

An Axle and Two Wheels:  
Material Culture and Memory in a  
Sutherland Emigrant Family of the  
Nineteenth Century

MARGARET A. MACKAY

ABSTRACT

In June 1831 a Mackay family group from Sutherland departed from Scotland on the ship *Cleopatra*, heading for a district of Upper Canada (later known as Canada West and the present-day province of Ontario), where others from their area had settled in the previous years. There are aspects of their story which may offer useful insights for the ethnologist.

# An Axle and Two Wheels: Material Culture and Memory in a Sutherland Emigrant Family of the Nineteenth Century

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In June 1831 a Mackay family group from Sutherland departed from Scotland on the ship *Cleopatra*, heading for a district of Upper Canada (later known as Canada West and the present-day province of Ontario), where others from their area had settled in the previous years. There are aspects of their story which may offer useful insights for the ethnologist. I have a personal as well as a professional interest in it, for these were my own Mackay forebears. And it is for personal as well as professional reasons that I offer this paper as a gesture of warm respect and gratitude to Dr John MacInnes, friend and colleague, for he too has Sutherland in his family history, and his work for the School of Scottish Studies took him there for field work and recording sessions on many occasions in the course of his long career.

The senior members of the family who took ship from the port of Cromarty were John Mackay (1785–1869) and Christena Munro (1788–1867). They had a family of nine children in total, born



between 1807 and 1827, and all but one accompanied them to Canada that year, a daughter joining them the following year with her husband and two small children. The youngest of the children, Alexander, was in his fourth year in 1831. He is likely the oldest of the men in the centre of a Mackay family photograph taken on New Year's Day 1909. He died later that year.

Gaelic had faded from use among my older Mackay relations well before I knew any of them, but I did experience a hint of the tradition of naming the generations through the *sloinneadh* or pedigree, though in this instance in the reverse order, at a family reunion. An elderly relative, a descendant of another of the emigrant children of Christena and John, was having difficulty in placing my sister Alison and me, in spite of promptings by one of our older cousins. At last a smile of understanding spread over her face and she declared, 'Oh yes, you're Uncle Sandy's Willie's boy's girls!' We are indeed the daughters of Eoin, son of William, and grandson of Alexander.<sup>1</sup> William, our grandfather, is in the back row of the family photograph, wearing a top hat. He was by this time an ordained minister of the Presbyterian Church in Canada.

The custom of holding an annual family picnic appears to have started in 1904, following the celebration of the golden wedding anniversary of Alexander and his wife Jane Sutherland in 1903. In later years, as family members came to be scattered across the North American continent and beyond, this gathering became a less frequent occurrence, but notable, well-attended ones took

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<sup>1</sup> In Gaelic my *sloinneadh* would be 'Mairead nic Eoin (1916–1993) 'ic Uilleam (1871–1952) 'ic Alasdair (1827–1909) 'ic Iain (1785–1869)'.

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place in 1967, the centenary of Canadian Confederation in 1867, when relatives from Scotland took part, and in 1981, the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the arrival of our ancestors in Canada.

These occasions quite naturally provided a focus for rehearsing features of the family saga, and in the 1930s, to mark the centenary of the family's arrival in Canada, it was decided to produce a booklet containing the by-then extensive family trees of the descendants of John Mackay and Christena Munro to which people who had known the emigrants and their children could contribute memories, their first-hand experiences as well as inherited lore. *From Highland Croft to Canadian Homestead 1831–1936* became a family history bible for the various branches of the family, and copies are treasured and consulted to this day. It is the source of much of the factual material here.

There is also, however, a real Bible in family hands, the Gaelic translation of 1803, given to John and Christena by their minister the Reverend Hector Allen before they left and inscribed as follows:

*Do' Ian MacAoidh agus do a' thearlach, na h'uile maith! agus le deadh dhochus gu'm be an leabhran beannicht so, a treorachadh an ceum, agus a toirst comhfhurtachd dhoibh anns an tir a rhoghainn iad mar aite comhnuidh.*

To John Mackay and family with best wishes in the earnest hope that this blessed book may be their guide and solace in the land of their adoption.

John's family home had been in the township of Torroble, near Lairg, where his father, John Mackay 'Catechist', was born in 1755 and lived with his wife Betsy Matheson and four children, of whom John was the eldest. The family's holding is today located at 92 Torroble. But before emigrating, he lived and farmed at Culrain in the parish of Kincardine, Ross-shire. His wife, with whom he first made acquaintance, it was said, at a communion season (a welcome occasion for meeting and courting), was a daughter of John Munro, tacksman of Balblair in the parish of Creich near Bonar Bridge.

Hector Allen was the author of the account of the parish of Kincardine which was published in volume 14 of the *New Statistical Account of Scotland* (1834–45). Allen's account refers to the fact that Alexander Ross, who served as a schoolmaster in the parish from 1822 to 1829, was ordained in the latter year to the 'Gaelic and English congregation at Dundas in Upper Canada', not far from present-day Toronto. It may well have been from earlier emigrants like Ross, and settlers who had preceded the Mackays to their exact destination two years earlier, that advice was received on what to expect in the new country, and what to bring with them for the journey and thereafter.

The NSA entry provides a picture of life in the parish around the time of the Mackays' departure. The following year, 1832, was to bring the Great Reform Act and also an outbreak of the dreaded disease of cholera. The years since publication of the *Old Statistical Account* in the 1790s had seen improvements in agriculture, communication, and housing. There were eight schools in the parish, a parochial library and a reading club; and a savings bank had recently been established in Tain. The district offered positive opportunities for development. On the other hand, the introduction of sheep had been 'turning whole straths ... into sheep-walks', and problems were arising because of non-resident proprietors. There had been agricultural depression in the 1820s, and evictions from the Novar lands at Culrain were no doubt creating an air of unease and uncertainty.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> *New Statistical Account of Scotland*, Vol. XIV: Parish of Kincardine, Ross and Cromarty. Edinburgh: 403–433.

The Mackays took ship in June 1831 at the port of Cromarty in the Black Isle. The ship was the *Cleopatra*, commanded by Captain Morris – names embedded in family legend. She and another ship, the *Salamis*, seem to have replaced two other vessels, the *Clio* and the *Corsair*, which receive enthusiastic descriptions in advertisements in the *Inverness Courier* earlier that spring. They were swift, copper-bottomed, with airy tween-decks. But they failed to arrive to take the would-be emigrants from the north of Scotland to North America. Instead came – but not very swiftly – a vessel for which no such favourable account was given. The

*Cleopatra* was expected to sail on June 1, but it was not until June 8 that the local agent, William Allan & Son, announced that she was hourly expected to arrive at Cromarty.

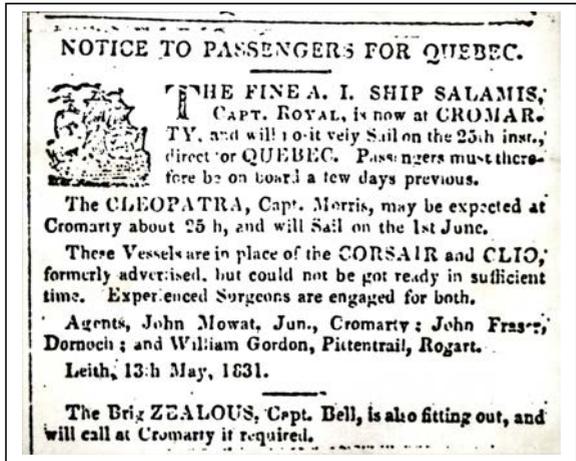
The sailing of the *Cleopatra* in 1831 was described in the *Inverness Courier* by the Cromarty-born folklorist, geologist and journalist Hugh Miller (1802–1856):

*The Cleopatra as she swept past the town of Cromarty was greeted with three cheers by crowds of the inhabitants and the emigrants returned the salute but mingled with the dash of the waves and the murmur of the breeze their faint huzzas seemed rather sounds of wailing and lamentation than of a congratulatory farewell.*

Miller's words are now inscribed on a monument erected at the shore there in 2002 to mark the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his birth, and to commemorate thirty-nine emigrant ships known to have sailed from its harbour in the 1830s and 1840s. Their names are listed from A (*Ami*) to Z (*Zephyr*) on a stone designed and carved by Richard Kindersley.

One major feature of the emigration story of the Mackays, as it came down through the generations, is the length of time it took for them to reach their destination. In this period, the normal trans-Atlantic voyage in the summer months took between four and six weeks. But their journey, according to family tradition, took over twice the maximum – thirteen weeks and three days. Fortunately, they had been in a position to take with them on board more provisions than they expected to need themselves. The ship was becalmed and finally the passengers had to help the debilitated sailors bring the vessel into berth.

I have to admit that, for all my belief in the core veracity of oral sources, I doubted this detail. Could they have survived a crossing of that duration? I decided to put the tradition to the test. With the help of the maritime historian A. W. H. Pearson at the National Maritime Museum at Greenwich and consultation of *Lloyd's List* and the *Quebec Gazette*, I was able to ascertain that the *Cleopatra*, a brig of 267 tons built at Whitby in 1817 and owned by Dickens & Co of London, arrived at



**NOTICE TO PASSENGERS FOR QUEBEC.**

**T**HE FINE A. I. SHIP SALAMIS; CAPT. ROYAL, is now at CROMARTY, and will positively sail on the 25<sup>th</sup> inst., direct for QUEBEC. Passengers must therefore be on board a few days previous.

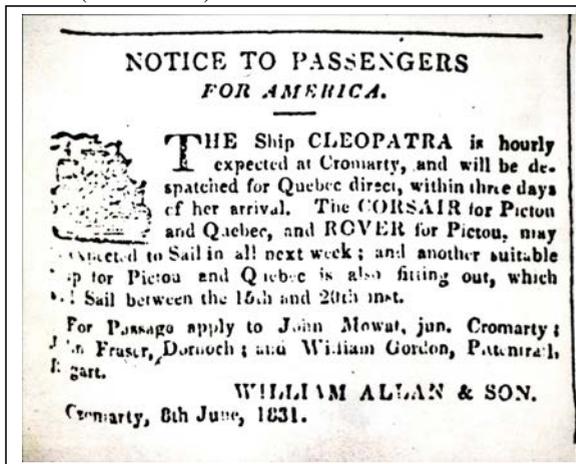
The CLEOPATRA, Capt. Morris, may be expected at Cromarty about 25<sup>th</sup>, and will sail on the 1<sup>st</sup> June.

These Vessels are in place of the CORSAIR and CLIO; formerly advertised, but could not be got ready in sufficient time. Experienced Surgeons are engaged for both.

Agents, John Mowat, Jun., Cromarty; John Fraser, Dornoch; and William Gordon, Pitcairail, Rogart.

Leith, 13<sup>th</sup> May, 1831.

The Brig ZEALOUS, Capt. Bell, is also fitting out, and will call at Cromarty if required.



**NOTICE TO PASSENGERS FOR AMERICA.**

**T**HE Ship CLEOPATRA is hourly expected at Cromarty, and will be despatched for Quebec direct, within three days of her arrival. The CORSAIR for Pictou and Quebec, and ROVER for Pictou, may be expected to sail in all next week; and another suitable ship for Pictou and Quebec is also fitting out, which will sail between the 15<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> inst.

For Passage apply to John Mowat, jun. Cromarty; John Fraser, Dornoch; and William Gordon, Pitcairail, Rogart.

WILLIAM ALLAN & SON.  
Cromarty, 6<sup>th</sup> June, 1831.

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Quebec on 8 September 1831. The family tale, one of endurance and fortitude, was thereby confirmed and the process of oral transmission vindicated.

From Quebec in Lower Canada they had to make their way by river boat up the St Lawrence River into Lake Ontario. Their goal was a township called Zorra in Upper Canada, now Ontario, where a community of emigrants from Sutherland had already been established. Zorra was surveyed in 1820 and organised as a municipality in 1822, and two Mackay brothers were amongst the earliest settlers, encouraging others to join them, amongst whom were a group who had arrived in 1829. My Mackays should have disembarked at the Lake Ontario port of Hamilton and travelled north from there into the interior. But before reaching Hamilton, on the quayside at York (now Toronto), they heard people speaking of a township called Thorah and mistook this for Zorra, an easy error for Gaelic-speakers to make. They let the boat go on before realising their mistake, but before setting off for Thorah, which was located to the north and east of York. Their trek through the bush to join the others in Zorra was thus extended by many miles.

In the 1970s, I was undertaking fieldwork among the descendants of emigrants who left the island of Tiree at a similar period, and this research happened to take me to the township of Thorah. When people there heard my surname, I was at once told the story of a Mackay family from Sutherland who had done exactly the same thing but had realised their mistake too late. They had journeyed all the way to Thorah and, unable to face the lengthy trek across country west to Zorra, decided to stay where they were, sole Sutherland settlers with a surname that was rare in a community of families from Mull, Tiree and other parts of Argyll. Once again an oral tradition was confirmed, in this case by the chance discovery of a parallel family experience.

As well as extra provisions for the journey, John and Christena Mackay took with them on board the *Cleopatra* an axle and two wheels. In over thirty years of taking an interest in, and conducting focused research on, emigrant traditions, culture transfer and adaptation, often using family histories as a tool, I have never found an instance parallel to this, though I have gathered references to many other items taken from Scotland to Canada. A drinking horn, a shoemaker's lasts, a hay knife, a *slabhraidh* (pot chain or hook), garden seeds, a spinning wheel carefully transported in a feather tick – these and other items are referred to in family traditions I have examined and, in some cases, are lovingly preserved by descendants of the emigrants.

This detail in the family story tells us not only about needs in the New World but also about features of the 'Old Country' (a usage which I often heard from another family member, my maternal grandmother, who emigrated from Badenoch immediately after the First World War). An axle and two wheels could be described as relatively modern technology in the 1830s. There were parts of Sutherland and Ross-shire where a creel on the back, a highland pony with a pack-saddle, a slide-car or travois, or a sledge would have been the only means of moving items any distance, this determined by the terrain and the presence or absence of roads (Fenton 1984a).

Four-wheeled wagons and two-wheeled carts, the latter often known as a 'Scotch' or 'Leith' cart, were making an appearance by the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century where the provision of roads allowed. Correspondence between estate officials in the Sutherland Papers in the National Library of Scotland in 1828 reports that

Wherever Roads have been introduced there is an immediate and evident Change in the habits and manners of the people. The Smallest lotter Considers his establishment incomplete unless he has a Cart and many when their lots are not Sufficient to Support both deprive themselves of the luxury of a Cow to be able to Keep a Horse.<sup>3</sup>

The cart in question may have been the type known in Scots as a 'tumbler', a light box-cart with a pair of wheels and axle that revolved together (Fenton 1984b: 128). Wagons or wains were noted in the *OSA* (1790s) in parishes around the Dornoch Firth and into Ross, the Black Isle and

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<sup>3</sup> National Library of Scotland, Sutherland Estate Papers, Dep. 313/1471, G. Gunn to J. Loch, 12 May 1828.

Moray on farms influenced by agricultural improvement, and 'oxen wains' were in use in the parishes of Kiltearn, Kincardine (Nigg) and Avoch.

Though Allen reported that 'the parish is not blessed with the convenience of good roads', there was an exception in the road from the church of Kincardine to Ardgay, and the means of communication were ample as there was a post office at Bonar Bridge and a daily post, the mail coming from Tain in a double-seated gig and arriving every morning at the Balnagown Arms Inn, Ardgay. A Parliamentary Bridge had been erected by Thomas Telford in 1812 to span a narrow part of the Dornoch Firth. John Mackay, who was able to take a generous supply of provisions on the *Cleopatra*, was obviously also able to ensure that he and his family had this potential means of transport at their disposal on arrival. We cannot know if he was advised by correspondence from earlier settlers that such would be useful, or whether it was his own ingenuity which prompted him to take this with him.

Two wheels and an axle would take up considerable room on ship-board, but they provided the basis of a means of transport immediately they reached the other side. A platform, box or other superstructure was constructed, and an ox acquired to draw the cart. By this means they arrived in Zorra. Because theirs is reputed to have been the first ox in the community, and because nicknames or by-names are necessary in order to distinguish families in a place where many have the same surname, they were ever after designated the 'Ox Mackays'.

The Mackays took up land in the township adjacent to Zorra, called East Nissouri, in the county of Oxford. The nearest village is Thamesford and not far away is London, now a major city in Western Ontario. The surveyors were, as one can easily guess, Englishmen, and this may account for the fact that the main centre in Zorra was named on the map as 'Embro' (= Edinburgh) rather than 'Embo', a Sutherland name preferred by the settlers. In time the map name was accepted as correct and it remains Embro to this day.

Written records are scant for the early years. There are details of land transactions in the township papers, and by mid-century an agricultural census detailing the amount of land broken for cultivation, crops, stock and other produce, and a nominal census as well. But we are fortunate in having an eye-witness account of their community provided by journal entries kept by a missionary, the Reverend John Carruthers, who was travelling through the area in the autumn of 1832 conducting services wherever he was welcomed. He preached in the Mackays' locality and noted in his diary, which he published several decades later, that he took his departure from London, crossing a branch of the Thames River, to a township 'not yet much opened from the forest, though the settlers are labouring hard and onward to obtain bread for themselves and families'. On 2 October, a Tuesday, he took a service, describing the scene as follows:

This was one of the first Presbyterian services in the woods here and the hearts of the people were filled with gladness. The Psalms which were sung reverberated in the forest, filling their souls with joy as they remembered the days of old in their native land, when they associated with those who kept the solemn holy days (Carruthers, 27).

John Mackay may have been helping to lead the singing; he is known to have been a precentor in his local congregation later. The nature of popular piety in Sutherland and Easter Ross provides the backdrop to religious expression in the new homeland, where family worship, Sabbath observance, the communion season lasting from Thursday to Monday, and catechising came to be practised as they had been at home. A local history published in 1900, noted below, includes memories of these. The metrical paraphrase 'O God of Bethel' came to be regarded as a family hymn, and was regularly used at gatherings and funerals.

Carruthers returned at the end of January 1833, by which time a rough log structure had been erected to provide shelter for worship purposes, with benches to seat 200 people but no doors, windows or fire. On Sunday the 27<sup>th</sup> of that month, he conducted a service. Metrical Psalm 122 and

Paraphrase 61 were sung. He makes no comment on the language used, but he was not a Gaelic-speaker. The following year a Gaelic-speaking minister, Donald MacKenzie (1798–1884), was ordained by the Presbytery of Dingwall in the Synod of Ross, and was inducted into the Zorra charge in 1835.

Glengarry County in eastern Ontario, with its early history arising from the settlement there of Highland Loyalists leaving the USA after the Declaration of Independence, joined by many more directly from the north-west highlands in a series of well-documented waves, and its strong and continuing Highland and Gaelic culture and identity, came to assume an iconic status within the consciousness of Canadians of Highland descent. Glengarry had its famous authors, most notably Charles Gordon, who took the pen-name ‘Ralph Connor’ for his novels based on the exploits of Glengarry people and whose father had been a minister in Zorra for a time, but others such as Grace Campbell as well. These brought the story of Glengarry to a wide audience in the twentieth century.

In its own way, the smaller district in western Ontario, composed of Zorra and the townships adjacent, gained something of this iconic status, too. It had its heroes, amongst them the tug-of-war team, skilled in a harvest-time sport which became a competitive one as Highland games developed in Scotland, Canada and elsewhere, who brought back the world championship trophy from the Chicago World’s Fair of 1893. And while Zorra’s authors were not as acclaimed as the Glengarry novelists, they nevertheless put its history on record in works such as William Alexander MacKay’s *Pioneer Life in Zorra* of 1899 and W. D. McIntosh’s *One Hundred Years in the Zorra Church* of 1930.

The church played an important role in this as in many emigrant Scottish communities, and the Zorra congregation came to be notable for the number of candidates it sent into the ministry as clergymen or missionaries. Another publication by W. A. MacKay documents in sketches the achievements of Zorra men in a range of fields, and exhibits a sense of local pride in its title, *Zorra Boys at Home and Abroad, or, How to Succeed* (1900). Amongst the most notable of these was George Leslie MacKay, the first missionary to be sent abroad by the Presbyterian Church in Canada. His destination was present-day Taiwan, then known as Formosa, where he founded Oxford College (so named because of the donations towards its creation received from his home county in Canada and not for any other pretensions). His wife was a local woman, and he regarded Formosa as his home for the rest of his life. His museum of artefacts relating to the natural and cultural history of Formosa bears witness to his interest in all aspects of life there, as do donations to the collections of the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto; his publication *From Far Formosa* of 1896 was the first ethnographic study of that island in English and a pioneering work.

Scotland drew some of their descendants back, for study or for permanent settlement. One of these was the Reverend Angus Mackay (1854–1939), a son of John Mackay and Christena Munro’s daughter Grace and her husband Donald Mackay. With his wife Annie Mark, from New Pitsligo in Aberdeenshire, he took his family to Scotland in 1905, where he was Free Church minister in Kingussie until his death in 1939. Two of their children were Free Church missionaries, the Reverend John Calvin Mackay in Peru, and Dr Annie Mackay in India, as was a grand-daughter who carried on her aunt’s medical work there.

I myself remember Dr Annie and her sister Catherine, when they were very elderly and then resident in Inverness, holding hands and reciting for me in a rhythmical fashion a family chant recalled from their childhood: ‘We’re Highland-Lowland-Scotch-Canadian-Presbyterian-Grits’ – ‘Grits’ being the Canadian term for supporters of the Liberal Party. Angus Mackay wrote occasional articles in the Free Church magazine *The Monthly Record* based on the life experienced in the early days in Canada by his forebears, and thus supplemented anything the family may have written to relations themselves in taking their story back to Scotland.

There is an extensive literature on the role of objects in focusing memory and triggering oral accounts relating to their making, function or ownership. The Swedish ethnologist Åse Ljungström has provided an analytical model which connects an artefact, a narrator, people in the past and the

listener (Ljungström: 81). In this case, arising from a documentation project, the artefact itself was present. But I would argue that the memory of an artefact can operate in a similar way. I must confess that with the help of a cousin, I once scoured the outbuildings on the farm worked by my father's uncle George, called by the name 'Maple Springs' from the stand of maple trees which provided maple syrup and maple sugar for many years, in the hope that we might just find vestiges of that cart made from the axle and two wheels, but to no avail. No doubt it was in use until no longer functional and then disposed of.

But the very memory of those items, reinforced by re-tellings in print or in oral form, has equally acted as a focus of identity, the mere mention serving to unite members of the same family group in an embrace of familiarity. Their physical presence is not required.

In the story of the 'Ox Mackays', oral accounts were over the years captured and transmitted in print, to be spoken about again on appropriate occasions, in the same interplay of written and oral forms of transmission that would have been familiar to our medieval ancestors. In its own way, it shows the contribution which the micro-genre of family lore can make to our understanding of human interaction past and present.

### ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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