

SCOTTISH IMMIGRATION TO CAPE BRETON

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AN account of Scottish migration to Cape Breton, in the first half of the nineteenth century, affords pathetic example of the trials and tribulations, which beset both settler and official alike, in the days of unregulated immigration. Of the hardships suffered by the Scots, prior to emigration, it is unnecessary to speak, as the purpose of this article is to discuss some of the problems presented to the government of Cape Breton and Nova Scotia by the sudden influx of penniless Scots to an island which was ill prepared to receive them and had done nothing to attract them to its shores. Nor had the British government done anything to direct them towards Cape Breton.

With the exception of a few Loyalists, who shared in the bounty of the period, none of the immigrants to Cape Breton, subsequent to 1784, received any assistance from the British government either in passage money or in provisions. There were no extensive military settlements as at Sherbrooke or Dalhousie in Nova Scotia, no pauper settlements like those which were assisted by their parishes to settle in Canada, and no Canada Company to lure immigrants into specific localities. None the less, unassisted immigration, chiefly Scottish, poured into Cape Breton between 1815 and 1838 in ever-increasing numbers and, by the end of the period, had increased its population six-fold. An estimated population of 6000 in 1815 had risen to 18,700 in 1827 and to 35,420 in 1838.

All who took part in this heavy migration to Cape Breton, subsequent to the Napoleonic Wars, were victims of both the new economic policy in the Highlands and the energetic action of shipowners and their agents in the emigrant trade. Since the one concern of the new economic landlord was to get rid of his tenants as easily as possible, of the emigrant agent to get his fee of 12s per head, and of the shipowner to unload his cargo at the nearest and most convenient port, it is obvious that most of the immigrants to Cape Breton would be penniless on arrival, and that many of them would be landed wherever wind and wave had carried them, regardless of whether there were officials there to receive them or, preferably, where there were not. To those

engaged in the emigrant trade Cape Breton Island was a boot-legger paradise, not only because it was practically uninhabited at the beginning of the nineteenth century, but also because it had so many unsupervised landing places, where emigrants could be disembarked and left to fend for themselves.

Though the census returns of 1827 and 1838 prove conclusively that immigration was heavy, and the correspondence of officials in Cape Breton bears similar witness, no passenger lists have survived, and there are in the Public Archives of Nova Scotia only two statistical reports: one made in 1831 and the other in 1840. Even these are frankly incomplete, being based on the returns of the Collector of Customs at Sydney alone. The report of 1831 deals with the years 1821 to 1830 inclusive, except the year 1823, and states that no record whatever had been kept between 1790 and 1820; but it shows that 6,513 Scots and 90 Irish immigrants had entered the port of Sydney, while several vessels had arrived annually and landed their passengers on the western shores of the Island without making any report of their number. Likewise, the return of 1840 deals with Sydney alone and shows that, in the years 1835 to 1838 inclusive, 1,348 immigrants had arrived at that port. Between 1821 and 1838, therefore, if we allow an average number for the years omitted, more than 10,000 immigrants arrived at the one port of Sydney; and it is highly probable that in the same period another 10,000 had landed at other ports in the Island, directly from Scotland or indirectly from Prince Edward Island and the peninsula of Nova Scotia. In no other way can the enormous increase of population in Cape Breton be explained; and this explanation is borne out by indirect evidence which will appear as the story unfolds.

In 1774 the population of Cape Breton Island was given as 1,012, of whom 502 were Acadians, 206 Irish, and the remainder American or British. There were not a dozen Scots on the whole Island, which in the nineteenth century came to be the largest centre of Gaelic-speaking Scots outside the mother land. Even now, seventy per cent of the total Gaelic-speaking population of Canada are to be found in Cape Breton. The Acadians were settled chiefly around St. Peter's Bay and on Isle Madame, and were employed by merchant-shipping firms from Guernsey and Jersey. Henceforth, they received no accession to their population, except a few score who returned from the Islands of St. Pierre and Miquelon, or migrated from Prince Edward Island to Cheticamp. The Irish congregated at Louisbourg and Main-

adiou. In later years few came direct to Cape Breton from Ireland, although there was a considerable influx of fishermen indirectly from Newfoundland, and of farmers from Prince Edward Island. The New Englanders and other British settlers were engaged in trade and the fisheries at Louisbourg, Arichat, Baleine, Mainadieu or Mira. In general, therefore, only the southern coast of the Island had any settlers whatever.

After the American Revolution, though the Island was nominally a separate colony, it shared but slightly in the migration of Loyalists. The few who came settled finally at Sydney and Baddeck. Two or three families settled at Port Hood and the north end of the Gut of Canso. There they were joined by post-Loyalist Americans, who were interested in trade and the fisheries and, though applying for land in these regions, were inclined to wander wherever opportunity beckoned. It is doubtful if the combined immigration of Loyalists and post-Loyalists exceeded 400, and it is equally doubtful if all of them became permanent settlers. In any event, the total population of the Island in 1801 was only 2,513 and, in the interval, a Scottish settlement had been formed on the western shore by migration from Nova Scotia and Prince Edward Island. In 1791 some Scottish immigrants, who had arrived at Pictou and moved eastward to Antigonish, crossed the Gut of Canso and settled at Judique. Later they were joined by Scots from Prince Edward Island, who were dissatisfied with the landlord system there, and in time this settlement extended along the coast from Judique to Margaree, and became a centre of attraction for immigrants from Scotland.

It was not until 1802 that immigrants came direct to Cape Breton from Scotland. In August of that year, 299 arrived in Sydney, too late to plant any crops and without means of subsistence for the winter. To save them from immediate want, while in search of employment, the Council recommended that 40s per man, 30s per woman, 20s a child over 12, and 15s a child under 12 be advanced out of the revenue arising from the new impost on rum, to be repaid either by work on the projected public roads or in cash when they could obtain it. No further record of direct immigration survives until 1817; but indirect immigration from Nova Scotia, New Brunswick and Prince Edward Island continued steadily, and by 1813 the population had increased to 5,909.

In 1817 the customs returns show that two ships, the *Hope* and *William Tell*, arrived at Sydney with 382 emigrants from

the island of Barra. Unlike the immigrants of 1802, these did not arrive unheralded. They had been assisted and probably encouraged to emigrate by one Simon Fraser, who asked the Colonial Secretary to recommend them to the care of Lieutenant Governor Ainslie, and sent Lord Bathurst's recommendation to the Lieutenant Governor, together with a request that the latter should reserve 5,000 acres of land for him in the midst of their settlement, in return for which he would form an establishment which would be very useful to the colony. He had also advised the emigrants to provide a sufficient quantity of beef and meal for their passage across the Atlantic, and had sent them salt from Greenock, so that they could slaughter their own cattle for provisions. They, therefore, came to Cape Breton in comparative comfort, and with the reputation of "the best fishermen in Scotland." This is the first instance I have found of an emigrant agent directing Scots to Cape Breton, although no doubt others were busy then and later. In this instance he seems to have dealt fairly with the Barra people, except that he was accused of having assured them that the colony would supply them with provisions for the first twelve months, in addition to free land. Otherwise, he seems to have tried to get a good class of emigrants and to have them placed where they could follow the same vocation as in Scotland. These immigrants were settled near the Narrows at the expense of the poverty-stricken government, at a cost of £43, 14. 6; £31 for hire of schooners, and the balance for pork, flour and mutton. Thereafter, they had to eke out their own subsistence from the waters of the Bras d'Or, until they could harvest their first crop.

In 1817, also, a small detachment of the disbanded 104th Regiment, which had been in garrison at Sydney prior to the War of 1812, arrived in the Island from Quebec and applied for land. As the party comprised only two serjeants, twelve privates, four women and four children, they did not constitute a distinct settlement or add much to the population. After 1817 I can find no record of further immigration until 1820; but a partial census of that period shows that a heavy immigration must have taken place in the intervening years, as the population had increased to nine or ten thousand, and both the western coast and the shores of the Bras d'Or were lined with new settlers. According to a report of Surveyor General Crawley, in October, 1820, the River Inhabitants was settled on both sides for about fifteen miles, the western coast from Bear Island to Cheticamp was occupied by farmers, "chiefly Scotch people,

with some Irish, more French and very few English". From Cheticamp to Cape North there were no settlers and, from Cape North to Sydney, there were only a few fishermen at Aspy Bay, Ingonish and Big Bras d'Or; but at St. Ann's the Scottish population was increasing rapidly. Established by Rev. Norman McLeod, who had migrated with his flock from Pietou in the spring of 1820, St. Ann's had already attracted fifteen families of 78 souls direct from Scotland and was destined to attract many more in subsequent years. The rivers Baddeck and Wagamatkook were settled for a distance of six or seven miles, but the River Denys was uninhabited. The shores of the Bras d'Or were all settled except at the southwest end of St. Patrick's Channel. In all these districts around the Bras d'Or, except at Baddeck which was partly Loyalist, the settlers were almost entirely Scottish.

It is not without significance that no records of immigration had been kept in Cape Breton prior to 1820, and it is fortunate that the Island was reannexed to Nova Scotia in that year: for between 1784 and 1820 the government of the colony had been notoriously inefficient, and quite unequal to the task of settling a large number of immigrants. Dependent upon the Imperial government for their salaries, confused by the vacillating policy of that government in regard to the disposal of public lands, without legal means of raising an adequate revenue for local improvements, the officials had quarrelled amongst themselves for office and, while charging exorbitant fees for their services, too often allowed personal concerns to interfere with the discharge of their duties. As a result of all these factors, inadequate records had been kept of even the titles to land and, when the government of Nova Scotia assumed control of the Island, they found that fully as much land had been occupied without any form of title as was held by grant, license or lease of the crown, that new grants had been made of lands in which the process of escheat had not been completed, and that everything was in hopeless confusion. Though some attempt had been made to open roads from Sydney to the chief centres of population, most of them were but blazed trails and even the best of them, as those to the mines, Baddeck, Mira and Louisbourg, were barely passable on horseback. For all practical purposes, therefore, the chief means of communication in Cape Breton was still by water. This made administration difficult and expensive, retarded agricultural and educational improvement, and precluded the possibility of dealing effectively with the complex problem of

immigration. Under these circumstances, even the government of Nova Scotia, with its long experience of immigration, its larger settled population, and its rapidly expanding commerce and revenue, found its resources strained to the utmost in bringing education, agriculture and communications up to the standard of the peninsula, while assimilating so many fortuitous newcomers.

While passenger acts were still in force to prevent overcrowding of emigrant vessels, and front lands were still available around the coasts of the Island and the shores of the Lake, the immigrants had arrived in moderate numbers and in good health and were assimilated with comparatively little discomfort both to themselves and to the officials in charge; but with the relaxing of these laws in 1827 and the arrival of larger numbers, many of whom were suffering from smallpox or ship's-fever, both the local officials and the government of Nova Scotia were driven to distraction to provide for penniless immigrants, to find lands that were accessible, and to avoid the spread of epidemics amongst the earlier settlers.

At the same time they barely escaped an inundation of pauper settlers from the parishes of England. In 1826 the House of Commons had examined witnesses on the capacity of the British North American colonies to absorb the redundant population of Great Britain, and Richard John Uniacke had rashly ventured the assertion that Nova Scotia could absorb 15,000. Fortunately his optimism was not shared in either the Island or the Peninsula. In the following year, when the British government sent Colonel Cockburn here to get first-hand information on the quantity of land available, he found little sympathy for the project anywhere: in Halifax the newspapers of the day subjected his proposals to unsparing criticism, and the Surveyor General of Cape Breton thought little of either Cockburn or his mission. "*Entre nous*", he wrote to Sir Rupert George, "This good Colonel's mission must be performed rather by hearing than seeing, and I venture to say without fear of contradiction, that His Excellency could have supplied His Majesty's Ministers with quite as good information respecting every part of the Province at a fiftieth part of the expense." To Cockburn himself he said that he would be very glad if the British government would overlook Cape Breton, as "The people who had of late years settled among us and who had numbers of relatives and countrymen that would gladly join them, if not prevented by restrictions and regulations, were much better

suitable to this climate and soil than any that the Parent State was desirous of removing".

The experiences of the next ten years did nothing to make the government of Nova Scotia and the Surveyor General of Cape Breton regret their decision in regard to pauper immigrants, from English parishes, or to change their opinion as to the limited extent of suitable agricultural land available for settlement. The year 1827 was to open a decade of misery for old and new settlers alike and to strain governmental machinery to the breaking point. With the opening of navigation hundreds of dispossessed Scots, exploited by agents of shipowners, were landed in the ports and harbours of Cape Breton and, in the outlying ports, left to shift for themselves. In September the brig, *Stephen Wright*, entered Sydney harbour with 170 passengers from Tobermory, forty of whom were down with small-pox; and, though they placed a constable on the vessel and a sentry on the shore to prevent unauthorized communication with the passengers, the magistrates of Sydney had the greatest difficulty to arrange for proper medical care and special provisions for the sick and, at the same time, to prevent intercourse with the town and the spread of disease. The following extract from a letter of Thomas Crawley to the Provincial Secretary will serve as an illustration of this aspect of the immigration problem which, though all too common at that time, is seldom thought of today when quarantine regulations are enforced as a matter of course and neither ignorance nor sentiment is allowed to interfere with them:

Another load of poor emigrants is arrived in our Harbor—We know little of them yet except that they brought with them some bad cases of malignant small pox—Four are dead, three more, I understand are dying, and happy shall we be if the contagion does not spread over the Country—The Magistrates have experienced great difficulty in their endeavors to prevent communication with the infected Vessel and from the vessel to the shore—The inmates of the latter have threatened more than once to force a landing; which may have received some encouragement from the impudent conduct of a wrong-headed Priest who ordered a Boat along side the vessel in direct contradiction and in the very face of the Magistrate who was calling and commanding her return—This scene being transacted in the presence of many spectators, among whom were some that wished to enquire for their relatives and friends, several Boats immediately rushed along side and the author of this dangerous disobedience when spoken to by the acting Magistrate defended his conduct and openly declared he was prepared to justify it.

I have been in constant expectation that the passengers and crew would throw the Constables overboard and rush into the Town. The Master of the vessel, who is an obstinate brutish fellow, declares he will do nothing towards the relief or recovery of his unhappy living Cargoe and in pursuance of that determination perversely refuses to let air into the hold of the vessel where it must necessarily be pestilential. Never perhaps was there a case that displayed more the necessity of some authority to command and enforce regulations for the preservation of the health and lives of a populous settlement.

In the following year the number of immigrants was more than doubled; and, in September again, the *Two Sisters* arrived in Sydney with 160 passengers from Greenock, several of whom were suffering from small-pox. This time the magistrates, headed by Chief Justice Marshall, sounded the alarm. As this communication gives a vivid picture of another aspect of the immigration problem, the problem of supporting large numbers until they could be placed upon the land, at a time when the earlier settlers were far from self-sufficing, I quote as follows:

In the course of the present year, upwards of 2,100 persons have come into this district, from the Western parts of Scotland, many of whom, on their landing, were quite destitute of food, and also of the means of procuring it. In one instance, a number of them, at the time of their arrival, were infected with the small-pox, and it was therefore found requisite to prevent their being landed, or any freedom of intercourse being had with them, until their recovery, and in consequence of their provisions being nearly exhausted, when they arrived, and of their being very generally in the destitute state we have mentioned, they would inevitably have suffered the miseries of famine, if supplies of food had not been furnished to them by our directions, which was done, on the faith that the expense thus incurred would be defrayed by Government. From the most correct information we have been able to obtain, we are satisfied, that this county, even in the most abundant years, would scarcely have been in a condition, to support such a number of destitute persons, for the long period of twelve months, through which they must struggle, before they can raise subsistence for themselves—Our crops, the present year, have in general failed, and those settlers, who have ventured to open their doors to their relatives and ancient connexions, have, with their families and lodgers, an alarming and melancholy prospect before them—But great numbers of these unhappy people are without friends, or resources of any kind to relieve their necessities, and are begging from door to door, for a morsel of food, and yet we have much reason to fear that notwithstanding the appearance of approaching scarcity, provisions will be exported, and thus the evil will be hastened and increased. It is unnecessary to attempt a description of the distress that awaits these wretched

people, when our navigation being closed, it will be impossible to procure a supply of provisions, from any quarter whatever.

Although the provincial government made generous grants for relief and held up the hands of the magistrates in their struggle against poverty and disease, the winter months, when Sydney harbor was icebound, were always an anxious time of stock-taking and near panic. For example, in February 1829, Judge Marshall wrote that by the close of the previous year 2,300 immigrants had been received through the port of Sydney, that the relief fund had been spent with rigid economy to keep upwards of a thousand from starvation but not from extreme suffering, and that further provisions would be needed for the spring months as private charity was almost exhausted. He added that, although the opening of rivers and brooks might afford opportunities of obtaining precarious and scanty food for some of the immigrants, unless they could be supplied with seed potatoes their future would be dark indeed. A few days later, on learning that the Legislature had granted £500 for further relief, one half for Indian meal and the other for seed potatoes, Judge Marshall urged the Lieutenant Governor to send everything to Sydney rather than to St. Peter's, as there were few immigrants in distress at the latter place and the freight from St. Peter's to Sydney was almost as much as from Halifax to either. At the same time he reported that the Scots preferred oatmeal to Indian meal, being much more familiar with its preparation, and suggested that, as potatoes could be obtained more cheaply in Prince Edward Island than in Halifax, a larger quantity than was needed for seed might be purchased there and the surplus used as food for the needy.

Such was the routine in affording relief to the immigrants between 1827 and 1838. A record of the facts year by year would be as monotonous as the constituent elements of the diet. The immigrants flocked in without means of subsistence for the interval between their arrival or settlement and their first crop, the magistrates reported their needs to the Lieutenant Governor, the Lieutenant Governor advanced money and provisions until they were voted by the Legislature, and again the magistrates supervised the dole of oatmeal, Indian meal or potatoes, as each or all became obtainable. Not all fared alike, as those who were far from Sydney could not avail themselves of the supplies, or make their needs known as readily as those who were on the spot; and in some instances they suffered greatly. The following

extract from the *Halifax Journal* of March 10, 1834, will show that even the best intentions of a benevolent government could be frustrated by lack of adequate machinery for the prompt and discerning distribution of relief:

We regret to state that notwithstanding the aid so considerably afforded by His Honour, the President, last autumn to poor settlers in Cape Breton, unparalleled distress now exists amongst the new settlers on the back lands near Baddeck and Middle River, and in other places in that quarter. We have been informed that it is positively affirmed that in one settlement about forty families consisting of one hundred and seventy persons, of whom 130 are children, are for the most part reduced to one meal per day, and this consisting wholly of potatoes of miserable quality, and that the effect of such bad description of food and of solely existing on it has been severe and troublesome diarrhoea. It is stated that, after partaking of their scanty and wretched meal, the parents have to contrive to put their children to sleep in hopes thereby to diminish or postpone their craving for more food.

In 1832, when the Provincial Board of Health was organized, the inspection and care of immigrants to Cape Breton was put on a more workmanlike basis. In the same year a local passenger act, which imposed a small head tax on immigrants, provided a fund to supplement the provincial grants for relief. But health and temporary assistance in provision were not the only problems of settlement. There still remained the problems of discovering, selecting and marking off suitable lots, of transporting the settlers to these new lots, and of protecting them against the ingenuity of squatters.

It was natural that these problems should be recognized first by the men who were immediately responsible for the settlement of immigrants. In 1828, Deputy Surveyor Robert McNab had written: "Amongst the many difficulties the numerous Emigrants that arrive annually in this province have to experience, that of finding a suitable situation to settle themselves is not the least. Unaccustomed to the forests, they dare not of themselves attempt to penetrate their recesses and their slender funds will not admit their engaging the assistance of those who, daily accustomed to ramble them, can in any part find themselves at home." Two years later, Surveyor General Crawley informed the Provincial Secretary that Cape Breton was "threatened with a dreadful inundation from Scotland amounting to 3,000 souls", and suggested that lots should be laid out for them in advance, to which they might repair at

once, "instead of lying about our beaches to be consumed by want and sickness". Finally, one of the magistrates reinforced the arguments of the surveyors, and the government of Nova Scotia ordered them to lay off as many lots as they could, and appointed a Board of three persons to engage guides, hire vessels and transport the immigrants to their lots.

Henceforth the location of immigrants was left less to chance; but the following letter from Mr. Crawley, in May 1831, shows that even the surveyors found difficulty in discovering suitable homes in the wilderness:

In my letter of the 5th May I alluded to the probability of being under the necessity of quitting the tract of land in the vicinity of the Grand Riviere Lakes to search for a more favorable situation. My three Deputies have been struggling about 20 days amidst all kinds of difficulties, and have not marked more than thirty-two lots scarcely one half of which are worth the notice of people in search of settlements. The Information obtained respecting the other parts of this large tract being vague and contradictory, I have directed that one surveyor explore land north of the waters that discharge into Mire Lake to ascertain whether it be worth while to return to that quarter, and for the others to repair with all vigilance to the vacant lands about the north western district, which reports lately received give reason to hope are of a better quality; but the number of good lots even there not being expected to be sufficient for all the emigrants, I have despatched a special messenger to my deputy at St. Ann's to lay out as many Blocks of good land as he can find in his District. I am persuaded that one result of these surveys will be a proof that this is not a fit country for the accommodation of emigrants on a large scale. I understand that flocks of squatters are on the watch to pounce on the best lots as soon as marked by the Surveyor, trusting that government will not incur any expense to eject them. I shall make it known that none but Emigrants sent out by government will get Tickets for their lots, which is all I can do to counteract this evil.

This problem of squatters was the most difficult of all which faced the administration. Even before 1820 they had been a problem; but as they were located in the more accessible portions of the Island, while land was still plentiful and free at the cost of survey only, they were finally brought under control. But in the 1830's, when all the front lands had been appropriated, and the remaining crown lands had to be purchased, the problem became very complex and hundreds of immigrants could roam the forests without the knowledge of the authorities. As late as 1840 a proclamation was issued against these unrepentant squatters, who were cheating the government by employing

unauthorized surveyors to mark off crown lands, so that they could show their lines to intending purchasers and turn them away. The proclamation gives an interesting sidelight on the resourcefulness of the squatter; but it is doubtful if it did more than call attention to the difficulty of the problem, as such practices could not be prevented until all wilderness land had been thoroughly surveyed and inspectors had been employed to see that only *bona fide* purchasers settled upon them. As a matter of fact, the squatter problem continued to haunt the government of Nova Scotia long after the flow of immigration had ceased and the more worthy immigrants had been assimilated.

In illustrating the mutual problems of immigrant and official, I have shown incidentally that Scottish immigration to Cape Breton did not reach its peak in 1817 and cease abruptly in 1828, as is so often stated. On the contrary, it reached its peak in 1828 and was still continuing ten years later.¹ Moreover, the problem of settlement was greater in the latter decade, and relief had to be extended long after that period. In fact it was the repeated failure of their crops in the 1840's that made the settlers of St. Ann's so ready to follow Rev. Norman McLeod to far-off greener fields in 1851 and 1852. But, from 1850 onward, Cape Breton shared the general prosperity of the province as a whole, and no longer required special treatment. By 1861 its population stood at 63,083, ten times what it was in 1815; and the newer generations were born in that hope which tribulation finally worketh.

¹ In fact the *Nova Scotian* of October 21, 1841, reports that about 1500 immigrants had arrived in Cape Breton since June of that year.