
The myth of the displaced Highlander, bedecked in kilt and sporran while longing for kith and kin as he steadfastly forges a new life for his family in a far away land, is a familiar one. But does this myth represent the reality of Scottish migration? The answer, as is ably demonstrated in the essays contained in *The Heather and the Fern* (University of Otago Press, 2003), is that it does not. Scots migrants did not come from a single social group or economic class. Rather, they constituted a cross section of Scottish society as varied as the landscapes of their native land. By clearly illustrating the diverse nature of Scottish migration *The Heather and the Fern*, a compilation of papers (with some additions) presented at the University of Otago’s 1998 Bamforth Conference on Scottish migration to New Zealand, makes an important contribution to the historiography of both Scotland and New Zealand.

The book opens with John M. MacKenzie’s discussion of the role of the Scots within the Empire. He counters the prevailing myth of the displaced Highlander by arguing convincingly that Scots, from all regions and all walks of life, eagerly embraced migration as a way of realizing ambitions which could not be fulfilled at home. While acknowledging the reality that some Scots were forced to emigrate he clearly demonstrates that many others, particularly Lowlanders, “voluntarily and enthusiastically” (p. 12) seized the opportunities presented by Empire. MacKenzie further argues that those Scots who participated in the Imperial adventure were not, contrary to another popular myth, collaborating with the English but were, in fact, asserting their distinctiveness. In discussing the Scottish experience within the Empire MacKenzie contrasts the experiences of the Scots with those of the Irish and alludes to the fact that the Presbyterianism of the Scots contributed to their success while the Catholicism of the Irish contributed to their relative lack thereof. This argument is not adequately supported, and remains unconvincing.
Despite this criticism MacKenzie’s essay presents a thoroughly readable overview of the Scottish experience within the Empire. MacKenzie’s essay also counters the prevailing myth of the displaced Highlander by demonstrating, through the use of short case histories, that many Highlanders freely chose to emigrate throughout the Empire.

Tom Brooking contributed an examination of the various economic, political, and cultural contributions the Scots made to New Zealand. He argues that, unlike in other localities where Highlanders tended to congregate in large groups, those who emigrated to New Zealand dispersed somewhat into the local population and that this made their contributions more subtle, but no less pronounced, than elsewhere. He also dispels the prevailing myth of the displaced Highlander by demonstrating that Lowlanders emigrated to New Zealand in greater numbers than did Highlanders. Brooking concludes his essay by admitting that “much of the discussion in this chapter has been tentative because we lack a solid empirical base for so many aspects of our cultural history.” (p. 64) and proceeds to instigate a call for “more sustained research on the historical experience of ethnic subgroups amongst our British settlers.” (p. 64) It is a call that historians in former colonies throughout the world would do well to heed.

In his examination of Scottish gold miners in New Zealand Terry Hearn builds upon the foundation laid by Brooking and presents an excellent statistical analysis of Scottish migration patterns. He demonstrates that the Scots who migrated to Otago in search of gold were generally older than other British migrants and, as such, tended to make long term commitments to the region. This helped to infuse Otago with a more Scottish character than was evident in other regions. Hearn’s analysis of the demographics lead to several convincing conclusions concerning the composition and contributions of the Scots who came to New Zealand in general, and Otago in particular.

Rosalind McClean focuses her analysis on the experiences of women and demonstrates that they were generally far more reluctant to emigrate than were their male counterparts. She does qualify this by concluding that, once they
accepted emigration, Scots women made significant contributions to their new communities and, often times, became the preservers of Scottish culture within those communities. McClean also provides evidence that indicates the changing attitudes of Scottish women towards emigration over time. In earlier years relatively few were inclined to emigrate independent of other family members but, by the late nineteenth century, more Scottish women were leaving their family unit in order to emigrate to the colony. McClean has laid a solid groundwork for further investigation into this trend as well as that of other aspects of women’s experiences of migration.

Jennie Coleman’s contribution examines the tradition of piping in New Zealand. This topic is one which would be expected in any examination of Scots migration for what could be more Scottish than the pipes? Coleman’s analysis, however, will be a difficult read for the non-specialist, drawing as it does from her doctoral thesis on the same topic. The reader might have been better served had Coleman included fewer diagrams and concentrated more on a less technical explanation of the tradition as it evolved in New Zealand. Despite this criticism, however, it must be acknowledged that her analysis does provide a unique interdisciplinary approach to the piping tradition which is unlikely to be found elsewhere.

The Heather and the Fern concludes with Alan Raich’s highly readable and informative exploration of the influence of Scotland’s literary tradition upon New Zealand’s. Rather than focusing solely on the work of Burns, as many are wont to do, Raich attempts to examine how the main themes of Scottish literature all played a role in the development of New Zealand’s tradition. Once this role has been established he goes on to demonstrate not only the similarities between the two traditions but, perhaps more importantly, the ways in which they diverged thus helping to establish the national identity of each nation. It is this which sets Raich’s work apart from that of many others.

Taken in its entirety The Heather and the Fern is an immensely readable book which makes an important contribution to the historiographies of both Scotland and
New Zealand. It is accessible to both the specialist and non-specialist alike and, as such, is recommended reading for anyone with an interest in the history of Scottish migration or its influence on New Zealand’s development.

Colin Graham
Wilfrid Laurier University

Endnotes


2 Ibid., 13.