

SPECIAL ARTICLE

JAMES HUNTER; March 2003 (an address to Americans)

Some years ago when I was working for the Scottish Crofters Union I attended a meeting on the Isle of Skye on a very stormy January evening. Into our meeting there stepped an elderly crofter and with water cascading from his clothing, he accused me: "You're the man who's always writing about the Highland Clearances."

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

"Well," said the wind-battered crofter, "My only regret about the Highland Clearances is that the 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 they too might easily have become Americans. But they didn't. So, like that disgruntled crofter, I'm not an orange-growing Californian – I'm a Scot, a Highlander who lives and works in the Highlands and Islands.

Twelve months ago, I went to see a tombstone at the Old Bethesda Presbyterian Church in Moore County, North Carolina. This tombstone commemorates Colin Bethune who came to Moore County, in all likelihood, from Skye, where Bethune, or Beaton, remains a common name. "Colin Bethune," the tombstone reads "Died 1820, aged 64. An honest man. A native of Scotland by accident, but a citizen of the US by choice." I like that.

To believe in the American Dream was to be convinced that to get here from Europe was instantly to liberate oneself from the Old World's hardships and injustices. Simply by crossing the Atlantic, it was thought, men and women – who, had they remained in the countries of their birth, would have been condemned to life-long poverty and oppression – could gain the ability to shape their lives, fulfill their potential, gain a good income. In reality, of course, matters weren't quite so simple – many didn't even get here. But America was a country where, as was then impossible in Scotland, a working family could acquire a farm of their own.

On to emigration's downside. From the perspective of individual emigrants emigration was almost wholly positive. For countries where emigrants settled, it was positive as well. But in the localities emigrants came from – such as the Highlands and Islands – emigration's impact was unremittingly, absolutely, almost terminally negative. You, and people like you, add up to a huge gain in America's human capital; but from our standpoint, you represent an equally huge loss.

But now; over the last 30 years, a period when Scotland's total population has been static or shrinking, the population of the Highlands and Islands has gone up by some 20 per cent and the number of people in work in the region has grown by nearly 50 per cent. Take Skye. Thirty years ago, Skye's population had been falling for more than a century, and that trend seemed set to continue. Instead the opposite has happened.

Skye today 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 centres, first rate hotels and the Three Chimneys – voted 28th best restaurant in the world.

There are plenty of other good Highlands' stories to tell: state-of-the-art aerogenerators; major renewables ventures are on stream, energy plant fuelled from biomass; an internationally-unique marine energy test centre, and a container trans-shipment hub for all of North-West Europe.

New ferries, bridges and causeways have turned the islands of Barra, the Uists, Harris and Lewis into a single economy; we're creating a multi-purpose industrial park with wind turbine manufacture. Inverness employs 1,100 people in the manufacture of self-diagnostic kits for diabetics. Our food sector is expanding; agricultural marketing ventures, fish-farming.

Today's Highlands and Islands are an area where more folk are moving in than moving out. In a world where good environments are increasingly seen as crucial, the northern part of Scotland, with easily the most outstanding landscapes and scenery in the UK, is a place where people want to live. And thanks to technological advance it's getting easier for us to have the sort of business that would formerly have been located in an urban centre far away.

Dr Hunter goes on to talk about the crucial part played by the University of Highlands and Islands Millennium Institute in the regeneration of the area.