

# ISSUES OF HISTORY, HERITAGE AND CULTURE THROUGH A HEBRIDEAN PRISM

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## Abstract

Scotland's Outer Hebrides have a deep, multi-layered past, with resources of cultural capital that are regularly drawn on, commodified and consumed as cultural heritage. Whether mediated through the economics of cultural production, the strategic essentialism of identity politics, or the societal policies of cultural sustainability, this heritage—not least in its shared transatlantic dimension—is a significant aspect of contemporary islandness. The resultant tensions between history and heritage arising over the contested cultural terrain of the Hebrides raise important issues, most importantly in the context of a re-emergent and redefined Scotland. This paper focuses on one specific set of locations, the Uists and Barra, and one particular set of episodes, the nineteenth- and twentieth-century emigrations to Canada. I aim to explore the tensions within the history/heritage dichotomy, to outline the implications of new historical research and, following Lowenthal (1998), foreground the significance of the implications for the small island communities concerned and the wider politics of Scotland and Atlantic Canada.

## Keywords

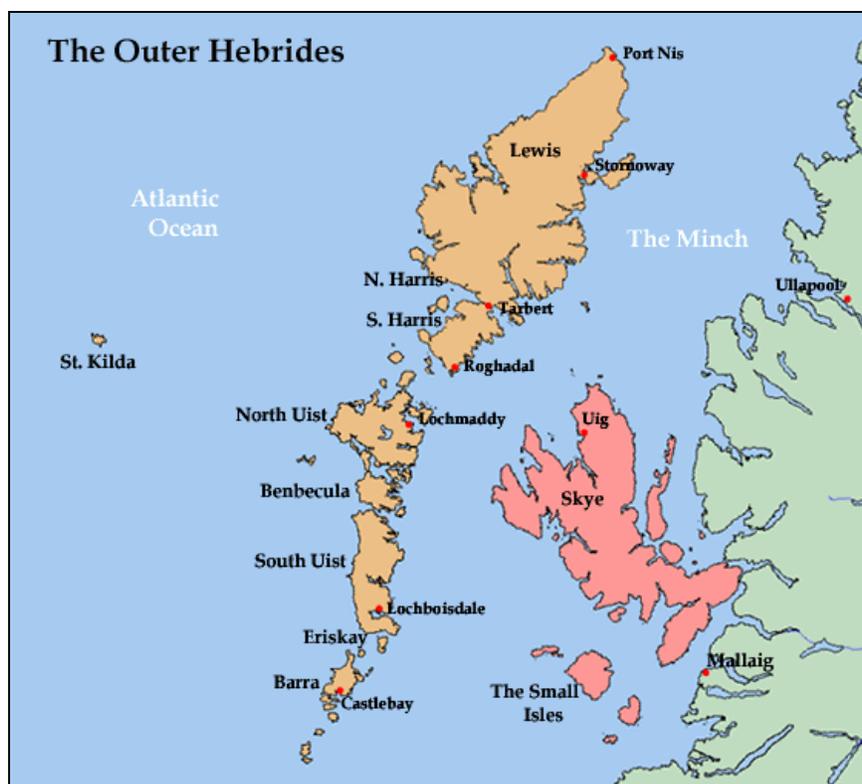
Hebrides, heritage, history, Scotland

## Introduction

In his stimulating study that seeks to resolve “the conundrums that encumber heritage when it is misconceived as history” (Lowenthal, 1998: xv), David Lowenthal touches on one of the many linkages between Scotland and Canada’s islands when he writes:

Ignorance, like distance, protects heritage from ... scrutiny.... The vaguest details of their Hebridean heritage suffice Canada’s Prince Edward Islanders.... The Islanders belong to the Hebrides in a way that explicit knowledge would only weaken (Lowenthal, 1998: 135).

It is this tension between history and heritage—a cultural phenomenon common to both island communities—that I would like to dwell on. In particular, I would like to highlight Lowenthal’s observation that “ignorance protects heritage from scrutiny” and that shared island heritage is ultimately weakened by “explicit knowledge”. My focus is on the islands of South Uist and Barra, where the ‘making of the Hebrides’ as a heritage construct involves not the exposition of the complexity of historical events, but rather the elision of all that is awkward and inconvenient in the latter. I want to do so through the prism of three specific moments in the successive phases of emigration from these islands to Canada by focusing on the particular strands woven into the palimpsest of Hebridean heritage that these three moments evoke, recurring themes that can be conveniently short-handed as ‘the extirpation of the Gael’, the monocular focus on ‘the land question’ and the presentation of the Hebrides as a ‘last bastion against modernity’. I want to tease out from the same three moments some explicit historical knowledge that points to a more complex and ambivalent reading of the past, one that reveals complicity, a more intricate and unattractive contestation of power and authority than a noble Manichean land struggle, and a setting of island communities highly receptive to external ideas and influences. This pattern of combinations provides a framework through which a grounded exposition of the problematic relationship between heritage and history in relation to island cultural studies can be developed.<sup>1</sup>



Map 1: The Outer Hebrides, Scotland

### The Emigration of 1851

Over the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the articulation of the distinctive pre-capitalist order of Gaelic clanship with an encapsulating mercantile capitalism was a complex process, reinforcing the former in the short term, but fatally corrosive in its social transformations. By the early nineteenth century, with the relatively sudden shift within the wider social formation to the penetrative practices of capitalist land use, the social and cultural order of the Hebrides changed irrevocably as across the Highlands all lingering remnants of Gaelic clanship were eclipsed, the vestigial remains of its natural economy destroyed, and its Gaelic culture eviscerated.<sup>2</sup> Reconfigured as 'estates,' the old clan patrimonies of Benbecula, South Uist and Barra were packaged and disposed of as commodified landed property to Colonel Gordon of Cluny, owner of an extensive portfolio of estates in and beyond his own domain in the non-Gaelic northeast of Scotland. The transformation ushered in new policies of land use, a process that centred on appropriation of communal grazings and old settlements to form large single-tenant farms, the relocation of a part of the 'redundant' population in contiguous and congested crofting townships as a convenient supply of labour, and the removal and forced emigration of the remainder 'surplus' population to North America. The reverberations of this traumatic social and cultural era had an enduring impact on the national-popular collective consciousness of Scotland itself, with one of the most extensively recycled stories in Scotland's heritage repertoire, the historical episode known as 'the Highland Clearances' (Devine, 2006; Richards, 2007).<sup>3</sup>

In presenting these events, no text is more assiduously cited—by academic historians, popular writers or heritage promoters alike—than Alexander Mackenzie’s *The History of the Highland Clearances*. This compilation drew heavily on the work of earlier authors, including that of Donald MacLeod, the Sutherland campaigner and subsequent émigré to Canada (Mackenzie, 1883). The eyewitness testimony quoted by the latter in his *Gloomy memories... A faithful picture of the extirpation of the Celtic race from the Highlands of Scotland* (1892) was utilised verbatim for Mackenzie’s own account of events in the Hebrides, including “the enormities perpetrated in South Uist and the Island of Barra in the summer of 1851”.<sup>4</sup>

On Barra it was the conduct of the Rev. Beatson, the resident minister, that the eyewitness deemed “deserving of the censure of every feeling heart”:

*This ‘wolf in sheep’s clothing’ made himself very officious, as he always does, when he has an opportunity of oppressing the poor Barra men, and of gaining the favour of Colonel Gordon. In fact, he is the most vigilant and assiduous officer Colonel Gordon has. He may be seen in Castle Bay, the principal anchorage in Barra, whenever a sail is hoisted, directing his men, like a gamekeeper with his hounds, in case any of the doomed Barra men should escape* (MacLeod, 1892: 139).

In South Uist, a similar zealous pursuit of reluctant emigrants by those in power and authority was graphically described:

*One stout Highlander, named Angus Johnston, resisted with such pith that they had to handcuff him before he could be mastered; but in consequence of the priest’s interference his manacles were removed, and he was marched between four officers on board the emigrant vessel.... Were you to see the racing and chasing of policemen, constables, and ground officers, pursuing the outlawed natives, you would think, only for their colour, that you had been, by some miracle, transported to the banks of the Gambia, on the slave coast of Africa* (MacLeod, 1892: 138).

MacLeod had subtitled his earlier account *A faithful picture of the extirpation of the Celtic Race from the Highlands of Scotland*. It is this framework of ‘fuadach nan Gàidheal’ (the clearing out of the Gael), also adopted by Mackenzie, that has become the enduring core motif of the heritage industry not just in the Hebrides but throughout the Gàidhealtachd (Gaelic area) and beyond.<sup>5</sup> These forced emigrations of 1851 are presented as moments in a deeper, wider process: the systematic ‘ethnic cleansing’ of an indigenous culture and people by other non-Gael external forces fuelled by institutionalised racism. The ‘explicit knowledge’ of history, however, tells a very different story.

MacLeod presented his documentation of events on Barra over 1850-51 in a passage entitled ‘The Exiled Barramen and their Calumniators’, the latter part of which contains the contemporary eyewitness accounts of the forced emigrations from Barra and South Uist in the summer of 1851 (MacLeod, 1892: 134-145). It is this section, which Mackenzie included in his subsequent incorporation of MacLeod’s work into his own, that indicates the route whereby the accounts have been recycled in all subsequent historical studies and heritage presentations. What Mackenzie did not reprint, however, was the opening part of the passage, a robust exchange of views on the circumstances that had led another group of Barra families into ‘internal’ migration to the cities of mainland Scotland. From this event and the subsequent acrimonious debate, MacLeod had drawn his subtitle as to the calumnies on the ‘exiled Barramen’. Their mainland arrival having attracted attention as a potential ‘burden’ on the public purse, the Barra families had publicly pointed out that they were reluctant migrants who had been compelled by hunger, destitution, and lack of work to leave their homes to seek employment or relief in the mainland cities.<sup>6</sup> When this account of circumstances on the

island was denied and the character of the families' representatives seriously denigrated by those in authority on the Barra Parochial Board, the exiles responded with a vigorous and illuminating riposte.<sup>7</sup>

MacLeod was in no doubt as to which version of events was the more accurate. Through their calumnies on those who had dared to speak out against them, the members of the Parochial Board revealed themselves to be no more than the 'underlings' of Colonel Gordon. And for their active implementation of policies that denied both land and gainful employment as well as adequate relief, "such vicious dogs should be exposed" as "the oppressors of the poor" and therefore classed "with the Devil and his angels" as the latter's companions through all eternity (MacLeod, 1892: 134). In doing so, however—and this is the key point—MacLeod not only highlighted the importance of the explicit knowledge that historical testimony provided, he also exposed the fatal flaw in the underpinning notion of 'fuadach nan Gàidheal', of 'extirpation', which provided the overarching framework through which his own account of events was presented. The reports make clear that all the leading figures on the Barra Parochial Board, the absentee landlord's resident network of authority and power, the 'vicious dogs' MacLeod was so intent on exposing, were themselves island Gaels, all firmly embedded in Gaelic society and culture with their own deep kinship lineages and sense of 'dualchas' (Gaelic for heritage, especially cultural; tradition).

Significantly, Mackenzie omitted these few pages of explicit and uncompromising written exchanges between 'oppressed' and 'oppressors' from the otherwise complete reprint of MacLeod that he incorporated into his own comprehensive text. It is a telling omission, but it is not the only one. A similar elision can be traced over the background to the events that also took place at Lochboisdale, South Uist, with regard to Angus Johnston and others. The evidence given to the Lochboisdale sitting of the government's Napier Commission into the grievances within the Highlands and Islands crofter communities in 1883 made clear that these events were well remembered within the island community (Napier, 1883). Angus Johnston was from Rossal, a small settlement on the east side of the north end of South Uist, one of many that were cleared and whose residents were forced into emigration to Canada when a series of new 'tacks' (large grazing farms) were created on the island. As on Barra, the few tacksmen who benefited from these new tenurial arrangements at the expense of the many dispossessed were all, without exception, fellow Gaels, all with deep roots in the islands and western seaboard Gàidhealtachd. The local priest, Father Donald McColl, provided the background and the names of those involved in this complicity to Alexander Carmichael, the renowned Gaelic scholar and collector of Gaelic lore (Burnett, 2012). Yet when Carmichael went on to publish his collected material as a testimony to the rich popular culture of the 'simple and law-abiding' ordinary people of the islands, he omitted all of the particulars as to the collusion of the other strand of Gaels, the Gaelic tacksmen and professional classes, in the clearing of their own islands (Carmichael, 1928: 71). Carmichael alludes to the events at Lochboisdale, and even explicitly refers to Fr. McColl's list of the families evicted from the east side of the island. However, on the involvement of island Gaels as beneficiaries, Carmichael—like Mackenzie—is silent.

## The Emigration of 1883

Clearance and crofterisation was the context for a protracted struggle over land that was to dominate the Highlands and islands well into the early twentieth century. It has been through the prism of ‘the land question’ that the late nineteenth century social, cultural and political history of these islands has been largely framed. Therefore, it is in this context that the scheme of ‘Assisted Emigration’ to Canada—initiated in the 1880s by Lady Gordon Cathcart, the remarried widow and inheritor of Colonel Gordon’s son and successor—is invariably discussed as an alternative answer to the demands for small-holding land settlement. On Gordon’s island estates, however, the issues over which power and hegemony manifested itself were always more complex than this monofocal ‘land question’ prism. On Benbecula, South Uist, Eriskay, Barra and the Barra Isles there was also the concomitant issue of religion, for in these islands those in positions of power also reflected a network of Protestant supremacy in an overwhelmingly Catholic community. Religion was the unseen (yet essential) dimension of estate authority that was exercised by her Ladyship’s right-hand man, Ranald Macdonald, the directing hand behind all aspects of her diverse estate land management policies. A native of Benbecula of long Gaelic and island lineage, Macdonald—in his background, beliefs and active policies—was the personification of complicity, the embodiment of the network of Protestant domination. In 1883 he was also the principal architect and lead advocate of her Ladyship’s ‘Assisted Emigration’ schemes.

Within the dominant island heritage narrative the 1883 emigration moment is presented within the singular context of the demand for land. However, a more searching enquiry within the historical sources of the era reveals another dimension to estate policy. On emigration in particular, the testimony of history is to a policy in which the maintenance of power in the hands of a minority Protestant ascendancy is an essential and integral aspect of the shaping of estate policy across the board, not least on emigration:

*I note your Ladyship’s observations regarding the influence of the Priests and am suspicious that they are not using their power to advance your Ladyship’s interests as they ought. It is very difficult to get any reliable evidence but from what is to be seen and heard they will not be satisfied until they get every Protestant of us out of the country. The Priest here, who is a young man, is very plausible and agreeable in conversation, but from his conduct at School Board meetings and his statements before the Royal Commission, it is evident there is a desire among them to get full power, and they will have to be cautiously watched (Philp, 1883a).*

It was a policy expressed even more bluntly to the Church of Scotland parish minister, when the latter reported damage done to established church property. The latter may have been a Gael and an Islander, but along with the tacksmen and the other professional members of the Protestant ascendancy, he was expected to be a dutiful servant of her Ladyship and her policies:

*I trust you will keep a strict watch that no further damage is done to the church buildings and if so call the attention of the policemen to it as I fear the RC’s are to annoy us in every way they can and it is our duty to put our foot on their neck at once (Philp, 1883b).*

Along with the complicity highlighted from the moment of 1851, these more intricate, less attractive aspects of the reality of the contestation of power and authority underlying the moment of 1883 reveals the complexity of the historical past behind the simple, moral binaries of the heritage narrative. The depth and ambivalence of this complexity becomes even more evident when the third emigration moment of 1923 is subjected to closer scrutiny.

## The Emigration of 1923

The Crofters Act of 1886 gave the crofting communities security of tenure and fairer rents. It did not, however, give back the cleared lands. Land agitation for resettlement continued into the 1900s. By the outbreak of World War I, land seizures, land settlement legislation and the establishment of related government agencies had resulted in a degree of re-settlement throughout the islands. Following the Great War, the radical national-popular political climate that swept Scotland gave stimulus to a further series of land seizures resulting in the break-up of the last of the big tacks that had been formed in the mid-nineteenth century.

In 1903, Ranald MacDonal had died. Her Ladyship's affairs in South Uist and Barra were now handled directly by John Macdonald, her resident island factor, another Gael who had served his apprenticeship with his fellow Gaels in the island network of loyal complicity and dutiful service. By 1923, the national and local context was very different from 1883 and 1851. Land agitation, concomitant legislation, significant changes in local governance, successive extensions of the franchise, and above all the actual break-up of the large farms on the islands themselves had cumulatively shifted the balance of power. Yet despite this significant change in context, the attitude of Lady Gordon Cathcart and dutiful functionaries remained fundamentally the same: there was no future in small holdings, including crofting; the remedy to economic distress lay not in land settlement at home but in emigration overseas and resettlement in Canada. As John Macdonald reaffirmed to her Ladyship:

*The great thing, however, is for the people to clear out from these Islands no matter what calling they adopt as it is very evident that there is nothing but misery in front of them if they remain in the islands (Macdonald, 1922a).*

*I am very hopeful that emigration will come off on a considerable scale, and especially as crofting in the Islands is a recognised failure and the crofters have begun to realise this more than they ever did before (Macdonald, 1922b).*

Macdonald's reassurances were written in the context of an estate fighting a protracted but ultimately unsuccessful rearguard action against agitation and land seizures by the island communities and land settlement legislation and schemes by the government, both combining to see the sequential break-up of every large farm on the estate from Barra to Benbecula. The reverberations of a turbulent era in Scotland and across Europe were echoing in the Hebrides, and the estate was now more convinced than ever that a combination of dark and sinister external influences were the root cause of all their troubles. As a weary factor reported to her Ladyship:

*The young soldiers are at the bottom of it all. Another fact which is deeply to be regretted and which may make for an explanation all round is that nearly all the Priests now in the Islands are more or less all young men—and nearly all bitter Sinn Feiners. The 3 Priests in Barra are good fellows headed by Father Cameron but in South Uist the whole lot are fire-eaters who will not move a finger to smooth difficulties over. The good old priests who were most reasonable men were all shifted to mainland charges last year and I can already see that nothing but hostility need be looked for from their successors (Macdonald, 1921).*

*In your Ladyship's islands there is, over and above Bolshevik ideas, clear evidence that Sinn Fein ideas are rampant, particularly among the Catholic communities, and one hears on every hand threats being made to establish a similar state of affairs in the islands as we have in Ireland today (Macdonald, 1920).*

Such assertions of radical, revolutionary ideas being 'rampant' in the 1920s Hebrides are clearly of interest in relation to an assessment of the factors involved in the land agitation and the latter's place in the wider context of social and political unrest in Scotland at that time. What makes them particularly significant in relation to the dichotomic variance between Hebridean history and heritage, however, is how dramatically they vary from the portrayals of the Hebrides prevalent at that time. In the popular culture of the 1920s, as encapsulated in the highly popular *Songs of the Hebrides*, the "islands of the West" were invariably presented through a "Celtic twilight" prism as an ethereal "edge of the world" retreat from the "whirling vortex of modernity" (Burnett and Burnett, 2011; Burnett, 2011). The Catholic islands of Barra, Eriskay, South Uist and Benbecula in particular were portrayed as communities devoid of the tensions and conflicts, the worries and anxieties, the political ferment and strife that were seen to bedevil the wider society in Scotland and beyond. There are a few insightful testimonies to the actuality of island engagement with this wider world in the years around the 1923 emigration. Yet as even a cursory glance at contemporary travel writing or promotional presentations will confirm, it is as the mythical 'other world' Hebrides of the imagination that twentieth-century island life is presented. For the emigration moment of 1923, as for that of 1883 or 1851, it is the tropes of the heritage narrative that prevails over the reality of history.

## Conclusion

As David Lowenthal reminds us:

*History and heritage transmit different things to different audiences. History tells all who will listen, what has happened and how things came to be as they are. Heritage passes on exclusive myths of origin and continuance, endowing a select group with prestige and common purpose (Lowenthal, 1998: 128).*

For the Outer Hebrides islands, reconciling the promotion of an essentialist imaginary heritage narrative of the "islands of the past" with the actuality of a history that "tells all who will listen what has happened and how things came to be as they are" is the challenge faced in making the 'islands of the future'.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> For the extent to which transatlantic history has given these issues a particular significance for Canadian island studies see Ray (2005) and in particular the work of Basu (2007).

<sup>2</sup> For exemplars of this process in the Uists and the lands of Clanranald see Burnett (1999) and MacKay (1964). For the wider setting see MacInnes (1996) and Dodghson (1998).

<sup>3</sup> There were Lowland clearances as well (Aitchison and Cassell, 2003) but the fact that 'the Clearances' invariably refers to the Highlands underlines the extent to which they are seen as much an ethnic and cultural moment as a social and economic episode.

<sup>4</sup> The bibliographic history of these texts is usefully detailed in Hanham (1969). Amongst the principal works to recycle this Mackenzie / MacLeod material are Prebble (1963), Hunter (1976), and Richards (2007).

<sup>5</sup> See discussion in Basu (2007). For the presentation of these events in Gaelic-medium education in Scotland, see BBC Alba (2012) and specifically with regard to Canada, see Education Scotland (2012).

<sup>6</sup> The arrival and subsequent movement across the mainland of large groups of destitute families from the island estates of Gordon of Cluny over this period was the subject of much debate and intervention by various public agencies involved in poor relief and social provision in the towns and cities involved. And as the extensive reports in the national and regional press across Scotland reveal, the specific question of 'the islanders' was inextricably linked to a raft of wider issues relating to politics, class and religion.

<sup>7</sup> The members of the Barra Parochial Board making the public statement were: 'Rev. Beatson, Minister; D W M'Gillivray, J P, Tacksman; Wm. Birnie, Manager for Colonel Gordon; Donald M Nicolson M D, Tacksman; Archibald M'Donald, Elder, Tenant'. Along with their counterpart in South Uist they constituted a core agency of resident factorial power that had been developed in the final years of MacNeil of Barra and Clanranald respectively, then integrated and extended under the post-1839 ownership of Gordon of Cluny. Although an intricate network of family ties and intermarriage that was overwhelmingly Gaelic and island in composition, the Parochial Boards were vigorous in their promotion of policies in which class, Protestant ascendancy and the implementation of capitalist agriculture took precedence over any ties of language, culture or ethnicity.

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