

Highlanders, Australia and the Macleods

Talk for the 50th anniversary of the Clan Macleod Society of South Australia at Football Park, Adelaide, 14 October 2007.

I'm very glad to be part of this grand Jubilee occasion, and it is a privilege to be asked. . It is also wonderful to be part of the celebration of the story of a world wide clan, a world wide family that retains a sense of identity despite its dispersion, and dare I say it, its dilution, across the world over the past many centuries.

Obviously the Macleods have remained Macleods even in a globalised world. And the great family has maintained its continuing traditions and a firm sense of affinity and solidarity.

Any society that can keep itself alive for fifty years deserves congratulation and the Macleods of South Australia evidently possess a deep historical sense. And this is what I have in common with you because I have been gripped by the history of the Scottish Highlands for more than twenty years and its impossible to avoid the Macleods in this story partly because there are simply so many of them and they have been very prolific.

But this create problems for historians and genealogists of which you are certainly likely to be aware. One of the most common names in Scotland is probably Macleod, especially Donald Macleod – a bit like John Smith elsewhere – and it is virtually impossible to distinguish the Donald Macleods, a genealogist's nightmare if you are tracking family histories or writing on Highland history..

It may seem a bit perverse to invite a Welsh-Australian such as myself to talk about the Highlands and especially about controversial bits of its history including those of the Macleods. But there is always some advantage in long distance perspectives and maybe some neutrality too. So I would like to make a virtue of this Welshness.

We all almost all of us emigrants or descendants of them; and the Macleods are part of this big story. I'm going to talk about the Highland part of this story because the Macleods generally originated in the first instance, from the north-west Highlands – from the Hebrides, from Skye, Lewis, Harris, Raasay, Coigach and Assynt in particular - the north-west coast of Scotland and in much of the Inner and Outer Hebrides.

The story of the Scottish Highlands is wrapped about in mist and romance and nostalgia but it also stirs up severe controversy within and outwith Scotland.

And the story of the Highlands is of course integral to present day Scottish politics and the recent great surge of Scottish nationalism. The new Parliament in Edinburgh is currently guiding the country toward more independence and much of it is inspired by a special version of Scottish History which includes much about the Highlands. Including their role of the Act of Union, Culloden, the famines, emigration and especially the Highland Clearances.

I was recently at a ceremony in the northern Highlands at Helmsdale in Sutherland which was to inaugurate a great new monumental sculpture by Gerald Laing to commemorate 'The Emigrants' over the past two hundred years. The First Minister of Scotland, Alex Salmond, was part of the ceremony and there was much talk about a new national museum not only to the Emigrants but also to the Clearances. I'll come back to the Clearances in a moment.

But I wanted to mention that the sculpture was commissioned and paid for by a son of a local croft who had made good in Canada and Africa in mining, especially gold, diamonds and sapphires. This millionaire tycoon émigré Highlander in fact is Dennis Macleod and he wants to set up replicas of the same fine monument in Canada at Winnipeg and in other locations where Scots emigrated including, of course, Australia and New Zealand.

So perhaps we might see one here in Adelaide. It's time we had more public sculptures in Adelaide - and Robert Burns on North Terrace for too long has been a lonely Scottish figure.

We are living at a very special moment in the Highland experience. The Highlands is presently now catching the attention of the nation at large and among Highlanders across the world. After decades of retrogression the Highland region is now beginning to show signs of remarkable and unheralded revival.

Let me mention a few aspects of this:

There is now net immigration into the Highlands; the population is rising faster than in Scotland at large; in Skye it is rising at a rate seven times faster and this is of course the traditional centre of the Macleods. Inverness has the fastest rate of growth in all Europe. Inverness house prices are rising faster than anywhere else

There is a rash of new enterprise in the Highlands and the Islands – including one of the worlds largest wind farms in Shetland and, more controversially on the Lewis, as well as big new hydroelectric development.

There is a new University of the Highlands and Islands in the making with campuses spread across the entire region. The Highlands and Islands now have a higher rate of workforce participation than in London.

The Highlands are now longer to be regarded as peripheral and people are even talking of Inverness as the new Seattle of Scotland.

All this is surprising especially in the light of the history of the Highlands which is the origin of so much of the emigration which I spoke of before.

This current revival is against that background of loss population decline in the Highlands for 150 years and, of course, emigration which is partly why we are here today celebrating the Macleods in the Antipodes as they are celebrated across the rest of the world. What was that about?

Highlanders have migrated within their region, within Scotland and across the entire world for more than two centuries. This is not unique to the Highlands – it was the generic experience of all rural people – most of us in this room will have come from rural ancestors, probably peasantries of some kind at some time in the last two hundred years. The Highlanders were high on the league table of British emigrants of all sorts in all directions but mainly to the south.

The West Highlands of Scotland went through several revolutionary changes even before they started coming to Australia. The most fundamental change was the population revolution which doubled and trebled the population in the 80 or so years after 1780, an astonishing expansion of the number of mouths to be fed. The West Highlands was region of shocking poverty even before the demographic revolution; population growth made it worse.

Many of the expanded male population were absorbed into the Highland regiments which served Britain through its wars with the Americans and against Napoleon and in the Crimea. Many others emigrated to the industrialising south of Scotland and to England; but the local population still kept rising and they became increasingly dependent on potatoes and tragically liable to recurrent famine.

On top of this, the old industries of the region declined or expired – fishing, kelp and cattle and local industries shrank over several decades. And meanwhile sheep farming became much more lucrative – introducing a revolution in land use in the Highlands. Sheep farming had little use of labour but was exceedingly demanding of the land itself.

Thus the people were pressed to get out; most of them walked off or became crofters on the coasts; but many were evicted by desperate landlords wanting to introduce dynamic sheep farmers and to also to reduce the burden of poverty on their estates. Mostly this was done by normal legal process but there was resistance and a lot of rough handling in the eviction methods. The people in large numbers were forced from the land and this was deeply resented at the time and ever since.

Thus the Clearances caused great aggravation and bitterness and accelerated emigration from the region, even though the total population of the Highlands continued to increase until the 1850s. Thereafter it fell for 150 years.

Out of this fraught background came all sorts of emigrants, and a small part of them came to Australia and a further proportion of them including very many Macleods of course.

The Clearances story is probably the most controversial issue in Scottish life even today. Any of you have read any recent Scottish history and politics will know that there are even ‘Clearance-deniers’ at large in Scotland. My own work suggests otherwise.

What is obvious and generally agreed is that in the Clearances, as at Culloden, families and clans were divided; Macleods were on both sides in the great divide in Highland society which took place in the years in which modern Australia was being founded.

For instance, several of the great clearing landlords were Macleods, in Skye and elsewhere. They included full-bloodied clearers who evicted without mercy and many of the people evicted were also ordinary clansmen, many of them Macleods of course since this was the most common name in the north west. Some of the greatest perpetrators of eviction were landlords named Macleod.

On the other hand we have another Macleod image. Thus Macleod, the owner the laird of the extremely remote island of St Kilda, when he heard that a party of the islanders were determined to emigrate to Port Phillip in 1852 was distraught at the loss of such people. Macleod pleaded with the people not to go; and he even accompanied them to the docks at the Broomielaw on the Clyde and wept tears on their departure.

And we can also register the fact that the most eloquent and ferocious critic of the Clearances was a poor stonemason who wrote a violent denunciation of the landlords lands – this was Donald Macleod of Sutherland who even denounced Harriet Beecher Stowe author of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, who had sided up too close to the clearing landlords, namely the Duchess of Sutherland.

And Macleod of Macleod in Skye in the famine of 1847 practically bankrupted himself providing relief to the starving islanders. So the landlords' story, even among the Macleods, is complicated.

Let me mention a few of the Highlanders who got as far as Australia – to show the diversity of the Highland exodus and the fact that people from all levels of Highland society were emigrating and many of them reached here.

One group came from Wester Ross under the charismatic leadership of a thunderous Presbyterian minister called Norman Macleod. He led several hundred Highlanders in 1817 to Cape Breton Island and set up a self-contained community, part of which persists through to the present day – a part Gaelic-speaking community still.

But astonishingly, 30 years after the original Atlantic migration - when eastern Canada suffered potato famine – they decided to leave Cape Breton still under Macleod's leadership – they built their own flotilla of ocean-going ships and in 1849 set off for South Australia to re-establish their community here. When they got to Port Adelaide they failed to reach agreement with the colonial government and decided to move on to Port Phillip. Here again they decided that there was not decent land available for them So they sailed onto North Island of New Zealand and obtained generous land grants at Waipu and set up their community there. It was an extraordinary treble migration which demonstrated the astonishing solidarity and the dominance of Norman Macleod – as many of you are bound to know.

There were plenty of wealthy Highland émigrés in colonial Australia – the Chief of Glengarry, whose family extravagance had reduced his family to penury and near bankruptcy – came to New South Wales in the late 1830s to re-establish the clan in the outback. Glengarry brought a full retinue of his clan and servants and had the idea of establishing a dairying property with 500 head of cattle in Taradale in Gippsland. Even though he was given a grand welcome on arrival in Sydney, with Highland

lunches and dinners just like this one today, it all turned to dust. And Glengarry capitulated, sold up in two years, and returned to Scotland in humiliation and penury and went to an early grave.

More successful and much tougher was Major Donald Macleod of Talisker in Skye who, after regimental service, realised that there was little prospect of economic advancement in the Highlands. Through various Highland connections Macleod acquired a land grant in Van Dieman's Land in 1820 and set up an estate which he called Talisker and was highly successful there and then in Port Phillip in 1837. But his reputation was tarnished by his brutal treatment of his convict labour force which produced rebellion and outrage – it was not a pretty story. There are, of course, 'Taliskers' in South Australia –including one near Delamere were a party of Macleods sought silver and lead in the 1860s: the old workings are still to be seen at the site..

Much bigger numbers coming to Australia were included the flight of ordinary Highlanders - poor folk offered free passages to Australia at the time of the Potato Famine in the late 1840s. They were not necessarily victims of clearances so much as generalised poverty in a very poor country. About 5000 came in the mere three year period. They included many who came on the nightmare voyage of the *Hercules* to Port Adelaide in 1851 and some of the descendants are here today.

They included also the 37 people St Kilda people I mentioned earlier. This was one third of the entire population of the island and their voyage on the *Priscilla* was fascinating but tragic story. They were, in effect, people escaping from their extremely remote fastnesses out on the continental shelf of the Atlantic: as I said earlier, and they were certainly not cleared or evicted. They travelled by way of the Clyde and the Mersey. But only half of their number survived the journey to Australia –they were more than decimated by the outbreak of measles on board their ship.

The St Kildans succumbed to this most common disease simply because their island location had prevented the usual immunity from developing in that remote community. Those who survived eventually spread themselves across Victoria and some went on to New Zealand – and their descendants are enthusiastic family historians who possess all the details

But I have to tell you that the football team and the suburb of St Kilda in Melbourne are not actually named aft the island or these migrants.

We should also note that most Macleods who came to Australia would have come from the Lowlands or England having already made their way south before moving overseas. This was the normal route for emigrants across the British Isles; most from urban backgrounds.

And of course every sort of motive that activated people to emigrate. Here in South Australia we had a considerable clustering of Highlanders in the south east and there are many signs of this today. Clan Genealogies show Highlanders in many parts of the colony. And we have a descendent of early South Australian Macleods with us today. As we know the grave of John Macleod styled Chief of the Clan Torquile, the Raasay Macleod who died in 1861 is preserved at Nalang Station near Tatiara,

Bordertown. His is an interesting symbolic figure of a certain type of migrant – apparently emigrating to avoid accumulated gambling debts back in the home country – one of the many sorts of motivation that produced emigration to Australia. His debts amounted to the colossal figure of £61,000 (many millions by present standards) and ended with the forfeiture of the family estates and an escapist emigration to South Australia. In this case Macleod was in the company of Murdoch MacLaine of Lochbuie in Mull and both of them forfeited estates back in Scotland prior to reaching this colony.

Highland adversity therefore produced many versions of emigration and we get the full range of these migrants here in South Australia and a good cross section of their descendants here today.

These connections between Australia and the Highlands are full of strange twists and peculiarities. One was the fact that the Highlanders were escaping, in part, from the effects of sheepfarming in the north of Scotland; yet they often found themselves enough pushing sheep grazing deeper and deeper into the Australian outback. This then, of course, put renewed pressure on Aborigines and evicting them in their turn from their ancestral lands.

And later on, from the 1860s, Australian sheep producers became so efficient and competitive that they helped to undermine sheep farming back in the Scottish Highlands which then saw the substitution of deer hunting in the Highlands and the growth of tourism glamorised by Queen Victoria and the Royal Family at Balmoral. At that point we have some of the descendants of the clearers who were emigrating to Australia to be abused by fellow Highlanders on arrival. It was another nice irony in the Highland – Australia story..

When James Hunter, the first Professor of History and the prospective new University of the Highlands and Islands, and also the historian of the overseas Macleods, visited Australia recently he was intrigued to find aboriginal Macleods and he spoke warmly about them.

The Highlanders and the Macleods were part of the great intermingling and intermarrying of people in this country – at which the Scots seem to have been slightly better than the peoples from the rest of the British Isles. This probably strengthened the genes all round.

It seems to me highly fitting that the most famous and celebrated Macleod in South Australia today is probably the man who graces the hollowed turf that we can see from here. In a way Andrew Macleod, the footballer, is the perfect exemplar of the convergence of Scotland and Australia, of Highlanders and Aboriginal people, and a further feather in the cap of the Clan Macleod. It is evidently a badge of honour from every viewpoint.

I live in hope that we will discover some Welsh Macleods somewhere in this wide land. And we can now look forward to the Centenary of the Clan Macleod Society in Adelaide. Fifty years from now that occasion I am sure will be of equal brilliance as today's great celebration. Perhaps in 2057 the Macleod Centenary will be

orchestrated by a Sudanese Macleod. And with this attractive prospect I would like to wish all you Macleods well for the next half century.

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