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Scots in Australia: The Gaze from Auld Scotia

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There are unverifiable claims that George Johnstone from Dumfries, founder of Annandale in Sydney, was the first ashore at Botany Bay from the First Fleet in 1788.¹ Since then he has been followed by over 600,000 of his compatriots,² the vast majority of whom could be considered Scotland's loss and Australia's gain. Three of the first six governors of New South Wales were Scots, John Hunter (1737-1821) from Leith, Lachlan Macquarrie (1762-1824) from Ulva, Isle of Mull, and Thomas Brisbane (1773-1860) from Largs.³ They, women children and men, and others of their ilk arrived in a country offering little that reminded them of the homeland, a place where their expectations of the Antipodes were met almost literally, in the sense that everything seemed to be the opposite of the norm. The southern sky was alien. The seasons were reversed, resulting in a Scotsman musing that the winters were 'awfy hot'. Notably, animal and plant life were like nothing they had ever seen – the platypus enigma. Rivers rose and disappeared for no obvious reason. The indigenous population appeared, to outside eyes, to live in the Stone Age. The majority of British incomers were exported criminals. Yet the early Scots (and doubtless representatives of other nationalities as well) strove to describe and understand the life and landscape of this extraneous continent in terms of the familiar, utilising tropes imported with their cultural baggage.

Malcolm Prentis's invaluable study provides an exceptionally useful historiography of the subject, which need not be reproduced here. The first real stirrings of serious, mutual, historical interest between the two countries can reasonably be dated to the 1960s, when David Macmillan's study appeared,⁴ thereafter greatly reinforced through the bicentennial celebrations of 1988 when Australia truly realised that although it is one of the youngest countries in the world it can boast one of the oldest populations. At the same time the Academy in both countries embraced many new avenues of historical investigation such as gender, popular culture and race. Because Scotland's historiography may be said to have begun with the Romans, the Scots have tended to take their history unquestioningly for granted, as a lengthy story, rather than as a cultural

phenomenon to be interrogated and rescrutinised from generation to generation. When the present writer was an undergraduate in Scottish History in the 1960s, Peter Hume Brown's somewhat pedestrian *History of Scotland* (3 vols 1899-1909) was still on the list of prescribed reading. The smashing of the historical moulds may be said to have been marked by the appearance in the '60s of *The Edinburgh History of Scotland* and Chris Smout's *A History of the Scottish People 1560-1830* (1969). In the same decade the late Gordon Donaldson was commissioned to write *The Scots Overseas* (1966), a task he accepted reluctantly, to produce a book which is important as pointing to what was then a neglected field of study.

Given the numerous publications on the Scot abroad today it is difficult to comprehend the extent to which Scots appeared to be completely uninterested in those who left them. While most Scots had relatives or friends who had emigrated, the departed were regarded with some measure of suspicion, or worse disdain, as unpatriotic betrayers of the 'Auld Country'. The supposedly daft notions about the homeland entertained abroad by folk of Scottish descent were also widely ridiculed. Those who left were no longer loved, especially, it might be added, if they were successful, or if they had made a significant contribution to the development of their adopted country. It might be said it was not the Poppy but the 'Tall Thistle' syndrome that prevailed! It might also be argued that academic historians considered that it was imperative to write the history of Scotland before tackling the history of Scots abroad, a somewhat forbidding topic which requires some mastery and understanding, however imperfect, of the history of the new host countries. As matters stand at present published Scottish investigations of Scots in Australia remain disappointingly superficial and almost relentlessly male.⁵

Scots abroad have been a phenomenon for centuries, first in Europe and then the Americas. Emigration is never a simple process. John Mair, the sixteenth-century philosopher, theologian and historian who enjoyed an international reputation once opined 'our native soil attracts us with a secret and inexpressible sweetness and does not permit us to forget it',⁶ an early articulation of the *maladie du pays* from which most exiles supposedly suffer. Departure can be painful as the individual feels some sense of guilt induced by

well-meaning family and friends, doubts about the wisdom of the move, and uncertainty about what lies ahead. At the same time it can be an exhilarating experience involving anticipation of the new, the promise of betterment and the attainment of freedoms much talked about but seldom realised at home. Propaganda deploring emigration for its potential dilution of the work force, and recruitment for the army and navy, reached a crescendo around the turn of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Poems and songs written by people who had barely ventured furth of Scotland taught the populace that emigration was bad, sad and dangerous but the truth is that while there was some back-migration a majority remained in their host countries, adapting with remarkable speed to the new environments and opportunities. Armed with a decent grounding in literacy and numeracy most Scottish emigrants were aspiring achievers who, even when they self consciously retained an attachment to the Old Sod, rapidly assimilated and furthermore, were keen to contribute to the development and identity of the nations of which they had become part.

The motives for emigration were many and various. The most obvious reason for opening up New South Wales was that, following the American Revolution, penal colonization, or 'parliamentary slavery'⁷ as J. D. Lang called it, was no longer an option. James Cook's 'discovery' of Botany Bay seemed a possible alternative. However, as Scots have long enjoyed pointing out, some law lords considered transportation illegal for crimes that did not carry the death penalty. Exile, in time-honoured fashion, should be regarded as equivalent to death. Consequently only some 5% of the male convict population in Australia was Scottish since judges were reluctant, unlike those in England and Ireland, to impose such a sentence for minor crimes. Other immediate considerations in the 1790s included war with France, which temporarily halted population movement, to revive following post-war economic recession after 1815. The lure of land, unimaginably plentiful, was attractive even though Australia was much further away than, say, Canada. The mechanization of manufacturing, the pitifully slow process of political reform at national and local levels, the post-war downturn in agriculture, the neo-feudal practices of landlords, and the promise of affordable passage, all proved additional incentives, not to mention the sunnier climes which still appeal to would-be emigrants.

Most of the negative commentary continued to come from critics such as Patrick Colquhoun, founder of the Glasgow chamber of commerce, the first in Britain, who condemned the futility and remoteness of the Australian colony.⁸ On the other hand several Scots, most of them like Colquhoun, products of the Scottish Enlightenment, wrote evocatively and positively about the early years of the new colony. Thomas Watling from Dumfries was an engraver who created his own drawing-academy in the burgh before suffering fourteen years transportation to Botany Bay for forgery. There his artistic skills were in demand documenting the four-year-old colony with paintings of exotic plant and animal life. He also depicted aborigines of whom he wrote that, though 'they are centuries behind some other savage nations, in point of useful knowledge . . . this is no criterion of judging mental ability'. He reported that they were 'extremely fond of painting and sits hours by me when at work', a truly arresting and sympathetic image of the meeting of distant cultures in art, especially since contemporaneously tensions between the races were tense and violent.⁹

Among those who tried to modify the stain of convictism was Captain Alexander Maconochie from Edinburgh who in 1818 pleaded with the British government to pay more attention to the Pacific Ocean, 'so far one entire gap in our commercial relations'.¹⁰ He was a keen advocate of the potential of New South Wales, praising its fertility and commercial prospects while deploring its constitution and governance. As a son of the Enlightenment he believed that transportation should be halted because the convict system outraged every principle of policy, humanity and justice. His was an authoritative voice, directly involved as he was in initiating schemes of penal reform on Norfolk Island.¹¹

Peter Cunningham (1789-1864) was a doctor, who, assigned to a convict ship, first visited New South Wales in 1819. In five voyages 1819-28 he accompanied 747 convicts of whom only three died *en route*. He was a member of the Cunningham family of Dalswinton, Dumfries, two generations of whom were awarded seven entries in the (British) *Dictionary of National Biography*. His brother Allan was the biographer and editor of Robert Burns. In 1827 Peter published *Two Years in New South Wales* a hugely impressive compendium of information in which he predicted that the colony would become the seat of a powerful empire while offering health, prosperity, a crime-free environment and

a high standard of living.¹² He named his farm in the Hunter Valley 'Dalswinton' after his birthplace. There were further publications on electromagnetism and *Hints for Immigrants*, but he quit Australia in 1830.

John Ramsay McCulloch (1789-1864), from Galloway, who has been described as the first professional economist, predicted that Australia, which he never visited, would become a new America.¹³ The most influential Scottish work of all appeared in 1834 when John Dunmore Lang (1799-1878) published his still highly readable *Historical and Statistical Account of New South Wales* and much else besides. Lang, a Presbyterian minister and tireless promoter of emigration, was *the* giant among Scots who settled in Australia. He was undoubtedly a quarrelsome individual who seemed to thrive on conflict. He was anti-catholic, anti-Irish and even anti-the Church of Scotland, setting up his own synod to combat Scottish interference in colonial presbyteries. He opposed convictism, aristocratic oligarchies, officialdom, colonialism (which stunted development) and soldiers (who were trained to kill). He condemned the naming of places after itinerant officials or overseas politicians who had never set foot in Australia, advocating the retention of native names. He wrote extensively and passionately about a wide range of subjects and causes, obsessing about the creation of an Australian democracy, republican in orientation.¹⁴ 'I maintain that entire freedom and national independence is a sacred, inherent and indefeasible right, to which my fellow colonists are entitled by the law of nature and the ordinance of God, and which our mother country has no right whatever to withhold'. He had a profound belief, which many Scots still share, that sovereignty resides in the people.¹⁵ Many did not agree with his views but they could not ignore them.

Less written about were other aspects of Scottish radicalism. John Macarthur, English-born son of a Scottish Jacobite and George Johnston from Dumfries, both formerly of the British army, conspired in the revolution of 1808 when they deposed the tyrannical governor William Bligh (1754-1817) who had survived the infamous mutiny on the *Bounty*. The two Scots set up a republic which lasted for two years with resonances of the American precedent. Johnston was eventually court martialed in England but was spared to return to Australia.¹⁶ J. D. Lang stated that he heard Macarthur boast in 1824 that he had

been 'the means' of sending home every governor except Macquarrie, 'and I am greatly mistaken if he did not render the same service to the then reigning Governor, Sir Thomas Brisbane'.¹⁷

Lachlan Macquarrie (1762-1824) is still regarded as one of the most successful governors, who allegedly administered the colony, 1810-21, as a clan chief would govern his domain, namely on a patriarchal and paternalistic, but somewhat progressive, basis, ably partnered by his artistic wife, Elizabeth Campbell.¹⁸ Michael Robinson was retained as his official bard. He adopted moderate policies towards the aborigines but showed no mercy to bush-rangers, while proving a tough negotiator who managed to outwit some of the wily colonials he encountered. He travelled quite extensively, for example to Tasmania, in order to gain a better understanding of the vastness of the country. While there he invoked the name of William Wallace, rather a dangerous ploy, perhaps, when most of the white population was made up of convicts who were presumably just as intent upon the acquisition of freedom as the Scottish hero.¹⁹ His secretary, Thomas Campbell was encouraged to write a history of New South Wales alias Australia, an appellation which Macquarrie favoured over 'the very erroneous and misapplied name' of New Holland. He urged his Australia-born son 'to cherish the warmest affection for his Native land', just as he attempted to instill a sense of pride and civic responsibility in the colonists through the media of architecture and art. Recent scholarship agrees that he well merits the accolade of 'Father of Australia'.²⁰

Other significant founders might include the father of Australian commerce, Robert Campbell from Greenock;²¹ other potential fatherly candidates are: of sheep-farming, John McArthur;²² of the Australian Library and the Australian Museum, Alexander Macleay from Caithness;²³ of the wine industry, James Busby from Edinburgh;²⁴ and of controversy, John Dunmore Lang, though there was a fair bit of fierce competition from fellow Scots for that title. Scottish explorers ventured inland to pioneer routes through some of the harshest landscapes in the world. Among them were the somewhat irascible Thomas Mitchell from Perthshire,²⁵ as well as John McDouall Stuart²⁶ from Dysart in Fife, and John McKinlay²⁷ from Sandbank Argyll whose epic trans-continental expeditions have become the stuff of Australian legend.

Scots continued to invest sweat, blood and capital. By 1884 it was claimed that 'three fourths of the foreign and colonial investment companies are of Scottish origin. If not actually located in Scotland, they have been hatched by Scotch-men and work on Scottish models'.²⁸ The clippers *Thermopylae* of Aberdeen and *Cutty Sark* of Dumbarton raced one another to Australia. The Clyde Company was only one of many Scottish enterprises active in the Antipodes. McIlwraith, McEacharn and Company in 1880 commissioned Glasgow engineers to build the first refrigerated cargo ship on principles developed by the Scottish Australian, James Harrison. Scottish writers, artists and poets were also to make a contribution.²⁹ Andrew Bogle Paterson, a farmer from Lanarkshire emigrated about 1850. One of his children was Banjo Paterson, Australia's national bard, who composed such classics as 'The Man from Snowy River' and 'Waltzing Matilda'.³⁰ If all of this appears too positive and benign two of the most scamming, scheming skullduggerous Scots of their generation contributed to the eruption at the Eureka Stockade, storekeeper Joe McTaggart and Commissioner David Armstrong both of whom specialized in racketeering, and gouging the miners.³¹

Music can prove a valuable aid in the preservation of cultural memory but there can be little doubt that the Australians have not proved as determined or retentive, as Canadians, Americans or New Zealanders where the perpetuation of Scottish identity is concerned. Scots were second to the English, admittedly by a fair margin, among overseas-born Australians, during the whole of the twentieth century but they were also becoming less conspicuous. People have different ways of preserving or remembering identity. Andrew Thompson from the Borders was once accused of 'making moonshine liquor upon Scotland Island', quaintly appropriate cultural reinforcement. Thomas Archer from Glasgow visited a number of sheep stations owned by Scots who conferred ancestral names on their properties, for example the Mackenzies of Kilcoy, The Scotts of Mount Esk and the Camerons of Fassifern, all ever-present reminders of origins.³² It seems he did not meet the Learmonth brothers, descendants of the legendary medieval Borders prophet, Thomas the Rhymer, in whose honour they named their 8,000 acres Erceldoune, which features in this exhibition pictured by William Hadcock and A. H. Fullwood.³³ At one place Tom Archer handled an

old flintlock pistol used at the battle of Prestonpans in 1746.³⁴ One highlander kept his father's broadsword hung up above his bedhead. As early as 1824 a newspaper satirized a young Australian barbecuing a Scottish smoked ham, drinking a bottle of Bell's best Scotch Ale, followed by a cup of Glenlivet and perusal of one of Scott's latest works.³⁵ The latter was the most popular novelist in nineteenth century Australia, perhaps providing some sort of inspirational model of human drama set in sublime landscapes.

As the absorbing *Images of Scottish Australia* attests, landscapes remained important to the immigrants, as they strove to describe the exotic in terms of the familiar. One man complained 'there is no peats here',³⁶ while John Mackinlay, burning up in the ferocious heat of the continental interior fantasized that sandhills appeared to him like 'dirty snow heaps with heather bushes protruding'. However it was reported that one result of Mackinlay's remarkable expedition, in revealing so many pleasing features of the back country, was 'to make us more thoroughly Australian. The yearnings after home (i.e. Scotland) are becoming small by degrees, and beautifully less'.³⁷ Thomas Mitchell, who survived three exploratory expeditions during a difficult life asserted that although Australia was 'a land now almost divided from the world' he envisaged that one day it would equal, 'in all the arts of civilization the illustrious regions' of Scotland'.³⁸ Angus MacMillan from Glen Brittle, Isle of Skye was a puzzling and pernicious paradox, a man hugely popular with his fellow Gaels but a savage exterminator of aborigines. He once climbed a hill in south-east Australia to obtain a view of the lochs stretching to the coast. The view, he said, 'put me more in mind of the scenery of Scotland than any other country I had hitherto seen and therefore I named it at that moment Caledonia Australis', so revealing that, however heinous his actions, he retained a somewhat poetic soul.³⁹

Fortunately, not all Scottish Australians shared MacMillan's extreme views. Most embraced their new country warmly and enthusiastically. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries a family by the name of Nivison was numerous and widely settled in the Nithsdale area of south-west Scotland, their lives governed by religious reform, covenanting resistance to Stewart tyranny, the everyday business of farming and coal-mining, and the struggle for existence. In 1839 Abraham Nivison and his wife emigrated to New South Wales. Today

there are hundreds of Nivisons in New South Wales and East Queensland, but they have only two entries in the Dumfries and Galloway phone book, truly a transplanted Scottish Australian clan, their history, traditions, heritage, and most importantly their futures, having emigrated with them.⁴⁰ They are now Australians linked to Scotland only by interest and sentiment; they are not alone. The Ballarat exhibition provides a welcome opportunity to reflect not only on what Scots made of Australia but also to ponder what Australians down to Federation thought of Scots.

¹ On the justifiable doubts surrounding this claim see Alan Roberts, *Marine Officer, Convict Wife The Johnstons of Annandale*, Balmain, 2008, 18-19.

² Malcolm Prentis, *The Scots in Australia*, Sydney, 2008, 77.

³ To avoid cluttering the text with references it should be noted that almost all the Scots mentioned in this article have secured entries in the *Australian Dictionary of Biography* or the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* or both.

⁴ David Macmillan, *Scotland and Australia 1788-1850*, Oxford 1967.

⁵ See, for example, Michael Fry, *The Scottish Empire*, Edinburgh, 2001, 108-118, 220-24 and index; T. M. Devine, *Scotland's Empire 1600-1815*, London, 2003, 271-89; T. M. Devine, *To the Ends of the Earth Scotland's Global Diaspora 1750-2010*, London, 2011, in which Australia is almost invisible but see 150-1, 162-5, 230-49. All three studies seem obsessed with Scottish achievement rather than nuanced analysis of the role played by Scottish emigrants in their host countries. Apart from Malcolm Prentis cited above, and see also his *The Scots in Australia*, Sydney, 1983, the major contribution to the study of the subject has been a number of publications by Eric Richards such as 'Highland Emigrants to South Australia in the 1850s', *Northern Scotland*, 5, 1982, 'Australia and the Scottish Connection 1788-1914' in *The Scots Abroad, labour, capital and enterprise 1750-1914*, ed. R. A. Cage, London, 1985, 'Leaving the Highlands: Colonial Destinations in Canada and Australia in *Myth, Migration and the Making of Memory Scotia and Nova Scotia c.1700-1990*, eds. Marjory Harper and Michael E. Vance, Halifax, 1999 and 'Scottish Voices and Networks in Colonial Australia' in *A Global Clan Scottish Migrant Networks and Identities since the Eighteenth Century*, ed. Angela McCarthy, London, 2006. The works of Marjory Harper should also be consulted.

⁶ John Major (Mair), *Commentary on the Sentences of Peter Lombard* (Paris 1519) cited in Alexander Broadie, *The Tradition of Scottish Philosophy A New Perspective*, Edinburgh, 1990.

⁷ John Dunmore Lang, *An Historical and Statistical Account of New South Wales From the Founding of the Colony in 1788 to the Present Day*, 2 vols 4th edition London, 1875, vol. 1, 11.cal.

⁸ Macmillan, *Scotland and Australia*, 47.

⁹ [Thomas Watling] *Letters from an Exile in Botany-Bay to his Aunt in Dumfries Giving a Particular Account of the Settlement of New South Wales with the customs and manners of the inhabitants*, Penrith, 1794, reprint Sydney 1945, 10, 13. It is noteworthy that the publisher of Watling's pamphlet was Ann Bell. The proceeds

of the publication were to be given for the financial relief of his aunt. See also Hugh S. Gladstone, 'Thomas Watling, Limner of Dumfries', *Transactions of the Dumfriesshire and Galloway Natural History and Antiquarian Society*, third series Vol xx, 1935-6, Dumfries, 1938, 70-133.

¹⁰ Alexander Maconochie, *Summary View of the Statistics and Existing Commerce of the Pacific Ocean*, London, 1818, xvi.

¹¹ John Clay, *Maconochie's Experiment*, London, 2001, *passim*.

¹² Peter Cunningham, *Two Years in New South Wales*, ed. David S. Macmillan, Sydney, 1966, 4, 9-16.

¹³ *Edinburgh Review*, 47, Jan. 1828, 97, qtd by Macmillan, *Scotland and Australia*, 47.

¹⁴ The fullest biography remains D. W. A. Baker, *Days of Wrath A Life of John Dunmore Lang*, Melbourne, 1985.

¹⁵ Lang, *History of New South Wales*, vol. 2, 496.

¹⁶ Roberts, *Marine Officer, Convict Wife*, 108-114.

¹⁷ Lang, *History of New South Wales*, vol. 1. 49, note.

¹⁸ M. H. Ellis, *Lachlan Macquarrie His Life Adventures and Times*, Sydney 1947, 399-418.

¹⁹ *Lachlan Macquarrie Governor of New South Wales Journals of his Tours in New South Wales and Van Dieman's Land 1810-1822*, Sydney, 1956, 67.

²⁰ For example, *The Age of Macquarrie*, eds. James Broadbent and Joy Hughes, Melbourne, 1992 and Harry Dillon and Peter Butler, *Macquarrie From colony to country*, Sydney, 2010.

²¹ C. E. T Newman, *The Sprit of Wharf House, Campbell enterprise from Calcutta to Canberra 1788-1930*, Sydney, 1961. Margaret Steven, *Merchant Campbell 1769-1846 A Study in Colonial Trade*, Melbourne, 1965.

²² M. H. Ellis, *John Macarthur*, 3rd edition, Sydney, 1978, Michael Duffy, *Man of Honour, John Macarthur*, Sydney, 2003.

²³ Macmillan, *Scotland and Australia*, 109.

²⁴ Eric Ramsden, *Busby of Waitangi H.M.'s Resident at New Zealand, 1833-40*, Wellington, 1942.

²⁵ J. H. L. Cumpston, *Thomas Mitchell Surveyor General & Explorer*, London, 1954; D. W. A. Baker, *The Civilised Surveyor Thomas Mitchell and the Australian Aborigines*, Melbourne, 1997.

²⁶ Ian Mudie, *The Heroic Journey of John McDouall Stuart*, Sydney, 1968; John Bailey, *Mr Stuart's Track The Forgotten Life of Australia's Greatest Explorer*, Sydney, 2006.

²⁷ Kim Lockwood, *Big John The Extraordinary Adventures of John McKinlay 1819-1872*, Melbourne, 1995.

²⁸ Eric Richards *et al.*, *That Land of Exiles, Scots in Australia*, National Library of Scotland, Edinburgh, 1988, 96.

²⁹ *That Land of Exiles*, 96-7.

³⁰ Clement Semmler, *The Banjo of the Bush The work, life and times of A. B. Paterson*, Melbourne, 1966, 27; Colin Roderick, *Banjo Paterson Poet by Accident*, St Leonards, 1993, 20.

³¹ Robyn Annear, *Nothing but Gold The Diggers of 1852*, Melbourne, 1999, 291-301.

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- ³² T. Archer, *Recollections of a Rambling Life*, Brisbane, 1897, (reprint Brisbane, 1988), 108-22, 294-301.
- ³³ *That Land of Exiles*, 92. On Thomas Rhymer see Lizanne Henderson and Edward J. Cowan, *Scottish Fairy Belief*, Edinburgh, 2007, 142-51 and index.
- ³⁴ Archer, *Recollections*, 16.
- ³⁵ *That Land of Exiles*, 86-8.
- ³⁶ Don Watson, *Caledonia Australis Scottish highlanders on the frontier of Australia*, Sydney, 1984, 60.
- ³⁷ Lockwood, *Big John*, 48, 98.
- ³⁸ Cumpston, *Thomas Mitchell*, 168.
- ³⁹ Watson, *Caledonia Australis*, 112. Watson's book includes an excellent bibliography. For a more favourable assessment of Macmillan see Kenneth Cox, *Angus Macmillan Pathfinder*, Olinda 1973.
- ⁴⁰ Julian Oppenheimer and Bruce Mitchell, *An Australian Clan The Nivisons of New England*, Kenthurst, 1989.