

## **Did It Really Sink?: 'History in Conversation with Memory'**

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This is to propose a paper based on themes emerging from my research into aspects of the Scottish diaspora, more specifically the mid-nineteenth century emigration of a single extended family from Islay to the Owen Sound district of Canada West. These themes, including the critical relation of history and memory in understanding the past, and the challenges of researching the lives of ordinary people, have been explored recently by prominent scholars, and can offer valuable insights to transatlantic research.

Stanford historian Richard White, in *Remembering Ahanagan: Storytelling in a Family's Past* (1998), tells of his family in its transit from Ireland to America, and faces head-on the tension between memory and history, family stories and historical evidence, oral tradition and archival research. Professor White argues for a judicious mix of memory and history; putting history "in conversation" with memory. That tension will be examined and tested in my paper, as it has been in my larger project.

The work of scholars like John Demos (*The Unredeemed Captive*, 1994), and Laurel Thatcher Ulrich (*A Midwife's Tale: The Life of Martha Ballard*, 1990), both set in colonial America, have pointed to the potential of microcosm in opening for view the "ordinary dailiness" of common life, while reflecting as well the larger movements of which they were a part. James Hunter, in *Scottish Highlanders, Indian Peoples* (1996), does the same for the McDonalds, as he draws parallels between oppressed peoples in the old world and the new.

Since the subjects central to my research, Alexander and Margaret – called MacDuffie in Islay and McPhee in Canada – are also my great grandparents, I am more than a disinterested investigator, and a word about my particular angle of vision is in order. After many years as a professor of American history, I have been drawn to a wholly new and unexpected avenue of research, telling the story of this one extended family in deciding to leave Islay in the mid-nineteenth century to settle on the Canadian frontier. This has led, among other things, to a reassessment of the Highland Clearances as they impacted Islay (the "Hebridean Exception"), assumptions about immigration patterns to and then across North America, challenges to traditional belief systems and forms of church polity, and in all of these and more, attempting to balance remembrance and history. And further, since I am telling the story of my own family, it has not only required that I recognize the biases and preconceptions that beset *all* historians, but be particularly wary of the perils of filiopietism and the pitfalls of hagiography.<sup>i</sup>

In this essay, I have focused on one defining moment in the lives of a single family – a near-fatal shipwreck – as it attempts to leave Islay, in the southern Hebrides, for Canada West. The story, depicted in an influential published family memoir, offers an opportunity to put "history in conversation with memory".

I am recently retired as a professor of American history at state universities in California and New York, and as President of the State University of New York at Fredonia. After retirement, I spent an extended time in Scotland, revisiting Islay (for the third time), Colonsay, and Glasgow and Edinburgh for research in the public records. I was then at Cambridge for a term as Visiting Fellow in History

where I continued research on this project. My Ph.D. is from the University of California at Berkeley, and publications are in early American history, labor history, higher education, and most recently, family history.

At various stages of my project, I have circulated drafts among a small group of historians in Scotland and America. In particular, James Hunter has been most helpful in offering encouragement and suggestions, and could offer comments on my work. On this side of the Atlantic, John Demos, Samuel Knight Professor of American History at Yale University, and a pioneer in the development of the academic discipline of Family History, has seen early pieces of my work and been most supportive. Most recently, Marianne McLean, author of *The People of Glengarry: Highlanders in Transition, 1745-1820* (1993), and now at the National Archives of Canada, has offered valuable advice and bibliographic suggestions.

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<sup>1</sup> Historian Gerald McFarland (*A Scattered People: An American Family Moves West*, 1985) and writer John McPhee (*The Crofter and the Laird*, 1970), have applied their professional skills to telling of their own families.