

From the Outer Hebrides to Cape Breton



by Bill Lawson

In our survey of emigration from the Western Isles of Scotland, we come now to Cape Breton, the destination of more Hebridean Scots than any other part of the then British Empire. There were to be emigrants from England and Ireland in Gabarus and Margaree, and Acadian settlers in Cheticamp and Isle Madame, but otherwise, Cape Breton was to become another Hebrides, on the other side of the Atlantic.

The first group of island settlers to arrive was from Barra. The story is well-known of Donald Og MacNeil, who returned from the Siege of Louisburg in 1756 full of the praises of the Bras d'Or. Donald Og was killed at the Siege of Quebec in 1759, but he had left instructions at home on Barra as to the best area for settlement. It was forty years before his advice was followed, and two sets of MacNeils, fathers and sons, came from Pictou to prospect for a site for settlement, and eventually recognised in Iona the site which Donald Og had so strongly recommended. Family after family followed them from Barra, not through pressure from any landlord, but through the wish to be pioneers in a new land. One group of settlers came from the Island of Sandray, south of Barra, and it was they who gave the name to the village of Sandray, later known as Iona. Settlements were made on both sides of the Barra Straits. At this time, the kelp, or seaweed, industry was at its peak in the Scottish Islands, and the landlords were, if anything, trying to force their tenants to remain at home to provide a work-force for the kelp. When the kelp failed in the 1820s, then the landlords' policies changed to putting people off the land to make way for sheep. By this time, most of the shorelands from Ottawa Brook round Red Point, Jamesville and Iona to Gillies Point and Washabuck had been settled, and the later emigrants had to make do with the higher ground and the inland valleys.

On the other side of the Barra Straits, at Christmas Island, was another Barra settlement, based around Christmas Island and Benacadie, and stretching up the shore of the Bras d'Or to Boisdale. Family tracing in these two areas is made easy by two most valuable books - All Call Iona Home by S.R. MacNeil, and A History of Christmas Island Parish by A. A. MacNeil. The

Grand Narrows Bridge now links the two communities which were officially separated by the political boundary between Victoria and Cape Breton Counties. There was another Barra settlement at a later date around Big Pond and Ben Eoin, but this is much less well served by written records than the others.

In the Barra settlements in Cape Breton, as at home in Barra itself, the most common surname by far is MacNeil, and there is little chance of being able to trace a family there unless with the aid of patronymics, nicknames and family by-names. S.R. MacNeil in particular uses the patronymic system, translated into English, and if his "John (Rory "Mor", Donald, Ruari) married Sarah (Rory, Donald "Og")" looks odd in print, it is a straight translation of Iain Ruairidh Mhoir mhic Dhomhnaill mhic Ruairidh, and Sarah Ruairidh Dhomhnaill Oig, and is the only feasible means of identifying their families among the MacNeils of the area. Although theirs is the most common surname in the area, there are also Campbells, Gillies and MacKinnons - many of the latter descendants of a Finlay MacKinnon who came to Barra from Elgol in Skye as a maor, or assistant factor. There were also MacLeans, noteworthy among them Lachlan MacLean of Washabuck, who had taken part in the Battle of Culloden! Another name found among the Barra families was MacCnais, anglicised as MacNash, but most of the family in Cape Breton dropped the Mac to become Nash, and apparently Irish!

I can still recall my first visit to Iona, and my shock when I realised that the Gaelic-speakers there still had as strong a bias of a Barra accent as their forefathers had brought with them in the early 1800s! On later visits to the Highland Village and to Christmas Island, my wife and I were fascinated to hear people willing to drop into Gaelic song at the drop of a hat, and prepared to keep going through an apparently inexhaustible repertoire. I also remember my delight on hearing one little boy ruefully admitting that although he could speak Gaelic, English and French, he had not really mastered Micmac yet! Heroic efforts were still being made then to keep a Gaelic children's group running, in the face of the official position which still pertained in the Scottish Highlands until recently, that somehow to be able to speak two or more languages made one inferior to those who could speak only one!

Further up the coast of the St. Andrew's Channel we have Boisdale, named after the village in South Uist, though many of the settlers here were from Barra. Leitches Creek and the backlands at Frenchvale and both the shores of East Bay were predominantly a South Uist settlement, as was the south-east shore of Boularderie Island opposite Boisdale. Across the hills to the south of East Bay, behind the mountain still called Sgurra Bhreac - the dappled sharp hill - is the settlement of Grand Mira, on the upper reaches of the Mira River, and here again was a South Uist settlement.

Emigration from South Uist followed the usual pattern from the Hebrides, except perhaps that it was earlier in starting. As we saw in previous articles, South Uist people started to arrive in Prince Edward Island in the 1770s, and, when that island was fairly full, began to spill on to the west coast of Cape Breton around Judique. As early as 1793, Rev. George Munro, in his contribution to the Statistical Account of Scotland points out - "The population of the parish has

of late years considerably diminished. The great cause of the decrease of population in the parish is owing principally to the vast numbers that have emigrated of late years to the Island of St. John's, Nova Scotia and Canada." Again, these were no poor refugees, driven from their homes, but pioneers, who reckoned that a better life was available on the other side of the Atlantic than in their own crowded homeland.

It was in the 1820s that the villages in the Middle District of South Uist began to be cleared to make sheep farms. Kilvanan was cleared in about 1820, and Peninerine and Ormiclett in the later 1820s. The latter was the site of Clanranald's castle, which was accidentally burned down in 1716 while the Chief of Clanranald was at the Battle of Sheriffmuir, where he was killed. The last of the Clanranalds to live at Ormiclett was Miss Peigi, but after her death in 1826, the area was made in to a farm. Miss Peigi, but the way, is still remembered in South Uist for the amount of whisky made available for consumption at her funeral! (That story, by the way, is taken from our latest book - The Churches at Howmore - telling stories through the years of people and events connected with the Churches in South Uist!) The Kildonan area followed in the 1830s, and Bornish in the 1840s. A cadet branch of the MacDonalds had bought the small farm of Upper Bornish, and he had given land on his farm for many of those evicted from other villages, but in the 1840s, his farm was bought out by the owners of the rest of the island, and Upper Bornish too was cleared. Many of those dispossessed in the earlier clearances found spaces in other townships, but many more crossed the Atlantic.

The settlers in the area from East Bay to Boularderie also are well chronicled in A.J. MacMillan's invaluable To the Hill of Boisdale. MacDonald is of course the most common surname among the South Uist settlers, along with MacLeans, MacKinnons and others, along with the diagnostic names which we mentioned in the article on Prince Edward Island - Steele and O'Henley. Two names from South Uist derive from the days of the Clanranalds and their retinue, but both have changed their form over the years. The MacMhuirichs were the bards, but their descendants hide under the names of Currie and MacPherson, while the Beatons, the physicians, make themselves Bethunes, and claim a wholly spurious Norman-French origin! MacLellans, MacIntyres, Macsaacs, MacMillans (MacMullins in Cape Breton) and Morrisons are also plentiful in this group of settlers.

As the original settlement areas became over-crowded, the younger generations moved out, some to the coal mines around Sydney and Glace Bay, but there was also a small movement to Baddeck and even to the fishing villages at the furthest north tip of Cape Breton, around Bay St. Lawrence.

Another group of South Uist settlers settled on the south shores of Lake Ainslie, and it was with pleasure that we wandered through the cemetery there, and especially to see a home made gravestone with the inscription - Walker, Laughlin Alasdair Iain 1852-1936, and Mary MacDonald, Niall Fhionnlaidh, 1865-1924 - Fois siorruidh gun robh aig an anam. (Walker, Lachlan son of Alexander son of John and Mary MacDonald, daughter of Neil son of Finlay. Eternal Peace be to their souls.

We felt very close to the Hebrides then!

It is one of the quirks of the history of the Western Isles that the islands of the Uists were divided between two branches of the MacDonalDs, with North Uist belonging to the MacDonalD of Sleat in Skye, and South Uist and Benbecula belonging to the MacDonalDs of Clanranald. Clanranald were always Roman Catholic, and South Uist remained so also, while North Uist followed the family of Sleat into the Presbyterian branch of the church. Benbecula was originally Roman Catholic also, but estate policy there favoured the replacement of local tenants by Protestant families from North Uist, resulting in a mixture of denominations.

North Uist also had its massive emigration to Cape Breton, beginning rather later than the South Uist moves, and a Presbyterian community was built up in the south west of the island, especially around, Gabarus, Catalone and the Mira, with an off-shoot around Loch Lomond, in the highlands above the Bras d'Or.

The earliest major emigration from North Uist was not until the 1820s, as there does not seem to have been the same religious and economic pressure to emigrate as there was in South Uist. In 1826 the villages of Kyles Berneray, Baile Mhic Phail and Baile mhic Conon at the north-east corner of North Uist were cleared of their people - the first real clearance in North Uist - and although many of the families dispossessed moved to the boggy lands of Loch Portain further to the east, a certain number decided to join a move to Cape Breton. A rental of North Uist in 1827 shows against the names of over fifty families the note "Gone to America" - which in this context means Cape Breton.

The emigrants were leaving for all sorts of reasons, but mainly economic. The kelp trade, which had provided the main income of the island since the days of the French Revolutionary Wars, had failed, and although the landlords still accepted work on gathering and drying seaweed as a form of payment of rent, its value had dropped so greatly that some years it was not worth the cost of selling the kelp. With their main source of income gone, the crofters could not pay the higher rents that had been charged in the hey-day of the kelp-trade, and in North Uist the landlords, realising this, began to reduce the rents. In 1827 the croft rents were reduced by an average of 20%, but this was not enough to prevent large scale emigration.

Most of the families who emigrated came from the north shores of North Uist - no doubt they were seeing what had happened in the Baile Mhic Phail area, and were moving out before they in turn were forced out, but many families went from other areas too, where there was never any threat of eviction. This is typical of emigration patterns at the time - it is a gross oversimplification to assume, as is frequently done today, that all emigrants leaving the Highlands and Islands of Scotland did so under duress from their landlords. Many were forced out, but on the same ship that took them to Canada there were also emigrants moving out for economic reasons, and younger sons who realised that there was no future for them in a land which at its best could only offer them a small share of a croft which at its best could maintain a family at

subsistence level. The newspapers of the day are full of advertisements for fare-paying passengers to Nova Scotia and Quebec, and hundreds of families who still could raise the cash to pay the fare took the chance to leave their homeland and become pioneers in the New World.

Among those leaving at this time was a family of MacAulays. They had lived for generations on Baleshare - a tidal island off the west coast of North Uist. By 1827 the family consisted of Neil MacAulay and his five sons - Donald, Ranald, Neil, Archie and Angus. The Baleshare crofts comprised on average 10 to 15 acres - large enough by island standards - but incapable of maintaining five families. The normal pattern was for one son to remain on the croft and the others to move elsewhere, but in this case the whole family group had decided to move to Cape Breton. They left in 1827 and settled at the head of Catalone Lake, south of the entrance to the Mira.

As economic conditions in the Uists worsened, and no doubt heartened by the good reports coming back from Cape Breton, the numbers of families leaving increased to a torrent, and they spread along both shores of the Mira up to Marion Bridge. Among this group of settlers were the brothers Donald and John Lamont, who settled one on either side of the Mira - and it is from this family that Mairi-Sine, the Gaelic singer, is descended. Another family, well-known in North Uist, were the MacCodrums, or MacOdrum as the name is usually spelled in Cape Breton. John MacCodrum - Iain macFhearchair - was one of the classical Gaelic bards in Uist, and his cousin Donald was among the North Uist men to settle at Mineral Rock, on the north shore of the Mira.

Others settled along the sea-coast from Louisburg south to Gabarus and as far as Belfry Lake, among them another family of MacAulays, this time from Malacleite in the Sollas area, who settled on the shore at Kennington Cove. They are known in Uist from having the family name Sgaire - usually rendered into English as Zachary or Zachariah. This is an old name, usually found in Lewis, and there also among MacAulays. It is generally recognised that the Lewis MacAulays are of Norse origin, while those of the Uists are from the Lennox area around Loch Lomond, so the presence of the name Sgaire in this North Uist does create a puzzle.

As the best land was taken up, the later settlers had to take back-lands south of the Mira to Trout Brook and New Boston, but many of these back-lands were of marginal agricultural value, and most of them have reverted once more to forest.

A few years later than the main Mira settlement, in the 1830s, a group of families from North Uist settled to the south-west of the Mira, in the area of Loch Lomond, in the hills above the Bras d'Or. This settlement straddled to boundaries of Cape Breton and Richmond Counties, with, on the Cape Breton side, Enon, where some of the family of Angus MacDonald, an Saor Mor, the big Carpenter, from Carinish settled. On the Richmond side, on the shores of Loch Lomond itself, settled a group of MacCuish families. MacCuish was an old name in North Uist, though it was never very common, and it is said to have been derived from Mac-Dubh-Sith - the

son of the Black Fairy! However that may be, the Christian name Dubhsith was at one time common among the MacCuishes, and, although it was soon lost in Uist, in Cape Breton it remained, in the forms of Dushie, Duffus and even David!

There were also other, smaller, North Uist settlements - at Marble Mountain on the south-west shores of the Bras d'Or, and on the Morrison Road between Glace Bay and the Mira, but for some reason none of the North Uist settlements seems to me to have retained its identity to quite the same extent as some of the South Uist and Barra settlements. Perhaps I am wrong in this, and indeed I would be very pleased if that was the case, and would be very happy to respond to any invitation to attend a North Uist ceilidh in the area on our next visit to Cape Breton!