

Hold Fast

The story behind MacLeod emigration to the Carolinas in the 1770s

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Many thanks to all of you for being here today. It's a great privilege for me to be addressing the MacLeod Parliament this afternoon. I should begin bit about myself. I teach Gaelic literature, Highland history and folklore, and material culture or objects, things, at the Gaelic college, Sabhal Mòr Ostaig, in the south of the island. My wife is head of research there – so she's effectively my boss. I've two sons, eldest doing deck officer training for the British Merchant Navy, at present somewhere in the north Pacific; and my other son is at Portree High School. But he's also at sea just now, but only at the local Plockton regatta not far from the Skye Bridge, where he's crew for the local boat races they're having there this week.

You'll be relieved to hear that I come from traditional MacLeod territory – I was brought up in the Island of Lewis, in the Outer Hebrides – and that I have a good hefty dose of MacLeod blood in me. My grandmother's father's mother was Ann MacLeod from the village of Tong, also the birthplace of the MacLeod mother of a rather more famous person than I am. And if it weren't for the MacLeods of Lewis, my Stewart family would never have left the central Highlands – my ancestors are said to have come from Atholl as part of the dowry of Barbara Stewart, daughter of Andrew, Lord Avondale, when she married Old Rory, chief of the MacLeods of Lewis, in 1541 – so in fifteen years time the family are going to have a big party to celebrate 500 years on the island. Of course, we're just newcomers compared to the MacLeods.

As part of my work on Highland literature, folklore, and history, for over thirty years now I've done research on the different branches of the Clan MacLeod, their rich and fascinating clan history, their stories, poetry, and tradition. On Friday I was up at Trumpan Church across in Waternish, being interviewed by a BBC film crew about the Fairy Flag, the supernatural Bratach Shìthe, and the Battle of Millegarraidh where it is said to have been unfurled, waved in front of a band of marauding MacDonalds of Clan

Ranald, and led to the smaller, but not inferior, force of the MacLeods being victorious.

What should I talk about this evening? I was pondering all sorts of different topics, but in the end I thought that, considering that many of you will have come back to Skye from overseas, from the other side of the Atlantic, and from the important 250th anniversary this particular year, I should talk to you about one of the subjects I'm working on just now – I'm hoping that a book might come out of it in the future. So for the next half hour or so, I'll give you a taster about my work looking at the reasons for the earliest big emigrations of the Clan MacLeod here in Skye across the Atlantic to Carolina, in the early 1770s. This was the time of a major 'epidemic of emigration' across the western Highlands and Islands, and the Island of Skye was at the very centre of it.. As a springboard, I'm going to be using two books by the historian Jim Hunter: *A Dance Called America*, about Highland emigration, and Jim's history of the Clan MacLeod, *Scottish Exodus*. I'll be adding to that my research in contemporary printed sources, archives across Scotland and the United Kingdom, and work by other historians.

The years after what turned out to be the final defeat of the Jacobites at Culloden in 1746 were indeed difficult and challenging. The Highlands were under military occupation by the British army; it was a time of military atrocities, even of guerrilla warfare. Tartan was banned, bearing arms was forbidden, the government was attempting to dismantle the old way of life.

But as is the way of these things, people picked themselves up surprisingly quickly. Over the twenty years that followed, perhaps unexpectedly, the economy of the Highlands started to flourish as it was drawn ever closer into the wider British economy. People came to have more money in their pockets. And here on the west coast, this was primarily due to rising cattle prices. Every year in autumn, great droves of bad-tempered Highland cattle would be assembled across the Highlands and driven to the great cattle fair at Falkirk in the Scottish Lowlands, where they would be sold on, and eventually feed the populace of the growing cities in the south, above all

London, and, in the shape of barrels of salt beef, feed the sailors of the growing British Navy. The people of Skye were increasingly dependent on the droving trade.

In 1764 the minister and natural historian Rev. Dr John Walker made an officially-sponsored tour of the Hebrides. In his report, he records that the annual black cattle trade in Skye brought in £5400, three quarters of the entire annual income. Relative to average income, that's perhaps £14 million or US\$19 million today. On his visit to Skye, Dr Walker saw a landscape already being remade for the cattle trade. Summer rye grass and clover was being planted for pasturage, winter hay was being extended. The result was not just more cattle, but bigger cattle as well. Skye, Walker recorded, now exported 'one third more black Cattle, and of a larger Size' than thirty years earlier.

But this system was a fragile one. The hay produced was 'sufficient only to fodder their Stirks in Winter', that is, their young cattle. The older cattle and horses spent the winter outside 'without receiving a Mouthfull of dry Forage.' As you might expect, Walker had opinions about this. Skye farmers and tenants alike, he said, should stop wasting their time and exhausting the land growing grain. The best way to make money was to extend pastureland for more cattle, which could be sold and grain bought with the proceeds to feed the people.

The chiefs of Skye agreed with the diagnosis of the Rev. Walker and other improvers. Indeed, the late 1760s especially were years of surveys, valuations, and re-setting of estates across the western Highlands. The landlords, heavily in debt, needed money. Agricultural improvement offered them a way to make much needed cash to try to cover their ancient debts.

Introduce the first of the MacLeod chiefs: the twenty-second chief Norman MacLeod, an Droch Dhuine, the Bad Man. In the late 1760s he was living in Yorkshire with his second wife. The Bad Man was a prodigious spendthrift and had effectively alienated most of his clan at home in Skye. The clan

was now perhaps £50,000 in debt: again, in relation to modern incomes perhaps £130 million, US\$180 million.

Norman was not a well man: now in his sixties, he was an alcoholic, crippled by serious gout, bad eyes, and, I suspect, guilt and depression. He was clearly in thrall to his financial adviser, an Edinburgh lawyer called Alexander Fraser of Balnain. A number of years previously, Fraser of Balnain had bought a Highland estate on the shores of Loch Ness and improved it: it was now a land of neat houses and well-drained land. He thought he could do the same for the MacLeod estate in Skye. So together they concocted an ambitious improvement agenda, culminating in a major re-setting of the estates in autumn 1769. Farms were no longer allotted to the clan tacksmen as had been the custom before, but open to competitive bidding, with advertisements in the Edinburgh press. All successful bidders had to follow binding improvement regulations for their farms. Altogether, estate income from rents was to rise by two thirds, from £2,595 to £4,316: in contemporary earnings, this is the rough equivalent of a raise from £6 million to £10 million, or US\$8 million to US\$13.5 million.

Improvers were extremely impatient with the old tacksmen, the traditional farmers. They leached off their tenants, they said; they were enemies of improvement. The Rev. Dr John Walker scorned how they told him that the grasses they had sown couldn't be made into hay 'because of the Rains'; how they would not risk sowing early crops for fear of bad spring weather; how they wouldn't try out larger, higher-yielding white oats alongside the smaller, harder, traditional grey oats. His frustration comes through in his remark that 'Wind and Rain, and the Badness of the Climate, is the Universal Objection over all the Islands, against any Innovation in Husbandry.'

But the Highland economy was flourishing, wasn't it? It was a boom time for cattle prices, an age, in the words of a contemporary commentator, when 'speculation was at an enormous height, hardly any bounds being set to credit or hope.' What could possibly go wrong?

We've all been through boom and busts. What goes up tends to come down. What happened then was, in the eyes of contemporaries, a slowly unfolding, all-encompassing catastrophe, embracing harvest failures, credit collapse, economic and societal instability, dearth, famine, and mass emigration. This is not recognised in British history books: the worst affected area, the Scottish Highlands, was and remains too remote from centres of power to be taken much notice of. The important travel writers who visited the Highlands during these famine years – the Welsh naturalist Thomas Pennant in 1772, then the following year Dr Samuel Johnson and James Boswell – all encountered atrocious weather, poverty, hunger, a pervading sense of hopelessness. And each of them, understandably, treats these conditions as part of the normal hardships of Hebridean life, rather than signs of an exceptional crisis. The best book about this crisis, on a European scale, is in German by a German professor, Dominik Collet, at a Norwegian university. In *Die doppelte Katastrophe*, Collet describes the European famine crisis of 1770–72, one of the most severe of the Little Ice Age, arising from relentless summer rainfall and resulting in hundreds of thousands of deaths across the continent. It's a 'double catastrophe' in which abnormal climate became catastrophic when it affected societies which were already made vulnerable, such as the western Highlands.

It may be that the first seasons of bad weather, in 1769 and 1770, didn't drive people into despair right away. Island communities were used to recurrent scarcity, maybe as often as every four years. But very soon, this compound crisis took hold, with serious crop and stock losses at home, a collapse in cattle prices abroad, general market and credit failure, debts being called in, social tension, and inadequate leadership from the clan. From 1771 onwards, Skye farmers and tenants alike begin to think of emigration.

In tradition, 1771 is known as *Bliadhna an Earraich Dhuibh*, 'The Year of the Black Spring'. In March 1771, with cattle starving to death in the fields, a number of disaffected Skye tacksmen were gathering people for departure in August. These were important men in the island, including ex-estate factors who had fallen out with the chief. Their plan was to go to the

backlands of North Carolina where there was already a substantial Highland, Gaelic-speaking population, mostly from Argyll in the south of the Highlands. They would sell their effects in Skye and use the money to buy land in Carolina which would be worked by their tenantry, as back home, but as plantations.

What was the chief to do? In fact, the Bad Man was in no fit state to do anything. By the early 1770s, Old Norman's body was giving out. He was dying. The future of the chieftaincy was in the hands of his seventeen-year-old grandson and heir, also Norman. Young Norman was clearly extremely headstrong by nature, made worse, we can assume, by the death of his father John MacLeod, the erstwhile heir, a few years previously in 1767. One question was what to do about his education. As a clan chief, he should receive a socially appropriate, expensive education. But the MacLeod estate was burdened by crushing debts. His mother Emilia, protective and anxious for her young boy, pressed for a proper education – otherwise, she said, he was destined for the army or the navy. Mother Emilia has no portrait in Dunvegan – she refused to be painted, saying she wasn't beautiful enough. But she is a fascinating figure and played a very significant role in helping to steer clan affairs. She strongly resisted the proposed sale of the Island of Harris, which would dilute her son's inheritance and standing as chief. Meanwhile, his tutor reported that Young Norman was getting 'a bad reputation for pride and temper'. The young man refused to be a student at St Andrews, going to Edinburgh instead, from where, in summer 1770, rumours reached his mother about his 'end of term dissipation' and, most horrifyingly of all, that he had made a secret marriage. Emilia writes that she was 'in great agitation' over such news.

But Young Norman was saved by the appearance of a new mentor. After the chief, Colonel John MacLeod of Talisker was the most influential and respected figure in the clan. For over twenty years he had been absent from Skye, serving in the officer corps of the Scots Brigade of the Dutch Republic. He began an enthusiastic and energetic correspondence from the Netherlands with Emilia and Old Norman over Young Norman's future. Talisker was a landed gentleman, he knew Skye intimately, but he was also

cosmopolitan; he was scholarly, having originally trained in medicine; and he had long military experience. He was thus sure of himself, forceful, and accustomed to command and giving orders. He also really didn't like lawyers. He was therefore an ideal adviser and mentor for the young heir, to try to wrench him back to the straight and narrow.

By early 1772 the crisis of the MacLeod estates was now acute. Skye and the entire west coast was gripped by dearth and famine. An epidemic of emigration was sweeping the country. Old Norman MacLeod was clearly not long for this world. Trustees were appointed, among them Colonel John MacLeod of Talisker, who returned in April, first to London, then to Skye. Old Norman, now on his deathbed, told his grandson he expected never to return to Skye. His grandson had to take that step, to 'show himself to the people'. The decision over when and how was left to his mother Emilia, and to Colonel John. Letters were sent around Skye, asking the people not to emigrate before Young Norman met them.

On the death of his grandfather on 22 July 1772, Young Norman became chief, and Colonel John effectively became his surrogate father. Talisker accompanied the young chief to Skye and presented him to the estate tenantry. The young chief performed admirably. He acknowledged their hardships, explained the family's debts, warned them against America, promised to live among them, and asked them to renew with him 'the ancient manners'. Note that he was proposing to live in Skye. This is Talisker speaking. There is no longer any question of the young chief eating up clan finances learning how to be dissipated at university. He wasn't going to follow his grandfather. At such a time of crisis, the chief had to reside among his tenants, get to know the estate, rebuild confidence, and rebuild the bonds binding the clan together. This isn't just PR. As well as the promises, substantial rent reductions were made, firstly around £400, then in the end nearly £800: perhaps as much as £2 million or just under US\$3 million. It was all sweetened by hospitality: a surviving bill records 30 bottles of whisky made into punch for the tenantry in Minginish, and 565 men entertained 'at meat'. We see here a revival of the language, rituals,

and obligations of traditional chiefship, to bind the clan together in a time of crisis.

Tensions may have been eased by rent reductions, and by the new chief taking up residence in Dunvegan Castle, accompanied by his rather unwilling mother, but the atrocious weather continued, and to some extent the emigrations continued as well. One interesting thing here is how Talisker and maybe the young chief himself had wider PR ambitions. They wanted to polish the image of Young Norman in the London papers, if you like. In 1772 the Welsh travel writer Thomas Pennant had visited Dunvegan, and was impressed with Young Norman, describing him as ‘a gentleman of the most ancient and honourable descent, but whose personal character does him infinitely higher honour than this fortuitous distinction.’ ‘To all the milkiness of human nature, usually concomitant on youthful years, is added the sense and firmness of more advanced life. He feels for the distresses of his people, and insensible of his own, instead of the trash of gold, is laying up the treasure of warm affection, and heart-felt gratitude.’ This was a good write-up for a wider British public.

It looks as if the MacLeods tried out a similar strategy on Dr Samuel Johnson, the greatest literary figure in London of his day, and James Boswell the following year, in autumn 1773, during their famous tour to the western Highlands and the Hebrides. Before visiting MacLeod lands, Johnson and Boswell had visited Sir Alexander Macdonald, chief of the MacDonalds of Sleat, in Armadale. Boswell was close friends with Sir Alexander in London. They had even planned parts of the Highland tour together. Both of them expected that Sir Alexander would greet them in a great Highland castle and give them full Highland hospitality – and they were hugely disappointed when Sir Alexander put his distinguished visitors up in his little pocket mansion, treated them offhandedly and indeed treated the clan gentry who also happened to be visiting with very bad manners indeed, as Boswell relates: ‘when Captain Macdonald and Mr. Macqueen came in after we were sat down to dinner, Sir Alexander let them stand round the room and stuck his fork into a liver pudding, instead of getting room made for them. I took care to act as he ought to have done.’

This all ended in a huge falling out between Boswell and his erstwhile friend.

Things changed much for the better when Johnson and Boswell came among the MacLeods. Young Norman, accompanied by Talisker and other MacLeod gentry, offered Johnson and Boswell a carefully staged performance of old-style patriarchal Highland hospitality. They were taken off Skye to the Island of Raasay, and at the helm was the very man who had taken Bonnie Prince Charlie ‘over the sea to Skye’ thirty years previously. In Raasay, they were presented with a Jacobite-tinged world of dancing, feasting, and clan sociability staged by John MacLeod, eleventh chief of Raasay, and his ten beautiful daughters.

There was also a strategic dimension to the celebrations: the travellers were kept occupied and entertained on Raasay, hopefully blissfully unaware of the famine-stricken Skye opposite, where an emigrant ship lay off Portree. This was a deliberate plan by the MacLeod clan gentry, probably with Talisker behind it. It was in fact all planned in advance – and contrary to their lawyer’s advice: several weeks before Johnson and Boswell had even arrived, he had written ‘A steady perseverance in his good resolutions will win MacLeod more credit than Dr. Johnson’s puffs.’

But puffs by Dr Johnson were exactly what Talisker and Young Norman thought they needed. You can see the clan fishing for them in Raasay by emphasising the estate’s crushing debts. In the midst of a severe famine, a great crisis, the MacLeods spent a fortune on wining, dining, and entertaining their visitors from the south. They thought that a personal endorsement by the foremost literary figure in London was worth paying for. It could launch Young Norman on the aristocratic marriage market; in the future, it might attract the attention of wealthy patrons in the capital who might think him worth supporting in politics or perhaps a military career. Johnson’s puffs were the eighteenth-century equivalent of a Moody’s or Fitch AAA credit rating, proving that Young Norman MacLeod was a man worth backing.

Now, Dr Johnson evidently thought the world of Young Norman. Here's Boswell:

Mr Johnson was very fond of MacLeod, who is indeed a most promising youth, and with a noble spirit is to struggle with difficulties and keep his people. He has been left with £40,000 of debt and 1300 a year of annuities to pay. Mr Johnson said, "Sir, if he gets the better of all this, he'll be a hero; and I hope he shall. He's a fine fellow, MacLeod. I have not met with a young man who had more desire to learn, or who has learnt more. I've seen nobody that I wish more to do a kindness to than MacLeod."

Such was the honourable elogium, on this young chieftain, pronounced by an accurate observer, whose praise was never lightly bestowed. (Boswell, diary 18 Sep 1773):

At breakfast Lady MacLeod complained of the difficulties under which the family now laboured. "Madam," said Mr Johnson, "consider what a son you have. He is as fine a young gentleman as I ever knew since I came into this world. I never knew anyone who at his age had advanced his understanding so much."

But these puffs never appeared in Johnson's book about his journey, printed in 1775. Maybe Johnson was too caught up with abstract philosophising and generalised lucubrations about his Highland tour to pay individual compliments to his host. He does write that 'at Dunvegan I had tasted lotus', but omits to say who was supplying the lotus. That had to be left until 1785 when Boswell published his own account.

By that time, the world of the MacLeods had all changed. Eventually, despite all of mother Emilia's protests, the Isle of Harris was sold. The epidemic of emigration was eventually cured, not so much by the improving climate, as by the outbreak of the American Revolutionary War – it was no longer safe, or possible, to travel across the Atlantic to find land in the New World. Many of the men who had emigrated had taken part in the ill-starred march of loyalist forces in early 1776, mainly Highlanders, many of them from Skye, marching from the interior down the Cape Fear River to link up with promised government forces at Wilmington on the coast, then march

north, roll up the patriots, and crush the American rebellion. That ended up with the disaster of Moore's Creek, the last ever Highland charge, right into a rebel trap: massacre, chaos, and flight. Even if they had reached Wilmington, there would have been no British Army forces disembarked and waiting for them. But that's a story for another lecture!

Then there's Young Norman himself. Ambitious and still headstrong, he had grown restless and enrolled in the British army. Captured by an American privateer on the way over to fight for the British in the Revolutionary War, he was an American prisoner for two years. We can imagine how frustrating this must have been for the young man, but it was the making of him. By the terms of his release, Norman MacLeod was forbidden to fight in America. Instead, he turned his attention to the east, to India, where he showed himself an extraordinarily able commander during the Second Mysore War. He was promoted to brigadier-general while still in his late twenties, and he was earning a fortune, maybe £12 million a year today, and he made a fortune in imperial spoils – according to the family, £100,000: as much as £100 million against contemporary earnings. Yet he couldn't use it to cover the family debts. Young Norman was immensely talented, but he was also headstrong, touchy, and disputatious. And he always had ambitions. He wasted much on gambling in India; he spent much of the rest on ill-advised political ambitions after he returned to Scotland – to his mother's utter dismay; it caused a final falling-out between them. Again, that's a story for yet another lecture.

To conclude, we've taken a brief look at the MacLeods during a time of serious crisis, when the very future of the clan itself appeared to be at stake. We've looked at the resourceful ways the clan chief and his advisor took to 'hold fast', to bind the clan together. And, although some of their tactics were more successful than others, the plans generally appear to have worked. When Young Norman was released from being an American prisoner of war in 1778, the clan gentry who remained in Skye came together and agreed to pay a substantial extra sum of rent in order to keep the clan finances as healthy as they could. Among the many clans I've researched and been writing about, I've a special kindness for the

MacLeods: the clan has an epic, almost cinematic history, full of larger than life characters, embracing not just the islands of Skye and Raasay, but the entire globe. Many thanks: I hope you all enjoy the rest of the week, and that you all ‘hold fast’. *Gun cùm sibh greim!*