2. What view of emigration emerges in the poetry composed by the emigrant poets?

The Highland Clearances were perhaps the most disruptive events in the history of the Gaelic world. They displaced thousands of people from their traditional homes in the crofts of the Highlands who were forced to seek new lands to call their home, whether on the shores of the Highlands, in the central belt of Scotland or even further afield in the “New World” of Canada, America or Australia. These events were documented in a variety of ways – from the landlords that evicted the people, from commentators who toured the Highlands during and after the Clearances, but perhaps most crucially by the people themselves. Those that were cleared and then emigrated were almost exclusively Gaelic speakers, with the language being dominant in the Highlands at the time, and therefore our evidence of the human experiences of emigration comes mostly in Gaelic. The nature of the language and its’ culture means that a large part of this evidence comes in the form of poetry. This essay will explore the range of opinions that the emigrants of Gaelic Scotland, in particular to Canada, expressed about their tribulations through the medium of poetry.

Perhaps the strongest emotion that comes across from emigration poetry of the Gaels is anger. The turmoil that the Gaels were put through was unimaginable, with what were their societal figureheads first ignoring and then actively persecuting them to a point where they were forced to leave their homes and their homeland. People were killed, raped, tortured or even burned alive for not leaving their homes. They either had to leave or wanted to leave the Highlands. Families were separated because of the terrible living conditions in the cities and on the ships leaving Scotland. It was a truly awful experience for many of the emigrants. The anger that they felt is completely understandable.

There are many good examples of poets attacking those that perpetrated the acts of the clearances that forced them to emigrate. Calum Bàn MacMhannain’s “Imrich nan Eileineach” (Shields, 2012, p. 770) has a strong description of the factor that cleared his land and forced him to leave Portree for Prince Edward Island:

“Umaidh àrdanach, cruaidh,
‘S e gun iochd ris an tuath,
E gun taise, gun truas, gun tròcair”

This final line is especially strong, describing the man as “without compassion, pity or mercy”. With such horrors going on in Scotland at the time, it is not surprising that people left for other lands.

Despite the atrocities that they had undergone, the emigrant Gaels’ sense of humour withstood the torrent of hatred that could have overwhelmed them. Some of the best and most revealing poetry surrounding the clearances and emigration are not
descriptive poems about suffering and loss, but satirical onslaughts against those that created this Hell for them. Landlords, tacksman, bailiffs and all authority figures connected with the Clearances are roundly condemned and mocked in poems penned by emigrants, whose fear of reprisals had been removed completely with an ocean between them and those they attacked and nothing more left to lose.

An example from Prince Edward Island of such poetry is that of “Aoir air Pàdraig Sellar” by Dòmhnall Baillidh (Meek, 1995, p. 54) where he savages the infamous factor of Sutherland, Patrick Sellar, for his brutality in evicting people. Baillidh describes him with evocative and insulting metaphors such as calling him a “mhadadh-allaidh” (wolf) and describing his features negatively:

“Tha shron mar choltar iarainn
No fiacail na muice bioraich;
Tha ceann liath mar ròn air
Is bòdhan mar asal fhireann.”

This gives Sellar an inhuman appearance and likeness, which is more akin to the manner of his clearances.

The strength of Baillidh's feelings towards Sellar are made even clearer by the way he describes how he would deal with him should he come across him:

“Bheirinn le m dhòrnaibh
Tri òirleach a-mach dhed sgamhan.”

There is no doubt that many emigrants shared the wish of Baillidh to physically attack their oppressors if they could. It is unclear from the poem, but often clearances would take place when the men of the village where elsewhere, such as tending to livestock or trading in a nearby village, and therefore many did not receive a chance to confront those who had banished them. There was no possibility of revenge for these people, and they expressed that emotion through their writings rather than violence.

This poem is a fantastic example of the way in which emigrant poets kept their sarcasm and humour alive even though it was being driven by anger at the people that perpetrated such terrible crimes against them.

Whilst the emigrants retained a sense of humour they also maintained a lot of their own cultural traditions as well, with Gaelic being one of them, as a way of making their lives as 'normal' as they could be in a completely different world.

A poem by Calum MacNeill of Cape Breton, “Moladh na Gàidhlig” (MacLeoid, 1970, p. 58), is particularly vociferous in its defence of the language and of its’ use in
Canada. He describes the language as “ghasda, bhlasda, aosda” (fine, delicious and old) and says that “Rì m’saoghal cha toir mi grain dhith” (in my world I wouldn’t dislike her). His love for the language is unquestionable. It appears that this poem may have marked the start of the Gaelic decline in Canada as MacNeill seems exasperated at those who have left the language saying:

“S an Gàidheal nach tugadh gaol dhith
Cha toireadh e gaol dha mhàthair”

He believed that those that were discarding Gaelic in favour of English were abandoning their heritage and that even though Canada was a new land it should be treated as an extension of Scotland. It is a similar attitude that means that the place names, language and culture of Scotland all maintained as much as possible for a long time in Canada. This is what MacNeill and many others believed in their steadfast defence of their culture.

Homesickness, or to use its more effective Gaelic name “cianalas”, is one of the key themes of much of the poetry of the emigrant Gaels, as they naturally struggled to come to terms with their new life. The new world of Canada was a very different place from the land that the Gaels had called home before crossing the Atlantic and the tough task of creating communities anew took a toll on the Gaels. Those that arrived in winter were especially affected, as they had no preparation for the harsh conditions. They longed for their lives in Scotland before the Clearances. This is what MacNeill and many others believed in their steadfast defence of their culture.

A great example of this type of poetry is “An cluinn thu mis’ a’charaide?” (MacLeod, 1970, p. 23) composed by Alan MacDonald (Ailean MacDhomhnaill). Rather than writing to his family, he is writing to his friend back home, and it is often forgotten that the emigrants lost their friends perhaps more often so than their families when they moved overseas. It is clear to see how much MacDonald misses his friend, with powerful language: “An càirdeas is an rioghalachd…Gu bràth cha dean sinn dhìochull’m’air”. (Our friendship and the majesty, forever I’ll not forget it) It is said that MacDonald may have been dying when he wrote the poem, and it lends extra significance to the lines: “‘S ged tha mi fàs ’n a m’sheann duine / Gun gabhainn dram is òran” (Even though I’m growing an old man / We’d have a drink and a song) and “Ach ‘s fhada leam gun tighinn thu…’S a thoirt do m’chridhe sòlas.” (I long for you to come…And bring to my heart some comfort) The last quote particularly shows how he feels about living out his final years in Canada, that he needs comfort from a friend after a tough life.

This homesickness is also true in reverse, with those left in Scotland also feeling lost and without a ‘home’ with the emigrants gone. “Manitoba” (Meek, 1995, p. 80) is a poem composed by Ian MacLean (Iain MacIlleathain), the bard of Balemartin in Tiree, after a number of his clansmen left their homes for Manitoba in Canada in 1878. The first line shows his unhappiness and loneliness: “Gur muladach mise ’s
“mi an seo gun duin’ idir”. (How sad I am without a single companion) The raw emotion of when the people left the isle is also present in the poem:

“Chan urra mi aithris am bròn a bh’air m’aire
’S an cùl ris a’bhaile sa mhadainn Di-màirt”

However, despite the sadness the composer feels he cannot blame them for leaving. The last two lines of the chorus are:

“Le dûrchd mo chridhe, soraidh slàn leis na gillean
A sheòl thar na linne gu Manitobà”

There is a sort of acceptance by the poet of the situation, and that acceptance is to be found in other poems as well.

As with any large-scale social event, there was a wide array of views about the Highland Clearances from those that emigrated because of it. Although the overwhelming majority of poetry expresses the emigration as a negative, at the very start of the process poetry shows some optimism towards emigration. John MacCodrum’s (Iain MacFhearchair) “Òran do na Fògarraich” (“Song to the Exiles”) (Shields, 2012, p. 769) in the 1770s takes a positive look at what lay ahead for the exiles, urging people: “Cuiribh cùl ris an fhearann” (abandon the land) for “dùthaich a bhainne” (land of milk) and “dùthaich na meala” (land of honey). It is a poem that was written with little experience of the actualities of life in Canada, and was perhaps part of the efforts of landlords to move people overseas. However it should be noted that not all experiences of emigration were necessarily bad. Some revelled in the ownership of large tracts of land and having fundamental ownership rights thereof. Many Scots emigrants became largely successful in Canada, including Canada’s first Prime Minister Sir John A. MacDonald. Emigration was not always a detrimental for the Gaels opportunities.

Emigration poetry is a very prevalent genre of the form and covers the many different views that the poets had of their experiences. Although the attitudes of the poets towards their ordeal definitely changed over the years, it can be concluded that the experience of emigrants was undoubtedly difficult, life-changing and society changing for almost all involved.

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**Bibliography**

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