Coll in Crisis -

Emigration in the 1800s

A brief description of the circumstances in which many Collachs emigrated from their homeland

By Brian Wills-Johnson

In October 1838 the ***British King*** sailed from Tobermory harbour on the Isle of Mull with 332 emigrants, bound for Australia. Of these, 19 were from Coll. On other ships at the time, Collachs were leaving their island for distant lands, driven by irrevocable changes to their social and economic circumstances. This brief history examines some of the events of the time.

AN ISLAND OF OLD TRADITIONS

Coll is a hard rock and peat bog island lying low in the Inner Hebrides, with its lack of mountains being given credit for more than average sunshine, since in Scotland the mountains are said to attract the clouds. The adjacent island of Tiree is reputed to have the highest number of annual sunshine hours in Britain. Coll has more than 20 attractive white-sand beaches, but strong Atlantic winds, a very small population (currently less than 150 people live on Coll) and infertile soils would always have made life difficult except for the most tenacious. Many stories are told about the people of Coll[1] who, like all Hebrideans, had numerous customs which would appear strange today. One of those worth relating is the tradition surrounding funerals.

Funerals until recently were lay matters, in which the clergy did not participate, largely because the famous treatise *The Book of Discipline* by the reformist John Knox forbade it, on the grounds that the prayers and rituals involved might be a doorway to Popery. In the early part of the 18th century, however, Acts were passed first ordering the corpse to be wrapped in a linen sheet and, when this industry's fortunes had recovered, to be wrapped in a Scots woollen cloth. Elders or deacons were ordered to be present at the coffining to ensure this happened, and so made their way back into the religious ceremony. On Coll, and perhaps elsewhere, they found the funeral wake to be a lavish affair, often beyond the real resources of the family, but a proud tradition nonetheless and well libated by "the ardent spirit."

Whisky was plentiful and cheap on Coll, with more being produced than the locals could consume. It was customary for five rounds of whisky to be served to the funeral party, from the first refreshment at the home of the bereaved to the final stop at the burial ground, no matter how short the distance between. This led to all sorts of bad behaviour, including fights, and in one case it ended the tradition of a piper playing a lament at the graveside. In this case, the piper who should have played the lament *Lochaber No More* instead broke into the reel *Miss Drummond of Perth,* and it seems that subsequently families of the bereaved were not prepared to risk similar embarrassment.

It was also a proud tradition that the coffin would be carried without being rested on the ground, all the way from the house to the graveyard, no matter the length of the journey, with six pallbearers being rotated with military precision from the double line of the all-male procession. Of course the allotted portions of whisky would also be consumed by all along the way, including the laden pallbearers, and in inclement weather these resuscitations might be more frequent. In the poorer ceremonies, where a portion was not taken straight from the bottle, it may have been served into scallop shells that commonly substituted for scarce and expensive glassware.

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[1] *Folklore from Coll*, Betty MacDougall, reproduced in 2000 by the Coll Business Centre.

COLL'S CASTLES

Though Coll is no more than 21km long and averages 5km in width, ("shaped like a seal heading north") it boasts two castles - the second being built in 1750 for Hector Maclean, the 11th chieftain of the Macleans of Coll. The older Breacachadh Castle is variously ascribed to the 14th and 15th centuries, and is well known for a stone which at one time was said to be on the lintel of the south-eastern entrance. A message inscribed in Gaelic translates as:

If anyone of the Clan MacElonich should appear before this castle, even though it were at midnight and with a man's head in his hand, he will be given shelter from everyone but the King.

MacDougall[2] explains it thus:

This inscription relates to a period in the 15th century when the chieftain of the time was in residence on his Lochaber property. This land had been given by the Lord of the Isles in reward for military support but the Cameron clan who previously held it attacked in force and MacLean was killed. A family of MacElonich gave protection to his young widow who was pregnant at the time and in due course safely restored her and her infant son to Coll. In gratitude for this deed the stone was inscribed and it is on record that the Breacachadth family honoured the promise in a variety of ways for many succeeding generations.

MacDougall comments that the stone was destroyed during one of the many inter-clan battles but a replica was to be installed by the Clan Maclean Association. Major Nicholas Maclean-Bristol bought the ruined castle in 1961 and has largely restored it as a habitable building complete with plumbing and electricity - which may have affected its reputation as the least altered medieval castle of the Hebrides. Breacachadth is one of only four Norman castles to survive intact, of almost 30 built to protect their Atlantic principality. Murray[3] believes it to be architecturally the most interesting of all, and though the crudely-worked masonry reflects the use of local stone workers, he attributes it to Angus Og of Islay, King of the Isles, built when he received Coll on MacDougall's forfeiture around 1314.

The MacDonalds had always been able to command the best-informed master-masons, and the one sent to supervise the erection of Breacacha knew every latest device used in the defensive and domestic planning of the great mainland castles. At Breacacha he reproduced in miniature the most advanced conceptions of his time. These and various other points of interest are nowhere

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[2] *Guide to Coll*, Betty MacDougall. Hay Nisbet & Miller Ltd., Glasgow. 1975. p12.
[3] *The Islands of Western Scotland*, W. H. Murray, Eyre Methuen, p268. ISBN 413 26100X

else in the Hebrides all brought together in one castle, for the others if not ruined have been partially adapted to their new role as mansion houses.

LIFE ON COLL

The castles of Coll were no more than a familiar backdrop to most of the populace, who were well down the social order and subject to all of the hardships of an island agricultural community. Donald McDonald, who emigrated on the *British King* with his parents, is revealed on his sister Catherine's death certificate as being illiterate in spite of having lived in Australia for 36 years after arrival. It is likely that few children went to school, since the first continuous schooling did not start until 1794 with a school at Grimsary, well beyond daily walking distance from much of Coll.[4]

However, Coll supported a substantial number of viable villages and the economic and agricultural conditions supported population expansion. A rudimentary census taken for the church in 1776 lists 37 people living at Caolas, while other villages recorded were Feall (98), Ardnis (39), Totronald (82), Bailehogh (75), Griseabull (49), Cliad (65) and Arnabost (73). The total of 938 had grown to 1409 by 1841, probably near the peak.[5]

Dr Samuel Johnson, during his famous journey to the Isles with Boswell in 1773, was unimpressed by anything less than a two-storey house, which is the least that he allowed as a house. A dwelling with just one floor he regarded as a hut, though he did note that there was a range of huts from truly dreadful to quite liveable:

Huts are of many graduations: from murky dens, to commodious dwellings. The wall of a common hut is always built without mortar, by a skilful adaptation of loose stones. Sometimes perhaps a double wall of stones is raised, and the intermediate space filled with earth. The air is thus completely excluded. Some walls are, I think, formed of turfs, held together by wattle, or texture of twigs. Of the meanest huts, the first room is lighted by the entrance, and the second by the smoke hole. The fire is usually made in the middle.

The house and the furniture are not always nicely suited. We were driven once…to the hut of a gentleman, where, after a very liberal supper, when I was conducted to my chamber, I found an elegant bed of Indian cotton spread with fine sheets. The accommodation was flattering: I undressed myself, and felt my feet in the mire. The bed stood on the bare earth, which a long course of rain had softened to a puddle….The petty tenants, and labouring peasants, live in miserable cabins, which afford them little more than shelter from the storms.

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[4] Betty MacDougall, *The Coll Magazine*, 1983, p5.
[5] *Eilean Colla: A Guidebook to the Hebridean Island of Coll*. Martin Lunghi, Toad Wine Press 2000. ISBN 0-9527179-3-X.

THE ISLAND BLACKHOUSE

Life on Coll was not easy for agricultural workers. Most of them lived in what would today be regarded as hovels, and many of these would have been what is now known as 'the island blackhouse.'[6] These houses were a feature of highland and island living for centuries and, regardless of size and layout, had a number of common characteristics. The perimeter wall was made of two leaves of undressed stone, built in the same manner as a classic free-standing stone wall. The space between was packed with peat and earth, both to keep out the wind and to provide extra insulation for those hard winters. The A-frame roof timbers were thatched with straw, but there was no chimney. Instead, the open fire of the kitchen, usually roughly paved with flagstones, was allowed to smoke the straw with ever-thicker layers of soot. When the time came to replace the thatch, the soot-impregnated straw was turned into the fields in the belief that it would provide an extra dose of fertiliser.[7]

The 9-to-18 metre by about 6 metre oblong of the typical blackhouse (less 2 metres for internal dimensions) was divided into two. The domestic end comprised a sleeping room and a living/eating room. The other half to two-thirds was normally a byre where, in winter, the family's few precious cattle would be kept, along with any other stock and poultry. There was not always an internal wall to divide off the byre, which meant cattle were tied to wall stakes to stop them wandering into the living quarters. Wealthier families might also have a parallel barn built in the same manner against one of the long walls, but even then, a byre was often retained.

Formerly, it was the custom in blackhouses to let the manure accumulate in the byre throughout the winter. In spring, instead of removing it laboriously through the front door, the gable end was broken open. This opening was in some cases sealed with turf, and was called the ***toll each,*** *'horse hole', since this is where the cart or horse creels were loaded with dung.*

A visitor entering a blackhouse in May after the annual removal of dung from the byre might expect to step down 30cm to the floor level, and then up again into the family's living area. Once the stock were brought in for winter this lower floor would gradually rise, from a combination of dung, earth and seaweed, until the spring clean. Primitive though this might sound, social archaeologists point out that the construction and usage of blackhouses was tailored precisely to the materials available and the conditions of the environment, and showed a surprising degree of sophistication.

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[6] They would not have themselves called these homes blackhouses - the term only came into use later when more modern, whitewashed houses were built and were called whitehouses, so the older dwellings became blackhouses.

[7] Information on these houses is taken from *The Island Blackhouse*, Alexander Fenton, Historic Scotland 1995, ISBN 1-900168-00-6.

Keeping cattle in a chimneyless space containing a fire presented problems, as cattle are susceptible to chest complaints. The problem was solved by giving the roof a distinct shape. The area of roof over the [living quarters] *had a 45-degree pitch to contain the smoke pall. At the byre end, however, the roof pitch carried from 45 degrees where it joined the house, to 20 degrees at the bottom end. The resulting shape assisted the heat rising from the cattle to form a warm air curtain, preventing smoke penetrating the byre. This convection current of warm air also had a secondary effect, as it carried into the house a weak solution of ammonia in the water vapour given off from the cattle's urine. This ammonia tended to reduce cases of tuberculosis, a fact regularly commented upon in medical journals of the nineteenth century. Dairy maids were considered immune from the disease for the same reason.*

There were several reasons for building a house without a chimney. The dead smoke in the roof space tends to extinguish sparks from the fire; it coats the timbers with tar, which helps their preservation; it prevents fungal growth in the thatch, turf and timbers; it discourages insects such as midges and mosquitoes, wood borers, houseflies and other species that might contaminate food. Meat and fish could also be dried and smoked by hanging them from the roof timbers.[8]

There is nothing lavish about the furnishings of a blackhouse. Functionalism rather than ornament is the first consideration and furnishings tend to be substantially but plainly made of wood, painted or varnished a dark colour - usually brown. The best and most characteristic pieces are the dressers, the long wooden settles, and the box beds. The typical dresser is open or has two cupboards below, two drawers above and a good working surface for jugs, bowls and other utensils. Behind this is a plate rack, not necessarily attached to the dresser, whose top is angled to match the slope of the blackhouse roof. All the furniture is ranged along the sides of the walls, leaving as much working space as possible on the floor around the central hearth.[9]

THE AGRICULTURAL CYCLE

Daily life was, however, much more varied than it is for agricultural families today, following the seasons through a variety of life-supporting industries such as raising cereal and vegetable crops, fishing, sheep and cattle husbandry and kelp burning, not to mention spinning, weaving, knitting and sewing, and milk and cheese production - the latter important for income.

In earlier times bere (an old form of barley) was also grown, since it was bere straw that was used for thatching in the days when thatch was taken from the roofs each year for manure. Bere gave a higher yield of meal than oats, but

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[8] *The Ancient Monuments of the Western Isles*, Ed. Denys Pringle. Historic Scotland, 1994. ISBN 0-11-495201-9.

[9] *The Island Blackhouse*, op. cit.

bere-meal fell out of favour quickly after imported wheat flour became readily available.

After harvest had been safely gathered, the work of processing it for food began. The first stage was to thrash it in the barn, using the flail, ***suist.*** *In earlier times the ears were often rubbed off the bere stalks by using the feet, a method known as* ***a suathadh an eorna,*** *so that the straw should not be broken and could then be used for thatching the houses. Next the grain was winnowed to clear away the chaff and empty husks, and then the ears were dried in preparation for grinding.*

If a communal kiln and mill existed at the village, the grain could be quickly processed - and there was a degree of urgency to complete drying and milling while the weather held. A good mill could grind enough grain in 48 hours to last a family for the whole year, but the time and space needed for drying and de-husking was much more of a pinch point. Summer was also the time when fuel had to be put by for cooking and for heat over the coming winter. There was no alternative to peat as fuel, the island having become treeless at least as early as 1764.

CUTTING PEAT

A crofting house of four persons, burning nothing but peat, would use approximately 15,000 peats in a year. A good man working the peat-spade, ***taraisgear,*** *in the peat bank, could cast 1000 a day, so that he had to spend a minimum of 15 days, given continuous good weather, at this job. Later the peats had to be set up to dry, they had to be transported, and they had to be stacked at home. It is estimated that peat work occupied about a month of the crofter's year, and unless a good surplus of labour was available, this could seriously interfere with the working of the croft. In practice, neighbours and relatives work at the job together and the various processes are done with expedition and also with* (the) *enjoyment of a communal task.*[10]

Some peat was traded with the residents of Tiree, where there was a severe shortage of fuel-grade peat. Most of Tiree's peat was, in fact, sourced from the Ross of Mull where Tiree families had a concession near Loch Scridain. Whole families would sail or row across the dangerous stretch of water to cut and stack peat. Once the hard labour as done, the men would return to Tiree to carry on fishing while the women and children stayed behind to dry the peat. The men would return to transport their families and fuel home, sometimes overloading their skiffs with disastrous consequences.[11]

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[10] Ibid

[11] *Ferry Tales of Argyll and the Isles*, Walter Weyndling. Sutton Publishing, 1996. ISBN 0-7509-1185-9.

THE CATTLE TRADE

The islanders were skilled boatsmen, with considerable trade across the straits and an annual turning-off of cattle for the mainland markets. Weyndling[12] details this way of life:

The rich grazings of Tiree and Coll have produced a significant number of cattle for export since records began. The obvious drove route to the mainland led via Mull, as this afforded the best chance of grazing on the way and the shortest sea-passages. Estimates by Knox from his Tour Through the Highlands and Hebrides of 1786 put the number of cattle sent annually from Coll at 400 and from Tiree at 500. According to the New Statistical Account of that period, there were on Tiree some twenty open or half-decked boats of 6-230 tons deadweight employed on carrying cattle between Coll and Tiree, or between Coll or Tiree and Mull.

In November 1804 the (Duke of Argyll's) *chamberlain* (on Tiree) *wrote to the duke regarding the ferries between Tiree and Coll:*

> *The factor has frequently had occasions to observe the bad effects of the small boats kept for the purpose of the ferry between Tiree and Coll, in which neither cows or horses can be ferried without throwing them down and tying them on their passage, a practice that often produces serious effects and at times the deaths of these animals. The ferryman on the Coll side will not alter the custom that was there when he got the tack, as it would subject him to the expense of keeping a proper large boat….*

Weyndling points out that the ferry *from the Caoles[13] at the west end of Coll to Caoles at the east end of Tiree, did not just carry people but also male calves, a byproduct of the dairy industry on Coll, and of cheese, its primary product.*

THE KELP INDUSTRY

While those families on the *British King* migrated to Australia well before the potato famines from 1846 to the early 1850s, they would have suffered the reduction in fortunes from the first collapse of the kelp trade. "Kelp" is now most closely associated with several species of seaweed, but it originally referred to the hardened ash produced from burning this seaweed, and subsequently became used for the organic source as well. It had been known from ancient times that the ash from seaweed mixed with animal fats could be applied with

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[12] Ibid

[13] "Caolas" is the spelling generally used today, rather than Caoles or Caolis. It means "strait" and in this case refers to the Gunna Sound, which separates the two islands. Shore to shore is about 3.5km.

curative effect to cuts and sores, but it was not known until the early 19th century that the active agent was iodine.

Seaweed had been harvested for centuries as a field fertiliser. On Coll, as elsewhere among agricultural communities bordering the ocean, seaweed thrown up by storms was gathered after rain had leached out much of the salt, and taken to the so-called "lazy beds." These were made by digging a shallow trench and filling it with seaweed and the product of the domestic byres. Then the dirt was thrown back on top and the crop, such as potatoes, was planted. Their roots reached down to the rich organic layer, and no further fertilising was needed. Over the years these long mound beds built higher and higher - their remains can be seen marking the site of many former settlements, including those on Coll.

Seaweed became an industrial feedstock, with a much higher economic value, when the French discovered in the 17th century that kelp ash was a good source of material for glazing pottery, and for making glass. Kelp contains a high proportion of chemicals used in the hard soap and glassmaking industries. The potash was also used for bleaching linen. Most of the seaweed is water, driven off during burning, so a tonne of seaweed will typically produce just 10kg of kelp. This will constitute, depending on the type of seaweed and which parts of the weed are used, 17-25% potassium chloride, 14% sodium chloride (common salt), 10-14% potassium sulphate, 4-5% sodium carbonate, 1-6% iodine, and a small amount of magnesium, with the remainder being insoluble ash.[14]

Chapman[15] notes that the kelp trade began to spread in the 18th century, first to Ireland, then Scotland where the first cargo left the Hebrides in 1722, and eventually as far as Norway. He estimates that by 1800, Scotland was producing 12,000 tons of kelp. The Napoleonic Wars and the introduction of tariffs on European imports of ceramic and glass-making materials led to a boom in kelp value, and the industry thrived in Scotland and Ireland. *In 1720 kelp ash sold for about £2 per ton, between 1740 and 1760 it was sold at £7 to £8 per ton. By 1800 this had risen to £18 to £22 per ton. Around 1810 the price of Barilla Soda from Spain fell to £10 per ton and following the end of the Napoleonic Wars, after British victory at the Battle of Waterloo in 1815, and the removal of import duty in 1820, the price of kelp ash rapidly fell back to the £2 per ton of 100 years earlier.*[16] As the price of kelp plunged, so did the labour-intensive opportunities for many Scots who were already being pushed off their lands.

At the same time, however, it was discovered that iodine could be extracted from kelp, and a new boom began. *The first factories for the extraction of iodine were built in France soon after 1820, and by 1843 the trade was once more*

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[14] *The Islands of Western Scotland: the Inner and Outer Hebrides*, W. H. Murray, Eyre Methuen 1973. ISBN 0413303802.

[15] *The Kelp Trade*, Dr V. J. Chapman. *Nature*, No. 3944, 2 June 1945, p.673.

[16] www.biomara.org - The importance of seaweed across the ages.

flourishing, says Chapman. *This stimulus given to the kelp trade by the discovery of iodine did not persist for long, because in 1873 the discovery of the Chilean resources dealt the industry a blow from which it never recovered.*

CLAN MACLEAN

The Macleans and MacDonalds have been marrying one another for centuries. The four main branches of the Maclean Clan are the Macleans of Duart, of Ardgour, of Coll and of Lochbuie. The Macleans of Duart are the senior branch, holding the title of Chamberlain to the Lord of the Isles - a MacDonald office. The Laird of Coll's extensive lands included the islands of Mull, Tiree, Islay and most of Coll, as well as mainland Morvern and Lochaber. Coll had been held by the MacDougall family of Lorne at the end of the 13th century, but they backed the wrong side when Robert the Bruce was leading his rebellion. Once he attained power he gave Coll to the MacDonald Lords, who in turn granted it to one of their supporters, John Maclean, who thus became the first Maclean Laird of Coll early in the 15th century.[17] The family was to hold Coll for 400 years.

A son of the 14th Laird of Coll in the late 18th century, Donald Maclean, seems to have been progressive, or at least had the future of his people at heart. In James Boswell's *Tour to the Hebrides* (his well known account of the 1773 trip to Scotland and the Isles with Samuel Johnson) "young Coll" takes the travellers safely through a storm and into harbour. Brady comments:

Coll, safely reached, turned out to be one extended low-lying rock, covered with sand and heath. Persistent bad weather kept them there ten days. Fortunately, they took to young Coll, a Highland chief of the best new kind. He was small, brisk, and shockingly informal with his people. He was also determined to import the new crops and farming methods he had learned in England. Already he had introduced turnips, despite local scepticism, and the natives had learned, as Johnson puts it, "that turnips will really grow, and that hungry sheep and cows will really eat them." Johnson and Boswell found him independent, good-humoured, and unfailingly helpful. His island was less attractive. They quickly exhausted its antiquities and curiosities, not overlooking two rocks which a giant and his mistress had thrown at each other.[18]

The son of the last Laird of Coll emigrated to South Africa in 1848, leaving the Georgian house where Dr Johnson and James Boswell had been entertained on their Highland tour, to become derelict. In Dr. Johnson's time there were about 1,000 people on the Island of Coll. Two hundred years later there were only about 200, mostly lowlanders in origin at that.

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[17] *Eilean Colla*: Op. Cit.

[18] *James Boswell: The Later Years 1769-1795*, Frank Brady. McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1984, p. 76. "Young Coll" drowned in the Sound of Ulva a year later during a ferry crossing.

EFFECT OF CROFTING

As landowners and tenants alike grappled with booming populations and economic events, there was a major social change in the way land was held that led to mass dispossession. The change in tenure from runrig (joint tenure land cultivated by a number of occupiers) to crofting, where each holder had a separate holding, was intended to rationalise the number of people being supported by each piece of land. Murray[19] believes this change, at the same time as the population explosion, made emigration inevitable. He records:

Runrig prevailed throughout the Hebrides until 1811, when the large-scale institution of crofting began. Crofting made for improvements in the cultivation of land, but other factors worked against its success. In the absence of leases, crofters could be removed at will, but now they were free of joint tenancies there was nothing to prevent them sub-dividing their land among cottars. (A cottar is a landless agricultural labourer, in this case likely to be kin to the crofter, often living in a cottage on the land.)

They did this to excess while crofting played a secondary role to kelp-production, the cottars giving labour as rent. The amalgamation of cattle farms to form sheep farms added to their number, and the emigration of larger tenants and tacksmen when rents trebled threw still more displaced cottars onto the croft-land, which was now occupied by a population far greater than it could naturally bear, because the tenants would not see their relatives and friends in distress.

There followed intensive cultivation of one or two crops, which impoverished the soil, for the lots were too small to allow proper rotation of crops. Scantier yields then gave inadequate support for a family even in good years, and now there were two families at least to a croft. And still the population mounted. For example, one township of Skye was held by twenty-two families of crofters, on whom lived a parasitical growth of twenty-five families of cottars. Everywhere in the Isles the pattern was the same. Only two pillars supported this dangerous social structure: the kelp trade and the potato crop.

Richards, continuing to quote Macdonald's 1811 work on agriculture, gives Coll as a specific example.

The Island of Coll, he calculated, carried at least one-third too many people. Its proprietor was caught in a dilemma. He could not bring himself to evict the surplus people, yet there seemed no humane alternative except further subdivision and congestion which would only depress further the average levels of welfare.

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[19] *The Islands of Western Scotland*, Op. cit. p.222.

The sine qua non of any agricultural improvement was the introduction of large tenants with capital. Meanwhile the condition of the people worsened and the landlord was forced to forego large amounts of rent because he was under "the necessity of maintaining three or four hundred souls of a superfluous population." The alternative - viz., "forcibly driving them away from the dwellings of their fathers, without capital, trade, or any other visible means of subsistence" - was utterly unthinkable.

But the unthinkable became inevitable, as the population outgrew the ability of the land to support it. Murray takes up the thread:

The first island to be cleared was Rum, in 1828. MacLean of Coll, who owned the island, shipped all 443 of his cottars and crofters to America, replacing them with one flockmaster, a few shepherds, and 8,000 sheep. Whatever misery may lie hidden behind these bare facts, the lot of his people seems easy compared with events on other islands 20 years later.

The kelp trade had virtually ended by 1825; around 1830, the herring shoals disappeared from the sea-lochs of the inner isles; and in 1835 the first potato blight struck the Hebrides. The effect was immediate destitution. Yet the population continued to rise, reaching its peak of 93,000 in 1841. Few landowners found strength to face the human disaster. MacDonald of Skye spent large sums of money helping a thousand of his poorer clansmen to emigrate to Australia and America.

MacLean of Coll, who had impoverished himself buying food for nearly 1,500 of his people on Coll, resolved to clear the island, not this time for sheep, but in the best interest of all. Half the people were transported and the crofts laid out as larger farms. His clearance of 1841 was too sharp and sudden, even if well-intended.

Today, there are just 45 agricultural holdings on the island.

A HIGHLAND DIASPORA

MacDougall notes that many Collachs emigrated to Canada, Australia and the mainland towns of Scotland. One mass migration in 1857 saw 81 Collachs board the *Persian* for Hobart, of whom eight died during the voyage from fevers. Overpopulation as the root cause of forced emigration from the Isles is supported by Richards[20], who states that most opinion in the Highlands at the beginning of the 19th century was strongly opposed to emigration.

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[20] *A History of the Highland Clearances: Agrarian Transformation and the Evictions 1746-1886*: Vol 1: Prof. Eric Richards: 1982: p.104. Croom Helm Ltd: ISBN 0-85664-496-X.

It was only after 1815 that landlords shifted from opposition, to ambivalence, and then to promotion of emigration. When James Macdonald published his General View of the Agriculture of the Hebrides in 1811 the dimensions of the population problem were more apparent, and public opinion was increasingly taking the view that over-population threatened the region. Macdonald wrote that:

"It is much to be wished, that Hebridean landlords had some way of providing for the surplus population of their estates, to whom they are in the present times obliged to give lands, as the only means of supporting them."

THE EMIGRATION

The Maclean of Coll[21] to whom Murray[22] refers was the 16th laird, Hugh, who took over from his father Alexander in 1828. An interesting man, he was hugely enthusiastic about the prospects of establishing a new Scottish society in Australia, and it was probably his focus on New South Wales rather than Canada that resulted in so many Collachs emigrating to Australia. Hugh McLean married twice and had a total of 10 children, while professionally he was a Lieutenant Colonel in the Guards. His exertions on behalf of his people eventually bankrupted him and in 1856 he was forced to sell off his estates, thus becoming the last Laird of Coll. He died in Dunbartonshire in August 1861, aged 78.[23]

His hope, however, had been to virtually transfer the society of an Inner Hebridean island to far-distant New South Wales, with himself continuing to run the whole show courtesy of funding by the British Government. On November 23, 1837, he wrote to Lord Glenelg, the Secretary of State for North America and Australia, setting down his plan.[24] He offered to send out 3000 Scottish immigrants at a rate of 300 a year for 10 years. In so doing, he would forego the colonial bounty for immigrants which would, by his reckoning, put him in credit for £36,000. He calculated that he would forego interest of four per cent by thus investing his capital, which added another £6480 (sic) for an all-up cost of £42,480. Hugh Maclean didn't have this sort of money, but because one arm of government was not having to pay a bounty, to him it was quite reasonable that another arm of government should advance him this amount, plus the cost of rations for his emigrants over the first year, while they became established.

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[21] There is some argument as to the correct spelling of the family name. The authors of www.mcleanofcoll.com, for example, strongly put forward McLean as the proper form.
This essay uses Maclean throughout simply because that is how Hugh, 16th of Coll, signed his name. Exceptions are where the name has been quoted in other documents, and the émigré McLeans.

[22] *The Islands of Western Scotland*, Op. cit.

[23] Mclean of Coll website, www.mcleanofcoll.com

[24] Archives Office of New South Wales, CO384/44 (reel PRO 1042)

In return for this entrepreneurship, Maclean's Scottish families should be granted 100 acres each, and he should be granted 20,000 acres. The whole capital advance would be underpinned by the rapid growth in agricultural production on his estate, and its increasing land value, which in turn would be facilitated by his Scottish families providing agricultural labour for his estate. Maclean vowed to pay back the entire loan, and painted a picture of *a moral Colony firmly rooted in this new country to the infinite advantage of it and themselves.*

He urged Glenelg to make haste, as there was not a moment to lose if ships were to be found for this sailing season. Moreover, the Highland Destitution Committee had a large surplus applicable to emigration and, according to Maclean, they were waiting on the outcome of his proposal before deciding on an unspecified distribution of funds. *Should this offer or any modification of it be likely to meet your Lordships approbation I am ready to go to London. Not a moment may be lost without danger of losing a whole year.*

Glenelg's bureaucrats had no intention of letting this Scottish laird put his hands into Treasury funds. Though he would not have seen it, his letter has been annotated (* = undeciphered word):

> *Reduced to plain terms, Mr. Maclean's proposal is, that Govt. should give him a very large tract of Land, and should advance to him £42.000 in the conveyance of labourers to it, upon condition of his engaging to repay the amount, if the scheme answer as well as he feels sure it would. There can be no doubt that this plan is not consistent with existing practice in the disposal of waste-lands. It also seems pretty evident that unlefs Govt. be prepared to give away an extensive district, and lend Forty or Fifty Thousand Pounds for its improvement, to any respectable proprietor who may apply for the purpose, there would be rather a question with exercise of power in dealing out the favor to a single individual; * while if the* is to be intended to ask who was willing to enter on the speculation, it seems to be a well-stocked Treasury that is to stand the drain. In short, the proposal seems obviously one that will not bear a moment's investigation ; and the only difficulty is that the objections are too many, and each so sufficient, that it is hard to know which to put forward without doing injustice to others of equal importance. Whatever be the reasons, however, that may be afsigned, they would, I believe, be connected with the administration of the public lands ; and as that is a branch of the * kept under the immediate direction of the Secy of State, Lord Glenelg would probably think it right that the answer to Mr Maclean should proceed from the Colonial Department, and not from me. T.F.E.*

Maclean received a polite reply formally noting that *his Lordship having attentively considered your proposal, regrets to find himself under the necefsity of declining on behalf of H. M. Government to accede to it.*

Maclean seems to have heard that he would be better off trying the Colonial Office, and 4 December 1837 he wrote to Earl Grey:

Sir,
Believing that the Australian Colonies are more immediately under your Direction and feeling afsured of the personal interest you will take in the subject, I beg leave to communicate the substance of my letter to Lord Glenelg offering to settle in Australia, clear of Convict Contamination, 3000 of my poor Countrymen without Expense to government. I am a Highland Proprietor who having lost one third of his income by the annihilation of kelp manufacture have consequently a large surplus population which must either ruin me, starve, or Emigrate. These poor people naturally look to me for the help I am utterly unable to afford – and I feel most keenly the responsibility of recommending their going into the almost certain destruction of Convict contact and example. They are themselves aware of their great danger and importune me for location apart. This I endeavour to obtain for them by my offer.

His letter went on the detail what was effectively the same proposal, and once again he was knocked back. On 9 December, Maclean had one last try, taking a slightly different tack:

Woodlands Dunoon Decr 9
1837

My Lord

I have just seen in the final report of the Committee of the Legislative Council of New South Wales on Emigration to that Colony Recommendation of a remifsion in the purchase of land by emigrant settlers – not to exceed 160£ per family.

This if acted on will greatly simplify the plan I had the honor of proposing to your Lordship – and will enable the British Government to carry on emigration to Australia to any extent without any expence whatever.

If the proposed remifsion in purchase of land be allowed to the extent of 100£ for each family – I make offer to purchase land near Port Philip to the amount of £25.000 being the amount of remifsion allowed for 250 families, about 1200 souls.

Provided that the British Government advance (in loan to be repaid in 6 years) in year 1838 £12.500 & in year 1839 £12.500, in all £25.000 for transport, 2 years rations, stock &c of 1200 emigrants – the land so occupied & stocked being worth many times the original purchase money must be ample security against pofsible lofs.

It is proposed that each emigrant shall work on my private farms or works for general benefit, 1½ years, receiving rations for <u>two</u> compleat years after landing, previous to settling on land of his own, on which he would thus be set down with experience, without debt or fear of want until the fruit of his own labours became available. Thus My Lord would the three great obstacles to emigration to Australia be overcome,

1st the great expence
2nd Convict Contamination

3rd the Emigration of the best only of our population.
The other advantages of this plan now can better appreciate and therefore I have no doubt of its obtaining your Lordships early consideration. Thousands are interested most deeply, & wait with anxiety the decision of Government.

I have the honor to be
your Lordships obedient hmbl servt
Hugh Maclean

Rt Hnb
Lord Glenelg
&c &c

The extent to which Maclean's plan might have helped my own McDonald and McLean ancestors is problematic, as they were not his people. The Maclean estates occupied the major part of the island, but the two extremities were owned by the Duke of Argyll. From the beginning of the 19th century a Campbell family had the tack of these two estates, which they ultimately bought from Argyll.

AUSTRALIA CALLS

In the midst of all this turmoil, hard-working God-fearing Scots were seen as ideal immigrants for a colony that was beginning to regard itself as "Australia" and was looking for ways to reduce the predominance of current and former convicts. A bounty scheme was set up to bring these displaced but valuable people to New South Wales, with the government paying £10 for each person.

By May 1838 the Highlanders' prejudices against going to Australia….had largely disappeared, probably because of (a) *relaxation of the regulations to permit elderly relatives to go out on the government ships….. The close ties of the relationship among many of these people can be guessed from the emigrant list of the British King, which sailed from Tobermory in October 1838. Of 332 people, 146 bore the surname MacDonald.*[25]

In 1838 the *Brilliant* arrived in Sydney with a load of bounty immigrants that included 56 from Coll. It was followed in 1839 by the *British King* with 19 Collachs amongst the passengers, and in 1840 by the *George Fyfe* with 14 more from Coll. Our McDonald family made up the bulk of the Collachs on board the *British King*.

Perhaps encouraged by letters from friends or relatives on the *Brilliant,* the McDonald family embarked on 28 October, 1838, at the port of Tobermory on the Isle of Mull to sail to Australia. The master of the 637 ton ship was William Paton and the surgeon responsible for the health of the 326 emigrants was

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25 *Scotland and Australia 1788-1850*, David S. MacMillan, Clarendon Press, 1967.

Alexander Arbuckle.[26] The complement comprised 140 male and 112 female adults, and 32 male and 42 female children. The agents were encouraged to bring out females so as not to add to the male-female imbalance in the colony. In order to obtain the bounty on each unmarried adult male, the agent had to declare that he had also brought out *an unappropriated unmarried Female, between fifteen and thirty years*.

The documentation also gives great assistance to those tracing family relationships, recording the parents of both heads of each household. Thus we find that Donald McDonald is the son of Neil McDonald, a farmer, and of Margaret Campbell, who is herself the daughter of John Campbell, also a farmer, and all of them *'of the same place.'* Mary McDonald is the daughter of Neil McLean, a farmer, and of Margaret McDonald, herself the daughter of Donald McDonald, also a farmer and also all *'of the same place.'* Untangling the omnipresent McDonalds and McLeans from the small community of Coll is thus rendered possible.

UNCERTAIN AGE

Donald possibly made himself a little more attractive to the bounty scheme by giving his age as 47 at the time of embarkation, whereas he was more probably 51, since we know that a Donald McDonald – the son of Neil McDonald and Margaret nee Campbell was christened on Coll on 25 April, 1787. He is less likely to have been confused about his age, since the documents show he could read and write, unlike his wife. Mary said she was 38, but she was probably 10 years older based on equivalent records of a christening on 26 May 1790.

Along with the parents came their children – Flora aged 24, Norman (15), Donald (12), twins Marian and Catherine (10), and Isabella aged just five. Elsewhere in the documents we find two adult unmarried male immigrants: 22-year old farm servant John McDonald *'A Native of The Island of Col Son of Donald McDonald pafsenger by the same ship'* and 20-year old farm servant Neil McDonald with the same description. There are slight mis-matches in their ages, but based on this and IGI records they appear to be members of the same family. So we find the McDonald family of three adult and two child males, and two adult and 3 child females, comprising 10 of the 19 Collachs on board.

VOYAGE OF THE *BRITISH KING*

The voyage's action started three days before sailing when the wife of Dun(can) McDonald gave girth to a baby boy. The voyage was not long under way when Betzie Frazer aged 5 died *'in consequence of a fall'* on November 3, and four

[26] AONSW reel 1299, shelf 4/4939: Immigration: Entitlement certificates of persons on bounty ships, 1839; 28 Feb 1839 British King.

days later 3-year old Catherine Frazer died from croup. By now a combination of living conditions and changed diet had seen diarrhoea take hold amongst the passengers, to the extent that babies Duncan McDonald and Alexander McDonald died from it on November 26 and December 3 respectively. Meanwhile, James Cameron's wife had borne a daughter on 1 December and Donald McLean's wife a son on December 3. The next two December births resulted in tragedy, with Mrs Donald McCallum losing her son within 19 days, and Mrs Malcolm Mackinnon her son within 12 days of their births. Both died from hydrocephalus, a build-up of cerebrospinal fluid caused by a blockage, and baby Mackinnon's death on Christmas Day must have dampened the spirits of the passengers.

Just one more birth and one more death occurred on the voyage, the latter ending the life of Isabella Frazer aged 18 years from phthisis (pulmonary tuberculosis). But overall, by the standards of the day, the voyage was regarded as quite healthy and the passengers had no complaints on landing. Master William Paton recorded in his log:

Divine service was kept every Sabbath since we left Tobermory. Two hundred & Forty Protestants and Eighty Eight Catholics – a school was also established. Thirty Five scholars attended regularly, all of whom made great progress – They were made to appear on deck whenever the weather permitted and the greatest attention was always paid to cleanlinefs – dancing & other amusement was also encouraged.'

The *British King* arrived in Port Jackson on 28 February 1839 after a voyage of 121 days, and the *Sydney Gazette*[27] remarked:

The principal part of the emigrants per British King are farm labourers and shepherds; they are a healthy and respectable set of people. Great credit is due to the officers and surgeon on board for the cleanly state of the vessel.

Catherine McDonald's death certificate records that the family stayed just two months in Sydney before moving to Victoria, where it seems more of their friends and relatives were already setting up, or were to join them. In adjacent graves in the Presbyterian portion of the Warrnambool cemetery lie Donald, Ronald and Norman McDonald; Janet, Allan, Margaret, Mary, Elizabeth, Catherine and Alexander McLean, and Isabella and William Hutton. Other McDonalds and McLeans are buried nearby.[28] Catherine McDonald, who was five years older than Isabel, never married and died in Victoria in 1874 aged 45.[29]

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[27] *Sydney Gazette and New South Wales Advertiser*, Saturday, March 2, 1839. Number 4143, page 2, column 6.
[28] Microfiche of the Warrnambool Cemetery Grave Plans, Alexander Library, Perth.
[29] Vic. Reg. Gen. index, death No. 07843 of 1874.

The clearances on Coll resulted in many deaths and a great deal of hardship, anguish and despair. But the outcome for those who survived being transplanted to Australia can be favourably judged against those few who stayed behind. In 1944 the Scottish Seaweed Research Association was formed to examine if the kelp industry might be started again, in part to help improve the lives of the crofters in the highlands and islands of Scotland. A year later Dr Chapman remarked:[30] *The poverty of these people has to be seen to be believed: the habitations compare unfavourably with many of our slums, and over-crowding in small, ill-lit and badly ventilated cottages with their heavy peat smoke atmosphere is the rule rather than the exception. Any effort, therefore, that will improve their lot is to be welcomed.*

Brian Wills-Johnson is a descendant of one of the MacDonald families who emigrated to Australia on the British King. He welcomes comment, corrections and additional information relevant to this article for future updates, and can be contacted here.

[30] The Kelp Trade, Nature. Op. cit.