Review


If there is one point that diaspora historians will take away from *Coin, Kirk, Class and Kin* it is the need to learn as much as possible about the sending community. In part this means locating individual decision-making within national structures, but Beals shows that the particularities of the migrant’s point of origin offers the finest gradation. It’s not that we do not have the data for much of this. We do in terms of the broad sweep of demographics; but we perhaps do not know as much as we would like on local variation.

In setting up her research, and in her conceptual handling of diaspora, Beals is wedded to the “trauma” of emigration. Beals’s literary overview is stuck in what she terms the “accepted view” of land clearance and lairds sympathetic to Malthusian principles (p. 14). A welcome degree of reflexivity comes in her second chapter—headed “The myth of Clearance”—yet the focus on trauma encourages flirtation with characterising eighteenth-century Borders’ migration as a “Lowland Clearance.” Perhaps because of that term’s relatively recent usage, and while it has provided welcome focus on lowland migration, it appears as unhelpful as its highland equivalent when the historian looks for conceptual refinement and empirical nuance. How many of us, I wonder, have struggled to persuade our students that “forced clearance” was not the only (or even main) reason Scots got into boats to cross the Atlantic or to head for the
Antipodes? If the concept of “Lowland Clearance” is to be of value, then it is the first not the second part of the phrase that is significant; a conclusion that also means expunging “trauma” when labelling Scots emigration a “real diaspora”.

In these early chapters Beals is at her strongest on “what needs to be done” rather than in mining new evidence; although gems have been found. These pages are awash with broad sweeps on contemporary agricultural change sat alongside fascinating detail on landowners’ attempts at Improvement. An interesting precursor to her main argument comes in the third chapter’s interplay of “Poverty and the Promise of Emigration,” focusing on the impact of paternalism. Yet a social and economic history of contemporary poverty—with all its unwelcome ramifications upon the fragility of the family economy—needs to be presented alongside the interventions of benefactors. Nor do we find here, or in the chapter that follows, a debate on the rising standard of living. Beals, though, does focus on the relative importance of the death rate upon regional population totals (a rate which, contrary to what is presented here, did not fall to a significant extent until the twentieth century), but whether those not carried out in a box were leaving temporarily, seasonally, or for a set period before returning, are analytical flows that require further deepening.

Beals’s research shines strongest when she explores Sinclair’s first Statistical Account to discuss the Church of Scotland’s reaction, support, and opposition to emigration in the late eighteenth century. She shows the Account to be a rich resource that historians will turn to increasingly for more than straightforward demographic or ordnance data. Yet on its own the Account remains too narrow a source to provide more than tentative indications of the Church’s support—as an institution—for emigration. While there is analytical value in including the idiosyncrasies of individual ministers alongside first-hand-knowledge of their parish and
community, so their freedom to express a view is cautioned by the editorial actions and standardising functions of Sir John Sinclair and his staff. This need to analyse both micro and macro sets of evidence is also apparent in the argument developed in chapter five—on the kirk and rural change—where scrutiny descends upon Borders’ ministers but not the socio-economic evidence of the period nor the pronouncements or investigations of the General Assembly.

This call for more rounded analysis can again be made regarding some of Beals’s evocative investigations into emigration adverts: on favoured sailing routes, the best captains and ship-owners, and the pros and cons of particular destinations. This section of the book is handled with great skill, but again one is looking for the argument to be extended, to see evidence on the intentions of agents as advertisers, editors as publishers, and editorialists as propagandists. The potential of Beals’s study also comes through when examining the delusions and disappointment of potential and actual emigrations, including the negative portrayal of the US, and the economic rivalry between America and Canada as reflected in adventure stories. Further valuable evidence on those who chose not to migrate comes out in the last two chapters, shaped around the family letters of five extended families, and on this theme Beals links the personal to wider socio-economic conditions of the region. She explores the perceptions of those left behind, and examines evidence from the Statistical Account about their returns. It sums up a volume that is nicely written with interesting details unearthed through an emphasis on region, locality and chain migration; yet also indicates a project still to reach its full potential; one to be fulfilled once a more rounded empirical source base is added to the mix.

Graeme Morton
University of Guelph