

Article by Betty MacDougall (1996)

Emigration. The Fourth and Final Instalment

EMIGRATION THE FOURTH AND FINAL INSTALMENT

By Betty MacDougall

In the 1840s some family groups crossed the Atlantic to Canada, usually to join relatives who had already settled there.

It was a big undertaking for people who had probably never before left the island and there was, of course, the language problem: Coll people were all Gaelic speakers. There was no system of assisted passage at this time, so would-be pioneers had to have some stock and effects to sell to finance the venture. Ship brokers toured the country for prospective customers, painting pictures of a Promised Land over the seas.

Liverpool was the biggest emigrant port in the country, ships were sailing for abroad on every tide. The emigrants from the Gaeltachd were bundled from one agent to another.

Usually Glasgow was a stopping off point en route and there the people would get some help and support from relatives or friends but once they reached Liverpool they were at the mercy of confidence tricksters and could be plundered at every step. Runners awaited the packet boats bringing in the hapless travellers and tried to steer them to dubious lodging houses. It was said that there were only two honest boarding-house keepers in the whole town.

A crofting family of MacInnes from Trelavaig sold up their goods and made their way to Liverpool in 1847. Unfortunately Liverpool just then had become a 'City of the Plague' in an epidemic of smallpox. The whole family was struck down. The parents and two of the children died but one boy, Alexander, aged ten, survived and miraculously was returned by the Poor Law authorities to his grandfather in Coll, Neil MacKinnon at Canadigh.

He worked on the family croft until his early twenties when he migrated for summer work in Bute and then decided to try the fishing at Campbeltown, then a boom fishing port. He settled there and prospered to the extent that he was able to send a son through Medical College. A grandson, Dr.

A. MacInnes, has visited Coll.

Early in the 1840s John Johnston, the tacksman of Mibosd died leaving a wife and eight children. Hugh, the eldest had just entered Edinburgh University to train for the Ministry, but with such a drastic change in the monetary situation the decision was taken to join relatives in Canada. The voyage took about six weeks and after landing in Quebec the mother, Mary MacLean of the Figsary family and one of the girls succumbed to fever and Hugh, a lad of 18, was left in charge of his small brothers and sisters.

He taught school for a time and was Precentor and Sunday School teacher in the Presbyterian Church at Beaverton.

Descendants have visited Coll.

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In 1847 when the potato famine had taken grim effect, Murdoch Johnston, who had a croft on Arnabosd ground, decided to emigrate.

He was a deeply religious man and the agitation at the time of the Disruption had disturbed him greatly. With his wife and nine children he embarked on a ship at Liverpool on what turned out to be a dreadful voyage of nearly eight weeks. Smallpox and other fevers broke out on board and his lovely son Alexander was interred in the watery grave of the Atlantic.

On arrival at Quarantine Island they were all separated, men to one hospital, women to another and the children elsewhere. It was two months before Murdoch recovered sufficiently to search for his family. He found his wife with one child and then set off for Quebec and Montreal to look for the others. He never saw his wife again.

In Montreal he found the name of his son Donald listed among the dead. In the course of further illness and hardship he found two more of his children dead. Months later he was able to settle in Mara township with the remaining four of his boys and one girl. Quite a number of Coll people had settled in that area.

This sorry tale was recounted in a letter written by Murdoch in Gaelic, strongly coloured by Biblical language. He was appealing to his brother William, who had risen from the ranks to a captaincy in the Madras Infantry, to send money to buy land. Another brother, Duncan arrived in Mara with the money and they were able to make a good settlement.

