LOCH LAXFORD TO THE ZORRAS
A SUTHERLAND EMIGRATION
TO UPPER CANADA

In July 1848 400 Sutherlanders arrived at Brantford in Ontario where the inhabitants raised a subscription to relieve their destitution and help them to reach Zorra where they intended to settle.¹

About this happening, referred to so briefly in Eric Richards: The Leviathan of Wealth, the Sutherland Fortune in the Industrial Revolution, no record survives in Brantford. But, on July 5, 1848, readers of the Toronto Globe were informed that the ship “Greenock” out of Loch Laxford had docked at Quebec City on Wednesday, June 28 carrying 417 passengers; they were from the Assynt District of Sutherland.

Nothing more was heard of them until Saturday, July 8th when the Hamilton Spectator and Journal of Commerce referred to them under the heading “Arrival of Emigrants.” The passage is smudged and some phrases are illegible.

On Wednesday last, the steamer Princess Royal arrived at this port, direct from Quebec, having on board upwards of 400 Emigrants, from the estate of the Duke of Sutherland, in the Highlands of Scotland. We [regret to say?] that many of these people were in destitute circumstances and that some declared they had not the means to proceed on to their destination [in Zorra?] in the Brock District [on making inquiry?] among them were two lunatics stark mad—who had not a single relative among their fellow-passengers and were utterly dependant upon the bounty of those who were their superiors in but one respect. These men were represented by those who knew them to have been insane for a number of years and their shipment under such circumstances was heartless in the extreme.² The
Scottish immigrants were among the hundreds whose arrival was almost a daily occurrence throughout a shipping season that followed the disastrous potato crop failures in Ireland and Scotland. Canadians of the time were all too familiar with the appearance of such newcomers and with the diseases and necessities which accompanied them.

In July and August 1848 issues of The Globe in that year, readers noted the commencement of the Brock Road linking Hamilton and Guelph and the news that the Cunard steamer, “America,” had arrived in Boston after being just ten days out of Liverpool. Of interest, too, was the report that a new mail stage operating between Galt and Brantford was bringing more timely news to settlers of the area, some of who were eagerly reading the serial instalments of Dombey and Son which Charles Dickens had just published in London. For readers of a more practical turn of mind, the paper regularly reminded them that available in Canada West was 1,500,000 acres of land for sale to those wishing to settle in the townships. Upon most of the lots, when leased, “no money was required down.” It was also known that, if a settler had $18.00 to spare he could travel by wagon team all the way from Hamilton to London—a very fatiguing journey but much better than walking.

Even the bitter memory of having been turned out of their homes by the Duke of Sutherland’s efficient factor, Evander McIver, may have eased as they sensed the freedom and breadth of their new homeland.

But this is conjecture only. More reliable and disturbing news about these exiles appeared on Saturday, July 14, 1848. By this time the Sutherlanders had gone as far as Brantford where their circumstances were such that the Galt Reporter decided that its readers should be informed of what others had said, even to the extent of using the Spectator’s actual wording;

About 400 emigrants from the Duke of Sutherland’s estates in Scotland, arrived in Hamilton this week, and the greater part immediately took their departure for the Township of Zorra, where they intend to settle. A number were too poor to hire conveyances,
and have gone off on their feet. The suffering and destitution of these poor people, particularly the children, as they passed through Brantford, is represented as very distressing. Among these Highland emigrants were two lunatics—stark mad—who had not a single relative among their fellow-passengers, and were utterly dependent upon the bounty of those who where their superiors in but one respect. These men were represented by those who knew them to have been insane for a number of years, and their shipment under such circumstances was heartless in the extreme.  

Both newspaper reports were open to question when considered alongside letters concerning another group of 206 High-lands who had sailed on May 31, 1848 from Loch Eriboll in the ship “Scotia”; they arrived in Quebec City on July 8, just three days after the “Greenock” immigrants had disembarked from the “Princess Royal” in Hamilton. The Scotia people were also bound for Toronto and the Zorras.

Thomas Carrey, Captain of the “Scotia,” wrote on July 19, 1848 to Robert Horsburgh, factor of the District of Tongue, who had arranged the emigration details for these passengers. Carrey reported on the “fine passage of five weeks” during which “we had no sickness, thank God.”

On the whole [continued Carrey] the Doctor at Grosse Island [Grosse Isle] said they were the healthi-est and finest set of people he had passed this season. I found some of them very decent people and willing to give every assistance to carry out our regulations for cleanliness—others of them I found incapable of any gratitude either to yourself or me. However, they all seemed sorry at parting with me. I went to the Immigration Office and got them all sent up free to Toronto. Neil McKay and the others that were going to Pictou I have on board yet, as lodging is very expensive—they will get away tomorrow or next day in a Schooner that is going down—they will remain with me until that time.
I gave them as much of the surplus stores as they
wanted. —I would have written you on my arrival, but deferred until I could sell the water casks.  

So far as contemporary records go, no reports exist describing the "Scotia" people as they made their way to Zorra. That they were noticeably better off than their fellow Scots from "Greenock" is highly unlikely. And the resentment that some of the "Scotia" exiles displayed while still at sea was probably even more noticeable among those on the "Greenock."

Captain Carrey's pique against the ingratitude of some of his passengers is, however, understandable. It was the Duke of Sutherland's money, not theirs, that had provided them with a transatlantic passage, clothing, provisions (each adult receiving about 70 pounds of oatmeal and 56 pounds of biscuit), water, medicine, and a family Bible. The overall cost was approximately 8.00 per adult. As well as taking advantage of the Duke's largesse, each family had whatever money they gained by selling the livestock they had owned on their crofts. What grounds then existed for blame or ingratitude?

It was probably the memory that their plight was not of their own making, that the Duke's largesse was far from being entirely charitable. They had been forced out of their homes and off their crofts where their names and unwritten right of ownership went back for centuries in the clan system. No longer wanted, they had been removed so that the Duke of Sutherland could rent his lands a hundred times more profitably by rearing sheep instead of Highland soldiers. What made good financial sense to His Grace, however, must have puzzled, even rankled the minds of the 400 crofters from the "Greenock" as they trudged along the plank and corduroy roads from Hamilton to the Zorras, where they hoped for assistance from relatives and acquaintances who had been taking up land there since 1820.

Arriving in Brantford, their appearance was such, that despite the public's familiarity with immigrant groups, the Galt Reporter felt compelled to comment at length on the pathetic condition of these Scots. That comment stirred a distant response. Someone in Dingwall in Scotland sent the Galt paper's news item to the Duke of Sutherland who passed it on to his principal estate agent, James Loch, M.P. in London. That worthy
sent it on to Evander McIver, the factor who had overseen the
departure of the Assynt people from Loch Laxford. His reply to
Loch throws some light on what happened:

I am annoyed [McIver writes, rather clumsily] at the
Extract from an American Paper as to our Emigrants
enclosed by you and which as desired I now return.
I hear it has been copied into a Glasgow Paper—I
believe any thing which appears in an American
Paper is doubted—and in this instance they have
published a gross untruth—The facts with regard to
the Paupers who went from Assynt are that all their
friends determined to emigrate—the brother and
sister of one and the father and family of the other—
They insisted on carrying with them these two who
were harmless idiots, and on the Parish Roll -The
Parochial Board gave a donation to each to clothe
them and in addition I provided them with some
blankets etc. The Board of Supervision last year
ordered all our fauous Paupers to be examined by
a Medical man—and both these were reported as
harmless and as better with their own relations than
in a lunatic Asylum which their situation did not
render necessary—

If you think it necessary to contradict the statement,
I can do it, but I don't think it worth while doing so
in this Country—I can write my Correspondent in
Canada to get the Paper which originally inserted it
to recant- This I shall do by next Post.⁸

On the same day that McIver wrote to Loch, Robert Horsburgh,
the factor in Tongue, also wrote to him saying that the notice in
the Reporter could not possibly refer to Scots from the “Scotia.”
The donation given by the Duke, he asserted, ought to have put
any “real suffering or destitution on the road from Hamilton to
Zorra out of the question.”⁹ Save for his assumption about the
Duke’s generosity, Horsburgh was correct. The Galt paper’s
reference was to the “Greenock” passengers. Nevertheless, both
factors had cause for worry; Horsburgh’s reference to “real
suffering” was an admission that some suffering on the road was
to be accepted as a reality.
The sensitivity shown by the Duke and particularly his factors to the extract from the Galt paper extended well beyond the boarders of the more than million acres that comprised the Sutherland estate. Since 1822, when Stewart of Garth had published his *Sketches of the Highlands of Scotland*, there existed a growing awareness in Britain of the evils attendant upon the Highland Clearances.\textsuperscript{10} And this awareness was also heightened throughout the 1840’s by a series of letters written by Donald MacLeod published in Edinburgh and Glasgow papers. MacLeod, whose own family had been evicted and their cottage burned, was an eye-witness of much of the cruelty that characterized the evictions. He is remembered, too, for the stinging invective he directed in 1852 at Harriet Beecher Stowe whose adulation of Harriet Howard, the Duchess of Sutherland, and defense of James Loch’s brutal policies were especially open to criticism.\textsuperscript{11}

British concern for the condition of its emigrating poor in 1848 spilled over on August 16 into a column of the Toronto *Globe* which quoted the London *Times* saying that it “could conceive nothing more wild, more preposterous, more dangerous, or more unsatisfactory to the home population” than the “shipment of mere paupers to the colonies.”\textsuperscript{12} Earlier, on June 10, under the heading “Immigration Question,” the *Globe* informed its readers that

The Home Government cannot expect any of the colonies to be a mere refuge for those who are unable from age or disease to cultivate the soil... care should be taken that selfish landholders should not be countenanced in sending away the least efficient of their population, or the guardians of the poor in emptying their work-houses.

To what extent the immigrants from the “Greenock” or the “Scotia” resembled or should be compared to “paupers” or sweepings from “work-houses” must be left to conjecture. But it is quite reasonable to assume that the newspaper reporters had seen impoverished Irish immigrants and that they had as a consequence a plausible basis for their statements. They could certainly have read about “Emigrant Distress” in the *Globe* on July 1 which reported some forty cases of “spotted or typhus fever” among the newly arrived Irish:

In Front Street is a small tenement, formerly
occupied as a storehouse, near the foot of Browne’s wharf, between a dung-heap to the west and the stagnant and sinking waters to the south, seventy individuals of all ages were found huddled together parents and children, men and women...sweltered with heat, damp and stench. They were principally from the western part of Clare, and chiefly from the Union Workhouse.

That the passengers from the “Scotia” were not as wretched a lot as many of the Irish, we have Captain Carrey’s word to assure us. But that the Scots from the “Greenock,” in particular, were low-spirited and miserable by the time they were seen in Brantford is more than certain if we accept the observer’s language as reported by the Galt paper: their condition “very distressing,” their “destitution” obvious, the suffering of the children noticeable, and then the “two lunatics—stark mad—who had not a single relative among their fellow passengers.” Here, however if we accept McIver’s word, both the Brantford and Hamilton sources were exaggerating for these “fatuous Paupers” were with close relatives. As the paupers were “harmless,” no need had existed to put them in a Scottish asylum or have them housed in the one in Toronto that was, until 1850, in an old jail in that city.13

But, as the emigrants moved past Brantford, they may have been heartened by the sight of well-cultivated farms, horse-powered threshing machines, and rich orchards—all of which William Kingston commented upon enthusiastically in 1853.14 Farther west was the town of Woodstock, not much more than a straggling, rural village of a thousand people, but nonetheless the administrative centre of Oxford County. Since its site had been surveyed in 1833, it had progressed very considerably so that, when the Greenock and Scotia people arrived, its amenities must have impressed, even offered encouragement, for those intending to settle nearby in the Zorras.

Thomas Shenston’s Oxford Gazetteer describes the town as having, in 1848, four churches—one of which was Presbyterian—, a grammar school, and a subscription library. As well, the town had a court house, a registry office, a gaol, a Mechanics Institute, a newspaper, and a post office to which mail was
delivered daily by night-fall.\textsuperscript{15}

Immediately north of Woodstock lay the southern limits of East and West Zorra, a land especially attractive to the six hundred immigrants from the “Greenock” and “Scotia” because of the Scots already settled there.\textsuperscript{16} Some of these settlers had very likely corresponded with relatives or friends off these two ships. Letters written from Upper Canada often circulated widely in Scotland, giving news and offering advice to would-be emigrants.\textsuperscript{17} One of the first Scottish settlers in West Zorra, Angus McKay, even returned to Scotland in 1829 to persuade fellow Sutherlanders to emigrate.\textsuperscript{18}

So, having seen Woodstock, the immigrants turned north expectantly, taking what Shenston called the Woodstock and Huron Plank Road that led into the Zorras. Most of the Sutherlanders from the “Greenock” and later the “Scotia” probably went to West Zorra which had three times as many Scots as East Zorra. Embro, in West Zorra in 1848, was a growing village with a post office and a Presbyterian church. The newcomers must have been cheered to find that the township had ten public schools, three sawmills, and two grist mills. Of its land area of approximately 56,400 acres, some 12,195 acres were under cultivation and 30,286 acres were listed as “wood and wild land.”\textsuperscript{19} Shanties made up 14\% and log houses 63\% of the settlers’ dwelling places in the township.\textsuperscript{20}

Employment was available and numerous references occur about the scarcity of labour and its cost. Writing about Upper Canada in 1842, James E. Alexander reported a conversation with a farmer near Brantford who said, “it was difficult to succeed in that part of the country, owing to the high price of labour at that time, viz. a dollar a-day, and food.”\textsuperscript{21} Well-to-do settlers needed men for clearing their land; those on the “plains” and farther away in the Niagara peninsula required harvests in the summer; nearer at hand was the possibility of work as a navvy on the Great Western Railroad for which the County of Oxford was a shareholder to the extent of 25,000 pounds.\textsuperscript{22} By 1852, Shenston’s map revealed that the line served Woodstock and the southern edge of the Zorras.

For most of the Highlanders from the “Greenock” and the “Scotia,” life in Upper Canada was one they could adjust to more
easily than we imagine. They were, as A.R.M. Lower reminds us, people who came "from one primitive set of conditions to another and apparently could the more easily put up with hard food, heat and cold, smoke in the eyes, mosquitoes, flies, lice." They were also people who had practical farming skills, who had built and maintained their "black houses" with their own hands, who knew how to cultivate barley, oats, turnips, and potatoes, and who could raise livestock. Luckily, too, they were now about to meet their own folk, perhaps friends and relatives who had survived the first pioneer years and could offer rude shelter, food and advice.

And yet, for these new immigrants what lay ahead was as daunting as anything in their past. Beyond the clearings, edged by snake rail fences, were mere trails through sunless stands of forest. Ahead, under the trees, lay land which they could claim as their own some day when they could arrange a lease or buy it outright. Meantime they did what others had done: erected lean-to's or shanties, borrowed what they could from neighbours, and became squatters hiring out to work for those who needed their labour. Gerald Craig maintains that to "a very considerable extent, Upper Canada was settled by squatters, and it was never practical to evict very many of them; the speculators and the government simply had to make terms with them."

To exist and to succeed meant unremitting toil for years. Chopping out clearings and erecting log buildings were tasks new to them that demanded both strength and skill. Happily, a well-developed co-operative spirit among the earlier settlers eased the toil of the first years in the bush. "Bees" were a common practice whereby, in return for labour, neighbours helped newcomers clear an opening in the forest and erect the first dwellings. An account of such a "bee" in West Zorra in 1848 appears in W.A. Ross' History of Zorra and Embro. Donald Cameron (William Sutherland) remembered the event which he witnessed as a boy. An earlier account of a "bee" near Hamilton, in which the writer actually took part using a chopping axe, may be found in David Wilkie's Sketches of a Summer Trip to New York and the Canadas. It was, says this Scottish traveller, "the severest day's work I ever set my hands to." What both these authors describe illustrates painfully what the beginnings were
like for the men off the "Greenock" and the "Scotia."

It is little wonder that they left no written records telling their story. Their life in the Zorra woods gave them no leisure for writing memoirs. In fact, it is reasonable to suppose that very few, either men or women, had had enough education to write at all competently. For the women there was, as always, child birth and the dull loneliness of interminable days in the bush varied only by the urgent need to adapt their crofter skills to the seasonal requirements of their new way of life.

As years of day-long, hard work in the township bore down on the, the passengers from the "Greenock" and the "Scotia" gradually lost their identity as a particular group and blended into a people already thinking of themselves as Upper Canadians.

Even their language—so essential a component for a living culture—became in their lifetime the possession only of the "old folks." From the first, it had proved a barrier in their dealings with the shop-keepers of Embro and Woodstock and likewise with some of their neighbours who knew no Gaelic, the United Empire Loyalists who had settled along the 4th Concession of West Zorra nearly ten years before the first Scots arrived. In the Common Schools that the children attended, English was the language of instruction and, within a few years, the only language in which they were fluent. In the wider world of Upper Canada, English was the accepted language of commerce, law, and higher education. Gaelic had no recognized practical function. Even in the Presbyterian church services in the Zorras, Gaelic as a living language was a thing of the past.

Today, with our emphasis on multiculturalism, it has become fashionable, almost policy, to encourage the revival of languages like Ojibway. Even Gaelic and its attendant arts have some support in Nova Scotia. Elsewhere, and noticeably in the Zorras, one manifestation only of the culture that arrived with the Greenock and Scotia people survives: the Highland Games in Embro on the first of July of each year. On this occasion, those who still think of themselves as Scots and who can leave their fields and business for a day, assemble to gaze approvingly at tartan-clad dancers and pipers and caber tossers and wonder at
the meaning of three strange words: "ceud mile failte."

That the Scots who settled in Zorra and Upper Canada gained much by emigration, no one can deny; that a distinctive society merged in another and was nearly lost may well be a matter of some regret, if not consequence. In the end, however, the descendants of those who sailed on the "Greenock" and the "Scotia" became a proud part of the Canadian mosaic. For many of these Canadians, their ancestry here and in the west Highlands of Scotland is a memory as fading as the inscriptions on the weathered faces of the tombstones in the cemetery belonging to the "Old Log Church" on Lot 9, Concession 7 of West Zorra. Here stand memorials that bear the family names of many of those who left Lochs Laxford and Eriboll at the end of May 1848: McCaskells, McCraes, McKays, McLeods, McKenzies, Mathesons, Munros, and the Nicholsons.

It is now altogether fitting that we and their descendants be reminded of the courage and endurance of these men and women who hewed out farms and homes from the wilderness. What they gained and what they lost in their search for land, freedom, and the abundance merits a place in Ontario's history.

For the preparation of this article, I wish to acknowledge permission to quote from letters held in the Sutherland Collection, Stafford County Record Office, Stafford, England.

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A Sutherland Emigration to Upper Canada

Notes


2 *Hamilton Spectator and Journal of Commerce*, 8 July 1848.

3 *The Galt Reporter and Waterloo County Advertiser*, 14 July 1848.

4 Stafford County Record Office, Sutherland Collection (hereafter S.C.R.O.): Carrey to Horsburgh, 19 July 1848.


7 S.C.R.O., McIver to Loch, 29 August 1848.

8 S.C.R.O., Horsburgh to Loch, 29 August 1848.


11 For an editorial on the subject of pauperism and colonization see the London *Times*, 28 July 1848.


See *Census of the Canadas, 1851-2, Personal Census* (Quebec: John Lovell, 1853), I,20 which records 1870 Scots in West Zorra; we cannot be certain of the number in 1847—perhaps as many as eight hundred.


*Census of the Canadas, 1851-2, I*, 36.

*Census of the Canadas, 1851-2, II*, 418


Shenston, *Oxford Gazetteer*, p. 82.


