
In publishing the Rev. Dr. John Walker's *Report on the Hebrides of 1764*, Margaret MacKay and her publishers, have done those of us with an abiding interest in the Highlands of the 18th century excellent good service. The document which she has so thoroughly edited, annotated and introduced is focal for a properly balanced view of what was happening in the Highlands—and more particularly the Islands—during the crucial generation between the “Forty-Five” Rising and the sailing of the emigrant ships to North America in the early 1770s prior to the American Revolution. The *Report* was written for the Commissioners of the Annexed Estates, a body whose mandate was to “civilise” the Highlands through social and economic “improvement”; none of the Annexed Estates, however, were in the Islands, and the archives of the Commissioners do not contain papers of management such as exist voluminously for the Highland mainland. Walker’s *Report* is therefore of rare importance.

One of the Moderates in the Church of Scotland, Walker was also one of the Edinburgh literati and a skilled botanist, later to become Professor of Natural History, a lecturer on agriculture, and a founder of the Natural History and Agricultural Societies of Edinburgh; he was therefore an excellent choice for the Commissioners’ survey of the Hebrides, as Margaret McKay’s biographical account makes clear. His method of survey was regular, like a modern questionnaire; his *Report* is therefore standardised to permit comparison and aggregation of statistical measures of the Highland and Islands economy. Each island, from the Lewis (Lewis) to Barra and from Skye to Islay—including St. Kilda and Rocca (Rockall), but excluding Raasay, none of which he visited—is described under the headings: Situation, Extent and Rental, Numbers of People, Soil, Plants, Price of Labour, Price of Commodities (usually an itemised list), Quality and Price of Grain, Exports (itemised by value), State of Agriculture, State of the Fisheries (by species), State of Manufacture (by raw materials), and Natural Productions (such as eider-down, spermaceti, oysters, manures—marine rather than farmyard in origin—red granite, agate and jasper). The account varies in length from island to island according to those idiosyncrasies that took Dr. Walker’s fancy: the initial trials of the herring fishery at Stornoway in Mull, and his own Barometrical and Thermometrical Experiments on the tops of the Paps of Jura and on the shores of the Sound of Islay which demonstrated for the first time that the boiling point of water decreased by 1 degree Fahrenheit for every 390 feet of ascent.

The *Report* adds materially to our factual knowledge of the social and economic history of the isles: commenting upon the strength of the emigration from Islay, Iona and Mull into Ireland (in fact, a traditional pattern since medieval times) and thence to North America with the “great shoals” of emigrants from Ulster, and suggesting that it had already resulted in depopulation and land abandonment (in the reviewer’s view a dubious conclusion); indicating that the potato was introduced to South Uist a quarter century before Walker’s visit in 1764; mentioning that Clanranald was introducing Annandale sheep-stock in 1763 (only three years after the first Blackfaced Lintons are reputed to have fatefully crossed the Highland Line in Perthshire and half a century before the mass evictions of people for sheep are generally understood to have occurred). In general, the *Report* makes it apparent that, while the Island economy and society were “backward” in Lowland and English terms, there were plenty of examples of individual enterprise in the fields of agriculture, manufacturing and the fishery, and even in medicine.

Margaret MacKay’s introductory essay deals with Walker’s treatment of land, its extent and use, the frustrating issue (for the scholar) of regional and local weights and measures, the recent history of religion in the Hebrides, and the important question of population—Walker’s “outlines of Life and Death”—which she illuminates with a useful analysis of his statistics and a commentary on emigration and disease. She fails, however, to identify the major fault in Dr. Walker’s approach to this task. Despite his obvious
sympathy for manifestations of Highland culture during his tour (the women singing in the new spinning school at Stornoway, the lost library of Iona Cathedral), the good doctor shows no appreciation of, nor asked questions about, the traditional Highland method of mountain pastoral farming with its sophisticated systems of seasonal grazing. This, in fact, was central to the whole economy and way of life of the old Highlands, and Walker's lack of interest in it is symptomatic of the Improvers' unwillingness or inability to recognise it as a finely balanced adaptation to a peculiar and fragile environment, worthy of improvement in its own terms. Instead, he—and they—decried it, and set in motion the whole sorry train of events which, generation after generation to the present, has destroyed it. A man of the Enlightenment like all the Improvers, Dr. Walker surely never intended it to be so. The myopia of his approach is, nevertheless, a demonstration of the fatal force of ideas in human history.

Alan G. Macpherson  
Memorial University of Newfoundland