SOME EMIGRANTS' LETTERS IN THE *INVERNESS COURIER*, 1820 - 1850

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INTRODUCTION

The *Inverness Courier and General Advertiser for the Counties of Inverness, Ross, Moray, Nairn, Cromarty, Sutherland & Caithness* was established by William Ettles, Roderick Reach, and James Suter in rivalry to the 1807 *Inverness Journal* of Robert Carruthers. The first edition was issued gratis on 4 December 1817, but subsequent issues were priced at 7d and later dropped to 4½d. It is described as generally liberal in its politics but remains loyal to the established church in the patronage battles of the 1840s.[1] This paper looks at a number of letters sent from the colony of New South Wales which were published in the *Inverness Courier* over a thirty-year period before the middle of the nineteenth century.

BACKGROUND

Public interest in Australia was rather slower to develop in Scotland than in England, and it was not until Governor Lachlan Macquarie, with his Scottish regiment and the Scots officials in his entourage, had been in the colony for a time that impressions of Australia and its prospects began to be published in letters written to friends and relations at home in Scotland.[2] The extent of the influence of the letters is difficult to gauge but it is recognised as likely being a significant factor in providing information for those contemplating emigration.[3] Sir Tom Devine has noted that until the later 1850s, emigration from the Scottish Highlands was an important aspect of the Scottish exodus, and this paper's focus on the influence of the *Inverness Courier* reflects that importance.[4] In the second half of the eighteenth century, the Highland population had grown by around twenty per cent and this population growth would prove to be beyond the capacity of the region to feed its people.[5]

Writing of the experience of emigration from Scourie in north west Sutherland, Eric

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[1] Laurel Brake and Marysa Demoor (eds), *Dictionary of Nineteenth-Century Journalism in Great Britain and Ireland* (London: Academia Press and the British Library, 2009).

[2] Macquarie was sworn in as Governor in Sydney on 1 January 1810 and sailed from Sydney on 15 February 1822.

[3] David S. MacMillan, *Scotland and Australia 1788 – 1850: Emigration, Commerce and Investment* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967), p. 26.

[4] T. Devine, *To the Ends of the Earth: Scotland's Global Diaspora* (London: Allen Lane, 2011), p. 107.

[5] Tanja Bueltmann, Andrew Hinson and Graeme Morton, *The Scottish Diaspora* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), p. 41.

Richards commented how '[b]eyond the goad of destitution, the critical factors included the flow of news from previous emigrants. ... Emigrant letters enhanced the promise of emigration.'[6] More broadly, it was not only destitute Highlanders who reacted to news of conditions in other countries, including America, Canada, Australia or elsewhere in the British empire, and information in the public press provided part of that news. Publication gave private correspondence an enhanced importance. It is 'when it is printed that news [or letters] receives that step-change in publicness that grants it the ability to affect crowds, influence politics, and shape debates in the public sphere.'[7]

Certainly, it was accepted in 1830 that personal letters gave a better insight into conditions in the colony, with 'communications of actual settlers [giving] impressions more accurate and vivid of the difficulties and advantages of colonial life ... than from more formal and elaborate statements.'[8] Richards discussed Australian emigrant letters generally while noting particularly the nature of collections of such correspondences.[9] These letters give voice to proletarian colonial Australia as the migrants adjusted themselves to remote overseas conditions' while the letters' key characteristics are their individualism and their localism.

Richards cautioned that among the various collections of letters claimed to have been written by convicts, only half have been authenticated as written by actual detainees. In this paper the earliest letter included was from a convict whose name and trial have been clearly documented, but this is the only letter obviously sent by a convict.[10] Richards further claimed that the Scots were the most literate of the migrants in the colonial era.[11] Prentis notes that while the literacy rate for urban Scots convicts was 61%, this is 'too low to reflect the Scottish working class as a whole.'[12] Access to migrant letters is considered important in the cultural history of the Anglo migrations

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[6] Eric Richards, 'Highland Emigration in the Age of Malthus: Scourie 1841 – 55', *Northern Scotland*, 2 (2011), p. 75.

[7] Joad Raymond and Noah Moxham, 'News Networks in early Modern Europe,' in *News Networks in Early Modern Europe*, ed. Joad Raymond and Noah Moxham (Brill: Leiden, Boston, 2016), p. 13.

[8] Committee of the Emigrants' School Fund, *Emigrants' Letters: Being a Collection of Recent Communications from Settlers in the British Colonies* (London: Trelawney Saunders, 1830), p. ii.

[9] Eric Richards, 'The Limits of the Australian Emigrant Letters' in *Letters across borders: the epistolary practices of international migrants*, eds. Bruce Elliott, David Gerber, and Suzanne Sinke (Houndmills: Palgrave MacMillan, 2006) pp. 56-74.

[10] Richards, 'Limits of Australian Emigrant Letters', p. 63; *Inverness Courier*, 27 January 1820, p. 4; W. B. Gurney (transcriber), *The Trials of Jeremiah Brandreth, William Turner, Isaac Ludlam, George Weightman and others for High Treason under a special commission at Derby* (London: Butterworth and Son, 1817).

[11] Richards, 'Limits of Australian Emigrant Letters', p.65.

[12] Malcolm Prentis, '"It's a Long Way to the Bottom": The Insignificance of "the Scots" in Australia', *Immigrants & Minorities: Historical Studies in Ethnicity, Migration and Diaspora*, 29 (2011), p. 205.

throughout the English speaking world.[13] Author Madeleine Bunting believed that the first generation of emigrants from the Hebridean island of Lewis were usually illiterate and that letters were few; however, the evidence even just from the letters which found their way into Scottish newspapers shows that her claim was not universally true across Scotland.[14]

Scottish emigrants did write letters in large numbers if the sample in this paper is any indication. In reviewing Belich's book on the rise of the Anglo-World, Richards remarked that the migration of millions of people may be at the centre of how this world was made 'and of these people we need to know much more.'[15] This collection of letters provides in their own words information on a small number of those who migrated.

Newspapers are recognised as providing a contemporary record of events and opinions and as such constitute a primary source of information for historians. However, limitations on the reliability of newspapers, when their reporting is taken in isolation, are also well recognised. Joseph Baumgartner reflects, 'While their contemporaneity is important ... this is, unfortunately, counterbalanced by a whole string of defects ... [including those] ...inherent in the medium itself.'[16] In particular, there exists the question of bias and writers have drawn attention to the possibility of bias both in how an event was reported, and also whether it was reported at all in newspapers. In discussing the reporting of collective action, Jennifer Earl and others have noted how events may be reported selectively and how that reporting may be 'structured by various factors such as competition over newspaper space, reporting norms, and editorial concerns.'[17] In the case of the letters or extracts dealt with in this article, the matter published will have reflected also the pragmatic need to fill each newspaper before printing a text-heavy four page folded-single-sheet publication issued on set days each week.

It should be recognised that several months would elapse between despatch of a letter from the colony and its receipt by the addressee then followed by publication in the press. This delay reflects the time involved in correspondence when even official despatches, mail and newspapers to and from Britain went by whatever sailing ship was available to carry them. The Historical Records of Australia series records the name of the vessel by which every official despatch was carried, showing how the carriage of mail was an almost ad hoc arrangement. Within the colony mail and papers to the more

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[13] James Belich, *Replenishing the Earth, The Settler Revolution and the Rise of the Anglo-World, 1783-1939* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 8, 120-1.

[14] Madeleine Bunting, *Love of Country: A Hebridean Journey* (London: Granta Publications, 2017), p. 233.

[15] Eric Richards, '*Replenishing the Earth* (review),' *Reviews in History*, https://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/895. Accessed 28 November 2018.

[16] Joseph Baumgartner, 'Newspapers as Historical Sources', *Philippine Journal of Culture and Society*, 9, no. 3 (September 1981), p. 256.

[17] Jennifer Earl *et al*, 'The Use of Newspaper Data in the Study of Collective Action,' *Annual Review of Sociology*, 30 (2004), p. 69.

remote areas of European occupation sometimes went by bullock cart or other land transport and could take weeks to reach areas like Queanbeyan on the Limestone Plains.

LETTERS FROM NSW

This paper examines seven letters from people in New South Wales which appeared in the *Inverness Courier* between 1820 and 1850, and which I suggest had potential to influence decisions on whether people might emigrate to the colony.[18] The period was one of rapid expansion in New South Wales even before the discovery of gold, which changed the nature of emigration and settlement. It was also a period of major social disruption in Scotland, including a continuing effort to clear small holders from their lands. With conditions at home becoming grim for many while lands in the Empire were opening up to settlers, there was an increased interest in emigration and a great interest in hearing firsthand — or as close to that as possible — from those who had taken the risk and journeyed south.

In examining these letters, we can look at what sort of a picture of the colony was being offered to readers in Inverness-shire. The *Inverness Courier* was keen to act in support of emigration to Australia, unlike its northern neighbour the *John O'Groat Journal*, which made it clear on more than one occasion that while it supported emigration from the over-crowded Highlands, it believed this should be to America and Canada. A notice placed in the *Inverness Courier* in 1848 by emigration agent Andrew Rutherford of Golspie in Sutherlandshire confirms information in letters which had appeared earlier in Scottish newspapers.[19] Rutherford's notice made it clear that only agricultural workers and associated tradesmen were wanted by the promoters of the government scheme for emigration to New South Wales. These were the categories of employees who had been sought after for many years by employers with large land holdings in the colonies. It is worth noting that the offer of passage was being made simultaneously in this advertisement to those willing to migrate to the Cape of Good Hope, to South Australia, and to New South Wales. For those hesitant about the voyage, the Cape would have been attractive, and to a lesser extent so would the voyage to South Australia, which was shorter than going all the way to Sydney.

The first letter considered here appeared in the *Inverness Courier* on 27 January 1820. Almost certainly the publication of this letter, written to the wife of a man transported to New South Wales, was copied from elsewhere, although where it first appeared is still an open question. The letter was introduced as follows:

> The following are extracts of a letter which has been received by the wife of Turner, the brother of Turner who, with Ludlam and Brandreth were executed at Derby, about two years since, for High Treason. Turner, it will be remembered, with several others, were allowed to plead Guilty, and thus to save their forfeited lives.[20]

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[18] The letters were printed in the editions of 27 January 1840 (page 4); 16 May 1832 (3); 9 October 1833 (4); 21 May 1834 (4); 7 March 1838 (2); 29 July 1840 (2); and 18 December 1850 (2).

[19] *Inverness Courier*, 14 March 1848, p. 1.

[20] *Inverness Courier*, 27 January 1820, p. 4.

Those executed are sometimes referred to as 'The Pentrich Martyrs.'[21] They were campaigners for political reform.

What is important for this study is that, notwithstanding not being a local item, its appearance in the *Inverness Courier* could have been of interest to readers in the Highlands and elsewhere in Scotland. The letter covers the living conditions, even for Turner himself as a convict. It includes the prices of clothing and foodstuffs including items such as wheat, Indian corn, peaches in abundance, lemons and oranges, beef, mutton and pork; and issues about the construction of buildings in the colony. Although lemons were far from uncommon in Inverness and had been so for at least a century before this time, their mention certainly provided evidence of an abundance of fresh fruit.[22]

The parts of Turner's letter home to his wife, which may have been of greatest interest to readers in the area reached by the *Inverness Courier*, are most likely to have been those concerning the availability of land. Some 3,000 persons had been cleared in 1801 from the land which they had previously occupied in Inverness-shire.[23] Turner's exhortation to his wife to join him in New South Wales noted that he had already partly agreed with the couple to whom he had been assigned that he would receive a thirty-acre farm. Thirty acres was specified in Macquarie's instructions as the amount of land to be given to a single emancipist, while free settlers were to be granted 100 acres beyond this.[24] Evidence of a heightened interest in farming land in the colony free of cost might be taken from the reports contributed to the 1834 *New Statistical Account of Scotland*, which reported how families had been cleared from the land which they had occupied, in many cases for generations. The people affected were perhaps those covered by James Hunter's description of 'A Redundant Population' in his seminal work *The Making of the Crofting Community.*[25]

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[21] William Turner, the man executed on 7 November 1817 at Derby, was one of four men surnamed Turner who were tried, among others, under a special commission at Derby between 16 and 25 October 1817 for High Treason following an abortive insurrection. W. B. Gurney (transcriber), *The Trials of Jeremiah Brandreth, William Turner, Isaac Ludlam, George Weightman and others for High Treason under a special commission at Derby* Vols 1 and 2 (London: Butterworth and son, 1817).

[22] See, for example, 'Lemons are seldom wanting here ...' in *Burt's Letters from the North of Scotland* Vol. I (Edinburgh: William Paterson 1876 edition), p.139.

[23] Eric Richards, *Debating the Highland Clearances* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), p. 220. Further details of clearances in, for example, Glenorchy at the far end of the Great Glen, Glen Quoich, the Braes of Taymouth, or the Isle of Arran are given in Chapter 3.

[24] John Ritchie, *Lachlan Macquarie: A Biography* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1986), p. 109.

[25] James Hunter, *The Making of the Crofting Community* (Edinburgh: John Donald, 1995), p.34 – 49. Marjory Harper refers to the process as 'Expelling the Unwanted.' Marjory Harper, *Adventurers and Exiles: The Great Scottish Exodus* (London: Profile Books, 2004), p. 32.

THE RESPONSE IN THE HIGHLANDS

After being cleared from the land, many of the poorer people in the western Highlands and Islands had been further disadvantaged when duties on imported barilla had been removed and the kelping industry in the coastal areas of the Western Highlands had been totally devastated. Kelping had provided employment for many of those affected by the clearances on the estates in the Highlands even if that employment had been in truly appalling conditions. Isobel Grant has estimated that some 40-50,000 people in the Highlands and Islands were dependent on kelping.[26] The prospect of a free allocation of land would have had great attraction for any disadvantaged Highlanders reading or listening to a reading of the *Inverness Courier* in January 1820.

A map dated 1872, now in the National Library of Australia, gives some idea of the area most likely to be that from which 'a person who was formerly resident in the neighbourhood of Inverness, but who, being unsuccessful in business, left this country about three or four years ago.' This person wrote a letter which appeared in the *Inverness Courier* of 16 May 1832.[27] The writer claimed to be at that time managing an estate in the county of Argyle, some 220 miles from Sydney. Readers in the circulation area of the *Inverness Courier* would have appreciated the great distance involved in travel to Sydney, since the 220 miles mentioned would take a traveller starting at Inverness almost to the border of England, on roads of considerably better standard than the indifferent roads in the colony used by bullock drays, many of them made in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries by General Wade or Thomas Telford. They would not have realised that Australian roads were poor. Between Yass and Sydney the roads were bad, and the hills were very steep. Farmers from south of Yass chose to send their wool to Port Phillip because the roads were easier.[28] From the County of Argyle, however, there was really little choice but to use the bad roads to Sydney. Further to the south, settlers had long progressed beyond Lake George/*Werrewaa*, starting with the *Canbery* property of Joshua John Moore and followed shortly after by *Duntroon* taken up by the colourful Scot James Ainslie in 1825 on behalf of the Sydney merchant Robert Campbell.

Unlike other letters from New South Wales or Van Diemen's Land appearing in the Scottish press at this time, the writer of the letter, unsuccessful in business in the vicinity of Inverness but now managing an estate in the County of Argyle, made no mention of the availability of land to be taken up or purchased by prospective settlers. This may be because all the available land in the County had already been taken over by Europeans, and in at least some cases there had been disputes requiring one or another party to relocate.[29] It may also reflect the desire of the writer, who was managing an estate to

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[26] I. F. Grant, *The MacLeods: The History of a Clan* (Edinburgh: Spurbooks, 1981), p. 568.

[27] The map is sourced http://nla.gov.au/nla.obj-231004334/view. Accessed 28 November 2018.

[28] G. A. Robinson, *The Journals of George Augustus Robinson, Chief Protector, Port Phillip Aboriginal Protectorate* (Ballarat: Heritage Matters, 2000). Entry for 25 April 1839, p. 49.

encourage workers to migrate from Scotland rather than potential land-holders. He cited the wages paid to shepherds and mechanics and noted that a ticket-of-leave man employed as a dairy man earned good wages.

The weekly rations for convicts were reported and contrast strongly with the diet of many in the Highlands of Scotland, where as late as 1845 the Kirk Session of Kilmallie in Inverness-shire recorded that 'from their knowledge of the general mode of living among the working classes of the Highlands, many families ... subsisted on potatoes and milk with fish occasionally and using but very little meal.'[30] For those struggling to obtain a living in the region of Inverness, or to better themselves and the prospects for their families, conditions in the colony could well have seemed attractive.

In one respect, however, conditions were considered worse in the colony than they were even in the Highland capital. Here we can quote the newspaper's editor: 'The greatest evil in New South Wales, according to our self-expatriated countryman, is the immense number of lawyers, with which it abounds, and these he describes being higher in their fees, and worse in their mode of conducting business than the writers of Inverness!!' The situation must have changed since the days of Jeffery Hart Bent, judge of the Supreme Court created under the colony's new Charter of Justice granted in 1814. Even though there was only one free lawyer in the colony at that time, Bent kept his court closed rather than admit ex-convict attorneys to practise.[31] It would be open to a reader to surmise that this letter writer at Argyle, being unsuccessful in business in Inverness, regarded lawyers as having some responsibility for his failure and, as a class, t be avoided in the colony if possible. It was certainly a negative view of one aspect of society in the colony and one unlikely to attract potential migrants.

Christmas Day 1832 in Sydney would have been very different in its nature to Christmas day in Scotland. An extract from a letter written on that day to a gentleman in Leith was published more than nine months later in the *Inverness Courier* of 9 October 1833. Christmas Day, even with the seasons inverted, would have been a day in the colony for reflecting on family and distant friends, and almost certainly a day free of the usual round of work, leaving time for letter writing. It would also have been a day for reflecting on news from home, such as the calamities in Scotland which are referred to in this letter – reform and cholera. Since reform was remarked upon as a calamity this gives an indication of the politics of both the letter writer and its recipient. *The Reform Act (Scotland) 1832* was passed by the UK Parliament at about the same time as *The Representation of the People Act 1832*, known as 'the first Reform Act' or the 'Great Reform Act.' In Scotland, the Act had expanded the electorate from 4,239 in the 1820s to over 65,000 after 1832. This 16-fold expansion also increased the Scottish

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[29] For an example, see Gwendoline Wilson, *Murray of Yarralumla*, (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1968), p. 28 – 32. Captain Murray had to relocate twice because of conflicts over occupation of lands.

[30] Lochaber Archive, Fort William, CH 2/719/1 Minutes of the Kirk Session of Kilmallie, 7 May 1845.

[31] N. D. McLachlan, 'Macquarie, Lachlan (1762–1824)', Australian Dictionary of Biography, National Centre of Biography, Australian National University, http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/macquarie-lachlan-2419/text3211. Accessed 6 February 2018.

burgh representation in Parliament from 15 seats to 22, and for the first time, Glasgow and Edinburgh were each given two MPs.[32] A man in Scotland describing reform as a calamity and likely to view unfavourably the extension of the franchise may have envied the political arrangements in the colony where it would be some years before even limited suffrage would be introduced in New South Wales.

The other calamity mentioned, cholera, caused its first fatality in Scotland on 23 December 1831, two days before Christmas. It would have inevitably weighed upon the consciousness of the correspondent in Sydney a year later, where happily there had been no outbreak of the disease, but where the news of the incidence in Scotland would have reached the colony sometime in 1832. The Sydney correspondent who had friends and probably family in Scotland was not to know that cholera would re-appear in Scotland in 1833 at about the same time as the letter from the healthy environment of Sydney was being seen in Scotland's press. A report in the *Caledonian Mercury* of 3 October 1833 did claim great efficacy in changing 'the state of the atmosphere' to prevent cholera spreading but notwithstanding this attempt at prevention and cure, there was cholera in many parts of the capital.[33] The 'gentleman in Leith' receiving this letter, with cholera in areas all around him, may well have wished he were safely in cholera-free Sydney, as indeed may have others reading it.

There was a serious gender imbalance in the European populations of the Australian colonies, with a 'masculinity ratio being three to two.'[34] Efforts had been made to address this, beyond those contained in Lord Sydney's original instructions to Governor Phillip concerning encouraging women from the Pacific islands to volunteer to move to Sydney.[35] The masculinity ratio of the first settlers was 347.27 males to each 100 females, exclusive of forty children.[36] On 10 October 1831 the Commissioners of Emigration in London received approval from the Treasury to appropriate £10,000 to contribute, at the rate of £8 per head, towards the passage costs of female emigrants. This amount was estimated to be about one half of the fare for each emigrant and would have financed 1,250 female emigrants. The funds were to come the sale of Crown lands in New South Wales and Van Diemen's Land and were considered to be an investment in the future of the colony.[37] In the Regulations made by the Commissioners, females aged between fifteen and thirty could be subsidised for emigration where they were

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[32] National Library of Scotland, http://maps.nls.uk/towns/reform/further_information.html. Accessed 24 November 2017.

[33] 'Re-appearance of cholera', *Caledonian Mercury*, 3 October 1833, p. 3.

[34] Fredk Watson (ed.) *Historical Records of Australia*, *Series I*: Governors' Despatches to and from England, Vol. XVII, pp. x - xi.

[35] 'Instructions' to Arthur Phillip, AJCP Colonial Office files, CO 201 Reel 1; HRA Vol. 1.

[36] Watson (ed.) *Historical Records of Australia, Series I*: Governors' Despatches to and from England, Vol. XVI, p. 717.

[37] Watson (ed.) *Historical Records of Australia, Series I*: Governors' Despatches to and from England, Vol. XVII, p. xi.

accompanied by family member(s), while those unaccompanied had to be between eighteen and thirty and were obliged to await the readiness of a sufficient number of like persons to allow the Commissioners to 'take up a vessel (into which no other passengers [would] be admitted for the conveyance of these Emigrants to their destination).'[38] Female emigrants were sufficiently noteworthy to justify an engraving in the *Illustrated London News* of 12 March 1853 making specific reference to them.[39] At a time when there were slightly more than one hundred and twelve women in Scotland for every one hundred men, assistance for women ready to undertake the journey to a land where the population imbalance was the reverse of that in Scotland would have been a significant consideration.[40]

An extract from a letter 'from a female emigrant to her friends in Glasgow, dated Sydney, 28th Nov. [1833]' which appeared on page 4 of the *Inverness Courier* of 21 May 1834 may be considered to have vindicated in this instance the stance taken by the Commissioners of Emigration. Writing to her friends in Glasgow the female emigrant recounted how she arrived on 7 May 1833 and was married on 28 June the same year to a baker from the Carse of Falkirk who had arrived in Sydney barely nine months before her but had already established himself in business and was doing very well. Pragmatically, the lady correspondent noted how 'a good bargain is as well made in one night as in one hundred' and she was happy with the arrangement which they had made between themselves.

It is impossible to determine the situation of the correspondent lady before emigration. She came most probably from Glasgow, but if she had travelled as one of the beneficiaries of the Government scheme providing half the passage money, she would still have had to find at least £8 passage plus any costs involved in joining the emigrant ship and other money for expenses on her arrival in Sydney. This suggests that she or her family may not have been entirely destitute or in the same desperate circumstances as some of those whose condition led a decade later to calls for reform of the Poor Laws in Scotland. Rather, she may have been of a class where her reports on the prices of housing and foodstuffs – 'butcher meat' (i.e., beef); mutton; green and black tea; and sugar – would have been of interest to those even remotely considering emigration to allow comparisons to be made of conditions in the colony *vis a vis* those in Scotland. The report on the wages which could be obtained by various classes of tradesmen would also have been of interest, both to those in Glasgow where her friends lived, and also in the area reached by the *Inverness Courier* which suggests a reason for the letter's inclusion in that publication.

Certainly, single women contemplating emigration in search of a husband might have drawn comfort and confirmation from the comments of a man in Sydney whose search for a wife appears to have been sincere and to date unsuccessful, and who

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[38] 'Regulations, Colonial Office, 1831,' in *Historical Records of Australia*, ed. Watson, Vol. XVI, p. 409.

[39] *Illustrated London News,* 12 March 1853, p. 204.

[40] James Gray Kyd (ed.), *Scottish Population Statistics, including Webster's analysis of population 1755* (Edinburgh: Scottish History Society, 1952), p. xvii.

suggested in 1836 that a correspondent at home might be required to undertake a commission 'to send one out' to Sydney for him.[41]

The letter signed by Duncan Murchison that appeared on page 2 of the *Inverness Courier* of 7 March 1838, while claiming to be concerning emigration to New South Wales from the Highlands, was in reality about the conditions on an emigrant ship, having been written on 13 September 1837 from only part-way through the journey from Skye to Sydney when the vessel called at Table Bay. Notwithstanding that the letter was sent only halfway through the journey, it would have been of considerable interest to readers contemplating emigration to New South Wales. Unusually, the letter was prefaced by a long commentary from the editors of the *Inverness Courier*, taking up well over half of one of the page's six columns, and considerably more space than it took to print the letter itself. The ship involved was the *William Nicoll* (sometimes referenced as *Nicol* or occasionally *Nicholl*) which had sailed from Skye on 6 July 1837 and eventually reached Sydney on 27 October that year carrying 311 emigrants, 'the first of those vessels chartered by the Government, for the conveyance of the distressed highlanders' to the colony of New South Wales.[42] The passengers when arriving in Sydney were described at that time as being 'in excellent health.' The ship, a 408-ton, three masted timber Greenock-built mixed passenger and cargo vessel, was relatively new, having been launched only in 1834.[43] It was about the same length as one and a half train cars of modern design.[44]

In its commentary on the letter from Duncan Murchison, the paper, in common with Murchison himself, recognised that parting from one's native land was inevitably accompanied by pain and reluctance. However, both the paper and the writer were at pains to assure readers that the anguish of departure was only temporary and the prospect of advantages in the new land far outweighed any regrets at leaving a place where the 'population in the Highlands and Isles is undoubtedly too numerous compared with the means of subsistence, and hence the unspeakable misery which occurs when there are one or two bad seasons.' The letter and commentary took pains also to assure readers that the voyage out was both safe and comfortable with only a few deaths having occurred on board in the ten weeks between departure and arrival at The Cape, apparently because of 'a flux' brought on board by a woman from Skye. I suspect that the letter writer and the newspaper's editor(s) were all from the mainland

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[41] *Inverness Courier,* 14 December 1836, p. 4.

[42] *The Colonist* 2 November 1837, p. 3. The *William Nicol* was the first to arrive in Sydney of three vessels undertaking the carriage of Highlanders to the colony at this time, the others being the *Brilliant* and the *Mid Lothian.* The *Colonist* was a Sydney newspaper established by Rev. J. D. Lang in 1835. It has been said of the *Colonist* that 'in the subjects to be treated, Politics stood first and Religion last' James Bonwick, *Early Struggles of the Australian Press* (London: Gordon and Gotch, 1890), p. 24.

[43] The ship's end came on 18 May 1842 when, having been dismasted in a hurricane, it was driven onto a reef at Port Louis, Mauritius and was damaged beyond economic repair (report in the *South Australian Register*, 3 September 1842, p. 3).

[44] http://www.heathsmith.com/genealogy/maxwell/mclennan_alexander_mary_voyage.htm. Accessed 28 February 2018.

and possibly more likely to disparage an islander. The letter continued, 'the emigrants wanted nothing that could make them comfortable, having each plenty of beef, pork, bread, oatmeal, flour, pease, tea and sugar, and water in great plenty.'

Duncan Murchison's letter from Table Bay depicted an almost ideal voyage from the Hebrides, with neither calm nor gales and only a relatively few deaths. It would have been comforting and encouraging for those left behind and considering emigration. The comments published with the letter do concede that the vessel was crowded but that 'the passengers enjoyed comforts which too many of them could never have participated in at home.'

It is tempting to draw a direct correlation between the publication of this letter on 7 March 1838 and events described in the same paper as occurring nearly eleven weeks later. At that time, the *Inverness Courier* reported in two separate articles on the same page that the government emigration agent, Dr Boyter, had visited Fort William

> and intimated his intention of meeting with intending emigrants on Monday the 21st [May 1838. The news of his arrival, like the fiery cross of old, soon spread through every part of the district; and at an early hour on Monday thousands of enterprising Gaels might be seen around the Caledonian Hotel, 'anxious to quit the land of their forefathers, and to go and possess the unbounded pastures of Australia.'[45]

Positioned on the corner of the High Street and Cameron Square, the Caledonian Hotel would have been an ideal location to accommodate the 'thousands of enterprising Gaels … anxious to quit the land of their forefathers' particularly in an era before vehicle traffic took over the High Street. There can be no doubt that the report of so recent and successful sailing of an emigrant ship, would have been welcomed by those in Lochaber and surrounding districts anxious to join the emigrants believed to be making a better life beyond Scotland.

This report of a smooth passage from Skye to Table Bay sits at some variance with other information not disclosed to the readers. In an article headed 'The Immigration Ships' published in Sydney rather than Inverness, it was reported that 'o]f the three ships that were sent out by the Home Government with the Highland Immigrants, the *William Nicol* was obliged to touch at Simon's Bay (i.e. Cape Town) for refreshments from the sickly state of the Highlanders generally.'[46]

> When the ship berthed at Table Bay on the Cape of Good Hope ... to replenish fresh water supplies, Governor Sir Benjamin D'Urban instigated a private collection to help the emigrants, after he and several of the inhabitants came on board and were horrified by the conditions. 150 pounds was raised in one day and used to buy supplies including sago, rice, fresh meat, vegetables and changes of clothing. ... Although Dr Boyter had recommended that each intending passenger 'procure a new suit of plaid with several other little articles required for the voyage' [this had not happened], other supplies [obtained at

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[45] *Inverness Courier*, 30 May 1838, p. 3. See also Marjory Harper, *Adventurers and Exiles: The Great Scottish Exodus* (London: Profile Books, 2004) pp. 50, 133.

[46] *Colonist* 17 March 1838, p. 2.

> Cape Town] included material for clothing .'.. many of the poor creatures being without a change.'[47]

While it is impossible to speculate on why Duncan Murchison, who by his own account was 'appointed by the [ship's] Doctor to see the provisions served out to the passengers', chose to send on 13 September such a glowing report on the voyage to date when facts suggested that it was otherwise, it can be assumed with some certainty that potential emigrants in Inverness-shire would have looked forward to a long voyage to Australia with somewhat less enthusiasm had they been given a true picture of conditions on board.

In prefacing an extract from a letter, 'recently received from Van Diemen's Land' and published on 29 July 1840, the *Inverness Courier* commented on the proliferation of letters offered to it but noted that it did not 'at all times avail ourselves of the whole of their communications.' It recognised the increasing importance to Scots of the general question of immigration and promised to write at considerable length on this matter. In the interim it confined itself to quoting from a letter from Van Diemen's Land which raised serious concerns about safety on a voyage from Britain to Australia. The vessel on which the writer travelled was the '*Minerva*, Capt. F.' Captain 'F' was Thomas Furlong and extensive coverage of this episode, contemporary and subsequent is available.[48] The vessel was referred to in the Sydney press as 'the fever ship *Minerva*.' There is no internal evidence in the letter of the writer's gender, age, occupation, or of origins although it may well have been from somewhere in the Highlands or Islands. Other passengers on the ship also travelled beyond the original destination and among these was Angus McMillan, explorer and pastoralist. McMillan was another Scot from the Highlands and Islands who came to Australia seeking a better life than was possible in his birthplace on Skye or his parents' home on Barra. Unlike the hapless passengers who travelled below decks, McMillan travelled to Australia in cabin class and was able to avoid the typhus which affected so many of the other passengers. [49]

For its voyages to Australia the *Minerva* was principally a convict transport, sailing with cargoes of convicts arriving in 1799, 1817, 1819 (two voyages), 1821, 1824, 1838 and 1839. These voyages were all to Sydney except for those in 1817 and 1838, both of which were destined for Van Diemen's Land. The voyage which carried typhus had left

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[47] Susan and Kevin McIntosh, *The Highland Shepherd: The story of James McIntosh and his family who sailed aboard the William Nicol in 1837 and settled on the Limestone Plains* (Gilmore, ACT: Gladefield, 2016), p.15. Governor D'Urban's report on conditions on board was referred to the Secretary of State comparing conditions unfavourably to those on the convict ship Platina which had arrived at the same time. Dr Boyter's comments in turn on the report included a statement that the arrival at The Cape with so many of the souls who had embarked still living was 'a far happier result than I had any reason to anticipate'! See C. Bede Maxwell, *Wooden Hookers: Epics of the Sea History of Australia* (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1940), pp. 57 - 59.

[48] See for example:
http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.694.6466&rep=rep1&type=pdf, which also references the reports in the Sydney papers, and other matters. Accessed 28 November 2019.

[49] Cal Flyn, *Thicker than Water* (London: HarperCollins/Fourth Estate, 2016).

Greenock on 13 August 1837 and arrived in Sydney on 23 January 1838. It was reported that 'The Minerva, from Greenock, with 235 emigrants on board, arrived on Tuesday, but in consequence of the existence of typhus fever on board, she has been placed in quarantine.'[50] The emigrants by the *Minerva* were selected by the Rev. Dr. Lang during a recent visit to the mother country, and travelled under the superintendence of Capt. McAusland, the Dr.'s brother-in-law.[51]

On 10 March 1838 and 14 March 1838 the *Sydney Gazette and New South Wales Advertiser* on page 2, and then the *Sydney Monitor,* again on page 2, respectively published the same article headed 'The Quarantine Station – Spring Cove' in which were the names of thirty one passengers from the *Minerva* who had died, either *en route* to Sydney or at the Quarantine Station. The names were published 'for the information of their friends in the mother country.' Apart from the second officer of the ship, a gardener from Belfast, and a German missionary, all those who had died were Scots. The letter published in the *Inverness Courier* claimed a loss of thirty-five lives, and the Sydney papers tallied four fewer, but the result either way would have been of serious concern for potential travellers. While the correspondent claimed the cause to have been bad treatment and provisions without mentioning typhus, these were probably more easily understood by readers in Scotland than a disease which was spread in unsanitary conditions particularly by lice but whose causes would not be understood until the early twentieth century.[52] The unsanitary conditions on board the ship, particularly below deck, would often have been a familiar part of daily life for many of the emigrants on board and it was more easily understood when the causes were said to be bad treatment and poor provisions. It was also implied that the master of the vessel was to some extent responsible, and that 'no one should be captain of an emigrant ship but a character peculiar for tenderness and humanity.' The *Inverness Courier* closed its reporting on the matter with an admonition to intending emigrants that they should 'look narrowly after their own interests' when planning to travel, noting that much had been said on the subject and passengers should satisfy themselves about conditions before travelling. For many, of course, such as those starting from remote parts of the country, it would not have been possible to check conditions before agreeing to travel and such persons had to take what was organised on their behalf.

Finally, there is a letter that appeared on page 2 of the edition of 19 December 1850. The writer is identified as Alex MacDonald, formerly of Kinlochmoidart, Inverness-shire, and described by the paper as an intelligent Highlander writing from 'Maneroo, by Sydney.' He is almost certainly the Alexander McDonald, a tailor and shepherd, who had arrived in Sydney on the British King on 28 February 1839 although his passenger record for the ship refers to him as a 'NAILOR & SHEPHARD' (sic).[53]

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[50] *Sydney Gazette and New South Wales Advertiser*, 25 January 1838, p. 2.

[51] *Sydney Gazette and New South Wales Advertiser*, 25 January 1838, p. 2.

[52] Charles Nicolle received the Nobel Prize in Medicine in 1928 for his work in identifying lice as the spreader of epidemic typhus.

McDonald was engaged on arrival for £26 with rations by Robert Campbell who held extensive pastoral properties on the Limestone Plains and the Monaro. McDonald's son would have been the person mentioned later as Sandy McDonald, a shepherd on Myalla. Myalla is near to the village of Nimmitabel in the present Cooma-Monaro shire. Edward Pratt recorded in 1872 that 'Sandy McDonald is anxious to get a school in the neighbourhood.'[54] The identification of Nimmitabel as being the area from where Alex MacDonald wrote to William Robertson of Kinlochmoidart would be consistent with both the description of the weather in the area and the stated distance to the east coast of New South Wales. The concern of Sandy McDonald for the education of children in the area also would be consistent with the evidence in this letter that the older Alex. MacDonald had received sufficient education which allowed him to write such a coherent letter and that the family valued education. He is described as a Gaelic scholar.[55] It is likely that at least some of those reading the Inverness Courier in December 1850 would have recognised the emigrant and been interested in his description of life and conditions in the colony.

This letter is a balanced one and MacDonald assured his readers that he avoided exaggeration in his praise for the colony. He noted his pain from the reports of changes, deaths, and destitution which had occurred in his home country in his absence. He stated his hope that his father would be encouraged and enabled to migrate to New South Wales but was concerned that his father would be left unassisted if all his (Alex's) brothers chose to move to Australia. As Philip Gaskell has noted in *Morvern Transformed*, 'it is the young and active who leave first' and these were those on whom the elderly most depended for support. [56] Had all the siblings emigrated, MacDonald's father may have been left reliant on charity and poor relief in his old age. Certainly the realities of poverty and misery in one's native land were in the mind of MacDonald when he wrote this letter and wondered why families would persist in that state rather than emigrate to New South Wales.

He did assure readers that clothing could be purchased in New South Wales at the same cost as in Scotland and reassured them that homespun clothes would suffice. Any newly arrived migrant ending up at Maneroo would have been grateful to have clothing suitable for the Highlands, particularly in winter.

It was in his honest advice that emigrants should not expect easy fortunes without hard work, as well as his admission of early homesickness, that MacDonald's letter stands out as a balanced and realistic view of the colony. He noted how some had sent home bad reports of the country having failed to make immediate fortunes, while others,

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[53] Person reference #MP46437 including Passenger Card http://www.monaropioneers.com; http://indexes.records.nsw.gov.au/ebook/list.aspx?Page=NRS5313/4_4780/British%20King_28%20Feb%201839/4_478000102.jpg&No=2. Accessed 28 November 2018.

[54] Quoted in Hancock, *Discovering Monaro*, 125. The younger Alexander was known as 'Black Sandy' because of his hair colour. See Person reference #MP49017 http://www.monaropioneers.com.

[55] Person reference #MP46437 http://www.monaropioneers.com.

[56] P. Gaskell, *Morvern Transformed: A Highland Parish in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968), p. 47.

inspired by the advantages offered by the colony had sent home exaggerated reports. The differences in the two levels of reporting had, he suggested, contributed to the nervousness of many who might otherwise have emigrated.

It is clear that Alex MacDonald intended to influence others from his home region to emigrate to New South Wales and this was the assessment also of the *Inverness Courier* which described his letter as giving a very favourable account of New South Wales. He assured readers of a safe and merry voyage to the colony, a warm reception, abundance to eat and of clothing, and certainty of employment which would be obtained quickly. He noted the improvement in the colony since his arrival which had at that time been suffering from drought for two years. Emigration - i.e. free emigration, both self-funded and sponsored - had, in this writer's view, transformed society to a fully civilised country.

Having earlier been reduced to a level which pastoralists said was all they could afford to pay, by July 1850 in the Maneroo region shepherds' wages had returned to £20 per annum with an adequate level of rations, particularly when, as MacDonald recorded, workers could maintain their own cattle and cultivate some ground for themselves. The pay rates were sufficient that he felt able to send a few pounds to his father in Moidart, to encourage his father to join him in New South Wales, and to note that 'none of the Moidart people here find themselves in condition to purchase land in Moidart ... here they can get better and cheaper land.'

The firm conclusion provided by this letter is that anyone in Moidart who could manage to emigrate would be well advised to do so but had to be prepared to work hard and not expect an easy fortune to be made. It is an attitude which still resonates today.

CONCLUSION

What none of the correspondents whose letters appeared in the *Inverness Courier* could have anticipated was the effect which the discovery of gold would have on the colony. The New South Wales colonial government made the official announcement of the discovery of gold in May 1851.[57] Gold had been discovered in Australia as early as the 1820s, but discoveries were kept secret for fear of sparking unrest among the convicts. However, as more people left the Australian colonies to join the gold rush in California, it became apparent that the outward tide of manpower would need to be stemmed. 'Gold provided an incentive for people to make the journey to Australia; increasing demand for ocean shipping prompted companies to introduce clipper ships and faster sea routes.'[58] Surges of population growth saw Victoria's non-Indigenous population, for example, grow rapidly from a starting point of 77,000 in 1851 to 540,000 a decade later in 1861.[59] These changes altered the face

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[57] For examples of public comment see the *Sydney Morning Herald,* 20 May 1851, where four items concerning gold appeared on page 2 and another on page 3.

[58] Keir Reeves, Lionel Frost and Charles Fahey, 'Integrating the Historiography of the Nineteenth Century Gold Rushes', *Australian Economic History Review,* 50, no 2 (July 2010), p. 113.

[59] Reeves et al. 'Lionel Frost' p.117.

of the country irrevocably with significant social disruption as many workers proceeded to the gold fields, while occupations and pursuits previously held were abandoned in at least the short term. Gold may possibly have held greater allure for Scottish Highlanders even than the prospect of large estates had done so few decades.