another farmer, and by Alexander's son, Robert, a lumber merchant. Just as John's home was more substantial than Murdoch's log cabin, Alexander's was bigger than John's, Robert's an advance on Alexander's. Taken together, or so it seems to me, this hundred-year-long sequence of McLeod family residences are nothing less than the realisation, in timber, brick and stone, of what in the nineteenth century began to be called the American Dream.

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To believe in the American Dream was to be convinced that to get to the United States from Europe was instantly to liberate oneself from the Old World's hardships and injustices. Simply by crossing the ocean, it was thought, men and women – who, had they remained in the countries of their birth, would have been condemned to lifelong misery and exploitation – could gain the ability to shape their own lives, fulfill their potential, gain a good income.

In reality, to be sure, matters never were that simple. Many people who left the Highlands and Islands for America didn't even get there – many of them dying on overcrowded, leaking, filthy, disease-ridden emigrant ships. And of those who made it over the Atlantic, by no means all did as well as Murdoch and Effie MacLeod, their sons, their grandsons and their great-grandsons. As this single family's story makes clear, however, there were plenty of emigrants – from the Highlands and Islands as from the rest of Europe – who managed to make the American Dream come true. This was not because folk like Effie and Murdoch MacLeod acquired new talents, new capacities, in the United States. It was down to that country's more open, more democratic, society enabling Murdoch, Effie and their numerous counterparts to do things in the Cape Fear River country they never could have done in Skye. Hence the manner in which, from the later eighteenth century onwards, America features in Gaelic songs and poems as a place of almost fabled opportunity and freedom; a country where (and this was the big thing) there were no evicting landlords; a country where, as then impossible in Scotland, a working family could acquire a home, a farm, of their own.

Which is not to say that emigration had no downsides. As my historical writings emphasise, and as I've stressed again here, emigration, broadly speaking, has been an enriching experience from the standpoint both of emigrants themselves and of the societies that received them. But in the places the Cape Fear River country's settler families came from – Skye, for example – emigration's consequences were unremittingly, absolutely, almost terminally negative. The thousands of Skye families who took themselves across the Atlantic add up, from a North American perspective, to a huge gain in human capital. To Skye, however, these same families represent a massive loss – of talent, manpower and capacity. In modern Scotland, we need to make good that loss. Which is why, I guess, we have agencies like Highlands and Islands Enterprises.

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HIE's challenge – my challenge as HIE's chair – is to help create circumstances in places like Skye which will entice folk there in much the same way as Murdoch and Effie MacLeod were attracted to North Carolina. Today we're having some success in doing just that.

Thirty years ago, Skye's population had been falling for a century, and that trend seemed set to continue. In fact, the opposite has happened. Present-day Skye, its total population up by a quarter since the 1960s, has thousands of new residents, hundreds of new homes. The island's economy has diversified enormously. It contains high-tech businesses, a college delivering higher education through the medium of Gaelic, flourishing arts and heritage centres, first-rate hotels and the Three Chimneys – which an international panel last year voted 28th best restaurant in the world.

Like much of the rest of the Highlands and Islands, then, Skye is on the way back, the way up. Which suggests to me that it's high time some Americans of Highlands and Islands extraction were thinking about coming home.

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