

The Scottish diaspora: understanding the forces which stimulate emigration

Jul 18 2012

There are many detailed accounts of nineteenth-century emigrants, of their journeys and settlements abroad – but what of those they left behind? This book delves into the heart of Georgian Britain to explore the role that the men and women of the Scottish Borders played in the mass emigration of the early nineteenth century. Ewen Cameron finds that this study adds great depth to our understanding of one of the key themes of Scottish history.

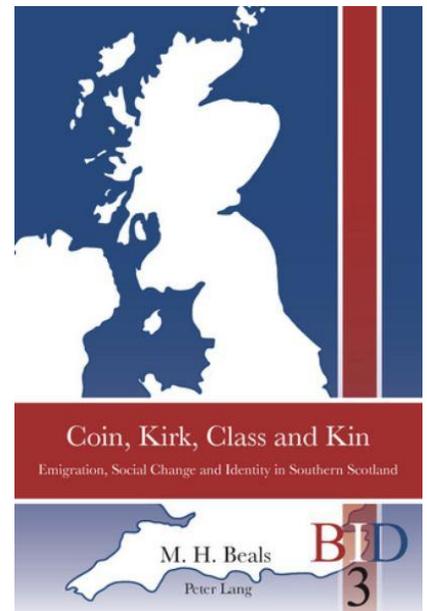


Coin, Kirk, Class and Kin: Emigration, Social Change and Identity in Southern Scotland. Melodee H. Beals. British Identities Since 1707 (Book 3). Peter Lang Publishing. 2011.

This interesting book arises from the [Melodee H. Beal](#)'s PhD thesis undertaken at the University of Glasgow under the supervision of Professor Ted Cowan. She is the latest of Cowan's students to add to our understanding of the key theme of Scottish emigration in the modern period and to help move the topic on from counting emigrants to trying to understand their motivations and the contexts in which they took the decision to emigrate.

The book is important for two principal reasons. First, as the historiography of Scotland increasingly turns outwards – exemplified by Tom Devine's recent volume [To the Ends of the Earth](#) – and considers the Scottish diaspora, we need detailed studies of the different facets of the movement of people and this is a useful contribution to that field. Second, in terms of the geographical focus of existing studies of Scottish emigration there is rather too much on the highlands and not enough on the areas of southern Scotland which produced the vast bulk of the 2 million people who departed in the great age of emigration from 1815 to 1929.

The emphasis on the highlands is explicable in broad cultural terms as there were so many contemporary images which drew attention to the highland emigrant and the emotive impact of the highland 'clearances'. One thinks of paintings by Thomas Faed, John Watson Nicol or William McTaggart which emphasised the sense of loss occasioned by the movement from the highlands.



This book is a very helpful counterweight and helps us to understand the forces which stimulated emigration among the small farmers and small-town dwellers of the Scottish lowlands.

Beals draws on a wide range of evidence to develop her argument and deals in detail with some of the main elements of Scottish society as they affected the region under examination. There is a very good discussion of the effect of the Scottish poor law, prior to its reform in 1845. The relationship between the 'welfare' system and its capacity to address some of the economic pressures which could lead to emigration is a fruitful area of study. Especially interesting is the detailed discussion of the role of the clergy of the established Church of Scotland. Careful use of the *Statistical Accounts* (interesting collections of reflections on their parishes by Church of Scotland ministers which were published in the 1790s and the 1830s) draws out the worries which the ministers had about the effect of agricultural change on their flocks.

Further evidence is drawn from the local newspapers which began to proliferate in Southern Scotland in the early nineteenth century and which did so much to provide information about emigration opportunities. The local newspaper editors were in a difficult position. Beals shows that many of them were opposed to emigration but recognised that many of their readers were drawn from a group interested in emigration and news from the colonies. The final constituent of the evidential base for the argument is emigrant correspondence and Beals handles this material adroitly, reading the evidence carefully to analyse the extent to which these letters can tell us about emigrants or, rather, the wider business of encouraging the passenger trade by contrived accounts of life in the colonies. This is neatly complemented by a useful section on the perceptions of those left behind.

Beals aim is to try to understand the way in which the society of the Scottish borders shaped the movement of people to the colonies and other destinations and the way in which emigration was a central feature in the development of the region. In this she is largely successful at a general level. One of the weaknesses of the book is that there is insufficient engagement with the details of agricultural change and the extent to which this was a driver of emigration. She certainly discusses the perceptions of agricultural change and the construction of an image of a golden age of pre-improvement rural society which was disrupted by new ideas, thereby forcing people to emigrate. More evidence from landed estates would have added depth to this element of the argument.

Further, she raises once again the notion of 'the lowland clearances'. This is the idea that the rural lowlands of Scotland were affected by forces of rural depopulation similar to those of the well-known clearances in the nineteenth-century highlands. In this matter Beals reaches sensible conclusions and recognises that landowners in her area of study 'interwove novel commercial opportunities with traditional social obligation throughout this period' (p.53). As, it might be said, did many highland landowners.

Overall this book is a useful study, making a serious attempt to shift our focus on rural Scotland in the nineteenth century from the much studied highlands to the relatively neglected lowlands. As a study which adds depth to our understanding of one of the key themes of Scottish history – emigration – it ought to be of wide interest. It also makes a contribution to nineteenth-century migration studies in a wider sense.

Ewen Cameron is Sir William Fraser Professor of Scottish History at the University of Edinburgh. His publications have mostly been concerned with the political history of modern Scotland. His most recent book was *Impaled on a Thistle: Scotland since 1880* published by Edinburgh University Press in 2010. He is currently working on a History of the Scottish highlands in the period since 1880. [Read more reviews by Ewen.](#)

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