EMIGRATION IN THE TIME OF ROB DONN, 1714-1778

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The exodus of Highlanders across the Atlantic in the eighteenth century reached its peak in 1774, and declined with the outbreak of the American War of Independence in the following year (Meyer 1961: 91-4). The only reference to the poverty of Highland emigrants during the period of spate concerns parties of people from Sutherland who had travelled to the Lowlands in search of transport. "In the beginning of June", reported the correspondent of the *Scots Magazine* in 1772 (34:395), "about forty-eight families of poor people from Sutherland arrived at Edinburgh, in their way to Greenock, in order to embark for North America. Since that time we have heard of two other companies, one of a hundred, another of ninety, being on their journey with the same intention. The cause of this emigration they assign to be, want of the means of livelihood at home, through the opulent graziers ingrossing the farms, and turning them into pasture. Several contributions have been made for these poor people in towns through which they passed." Seventy-five year old Hector Macdonald, a farmer "at Langwall in the parish of Rogart in the county of Sutherland, upon the estate of Sutherland", amplified this report in 1774 when he deposed that he was emigrating to North Carolina to improve the prospects for his children: "and in all events they can scarce be worse" (Newsome 1934:133). There is, on the other hand, the single testimony of a report in the *Edinburgh Evening Courant* of 1773, remarking on the affluence of Sutherland emigrants.[1]

It is not always as clear as in the case of Hector Macdonald, from what part of Sutherland the emigrants came. The sheriffdom was divided during this period into three distinct areas, governed by separate rulers. In the south lay the original Sutherland earldom, which had been ruled by a branch of the Gordon family ever since they obtained it early in the sixteenth century. To the north of the earldom lay the

province of Strathnaver, slightly larger in extent, that had been ruled by the chiefs of Mackay for a very much longer period. But Strathnaver had never been erected into a barony or earldom: in the sixteenth century the Earls of Sutherland had acquired a feudal title of superiority over it, and in the seventeenth century it had been joined to the sheriffdom of Sutherland. In addition, the Sutherland Earls and Sheriffs acquired the dominium of a corridor up the centre of Strathnaver, from the earldom to the northern sea; and as this was the valley through which the Naver river runs, it lent itself to the claim that they had acquired Strathnaver, as, in a limited sense of that term, they had.

Hereupon, the inhabitants of the part of Strathnaver still owned by their chief began to call it (by the title of nobility he had acquired in the seventeenth century) Lord Reay's country, or the Reay country. In doing so, they added a further confusion to the difficulties of understanding the contemporary usage of these names. For the barony of Reay lay, not in Strathnaver, but in Caithness. It was indeed adjacent to Strathnaver, but not to Lord Reay's property there. Next to it lay the valleys of Strathy and Strath Halladale, granted long before to junior branches of the Chief's family. To the west again lay the valley of the Naver, an integral part of the Sutherland earldom; so that several estates and some thirty miles separated the barony of Reay in Caithness from the Reay country in western Strathnaver. In addition, the parish of Reay included not only the Caithness barony, but an area of eastern Strathnaver of about equal size. The meaning of the terms Sutherland, Reay and Strathnaver consequently depends much upon who uses them, and in what context. It is possible that distant observers sometimes understood the term Sutherland to comprehend the entire sheriffdom when they heard it used of the earldom, or that a reference to the Reay country was related to the parish of Reay when it concerned the Chief of Mackay's territories in the far west.

Of the three distinct areas of Sutherland, the earldom contained nearly a million acres, while Lord Reay's country was described in 1797 as being "equal in extent to the county of Fife, or any of the Lothians" (Mackay 1906:463). Here was the ancient patriarchal society on the grand scale, beyond the reach of more than the merest ripples of political disturbance or economic innovation. The whole area had been officially opposed to Jacobitism ever since General Hugh

Mackay of Scourie had helped to place William of Orange on the throne. Except in the general application of the penal statutes, it had sustained no damage through the failure of the Forty-Five. In addition, it lay the furthest distant of all the mainland counties from the new systems of agricultural improvement that were infiltrating from the Lowlands. The statement that people were forced out of Sutherland by the engrossment of farms in 1772 is indeed puzzling. It stands alone, twenty years before the next reference to such an occurrence in the *Old Statistical Account*, and over thirty years before the sheep enterprises of 1806, that caused the evictions in Edderachillis and Strathnaver referred to by Henderson (Gray 1957:88, 100).

The activity that had served longest to promote emigration throughout the sheriffdom was military service. Tacksmen received commissions in the army through the numbers of sub-tenants they could form into companies. Chiefs raised regiments that were named after them.

The Reay country to which Rob Donn belonged was entirely Calvinist, and at the time when he was born his countrymen continued what amounted almost to a private military alliance with the Calvinist Netherlands of almost a century's duration. It led to much intermarriage, the settlement of Mackays in Holland, and ultimately to the succession of a Dutchman as Chief of Mackay in the nineteenth century. In Rob Donn's lifetime, Hugh Mackay from Scourie entered the Dutch service in 1729 and was promoted Lieutenant-General in 1772. Many of his countrymen entered the same service under his patronage (Mackay 1906:291, 235).

But an altogether new field of enterprise was opened in 1732 when General James Oglethorpe, the English philanthropist, obtained his charter establishing the colony of Georgia in America. He required not merely settlers, but soldiers who would prove competent to hold the territory against the neighbouring Spaniards. That same year Patrick Mackay, who had held a Hanoverian commission during the 1715 rebellion, disposed of his property in Edderachillis and carried a number of its people to Oglethorpe's new settlement (Mackay 1906:294). In 1734 Oglethorpe despatched Lieutenant Hugh Mackay from Georgia to the Highlands to raise a hundred men "free or servants". The combined requirements of settlement and military duty were made explicit: "they farther allowed them to take 50 head of women and children".

Hugh Mackay became a Captain and commander of the new fort of St. Andrews, not without accusations in 1738 that he "exercised an illegal power there, such as judging in all causes, durecting and ordering all things according to his will". But he held the fort against Spanish attack, and Oglethorpe backed him. The murder of Highlanders in 1739 and the defeat of an expedition to avenge them perhaps helped to damp enthusiasm for any further emigration to this colony (Maclean 1900:146-69).

Meanwhile recruitment continued in more conventional directions. The Earl of Sutherland raised a regiment of which he was Lieutenant-Colonel in 1759. Charles Gordon, tacksman on his estate at Skelpick near the mouth of the Naver river, was a Captain (Mackay 1906:211; Sutherland Book I:450-1). Hugh Mackay of Bighouse in eastern Strathnaver, who was also a manager of Lord Reay's estate in western Strathnaver, received the rank of Major and was promoted Lieutenant-Colonel (Mackay 1906:204, 306). Among his fellow tacksmen and kinsmen in the Earl's regiment were George Mackay of the Scourie branch as an Ensign, Captain John Mackay of Strathy, Captain James Mackay, the tacksman of Borgie's son, and Lieutenant John Mackay who later settled in Melness (Mackay 1906:293, 313, 320, 323). Rob Donn the bard enlisted as a private, for he was merely the son of a sub-tenant. But he enjoyed certain privileges, since it was known to all by this time that it was in his power to immortalise whom he chose, both by eulogy and by satire (Rob Donn 1829:xxii-xxiii).

The Earl of Sutherland's Regiment, 1759-63, had its counterpart in Lord Macleod's Highlanders, in which Malcolm Mackay enlisted as a private to serve in India in 1777: in the Duke of Gordon's Fencibles to which George Mackay of Handa contributed a company in 1778. Others pursued military careers outside the tight-knit social nexus of the family regiments. One of Handa's brothers was a captain in the 31st Foot before his death in 1773, another became a Major of Artillery in India, a third a Captain in the 42nd Highlanders who fought in the American War of Independence (Mackay 1906:268, 331-2). William Polson, though he was a grandson of the Rev. John Mackay, Lairg, and nephew of the Rev. George Munro, Farr, and of the Rev. Aeneas Sage, Lochcarron, chose the profession of arms and died in America in 1755 as a Captain in the Virginia Rangers (Mackay 1906: 295).

Most of the evidence of military service in Sutherland during this period concerns the families of tacksmen who obtained commissions. It is not easy to estimate the numbers of their sub-tenants who were drained into the ranks, or the proportion of these who subsequently returned to their own land. But the comment of Rob Donn is suggestive. Three of his poems lampoon men whose success with the girls is attributed to the absence of competition, while so many of the young men were away in the army (Rob Donn 1899:174-6, 254-7, 329-30). A fourth concerns Donald Mackay, who had joined Lord MacLeod's Highlanders by 1778 in order to escape from charges of "criminal correspondence" with five different girls before the Church Session. It appears that he had engaged in day-labouring for a wage, an activity for which it has been suggested that the Highlanders of this period had a strong aversion (Rob Donn 1899:409; Adam 1922: 169-71).

'Nuair thigeadh am foghar,
Có dheanamh a' bhuain?
Có dheanamh an ceanghal,
No stucadh na sguab?
Có chuireadh na siomanan
Ceart air na tudanan,
Ach am boc luideach,
Na'm faigheadh e duais.

(Rob Donn 1899:409)

(When autumn came, who worked at the harvest? Who did the binding and the stooking of the sheaves? Who put the ropes aright on the stacks, but the rascally buck, if he were paid for it.)

It appears likely that there was an actual shortage of such day labourers in Rob Donn's country, whether or not men were unwilling to do this kind of work.

Another of his poems concerns two men who fled into hiding when Lord Reay tried to force them into the army: the bard does not seem to have disapproved of such a use of his chief's authority, and merely exploited the comedy of the situation. It can be assumed that the army press gangs did not menace this remote area, as they were notorious for doing on the fringes of the Highlands, and it is evident that there would have been little point in their entering a land of such extensive recruitment. Rob Donn only mentions them once, in the context of a drover who went to Crieff with cattle and

was taken by a press-gang there (Rob Donn 1899:423, 227; Adam 1919:146-7).

Over twenty years after Rob Donn's death, James Anderson wrote to Captain Kenneth Mackay, one of Lord Reay's factors: "I think they must see little who does not see this country approaching rapidly into a state of *depopulation*, and that by the very means once thought favourable, I mean the volunteer establishments. Such effect has the smattering of exercise upon the rising generation, aided by their pay, which is all converted into dissipation, that not one individual able to lift a drumstick now remains unenlisted in Durness. And I'm told the case is pretty similar in other parts of this estate, though not quite so bad." By 1798, when Anderson wrote this letter, it is less surprising to read his proposal that some land east of Durness "would make a kind of small sheep farm—perhaps sufficient for supplying the farm produce wants of Rispond family" (S. R. H. Reay MS. 74). Anderson held a lease at Keoldale, south-west of Durness, where Kenneth Sutherland had been tacksman in Rob Donn's day, and a factor to Lord Reay so popular that Rob Donn had honoured him with an elegy at his death (Rob Donn 1899:28-31). The comments of James Anderson resemble those of the bard over a generation earlier, and suggest the conclusion that at no time during the second half of the eighteenth century could the pressure of over-population have been a cause of emigration, in the world that Rob Donn knew.

A different cause was put forward by an observer in 1773: "the extravagant rents extracted by the landlords is the sole cause given for this spirit of emigration" (*Scots Magazine* 35: 557). Rob Donn's landlord at the time of Culloden was a personage very different from those chiefs of Mackay, his forbears, who had defied the government in Edinburgh over so many centuries. The third Lord Reay wrote of the Duke of Cumberland, from Edinburgh, in 1746: "I hope by his prudent and wise direction he'll fall on proper methods to make these idle ignorant people useful subjects, which will make him famous to posterity, as it is easier to conquer than to civilise barbarous people" (Mackay 1906:456). The contrast between these words and Rob Donn's probably reflects, as well as any at this time, the growing rift between barbarous (or, in its original sense, Gaelic speaking) clansmen and their civilised (or, in its original sense, town-dwelling) chief.

Tha mi faicinn bhur truaighe,
Mar ni nach cualas a shamhuil,
A' chuid a' s fèarr de bhur seabh'gan,
Bhi air slabhruidh aig clamhan,
Ach ma tha sibh 'n ar leòmhan,
Pillibh 'n dòghruinn s' 'n a teamhair,
'S deanaibh ur deudach a thrusadh,
Mu 'n tèid bhur busan a cheangal.
(Rob Donn 1899:84)

(I observe your misery as something unprecedented; the best part of your hawks chained to a kite. But if you are lions, retaliate in good time and have your teeth ready before your mouths are muzzled.)

Such was the difference in sentiment possible in 1747 between Mackay chief and Mackay bard. It would not have been surprising if some Gaelic poet had likened his people's relationship with their chiefs as "hawks chained to a kite", but this was certainly not Rob Donn's meaning. Throughout his life he retained a profound belief in the chiefship: a fact of some significance considering the number of people, less eloquent, whose views he probably reflected. He trusted that any stresses might be eased by good advice, which he was not backward in giving himself. He asserted the bard's traditional privilege of addressing the highest in the land when he chose, and while this feature of the old order remained intact, he perhaps assumed that all its other amenities would do so too.

When Donald, fourth Lord Reay died in 1761, Rob Donn made an elegy that reveals impressively what the chiefship meant to him.

'S i so nollaig a's cianail'
A chunncas riamh le mo shùil;
'S soilleir easbhuidh ar Triath oirnn,
An àm do'n bhliadhna tigh'nn ùr;
Ceann na cuideachd 's na tàbhuirnn,
Luchd nan dàn, is a' chiùil,
N' a luidhe 'n eaglas Cheann-tàile,
'S an rùm tha mhàn fo'n ùir.

(This is a Christmas as melancholy as I ever looked upon with my eyes. The loss of our chief is brought home to us as the new year approaches, the apex of society and of hospitality, of the men of poetry and music, lying in the church of Kintail, his authority interred in the underground vault.) It is the

immemorial image of the leader of the patriarchal society in which Rob Donn still trusted, and he was specific about the virtues required.

'N uair thigeadh àm na Féill-Màrtuinn,
Is cunntadh Rainnt thugad féin,
Bhiodh do shùil ris gach pàipeir
A chuireadh 'n clàrc as a dhéigh;
'S maith a dh'aithnicheadh tu'n t-airidh,
'S an neach a thàrladh 's an fheum;
'S e do pheann a bhiodh èasgaidh
Gu dubhadh mach an cuid féich.

Na'm bitheadh gionaich 'n ad nàdur,
C' uim' nach deanadh tu tòrr,
Leis na thogtadh do reinnt dhuit,
'S le do phension d'a chòrr:
Nuair a gheibheadh tu'm meall ud,
'S ann leat a b'annsa gu mòr,
Iomhaigh Dhé air bochd aoidheil,
Na ìomgaigh 'n Rìgh air an òr.

(When the time of Martin's Festival would arrive, and the assessment of your rents, your eyes would examine every paper prepared by the clerk; well you knew the worthy person who happened to be in want, and your pen would be ready to cancel their arrears. If you had been by nature avaricious, what a fortune you might have made with what would be collected in rent for you, and with your pension in addition. When you acquired that hoard, more dear to you by far was God's image smiling in a poor man's face than the likeness of the King on a golden coin.)

But there is a querulous note towards the end of the elegy.

'S fhusa 'dhùrachd na 'earbsadh
Gu'n tig ni's feàrr 'n ad dhéigh.

(It is easier to wish than to be confident that better will come after you.) Perhaps reflecting how entirely his patriarchial society depended upon the accidents of succession, Rob Donn ended with the threat:

Ach 'n uair their mi 'n dàn bròin so
Do dhaoinibh mòr' as do dhéigh,
Mur bi 'leithid r' a inns' orr',
Cha bheag an aoir e dhoibh féin.
(Rob Donn 1899:6-10)

(But when I recite this sad poem to the great men who come

after you, unless the like can be told of them, this song of praise will become a satire on them.)

In 1768 the fifth Lord Reay died in Edinburgh, leaving an idiot brother to be chief until his death in 1797, when a cousin succeeded who sold the entire estate and left the country (Mackay 1906:216, 232). In 1766 the young Earl of Sutherland died at Bath, leaving as his heir a baby girl. Her claim to the earldom was not established until 1771[2]; she was brought up by a grandmother who belonged to Edinburgh; and she did not visit Sutherland at all until she was seventeen years old. Rob Donn's patriarchal society had been shattered. The two vast estates could no longer appear even to a poet's imagination to be presided over by Gaelic fathers of their people when they were administered by lawyers and trustees. At least five years passed before Rob Donn composed the sombre opening of his elegy for the dead Earl.

Rugadh mis' anns a' gheamhradh,
Measg nam beanntaichean gruamach;
'S mo cheud sealladh do'n t-saoghal,
Sneachd is gaoth mu mo chluasaibh;
O'n chaidh m' àrach ri aghaidh
Tir na deighe, gu tuathail,
Rinn mi luathaireach tuiteam,
'S rinn mo chuislidhean fuaradh'.

(I was born in the winter among the lowering mountains, and my first sight of the world, snow and wind about my ears: since I grew up looking upon a land of ice, a northerly land, my health declined and my veins were chilled early.) The chill air of his homeland was something he had not, apparently, noticed in happier times. Now, too, when a great deal of fresh thinking was necessary, Rob Donn fell back upon the excuse that his talent for poetry had deserted him. He only made this elegy, he declared, because the last Gordon Earl was lying in his tomb without anyone having commemorated him in the traditional manner.

Chrìoch mi sgur do na dàintibh,
Chionn mo thàlann bhi géilleadh;
Ach cha'n fhuil'ngeadh mo nàdur
Dhomh, bhi 'n am thàmh air an aobhar-s'—
Ceannard Teaghlaich Dhun Robain,
'N luidhe 'n Abaid Dhun Éidin,
Gun aon fhocal aig filidh
Dèant 'n a shiorrumhachd féin da.

(I made an end of composing poetry because my talent was forsaking me; but my nature would not permit me to remain silent on this theme—the head of the Family of Dunrobin, lying in the Abbey at Edinburgh, without one word being composed for him by a poet in his own country.)

Since Rob Donn belonged to the Reay country, it is unlikely that he had any association with the subject of his elegy other than that of a soldier in his regiment; to which he pays tribute in his reference to Iarla Uilleam am Coirneal. It was probably through this association that he had visited Dunrobin castle and inspected Earl William the Colonel's portrait. It is interesting in being the earliest portrait of a Gordon in Highland dress, painted about a hundred years after a member of this family had urged its proscription throughout Sutherland.[3]

Fhuair mi 'dhealbh air mo leth-taobh,
'N a sheasamh 'm breacan an fhéilidh.

(I found his portrait beside me, standing in his kilt and plaid.)

For the rest, Rob Donn could only elaborate the standard compliments about the virtues of the Earl and of his ancestors: doubtless he spoke with complete sincerity about the Earl himself, who appears to have been popular in his country. The poet concluded:

Bidh mi dùnadh an dàin so,
Oir tha e àrd airson m' inntinn;
Le aon athchuing do'n òigh so,
Dh'fhuireach beò mar aon chuimhne:
Tha mi'g earbsadh ri Freasdal,
'S a Righ gu'm faic, 's gu'n cluinn mi,
Thu bhi pòsda ri gaisgeach
A leanas cleachd'an do shinnsear.
(Rob Donn 1899:36-9)

(I will conclude this song, for it is a matter too lofty for my intellect, with one prayer for this little girl that she should remain alive as a unique memorial: I am confident in Providence and O God may I see and hear of your marriage to a worthy man who will continue the customs of your forbears.)

The little girl on whom the bard invoked this blessing was the Countess-Duchess of Sutherland who presided over the nineteenth century clearances.

It was in March 1771 that Elizabeth Gordon was pronounced Countess of Sutherland, and that her guardians

acquired the legal control of her estate. It was in June 1772 that the correspondent of the *Scots Magazine* noticed the "poor people from Sutherland" trailing south to embark for America. The condition of the two hundred passengers who sailed in the *Adventure* for North Carolina on the 19th August 1772 was not remarked upon, probably because they embarked in Loch Eriboll where there was no stranger to comment on their appearance (*Scots Magazine* 34:515). The following year the brig *Nancy* took a further consignment of emigrants from Dornoch to New York (*Scots Magazine* 36:157-8).

The factors of the Sutherland estate blamed the native tacksmen for luring them away in terms almost as harsh as later factors used of those tacksmen who resisted the same trend when the population was no longer required by the estate. Captain James Sutherland, the general commissioner, identified one of the ringleaders as George Mackay of Mudale, son of the tacksman-poet John of Mudale. His property lay west of Ben Klibreck, within the territories of the Sutherland earldom in Strathnaver. "I do not hear," wrote the commissioner in February 1772, "of any embarking in this scheme but the subtenants of those who have large highland tacks, except George Mackay at Mudale (at the head of Loch Naver) and a young lad of the name of Macpherson." By June the commissioner was reporting from Edinburgh that "George Mackay at Mudale has been here to freight a ship for two hundred people from Strathnaver", and by the 26th June he learned "that 350 or 400 are engaged and paid their freight for that Strathnaver ship, and that there is from 60 to 100 that is to travel on foot to Glasgow that cannot get a passage in the ship for want of room". The manner in which so many people were able to pay for their passage is indicated by another of the commissioner's complaints. "Ken: Scobie has money to buy the emigrants' cattle, which enables them to put their dreams about America in execution, yet he has not money to pay the Countess her rent" (Home 1960:xxiv-xxv, xxx).

The dream of America was a dream of escape from oppressive overlords. It was stealing over a people deeply attached to their native land, to whom the old patriarchal order had been so precious that they had been capable of placing in it an almost unlimited trust. In the case of the most distinguished poet in the Sutherland earldom, that limit had been reached. Donald Matheson (1719-82), who farmed in Kildonan, was an almost exact contemporary of Rob Donn

(1714-78). While Rob Donn composed his belated elegy for the dead Earl, Donald Matheson commented instead on the consequences of his death as he observed them from within the earldom.

Tha mi faicinn deuchainnean
An tràthsa air gach laimh,
Teaghlaichean bha urramach
Air leagadh mhàn an ceann,
Seirbhisich 'nan Uachdarain,
Is oighreachan 'nan clann;
An talamh làn de dh'éigin,
A Dhé, có sheasas ann!

(I am seeing hardships now on every hand, families who were respectable with their heads brought low, servants in the role of landlords and young children as heirs; the land full of distress—O God, who can endure it?) Carolina, the destination of the *Adventure* from Loch Eriboll in 1772, appeared to Matheson as a promised land prepared by God for his afflicted people.

Ach tha mi faicinn faileas
De nithe bh'ann bho chéin,
'N uair bha pobull Israeil
'San Eiphit ann am péin:
Thug e le làmh làidir iad
A mach bho Pharaoh féin,
A's dh'fhosgail e an cuan doibh,
'N uair luathaich e 'nan déigh.

(I am seeing the shadow of things that happened long ago, when the people of Israel were in distress in Egypt. He took them with a strong hand away from Pharaoh himself, and He divided the sea for them when Pharaoh hastened after them.) Here are words that echo Hector Macdonald's deposition as to why he left Sutherland for North Carolina.

Tha uachdarain 'nan daorsa
Do dhaoine anns an àm,
'Gam fuadachadh 's 'gan teannachadh
Gu tìr ni maith do 'n clann;
Ach moladh a bhi gu bràth
Do'n Tì is àirde glòir,
Fhuair a mach am fosgladh ud
'S a dheasaich doibh an lòn.

(The landlords are enslaving people at this time, oppressing and evicting them to the land that will bring our children good. Oh praise be to Him of highest glory, who opened a way out there, and prepared sustenance for them.) The last verse of the poem touches upon two important aspects of emigration, the strong deterrent of the journey itself, and the encouragement to those who had remained at home, when the first letters arrived from emigrants who had survived the journey.

'S e mo bharail air na càirdean
Tha 'n tràthsa fada uainn,
Gu'n dean Dia an lìbhrigeadh
Bho chumhachd gaoith a's cuain;
A's ged [nach] 'eil dàn mar dhurachd
Aig uaisle an taobh tuath,
Gheibhear an cuid litrichean
A's teisteanas am buaidh.

(Matheson 1851: 271-3)

(My expectation for the kinsfolk now far from us is that God will deliver them from the power of wind and ocean; and although Providence may not accord with our wishes for the worthy folk of the northern Highlands, their share of letters will arrive to testify to their excellences.) (cf. *Sutherland Book* 1: 463.)

Matheson's analogy of the afflictions of the children of Israel who fled from Pharaoh did not occur only to the devout Calvinist in Kildonan. The west-coast Catholic, John Macdonald of Glenaladale, wrote in 1772 to the son of Angus Macdonald of Boisdale (both tacksmen), "your own old father is quite impatient to go—he is positive this scheme was inspired by Providence. It would make you laugh to hear how he applies to this case the story of Jacob, Joseph, Egypt, Moses etc. etc. in different ways" (Mackay 1963). Nor were such strictures on the landlords confined to Gaelic Highlanders. Janet Schaw of Edinburgh paid a visit to North Carolina in 1774 in the stateroom of the *Jamaica Packet*. She found her ship infested with emigrants from Orkney, and after listening to their stories and witnessing their circumstances, she was eloquent with anger against the "hard-hearted little tyrant of yonder rough domains". On another occasion she exclaimed, "it is needless to make any comment on the conduct of our highland and island proprieters", and during a storm at sea

she reflected, "but what rest remained for the iron-hearted, who forced age and infancy into such distress?" Perhaps she did not know that she was speaking of her neighbour in Edinburgh, Sir Lawrence Dundas (Schaw 1939:34, 37-8, 49).

Between the Orkney islands to which Janet Schaw referred, and the Highland world of Rob Donn, lies Scotland's most northerly Lowland county of Caithness. Here James Hogg from East Lothian rented a farm which he found so unprofitable that he left it in 1773 to settle in North Carolina. His testimony is of peculiar interest because he was an incomer, not a hereditary tacksman. He was eager to introduce modern methods of agriculture. "Others, with too much justice, complain of arbitrary and oppressive services, of racked rents, and cruel taskmasters; but Mr. Innes, my landlord, did everything in his power to render my possession convenient and profitable" (Boyd 1927:421-4). The Innes family of Sandside had purchased their property from the first Lord Reay early in the seventeenth century (Mackay 1906:137).

Hogg blamed his failure upon the depredations of the native people, who "were extremely addicted to theft and pilfering, the constant attendants of slavery and poverty", and on the total failure of the law to protect his property. The men against whom he obtained convictions were Gaels, one of them from as far away as Glenmoriston, and in Hogg's own account there appears a little of the immemorial antipathy between the Gael and the busy incoming Saxon with a propensity for litigation. Rob Donn freely admitted that he was more than once in trouble with the tacksmen of his pastoral country for shooting deer in the hills (Rob Donn 1899:141); but the destruction of crops was a more serious matter for a working farmer, and James Hogg's placing of the blame is all the more striking. When he left, local people clamoured to accompany him, and over two hundred and fifty emigrants set sail with him from Thurso. "I rejoice in being an instrument, in the hand of Providence, to punish oppression, which is by far too general; and I am glad to understand that already some of these haughty landlords now find it necessary to court and caress these same poor people, whom they lately despised, and treated as slaves or beasts of burden" (Boyd 1927:421-4). Hogg blamed individuals who had injured his livelihood and even set fire to his house, but his final condemnation was reserved for the hereditary masters who had reduced them to such behaviour.

One of those who sailed with him from Thurso was a William Mackay, listed as one "of the heads of families or principal emigrants . . . from the parish of Reay in the counties of Caithness and Sutherland" (S. H. C. Hogg MS. 1774 f.1). Hogg later deposed that "the first time I saw him, to the best of my memory, was in the house of Mr. Pope, Minister of Reay; when talking of the emigration which was then the sole topic of conversation all over that part of Scotland, the said Mackay told us that those who had emigrated the former year from his county, viz. Strathnavern, had written such favourable accounts of Carolina, setting forth the richness of the county, the cheapness of living and the certain prospect of bettering their fortunes etc etc, and advising all their friends to follow them, that half the people of his county, he believed, would emigrate if they were able" (S. H. C. Hogg MS. 5 Nov. 1773, ff. 2-3).

Those who accompanied Hogg were unfortunate. Their ship was wrecked off Shetland, where the survivors starved while Hogg engaged in fresh litigation with the owners in Edinburgh over the responsibility for their passage and maintenance. But the misfortune led to the preservation of some interesting details. The ship *Batchelor* sailed with 234 emigrants in addition to 32 sucking children, besides the family of James Hogg, and the crew. By the 28th October 1773, eleven of these had died, leaving a total of 255. The list of heads of families and principal emigrants who in 1774 supported the process against the owner and captain of the *Batchelor* gives their parishes of origin (S. H. C. Hogg M.S. 1774 f. 1; Second list of passengers).

Halkirk	1	Rogart	2	Tongue	4
Reay	11	Kinbrace	6		
		Kildonan	4		
		Clyne	2		
		Farr	4		

This list of principal emigrants is not complete, and the number in each family varied to an unknown degree. The details preserved among the Hogg papers should be compared with those that reached the Public Record Office.

For a government order of 1773 had instructed all customs officials in the kingdom to give particulars of emigrants, and of their reasons for leaving the country. The stranded passengers of the *Batchelor* thus offered the Lerwick port authorities

an early opportunity which they seized with what appears to have been an unrivalled enthusiasm. Thirty-one depositions (some of surprising length) were forwarded, covering the circumstances of over 125 individuals, or about half of those who sailed. Ten heads of families who gave evidence had left the Sutherland estate, seven had left the Reay country, five that of Mackay of Bighouse, while one each came from Rosehall and Achany and the remaining seven from Caithness (Newsome:130-8).

Of the latter, the three "upon the estate of Mr. Alexander Nicolson, Minister at Thurso" made particularly severe accusations of rack-renting and oppressive services (Newsome 1934:131, 132, 135). It was told of Rob Donn that he once met Nicolson in Thurso, who enquired how a new minister at Tongue was doing. "He is doing what you never did or will do", Rob Donn is said to have answered: "he is doing his best" (Rob Donn 1829:xxxv). The bard's severity is amply explained by the Lerwick depositions.

The five statements from the Mackay estates in eastern Strathnaver are similar in their condemnation. "The services," said one of several William Mackays, "were oppressive, being unlimited and arbitrary, at the pleasure of the factor; and when, by reason of sickness, the declarant could not perform them, he was charged at the rate of one shilling per day" (Newsome 1934:134).

Of those who had left the estates of Lord Reay, Aeneas Macleod brought the most severe complaint. "Being near the house of Tongue, he was harassed and oppressed with arbitrary services, daily called for without wages or maintenance." Alexander Morison likewise deposed that "the tenants were in various ways oppressed by Lord Reay's factors". But these were relatively isolated strictures in the total evidence of the seven witnesses from Lord Reay's estates, compared with those of Nicolson the minister's former tenants, or those of eastern Strathnaver. Of the other five emigrants from the parish of Tongue, one "hath been taught to read, write and cypher, and goes to Carolina in hopes of being employed as a teacher or as a clerk". A fourth left "because the small farm he possessed could not keep a plough, and he could not raise so much corn by delving as maintain his family and pay his rent". The remaining three were all shoemakers, one of whom "left his own country as his employment was little, and he had no hopes of bettering his circumstances in it". The second "goes

to Carolina upon assurance that tradesmen of all kinds will find large encouragement". The third had been "assured by his friends who contributed among them the money required to pay his passage, that he would find better employment in Carolina" (Newsome 1934:135-8). There were no witnesses from Rob Donn's parish of Durness.

Of those who had left the earldom, another William Mackay deposed that he had been a sub-tenant "in a wadset of the Family of Sutherland to Mr. Charles Gordon of Skelpick, lying in the height of the country of Strathnaver. The rents were not raised" (Newsome 1934:131). But most of those who were directly at the mercy of the factors of the baby Countess had a very different tale to tell. The factors enriched themselves at the expense of their tenantry by buying cattle cheap and selling bread dear, in addition to the burdens of personal service and raised rents. "The price of cattle has been of late so low, and that of bread so high, that the factor who was also a drover would give no more than a boll of meal for a cow . . . and obliged the tenants to give him their cattle at his own price" (Newsome 1934:133-4). So said Hugh Matheson, lately of Rimsdale, and almost certainly a kinsman of the poet; but others from widely separated districts said almost exactly the same. "The evil is the greater that, the estate being parcelled out to different factors and tacksmen, these must oppress the sub-tenants in order to make a profit to themselves, particularly on the article of cattle" (Newsome 1934:136). John Ross, who said this, was making a timely escape from the country, before its factors discovered the even larger potentialities of sheep.

A study of these depositions from the Reay country and eastern Strathnaver, from Caithness and the Sutherland earldom, reveals certain widespread ills, and complaints common to them all. But the evidence from the earldom goes far to explain the contrast between the attitudes of the two bards, Rob Donn in the Reay country, and Donald Matheson in that of the baby Countess. It also fortifies a surmise that James Hogg was speaking predominantly of subjects of the earldom when he declared: "that the petitioners were and are discontented, nobody who knows them will have the least doubt: and that the spirit of emigration had seized them long before I moved in the affair is also a certain truth. . . . For a whole year before that time, all Sutherland and Strathnavern (from whence all the present emigrants come) were in an uproar about emigration, and that, in summer 1772, a ship

actually went from thence with near 300 passengers and this year also another ship with almost the same number. I do not exactly remember when I first made public my intentions of emigrating, but no sooner was it known that these discontented complainers from the farthest corners of Sutherland and Strathnaver flocked to my house by scores and dozens together" (S. H. C. Hogg MS. 5 Nov. 1773 f. 1).

While they were marooned in Shetland, certain of them sought to make James Hogg liable for their relief, since it was he who had received their passage money plus commission, and chartered their ship. He disclosed that he had been paid "the sum of £731 for passage money and provisions, and £15-9 for his trouble in finding the ship and executing the contract foresaid" (S. H. C. Hogg MS. 10 Oct. 1773). Hogg's commission was 1/6d. a head, and he seems to have been comparing this with George Mackay of Mudale's commission when he wrote: "forgive me to put them in mind that their acquaintance who hired a ship for their friends of Sutherland and Strathnavern in 1772 took 5/- per head, besides his expences of meeting with them and of two jaunts to Edinburgh, and it is affirmed, had other considerable profits too" (S. H. C. Hogg MS. 5 Nov. 1773 f. 5). Hogg argued that the emigrants should seek redress from the owner of the *Batchelor*, but it is not known whether they ever received it. Nor is it known that any of them accompanied him when he sailed to Carolina in 1774.

In the opening of that year more dreadful news arrived of the fate of those who had sailed from Dornoch for New York. "The poor Highlanders from Sutherland, who arrived here in the brig *Nancy*, have been treated with unparalleled barbarity. Near a hundred of them have fallen victims to the avarice and inhumanity of the captain. It is impossible to express the cruelty they met with while on board. Of above fifty children at the breast, and not more than four years of age, all died but one, and many of the mothers. Seven women, who were delivered on board, all died but one, with all the children.. . . . [The captain] gave the passengers only corrupted stinking water, that was of itself sufficient, in all human probability, to have destroyed their lives, with black musty meal, hardly fit for swine to eat, and this to be eaten raw. In short, it seems wonderful that any of them escaped with life. . . . The captain upon his arrival here narrowly escaped the vengeance of the law, by leaving this port clandestinely, with the utmost

precipitation, with his vessel in the night" (*Scots Magazine* 36:157-8).

A more fortunate party of emigrants sailed from Loch Broom on the 1st July 1773 aboard the *Hector*, bound for Nova Scotia. It appears that Sutherland contributed the largest single contingent, consisting of twenty individuals and heads of families, the number in two families being given as five each. Ross-shire's total was nineteen, and Inverness-shire's twelve. From Sutherland came John Mackay, who was discovered to have stolen aboard without the price of his fare. But when the captain threatened to set him ashore again, the other emigrants offered to share their rations with him, and persuaded the captain to allow John Mackay to accompany them. They had good reason, for he was a piper (Patterson 1877:80, 456; Maclean 1900:236-7, 243-4; Dunn 1953:55).

The distances between the destinations of these emigrants of 1773, North Carolina, New York and Nova Scotia, were so great that they could scarcely hope to see one another again.

'S ged rachadh iad Charolina,
No do thìr tha fo'n ghréin,
Cha b'urrainn iadsan tachairt
Ach ann nan talamh féin.

(Matheson 1851:272)

(And though they would go to Carolina, or to any land under the sun, they would not be able to meet except in their own land.) But Donald Matheson did not allow his sense of the sorrows of parting to affect his advice that everyone should leave, and his words contained the comfort that the whole world belonged to the Lord's Elect.[4]

This advice, given in Gaelic verse by the poet of Kildonan, was repeated by an anonymous Gael of Islay in 1773 in an English tract of extraordinary bitterness. "The natives of the Highlands and isles have always been remarkable for the strongest attachment to the place of their nativity, and for the highest respect towards their masters and superiors." This respect was now undermined by their rapacity. "Let proprietors of the largest estates among them, such whose fortunes enables them to figure it away in life, ask themselves if they have not used every means to estrange the affections of the Highlanders from them." The landlords had become absentees, dealing from a distance with their people "in a language strange and unknown to the most of them". The

natives were blamed "as an intractable, idle, and useless set of beings. Without means, without encouragement, at a distance from market, against climate, and soil too in many places, it is expected of them that they should cultivate and enclose wide extended heaths, rugged mountain, and large barren morasses. . . . Can it be expected that tenants upon short leases can do anything remarkable in this way, especially when, instead of that tender indulgence and encouragement requisite to bring forward agriculture in a country still lying in a state of nature, nothing is heard of but new impositions, new grassums, and a rise of rent equal to, if not beyond, what the gross produce of the ground can amount to?" (Boyd 1927:429-30, 434). The Islayman, like Donald Matheson and James Hogg, recommended wholesale removal to a land where there was no antique feudal superstructure of an absentee aristocracy to blight local initiative, and carry off its meagre capital to the Lowland towns. Looking back from the vantage-point of to-day, past the dreadful history of the Highlands in the nineteenth century, it is possible to regret that more of their countrymen did not take their advice: that the entire Gaelic race did not abandon Scotland and, strong in numbers, build a new society across the Atlantic. But they did not do so, and the testimony of Rob Donn throws some light on the contemporary attitudes with which Matheson's advice had to contend.

It is told that the two poets were reciting their verse to each other on one occasion, when Matheson asked his friend to compare their quality. "There is more piety in your poetry, and more poetry in mine," Rob Donn answered (Matheson 1851:248). There is something other than greater piety in Matheson's verse, to which Rob Donn never approached nearer than in his verses to Mackay of Bighouse, the factor of Lord Reay who died in 1770. Bighouse had invited Rob Donn to his presence to admire his new suit, and after four lines of compliment on his finery the bard concluded:

> Ach cha'n eil putan innt', no toll,
> Nach do chost bonn do dhuine bochd.
>
> (Rob Donn 1899:445)

(But there is not a button nor a buttonhole in it that has not taken money off a poor man.) On the other hand, when a herdsman was evicted from his holding, and his wife employed a Lowlander to write an English petition for them which the

factor could not read, Rob Donn saw only comedy in the situation.

> 'S mi nach earbadh gnothach trom
> Ris an Nòtair ghalld' aig Briogaiseag.
> (Rob Donn 1829:115; 1899:346-7)

(I certainly would not entrust important business to the Lowland notary Briogaiseag used.)

It is clear that Rob Donn was utterly conservative and deeply attached to the old ways. But perhaps, in days of more restricted travel, these did not appear so evidently to have been undermined in the Reay country of western Strathnaver, as they did in the Sutherland earldom or on the Caithness border. The chief of Mackay, the "Ceann na cuideachd 's na tàbhuirnn" was indeed an idiot living quietly at Skerray from 1768 until his death in 1797. But after he had grown accustomed to the humiliation, Rob Donn may have noticed less ominous consequences than Matheson, whose baby Countess lived in state in Edinburgh. It was long, in fact, since a Chief had been closely connected with the cultural life of his clansmen. Rob Donn, the son of a sub-tenant, was now the apex of a literary world containing John Sutherland the school-teacher (Rob Donn 1899:112, 184, 262, 331-7, 390-3), Alexander Cormack the baron baillie (Rob Donn 1899:94, 127, 301, 304), the minister of Reay who made a collection of Ossianic ballads before 1739 (Campbell 1872:xv), and the minister of Durness (Rob Donn 1899:20-7), whose son published the first collection of Highland airs in 1784. Pipers, fiddlers, poets and scholar-ministers flourished here, whether the Chief was in Edinburgh, writing about the barbarous clansmen who supported him in urban luxury, or living, an imbecile, in Skerray. The second was far more economical.

It is impossible to assess whether this curious accident of succession contributed to a kind of Indian summer in the Reay country, of which Rob Donn witnessed the first ten years. A land the size of Fife perhaps approached as close as it has ever done to the condition of those similar regions of Scandinavia in which there were no absent landlords: it continued in this exceptional situation for as long as the idiot Lord Reay lived, and fortunately he lived long. When he succeeded in 1768, the estate had also to support the widow of the fifth Lord Reay, who continued living until 1800 and who possessed three daughters (Mackay 1906:214-15). It had also to support

the widow of the fourth Lord Reay, who continued living until 1790, possessed two daughters, and drew £1,000 a year from the rents of one part of the estate, and 400 merks Scots from those of another (Mackay 1906:204-5; Rob Donn 1899: 266). The idiot chief added nothing to these family expenses.

There appears to have been no pressure of over-population in the Reay country to drive people abroad during Rob Donn's lifetime, and there is no evidence of engrossment of land there for sheep farms in his day. On the other hand, people emigrated as they had been doing before he was born. He witnessed the wholesale removal to Georgia from Edderachillis ten years before the Forty-Five, and the constant traffic to the Netherlands, India, and the new world thereafter. The circumstances of this traffic were not those described by Janet Schaw, James Hogg, Donald Matheson, and the correspondent of the *Scots Magazine*: though it will not suffice to conclude that Rob Donn did not witness such circumstances in western Strathnaver. He paid visits to Lewis and Skye, those centres of emigration, and visited other parts of the mainland as a drover. But he was an illiterate Gaelic monoglot, so that he was doubly barred from reading the Islayman's arguments in support of Donald Matheson's views. Also, he did not see things at a great distance; and for much that was near to him he possessed the affection that does not easily find fault. In his attitude there is probably reflected the latent optimism of a host of his compatriots, reflected also in their reluctance to leave, and their misery when they were compelled to do so.

His verse helps to illuminate another curious paradox. After the introduction of the great sheep farms, the sale of the remainder of the Mackay country to the house of Sutherland, and the vast upheavals of the nineteenth century evictions, men looked back on the earlier period as a golden age (*C.C.R.* 1884:**2**, 1614-18). Were they wrong? The remembered poetry of to-day in Strathnaver passes through the savage and poignant utterances of the nineteenth century into the elegant, untroubled poetic world of the period that preceded it, in which Matheson's is the only disturbing voice (Gunn 1899; Mackay 1962; Grimble 1962:155-60). Was Rob Donn's world, then, a mirage? Many people have said that it was, from the eighteenth century to the present day; and in four instalments in the *Scottish Historical Review*, Margaret I. Adam has used their opinions, and based confident conclusions upon

what she describes as their "intimate knowledge". These conclusions specifically embrace the Sutherland sheriffdom, yet they are almost impossible to reconcile with the eye-witness testimonies of Rob Donn or Donald Matheson, the Islayman, James Hogg or Janet Schaw. There is no evidence in her thesis that Margaret Adam knew of the existence of any of these people. As for the knowledgeable experts upon whom she depended, James Loch's *Account of the Improvements*, 1820, has been accepted uncritically, and the examination of its arguments made by scholars since 1820 has received no more attention than the most striking contemporary comment.

Behind its didactic conclusions sound the authentic voices of those times, communicating their problems, their doubts and their diverse experience. Behind its recital of the poverty, filth, laziness, and misery, there remains above all the fragrance of Rob Donn's witness to challenge modern judgments. He may have lacked foresight, his way of life may have been squalid by city standards: but in it, he and his contemporaries expressed in art more joy and richness than any have cared to do in his country since.

In 1828, Barbara Mackay, grand-daughter of the tacksman-poet John of Mudale, contributed her own picture of Rob Donn's world. "I have of late frequently heard *strangers* express their surprise, at the marked intelligence evinced in the works of a man devoid of every degree of early cultivation. To this it may be answered, that the state of society was very different then from what it is now, progressively retrograding as it has been for the last thirty years at least in this country." She wrote from Keoldale by Durness, where Rob Donn had held *céilidh* in company with the minister's sons, in the home of a factor-tacksman. She wrote almost exactly thirty years after the death of the idiot chief, and on the eve of the sale of the entire Reay estate to the house of Sutherland. "I perfectly remember my maternal grandfather, who held the wadset lands of Skerray, every post-day evening go into the kitchen where his servants and small tenants were assembled, and read the newspapers aloud to them; and it is incredible *now*, the propriety and acuteness with which they made remarks and drew conclusions from the politics of the day" (Rob Donn 1829:lix-lx). The old woman's nostalgic memories followed one another at random, oblivious of their inconsistency with the remarks already published by James Loch in his *Account*. For although she had lived into the age of factors, she was a

product of the age of bards; and she was thinking, not in terms of James Loch's values, but of those of Rob Donn.

NOTES

[1] Margaret Adam gives a further example of the affluence of Sutherland emigrants in 1772 (1919:282). But this appears to derive from *Scots Magazine* 34: 515, which relates, in this respect, to the Hebrides.

[2] Sir D. Dalrymple, *The Additional Case of Elizabeth, Claiming the Title and Dignity of Countess of Sutherland*, 1771: *Brief For The Counsel of Sir Robert Gordon, Bart.* 1771: *Sutherland Book* I, 465-7.

[3] Earl William's tartan is of the Sutherland or Black Watch sett: the yellow stripe had not yet been added to this, to compose a Gordon tartan.

[4] The similarity of thought in Matheson's poem and in the Hebridean *Oran do na Fogarraich* (*The Songs of John MacCodrum*, ed. William Matheson, 1938, pp. 196-203) is extremely arresting.

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