Scottish Emigration to North America: A Review Essay


Wayne Norton, Help Us to a Better Land: Crofter Colonies in the Prairie West (Regina, Canadian Plains Research Center, 1994), pp. 107. $15.00 pbk.

In the past few years there has been a revival of interest in transatlantic migration from the British Isles. Exciting new academic treatments have been published which explore the importance of emigration for the establishment of the culture and character of the early colonies in British North America as well as the later development of the United States and Canada. Although Irish emigration has received the closest scrutiny in this regard in works that assess the impact of mass migration in the homeland as well as the destinations, Scottish migration has also attracted its share of scholarly attention. The three studies under examination here demonstrate that, for Scottish history, the results of this effort have been uneven.

Adams and Sommerville's Cargoes of Despair and Hope is a bold attempt at providing an overview of Scottish emigration to North America during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. A general synthesis of recent scholarship in this area would indeed have been welcome. Unfortunately this text is not that book. Between its covers one can find references to most of the known migrations in the period under study, but the volume is deeply
flawed, greatly diminishing its value. One could point to the extremely poor production, such as gaps in the text and a crowded type-face, or the numerous failures to cite sources, but these are minimal irritants when contrasted with the authors’ more serious failings. Firstly, there is no interpretive framework with which the reader can assess these various migrations. Secondly, the study lacks structure, as topics appear to be introduced at random with little or no apparent connection between them. Finally, the authors ignore important recent scholarship on the very migrations they are exploring.

Adams and Sommerville refer to D. W. Meinig’s scheme, which proposes a three-stage sequential model of European migration—from sea-faring, to conquering and finally planting [i.e. settlement]—without linking his theory to their own study. One assumes that the authors wish to discuss a Scottish planting era, but this is far from explicit. After the first page, Meinig disappears from view, not to be linked to any subsequent discussion. One can only assume that his theories have no bearing on the authors’ interpretations.

The volume concludes with an extensive discussion of population growth and emigration statistics, thereby implying a connection to the preceding narrative, but the authors make no explicit reference to Malthusian pressures on Scottish emigration. The reader is left with the vague impression that Scottish emigrants were the victims of demographic growth, agricultural change, and industrial development, but only in the most cursory way.

The failure to provide an interpretive framework contributes directly to the volume’s lack of structure and coherence. For example, Chapter One, “Encouragement to Colonists,” jumps from a discussion of seventeenth-century Scots’ adventures in Europe to the Lowland “colonization” of the Highlands and Ulster, and then to colonial schemes for North America, ending with a brief treatment of the ill-fated Darien settlement on the Isthmus of Panama. The use of subtitles does not contribute, as the authors must have intended, to the chapter’s clarity. From the narrative of events one assumes a causal connection between these developments, but this is not made explicit. One wonders how Scots soldiers who fought on the continent during the
Thirty Years War, introduced at the start of the chapter, could be connected with eighteenth-century Scots merchants involved in trans-Atlantic trade, found at the end.

The authors consistently fail to provide satisfactory introductions to their topics or necessary transitions between them. The book’s chapters discuss seventeenth-century colonial schemes; the impact of improvement; Highland migration to New York, Upper Canada, Prince Edward Island, Nova Scotia, and the Carolinas; the Sutherland clearances; the debate over the Passenger Acts; and fluctuations in Lowland industrial development. Only a rough chronological sequencing tie these topics together, and since there is no linking text, they appear to materialize at random.

This lack of clarity and organization could be overlooked if there were a reward for a reader’s persistence; unfortunately, there is none. Rather than providing an understanding of the importance of emigration for the history of Scotland, the authors appear content to describe emigration to North America as one long tale of woe, neatly summed up in their concluding sentence. Adams and Sommerville contest Dr. Johnson’s famous comparison of emigration to a contagion, arguing instead that it should “rather be seen as the last desperate remedy taken by sufferers of an incurable disease.”

Much of what *Cargoes of Despair and Hope* examines has been extensively treated elsewhere, but the authors largely ignore this literature. An entire chapter is devoted to the Highland settlement of Prince Edward Island, but J.M. Bumsted’s exhaustive treatment of the subject does not appear to have been consulted. Adams and Sommerville cite his influential *People’s Clearance*, but appear to have read the text only to extract Bumsted’s sources. They fail to address his interpretation that, rather than the consequence of landlord oppression, emigrations were often initiated by the tenants, who deliberately chose to migrate in order to preserve their traditional Highland way of life. Similarly, although considerable space is devoted to a discussion of the Glengarry settlements in New York State and Upper Canada, Marriane McLean’s recent study, *The People of Glengarry*, is not
mentioned. Her interpretation that the timing of the Glengarry migrations corresponded to periods of estate improvement is based on a far more sensitive treatment of the sources than Adams and Sommerville produce. Reference to extensive literature on other controversial topics, such as the origin and impact of the Passenger Acts, also fails to appear in the authors’ analysis.

Perhaps the most glaring oversight is the failure of the authors to acknowledge the detailed investigations of Bernard Bailyn. In *Voyagers to the West*, published in 1986, Bailyn examines at length several migrations treated in *Cargoes of Despair and Hope*, including the voyages of the *Hector* and *Bachelor* as well as the activities of the Scots-American Company which, starting in 1773, settled Ryegate, New Hampshire. Not only is Bailyn’s discussion of these migrations both more detailed and critical than that of Adams and Sommerville, the former places them in the broader context of the pre-revolution settlement of British North America, arguing for a phasing of emigration from the British Isles based on broad economic and demographic trends. *Cargoes of Despair and Hope* offers no such context.

Adams and Sommerville’s volume is largely an uneven narrative pieced together from a variety of primary sources and, as a consequence, does not do justice to the depth, variety and complexity of both recent scholarly examination of the subject and the historical experience of Scotland’s emigrants.

In contrast to *Cargoes of Despair and Hope*, Alan Karras’s *Sojourners in the Sun* does not attempt to provide a broad overview of Scottish emigration, but focuses instead on one particular type of migrant, the sojourner. The term, borrowed from anthropology, is used by Karras to identify single males who crossed the Atlantic with the intention of amassing a fortune and then returning to Scotland. This masterful study demonstrates how enlightening such detailed investigations can be.

The areas examined by Karras, Jamaica and the Chesapeake, were concerned with producing sugar and tobacco for the British market during the eighteenth century. The Scottish sojourners worked as factors or estate managers in the production of these commodities. However, other professionals such as
physicians and lawyers also tried to improve their financial health by migrating on a temporary basis to these colonies. Much of the statistical information demonstrating the impact of these staple trades on Scotland has been anticipated by the work of others. What is valuable about Karras's analysis is his case study approach which provides the reader with insights into the mentality of the temporary migrant.

One such case, highlighted by the author, was that of Francis Grant who acted as factor for the Georgia Estate, a sugar plantation on the north side of Jamaica. The absentee owner, Charles Gordon, was another Scot and friend of Francis's elder brother John Grant, a Scots lawyer who became the island's chief justice in 1784. By tracing the career of Francis Grant, Karras is able to demonstrate the remarkable autonomy such individuals could exercise, so much so that the traditional dependent relationship of manager upon owner was overturned. Grant, and individuals like him, were expected to handle all estate matters, which might include book-keeping, employment of overseers, purchase and maintenance of slaves, and the selling of crops. Since the profitability of the estate depended on these activities, particularly the latter, and because absentee owners could do little to monitor factors' activities, managers were often given free reign. This not only meant that Grant could play the "part of an independent planter", but also allowed him to create his own patronage network which provided positions and contracts to other Scots, particularly business acquaintances and relations. Such authority, reinforced by management of a number of other estates on the north side of the island, clearly affected Grant's demeanour. According to one contemporary, Grant believed himself to be "a man of consequence" and had "a great deal of the hauter of a highlander; consequently [he] expects little attentions which a man in a middling sphere would look over." But Karras makes it clear that such a rise in status was only viewed as success when it could be translated into financial autonomy in Scotland. Grant was able to fulfil this goal when he retired, an independent gentleman of means, to the Kilgraston Estate in Perthshire in 1793.

Karras's numerous examples demonstrate that most of the Scots sojourners shared this ambition, but that the expectations of the majority were not met. The successes of individuals like
Grant, or the first Glaswegian tobacco factors in Virginia, encouraged in many the vain hope that they too could raise their status in Scotland by migrating to the colonies. One consequence of this perceived opportunity was the continued domination of the tobacco trade by the Scots, but Karras’s case studies show that despite this stranglehold, many would-be ‘Tobacco Lords’ failed. He argues that this was a consequence of the Scots sojourners continuing belief that the product of their labours would result in financial independence in Scotland. Most were not interested in capitalising on their status in the colonies by remaining. Karras convincingly demonstrates that in the Chesapeake, the low wages of tobacco factors during the second half of the eighteenth century meant that the desire to obtain personal fortune proved extremely difficult to fulfil. Only by engaging in side trades, usually based on credit or barter, were the Chesapeake sojourners able to amass fortunes. In both the Chesapeake and Jamaica, however, the absence of specie and the domination of the colonial economy by the credit system made extraction of capital extremely difficult. Karras describes this phenomenon as the “Paradox of Success”. Although most Scots sojourners could improve their economic position while in the colonies, they could not transfer that success to Scotland and thus realize their ambitions.

More significantly, Karras also notes that a rejection of the opulent planter life-style (particularly in Jamaica) by this class of Scots steeped in Calvinism and bent on upward mobility, as well as the hostility and resentment directed at them (especially in the Chesapeake), helped to encourage an awareness of a Scottish identity. This is an important point and worth greater attention from historians. To what extent did sojourning, whether it be to England or across the Atlantic, contribute to the development of a Scottish identity among the nations’ professional classes? Historians have already highlighted the importance of East India Company appointments for the patronage system which developed in eighteenth-century Scotland and Karras’s case studies effectively illustrate a similar Scottish “web of patronage” at work in Jamaica and the Chesapeake. 10 The remarkable extent to which this patronage system was international, largely restricted to Scots, and based on the “temporary migration” of professionals, should not be overlooked when we con-
sider the significance of national identity for eighteenth-century Scottish society.\textsuperscript{11}

Karras's study raises further issues which should be pursued. He deals with a particular class, the well-educated Scottish professionals, but also acknowledges that many other Scots, lower on the social scale, found themselves in America either through transportation (first employed against the Covenanters in the seventeenth century), indentured servitude (a practice which persisted up to the American Revolution) or, by the second half of the eighteenth century, a tacksman-led Highland emigrant party.\textsuperscript{12} How does the sojourner's experience and perception compare with these groups? What was the relationship between the transient Scots and these more permanent migrants? Karras's study should be the starting place for scholars seeking answers to these questions.

For example, Karras's definition of "independence" should be broadened. According to Karras, both the sojourning Scots and permanent settlers of the American colonies viewed "independence" as being equivalent to the freedom, or liberty, to pursue wealth and, with it, upward social mobility. The two groups, however, diverged prior to the revolution, since the sojourners' desire to transfer their independence to Scotland ensured that they would continue to be loyal to the empire. American colonists, on the other hand, saw the British connection, and at times the Scots sojourners themselves, as an impediment to increasing their own social status and economic power.\textsuperscript{13} As a consequence, the permanent settlers of the American colonies increasingly came to view "political independence" as the only means of ensuring their own upward social mobility, encouraging many to support separation from the empire.\textsuperscript{14} This analysis can be expanded by acknowledging that in the decades preceding the revolution, emigrants from much lower class levels, particularly those from agricultural and artisan backgrounds, arrived in increasing numbers. These individuals brought very different notions of "independence" with them. Their understanding of the concept is more accurately understood as a desire for personal autonomy based not upon a personal fortune, but on self-sufficiency and freedom from elite interference. It was these emigrants, many thousands of them
Scots, who helped to give the American Revolution its radical complexion.\textsuperscript{15}

Unquestionably, Karras has extended our understanding of the motives and aspirations of the migrants belonging to Scotland's professional classes. He has also underlined the intimate connection between the activities of these sojourners and the patronage networks of Scotland itself. This fact must now be taken into account when we consider the development of Scotland's professional classes, particularly as we connect this with the eighteenth-century understanding of Scottishness. *Sojourners in the Sun* clearly demonstrates the value of attempting to recapture the context of individual migrant experiences as we endeavour to assess the impact of such movements.

Wayne Norton's short but well-documented monograph, *Help Us to a Better Land*, also has a well-defined focus: two British government-sponsored schemes that assisted seventy-six Hebridean families to establish settlements at Pelican Lake, Manitoba and Saltcoats, Saskatchewan between 1888 and 1889. Norton is less concerned, however, with examining emigrant perceptions than with answering broader questions concerning nineteenth-century emigration policy. In this context, he makes considerable claims for the importance of these settlement schemes. Firstly, he suggests that their apparent failure calls for a revision of the historical tradition which views the Scots as a particularly advantaged and upwardly-mobile group in nineteenth-century Canada. Secondly, he argues that the negative experience also shaped Imperial and Canadian policy on assisted emigration. The British government was disinclined to support further proposals, particularly a British Columbia scheme entailing the establishment of crofter fishing communities on the west coast, and Ottawa's official encouragements designed to settle the Canadian prairie were directed away from the British to 'better suited' agriculturalists from elsewhere in Europe. The majority of the text is devoted to the demonstration of this latter point.

The reader is introduced to all the important policy makers and administrators responsible for the scheme, from the Tory Secretary for Scotland, Lord Lothian, who as a major Scottish landlord endorsed the "experiment" as a method of avoiding land reform in the wake of the Crofter's War, to Henry Hall
Smith, the Commissioner of Dominion Lands in Winnipeg who "volunteered" to assist the settlement of the crofters, only to lose his job in the shake-up which followed the disastrous implementation of the plan. In particular, the importance of the Barra-born Gaelic-speaking civil servant, Malcolm McNeill, is effectively highlighted. Norton demonstrates how McNeill's experience with the Board of Supervision for Poor Relief not only convinced him of the necessity of emigration in order to resolve the increasingly desperate plight of the crofters, but also placed him in a position to lobby effectively the various levels of government, including the Imperial Colonization Board which played a central role in the exercise. In addition to proposing the experiment, McNeill was largely responsible for the selection of the first emigrant families from the Western Isles. This perhaps explains his later insistence that it was an apathetic Canadian government, rather than the crofters, who were to blame for the settlers' lack of success. Norton's careful analysis, however, demonstrates that the hasty organization in Scotland as well as the lack of official support in Canada, were equally to blame for the hardships experienced during the prairie settlements' initial years.

After reading this book, there can be little doubt that poor planning and administrative confusion contributed to the considerable hardship suffered by the crofter pioneers, but Norton's argument that this experience caused a fundamental shift in emigration policy is less persuasive. While their example was clearly employed in parliamentary debates by the Liberal critic George Trevelyan as a method of condemning all such schemes, other factors were at play. Hugh Johnston has demonstrated that convincing Westminster to support state-aided emigration had been difficult from the start of the nineteenth century, while Jill Wade has forcefully argued that popular reaction in British Columbia against government involvement in the fishing industry was an important element in contributing to the collapse of the west coast settlement plan. In addition, at least one historian has provided evidence which disputes Norton's conclusion. Marjory Harper has shown that, in the Scottish northeast at least, the Canadian government and CPR land agents continued to encourage Scots to settle in the western prairies well into the early decades of the twentieth century.
A more likely explanation for the decline in Highland prairie settlement was the crofters’ disinclination to emigrate after the 1880s. Although this is acknowledged by Norton, he does not sufficiently explore the consequences of this reluctance. Adverse publicity in the form of negative newspaper articles and emigrant letters had an immediate impact in the Hebrides. When Lord Lothian tried to revive the assisted settlement plan in 1892, not a single applicant came forward from the districts where the prairie settlers had been previously recruited.¹⁸ This should give pause. The astuteness of these Hebrideans belies a common contemporary analysis that the crofters were responsible for their own predicament.

Norton’s study clearly demonstrates that poor planning, inadequate funding, adverse weather conditions, poor quality land, as well as the varying availability of local credit and employment, were all factors beyond the crofters’ control which had a direct bearing on their early difficulties. Despite this, many crofting families remained in the districts in which they were settled to become successful settlers after their initial disappointments.

Nevertheless, the evidence that Norton cites demonstrates that the stereotypical view of the crofters as lazy, backward and unskilled farmers had been transferred to the Canadian prairies. Strict sabbatarianism along with the settler’s use of Gaelic made them appear to their neighbours as alien and worthy of ridicule.

According to Norton, some found humour in the apparent ineptitude of the crofters who, during their first Canadian winter, “complained of not getting milk from cows suckling calves and of having their chickens freeze to death.”¹⁹ But the disparagement of the crofter character was tinged with concern over their apparent aggressiveness. Norton notes that it was crofter agitation and their espousal of “socialist” principles that had encouraged the Conservative British cabinet to support the assisted emigration scheme in the first place. The Hebrideans’ continual demands for the redress of “broken promises” once in Canada encouraged some neighbours to suggest that their arrival had “lowered the character of the settlement.”²⁰ Unfortunately, Norton does not pursue these lines of inquiry.
Since so much of *Help Us to a Better Land* is devoted to an examination of the creation and implementation of the assisted emigration policy, the experience of the crofters themselves is given little space. This is a pity, since it leads Norton to ignore the importance of crofter stereotyping and thus to his unsupportable conclusion that the difficulties experienced by these Hebrideans affected the perception of all Scottish-born immigrants. Crofters were viewed by Lowland Scots as well as Canadian and British officials alike as inefficient, hostile and child-like, hence the Dominion government’s tendency to compare “the crofters with ‘helpless’ natives.” While it is certainly true that many Lowland Scots failed as settlers and, as Karras has shown, in trade as well, they were not perceived in the same fashion as were the Gaels. Thus, Norton’s study unintentionally demonstrates the importance of accurately distinguishing between Highland and Lowland emigration in the analysis of Scottish settlement. That said, this meticulous study provides a valuable insight into the workings of late nineteenth-century British and Canadian emigration policy and administration. It would most profitably be read in conjunction with other recent scholarship that chronicles the very particular crofter settlement experience from the Eastern Townships of Quebec to Port Philip in Australia.  

The conclusion to be drawn from this survey of recent scholarship is that although important new insights are being gained by detailed examination of particular types of emigrants, Karras’s sojourners and Norton’s prairie crofters, Scottish emigration history still requires a well-researched broad synthesis of the studies undertaken in the last twenty years. Only then will we be able to integrate fully the varieties of Scottish emigrant experience into the wider discussion of transatlantic history. Such a synthesis would be a boon to the serious scholar and general reader alike. We eagerly anticipate its arrival!

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NOTES

1 Perhaps one of the most notable and controversial contributions to this new literature is David Hackett Fischer's *Albion's Seed: Four British Folkways in America* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1989). For some of the reactions to this work, as well as the author's reply, see the "Forum" in *William and Mary Quarterly*, April, 1991, pp. 223-308. For a sampling of the depth of scholarship now available on the transatlantic impact of Irish emigration, readers should consult Kerby Miller, *Emigrants and Exiles: Ireland and the Irish Exodus to North America* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1985); Bruce S. Elliot, *Irish Migrants in the Canadas: A New Approach* (Montreal, McGill-Queen's University Press, 1988); Catharine Wilson, *A New Lease on Life: Landlords, Tenants and Immigrants in Ireland and Canada* (Montreal, McGill-Queen's University Press, 1994); and for the international context, Donald Akenson, *The Irish Diaspora: A Primer* (Toronto, P.D. Meany Co. Ltd., 1993). Recent works dealing with Scottish transatlantic emigration are referred to below.

2 A full explanation of Meinig's model, derived from the perspective of historical geography, can be found in his *The Shaping of America: A Global Perspective on 500 Years of History - Volume 1 Atlantic America, 1492-1800* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1986) pp. 3-8. Meinig offers his model as a schema for conceptualizing a broad range of European transatlantic activity, and although he believes it also reflects a rough chronology of events, he does concede that it is merely intended as a "useful guide through a complex history." Central to Meinig's argument is the importance of geography in determining the first sending and receiving areas of the old and new world as well as in dictating the course of subsequent development and settlement. This over-reaching geographic perspective is absent in *Cargoes of Despair and Hope*.

3 Adams and Sommerville, p. 206.

4 J.M. Bumsted, *Land, Settlement and Politics on Eighteenth-Century Prince Edward Island* (Montreal, McGill-Queen's University

5 M. McLean, *The People of Glengarry: Highlanders in Transition; 1745-1820* (Montreal, McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1991). Adams and Sommerville do cite her doctoral dissertation, but as with Bumsted, appear only to have examined her sources and not her interpretations.


8 This is particularly true for the tobacco trade. See T.M. Devine, *The Tobacco Lords: A Study of the Tobacco Merchants of Glasgow and their Trading Activities c. 1740-90* (Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 1975).

9 Karras, pp. 66-71; 139-41. The Kilgarston Estate had been bought by John Grant from the proceeds of the chief justice’s position. After inheriting from his brother, Francis resided there until his own death at age seventy-five in 1818.


11 Of course some would argue that this patronage helped to foster a “British identity”. See Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation 1707-1837* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1992), pp. 163-64. Nevertheless, Karras’s evidence of Scottish identity and sense of alienation, particularly in the Chesapeake, is compelling. See Karras, pp. 120-24.

Karras, p. 189, highlights the 1772 credit crisis as reinforcing this perception and encouraging hostility to the Scots in particular. Scots factors monopolised the tobacco trade in Virginia and Maryland through the liberal extension of credit, but when the crisis produced a cutback in Britain factors were forced to call in debts in the Chesapeake. Naturally, this caused considerable resentment.

These attitudes were not shared in the Caribbean, since the colonial elite there “recognised that the individual economic independence for which they strove could amply be achieved within imperial economic boundaries”, largely thanks to the easy supply of “credit from the metropole.” See Karras, pp. 211-215.

For the numbers and background of Scots emigrants to the American colonies before 1775, see I.C.C Graham, *Colonists from Scotland: Emigration to North America*, 1707-1783 (Ithaca, New York, Cornell University Press, 1956) and Bailyn, *Voyagers to the West*, for a more detailed examination of the immediate pre-revolution migration.

Scotland's artisan emigrants. For an introduction to the importance of these emigrants for early American radicalism, see M. Jacob and J. Jacob, eds., The Origins of Anglo-American Radicalism (London, Allen and Unwin, 1984).

In advocating assisted emigration as the solution to Highland poverty, Malcolm McNeill was adopting a long-held Board of Supervision position. In 1851, the Board's chairman, Sir John McNeill, authored an influential report on Highland distress in which he argued that, in light of the recent potato famine, it was mistaken humanity to employ charity as the means of relieving destitution. According to Sir John, emigration offered the only 'permanent' solution. Partly as a consequence of this report, thousands of Highlanders were "assisted", whether they were willing or not, to Canada and Australia. For a discussion of Sir John McNeill's activities, as well as a thorough examination of the relationship between famine, estate management and emigration, see T. M. Devine, The Great Highland Famine: Hunger, Emigration and the Scottish Highlands in the Nineteenth Century (Edinburgh, John Donald, 1988).


In "British Columbia's Twentieth-Century Crofter Emigration Schemes: A Note on New Sources", published in the vol. 18, 1993 issue of this journal, I demonstrated that the concept of assisted crofter emigration remained attractive in British Columbia up to at least the 1930s.

Harper has also noted that adverse publicity dissuaded many others from emigrating to British Columbia and joining the Pacific fishing fleet op. cit., pp. 154-157.

Norton, p. 47.

Norton, p. 46.

Norton, p. 43.