

## **The Scottish Highland Clearances and their Place in History and in the World Imagination**

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ABSTRACT: This article considers the policy of genocide known as the Scottish Highland Clearances. The cultural uses of this memory are then traced across the nineteenth century, the Scottish diaspora found congenial places elsewhere in the world, while paradoxically the English found new interest in Scotland itself. The Clearances are then traced through their appearance in twentieth century memory and imagination, including the continuity of Scottish passion and the renewal of distinctively Scottish practices.

### *Prelude: A Grand Theme Still Resonant and Imaginatively Throughout the English-Speaking Countries*

This short article is so entitled to allow its perspectives to start with the most significant and positive aspect of one of the saddest events in that Celtic nation's history, the mass eviction of people from the Highlands of Scotland.

I now give the mottoes appended a most challenging and forward-looking cultural perspective on certain tragic events in the history of Scotland in the 18th century, and an anthology of the complex, unexpected, and even vibrant resonances (from p. ix).<sup>1</sup>

I think... every Highlander should have copies of the histories of Clearances along with the Bible in his bookcase.

John Maclean, Inverness Harbour Master.

We have not become so civilised in our behaviour, or more concerned with men than profit that this story holds no lesson for us.

John Prebble (*v. infra*).

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<sup>1</sup> June Skinner Sawyers, *Bearing the People Away: The Portable Highland Clearances Companion*, Sydney, Cape Breton University Press, 2013, soft covers, pp. ix, 318. \$Can 24.95.

*The Grand Theme of the Tragedy*

The Highland 'Clearances', as the term still is, refers generally to the eviction of the indigenous Gaelic-speaking people of the Scottish Highlands and Islands in the period between 1790 and 1855, to make way first for the more profitable cattle and sheep, and then, from the earlier Victorian period, for estates for shooting of the native fauna and the (cultivated) semi-wild deer. The inevitable consequence of this bizarre arrogance and ruthlessness was that a culture—early on deemed to be Roman Catholic and destructively defiant—was then destroyed in its style and practice in that region, or it and its people evicted to survive in cities like Glasgow, or in most cases, to be forced overseas, to Canada, the United States, Australia and, farthest, to New Zealand.

The result of this policy of genocide was that the culture would long be told of in (regional) histories, novels, plays, poems, (family) memoirs and songs of protest—these collected up and now reflected on by Jane Skinner Sawyers, a Scots-born writer living in Chicago, U.S.A.. We understand that she has written more than twenty books, many with a Scottish theme, including popular and regional histories. Not content with a sumptuous bibliography of 28 pages, the writer has referenced these for her readers most closely with the glosses, notes and short articles mentioned in her text.

Thus, the book might well go on one's shelves alongside early editions of *The New Zealand Encyclopaedia* or the *Oxford Companion to Classical Literature*, being of a like quality of illumination, and authority on painful severance, combined with readability. This last comes from her love of the subject and her urge to collect and to organise the multiple responses from many countries, in many genres and styles, and all with the same fire in their observations and an infinite compassion.

Clearly the main emphasis is on the Scots in Canada, their first and nearest new homeland, and there is a like significance on the mid-19th century exile turn to New Zealand, as with Otago—Scottish settled in 1848—and in the case of the twice driven-off settlers to at last rest at Waipu, where the Reverend Norman McLeod (1780-1866) would move, first to Pictou, Nova Scotia in 1817, remaining in Canada until 1851, moving to Australia (p. 177), and finally settled at Waipu, on the North Island of New Zealand in September 1853, his ship being followed by four more.

Finally he, McLeod, would select some 66,000 acres in Northland, about 160 km north of Auckland. And another three communities would spring up near Waipu. This is the ultimate tale of Highland displacement and failure to find some place of rest in this world.

*But now to Reflect on John Prebble (1915-2001), the Champion of the Highlands*

The enormously popular historian of the Clearances—for his hugely impacting book, *The Highland Clearances* (1963), was the major twentieth-century populariser of the theme. He had been born near London, but he grew up in Sutherland (Saskatoon, Saskatchewan) in Canada, returned to England in 1934 to serve in the British Army. This book of appraisal is typical of those from the dominions who re-appraised Britain in war times, reflected and produced a measured and hugely informative sequence of documented history of the Highlands, over more than twenty years.

The cited work was the second of a monumental trilogy, which was concerned to record the downfall/destruction of the clan system, as well as of the shifting fortunes of his real mother country. The sequence now given is that of the blows delivered to the 'Mother Country' by his passionate pen.

Darren's *Culloden* (1962)

*The Highland Clearances* (1963)

*Glencoe* (1966)

*The Scottish Dream of Empire* (1968)

*The Lion in the North: A Personal View of Scotland's History* (1973)

*Mutiny: Highland Regiments in Revolt, 1743-1804* (1975);  
and

John Prebble's *Scotland* (1984).

This sequence has long had and will probably continue to have aroused passion, anger and desire for rightful identity, this force so much the driver of Scottish Christianity, education and ever-increasing political defiance of the blandness of 'England' and other pragmatic and cynical societies.

*John Watson-Nicol (1856-1926)*

This Edinburgh-born painter is best known for his Clearances themed painting, *Lochaber No More* (1885), one in which an emigrant couple and their loyal dog look back wistfully as their ship prepares to leave for the New World. This encapsulation of despair has been rightly called 'a visual elegy' and is the most haunting of all the images of despair from the rejected people, all so unjustly and cruelly evicted.

Jane Skinner Sanders herself is equally moving in her scathing prose, as in this instance of her discussion of English indifference to the ever-continued injustices to this Celtic-descended society—

By 1837, when Victoria became queen, the South had become fascinated by Highlanders, who by now were harmless and exotic objects of curiosity since the Jacobite rebellions were safely in the past. In 1859, Queen Victoria bought Balmoral Castle and helped to foster the 'Balmoralism' that continues to haunt the Highlands today. (p. 101)

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### *Fascinating Speculations*

While many of the topics treated are not specifically linked with Australia, many of the themes must intrigue those familiar with Australian 'mustering' (pp. 103-104). The link is this Saunders' piece entitled 'Highland drovers', these men largely concerned with sheep, and Walter Scot's awareness of the differing and distinctive lifestyles of those moving mobs of cattle, as opposed to sheep. Indeed, this is a nice corrective to the Australian pride at its movement of cattle, over vast distances and in enormous mobs.

### *But 'New Caledonia'?*

An obvious omission from the very rich compendium would seem to be the fact that the area beyond the limits and long-known as New England, had long been deemed 'New Caledonia', as the title removed from survey documents from Thomas Mitchell, the surveyor general for the northern region of New South Wales in the earlier 19th century. And the Scottish driver of higher education—notably present in the University of Otago in Dunedin, New Zealand—or in specific colleges at the University of Sydney and the New Zealand university, are not mentioned, despite their clear roots in Scotland.

Thus, the general 'Scottish diaspora' article (pp. 227-228) might well have been expanded in various ways beyond—

a collective memory and myth about the homeland, including an idealisation of the ancestral home (p. 227); and

an ethnic group consciousness over a particular period of time based on a strong sense of distinctiveness (p. 227).

Indeed, the celebration of fifty years in the promised land—as in New Zealand's Dunedin in 1898 and marked by so many of the original children—might/should qualify for her request/ muted hope. Moreover,

she is more accurate on her comment on Americans so descended—she noting fairly—

The truth is, most Americans of Scots ancestry paid no particular heed to Scotland. They might express an admiration for the country, and wish it well, but on a day-to-day basis, Scotland as a country barely entered their mind. They did not become involved in Scottish politics. (p. 227)

*But Scots Remained Political—in Some Places*

It is the particular observation of the present reviewers that the Scottish dynamic in the political sphere has remained, if muted, in the Australian Labour Party, even if it has produced such clear thinking figures as the New Zealand Prime Minister in World War II, the Clydesider, Peter Fraser. And the moral conscience of Presbyterian ministers of Scottish descent is notably present in the public lives of such committed ministers as—

Garfield Todd, as in Rhodesia.

Ronald Watson in 20th century New Zealand; or his son

Nigel Watson (1928-2013),

it notably manifested in both Southland (N.Z.) and in Melbourne in Australia.

*How Passionate are Diasporic Scots?*

The book under examination refers variously to the recent (2012) volume by Peter Aitchison and Andrew Cassell's *The Lowland Clearances: Scotland's Silent Revolution, 1760-1830* (Edinburgh, Birlinn, 2012) and, so it seems to agree with them that the descendants of the thus scattered are not much involved with things Scottish. The present writers<sup>2</sup> can only disagree. Depending on access to even skeletal knowledge, or awareness of Caledonian or clan events, we believe that the fire is still there. Indeed, the renaissance of things Celtic in Eastern Australia has been notable, particularly since the Bicentennial of 1988.

Many like W. Wannan have made this point memorably and it is not appropriate to give all the emphasis to the Irish because of Ned Kelly and the very visible Irish presence, as at the time of the Eureka Stockade.

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<sup>2</sup> One descended from Scots evicted from High Barbeth on Loch Ryan, then failing commercially in the Lowlands, and so then seeking a better life in New Zealand in 1887. The other descended from Sutherlands.



*Lochaber No More (1885), by John Watson-Nicol (1856-1926)*

*A Form of Summary*

The events that 'Bore the People Away' are not forgotten and for many descended from the then dispossessed, that grave injustice still burns fiercely in the fields of music and song, in pageantry and Presbyterian and Roman Catholic minds alike.

We cannot do better than cite the assertions made on the rear cover of this rich and powerful 'companion' volume—

A number of histories, novels, poems, plays, memoirs and songs have been written about the Clearances. In recent years some scholars have minimised the impact referring to the historical accounts as being hyperbolic, an exaggeration fuelled by anger as much as by wishful nostalgia. Others maintain that the Clearances were an inevitable part of economic history and a necessary if painful consequence of progress.

It is a story about a particular subject of people in a particular area of a small northern nation, but it is also the larger story of the human condition—the strong overwhelm the weak, with their resources, their power and their ambition. (Rear cover)

However, all will concur with the book's summary conclusion that—

The Clearances—an iconic image and a concept—is of deeply rooted and profound symbolic importance for Scots in the Highlands and in the global Scots diaspora. *Bearing the People Away* is the only one-volume companion ... to one of the most defining moments in Scottish, and indeed, British history.

*A Reference Classic for Australia*

For Australia, this book deserves to have the respect accorded to Russel Ward's *The Australian Legend* (1958), for neither book can be ignored if those who follow would understand most clearly the great colonial drives for the emerging national psyche.

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