The Scottish Historical Review, Vol. LXXI, 1, 2: Nos 191/2: Apr., Oct. 1992, 129–155

ERIC RICHARDS

St Kilda and Australia: Emigrants at Peril, 1852–3

> Geography they seem to feel more interest in, and some of them asked me, 'Where is California? Where is Australia?' Having no maps I was obliged to indicate the forms and relative positions of these countries (where St Kildians have settled) by tearing bits of paper and placing them on the ground.[1]

I

Intercontinental migration, no less than, say, imperialism or political reform, was one of the grand themes of the nineteenth century. During that century, despite great practical and psychological costs, millions of ordinary men and women reached the new worlds in both the Atlantic and Pacific oceans. Among the broad streams of exodus, the more remote agricultural peoples of the European peripheries were among the last to respond to the continent-wide movement.[2] There had been exceptions: emigration to America from the British Isles in the eighteenth century had been led by precocious agrarians from parts of Ulster, Yorkshire and the west Highlands of Scotland.[3] Generally, however, isolated peasantries (and the poor in general) were not well placed to raise the costs of emigration nor to insert themselves into the elaborate arrangement required for intercontinental migration. Australia, the most distant and the most expensive destination, joined the age of mass migration in the 1830s. The conveyance of large numbers of migrants to the antipodes was achieved primarily by complex government intervention and subsidisation (which effectively assisted almost half of Australian immigrants in the nineteenth century). These schemes were first developed in the twenty years after 1831 and were financed mainly by revenues derived from colonial land sales. Severe labour shortages in Australia in 1851 (associated with the gold rushes) caused the immigration authorities to extend their recruitment nets into the most distant regions of the British Isles. Within a few years some of the last

1 J. Sands, *Out of the World; or Life on St Kilda* (2nd edn., Edinburgh, 1878), 28.

2 See C. Erickson, 'Who were the English and Scottish Emigrants of the late 19th Century?', in *Population and Social Change,* ed. D. V. Glass and R. Revelle (London, 1972), 78.

3 See generally B. Bailyn, *Voyagers to the West* (New York, 1986).

ERIC RICHARDS is professor of history at the Flinders University of South Australia, Adelaide.

remaining peasantries of Ireland and Scotland were mobilised to serve the needs of the Australian co1onies. The most remote and the most resolutely peasant element in the antipodean migration was a group of people from the island of St Kilda who departed for Port Phillip in the new colony of Victoria in the early autumn of 1852.

In Scotland the emigration agencies, under the aegis of the Co1-onial Land and Emigration Commissioners, offered special opportunities to the people of the western Highlands and Islands. A conjunction of local landowners and philanthropic interests promoted the movement to Australia. The main organising body was the Highland and Island Emigration Society, energetically led by Charles Trevelyan; and supported by many respected names in royal, political and charitable circles.[1] The people of the Highlands were in a relatively suggestible condition. They were only slowly emerging from a succession of famine years. In addition some of them were also subject to varying degrees of pressure from their landlords to leave the region altogether. In the contemporary reports of the Highland emigrations to Australia there was a recurrent alternation of accounts of landlord benevolence and allegations of coercion.[2] Promoters of the society were acutely aware that Highland emigration could not 'be applied by individual proprietors without giving rise to clamours and complaints that tend very materially to render Highland property unpopular as an investment,' a remark which exposed the moral ambiguities which surrounded the society's operations.[3] Between 1852 and 1857 almost 5,000 people were assisted from the Highlands to the southern continent. Of these emigrants, it has been proposed that 'the primary factor influencing the exodus was the pressure of grinding poverty and a desperate desire to escape from intolerable conditions at home.'[4]

The emigrants from St Kilda were a small portion of the total migration of that year—indeed, less than one per cent of the Highland contingent—and were hardly even a drop in the ocean of folk migration out of nineteenth century Europe. Nevertheless the exodus from St Kilda represented an especially clear and uncluttered example of the passage of a poor community across the globe. More particularly the St Kildan emigration of 1852–3 exemplified the special perils of emigration which faced people who had not experienced

1 See D. S. MacMillan, 'Sir Charles Trevelyan and the Highland and Island Emigration Society', *Journal of the Royal Australian Historical Society,* xlix (1963), (161–88).

2 See E. Richards, *A History of the Highland Clearances,* i (London, 1982), chs. 13, 14; ii (London, 1985), ch. 10.

3 *Emigration from the Highlands and Islands of Scotland to Australia* (London, 1852), quoting T. Fraser, 8 Dec. 1851.

4 T. M. Devine, *The Great Highland Famine* (Edinburgh, 1988), 259.

the normal disease-conditioning which typified most mainland west European emigrants by the middle of the nineteenth century.

II

St Kilda was a remote, pre-industrial, peasant economy with a single commercial sector.[1] Its isolation was famous and, until the mid-century, few ships called at the island apart from the annual visitation by the landlord's factor. From the great cliffs of St Kilda and their vast colonies of birds came the subsistence, rent and tradeable goods of the islanders, in the form of eggs, meat, feathers and oil. The gannets, fulmars and puffins, in their seasons, yielded protein, medicine, lighting, manure, shoes and, by the export of feathers in the landlord's boat, virtually all the islanders' payments for rent and imports. The division of labour was primitive even by west Highland standards, but the community was virtually self-sufficient in the basic necessities of life. Visitors to the island testified to the narrow circumstances of the islanders' existence but were almost always impressed by their relative comfort. One of them, James Wilson, visited St Kilda in 1842 and provided an extended account of living conditions. He found it difficult to convey the precise conditions prevailing on St Kilda because good times tended to alternate unpredictably with times of privation. In 1841, for instance, severe weather conditions had dislocated the normal rhythms of economic life and the people were reduced to eating shellfish. Wilson, however, was evidently impressed by the general level of welfare he witnessed: his portrait of the island was in no sense one of deprivation even though the people had few luxuries apart from tobacco (for which they possessed, in Macaulay's report of 1764, a 'most violent passion').[2] There were reports of an increasing appetite for imports among the islanders and, as early as the 1820s, MacCulloch had remarked on the surprising velocity by which the latest clothing fashions were transmitted to the island. Osgood Mackenzie, visiting in 1853, observed that the St Kildans were 'keen for money and still more for tobacco. They would part with any of the commodities of the island for half their value if paid in tobacco.'[3] Wilson's more detailed account in 1842 hinted at factorial domination on St Kilda but absolved the landlord, Sir John McPherson McLeod, from any such

1 This section draws on E. Richards, 'The Decline of St Kilda: Demography, Economy and Emigration', *Scottish Economic and Social History*, xii (1992), 55–75.
2 J. Wilson, *A Voyage Round the Coasts of Scotland and the Isles* (Edinburgh, 1842), ii, 46; K. Macaulay, *The History of St Kilda* (London, 1764), 223.
3 J. MacCulloch, *The Highlands and Western Islands of Scotland* (London, 1824), iii, 185–6; O. H. Mackenzie, *A Hundred Years in the Highlands* (London, 1921), 87.

imputation, reinforcing the impression that he was an 'undemanding landlord' who extracted no more than moderate rents.[1]

Wilson emphasised the phenomenal solidarity of the Gaelic-speaking community and its total faith in its minister, the Rev. Neil Mackenzie.[2] He had brought leadership and practical improvement to the St Kildans. Under his aegis the community was effectively reconstructed and introduced to a new range of working methods. The islanders were, in many aspects, jolted out of their former ways. Between 1829 and 1842 Mackenzie, in the first of the several attempts to change living modes on St Ki1da in the nineteenth century, made an heroic effort to introduce modern religion as well as decent standards of housing and hygiene to St Kilda. He brought all aspects of 'improvement' to the island, entailing the re-organisation of tenure, new agricultural methods (which Wilson said had doubled arable productivity), better diet, housing and education as well as greater contact with the rest of Scotland. Mackenzie opened new windows on the outside world.[3] Wilson also reported the St Kildans' extraordinary attachment to Mackenzie (who was indeed himself about to leave the island for other pastures in Scotland). They spoke passionately about their allegiance to him, and said that if he wanted to go to America that 'they were all quite willing to accompany him wherever he might choose to go!'[4] This was not meant to detract from their loyalty to the island, but may have been a hint at a certain suggestibility towards the idea of communal migration. So far, however, there had been little emigration from St Kilda, not even to the other islands in the Hebrides.

Over the previous 150 years the island had supported a community (in effect, a handful of families) of between 180 (in 1698) and 88 (in 1764) and which reached about 110 in the decade prior to the emigration to Australia. There appears to have been virtually no net migration apart from the departure in 1843 of Neil Mackenzie and his large family. He was eventually replaced by another minister with no family. The population seems to have been at about 100 to 110 for the first half of the nineteenth century despite the persistence

1 Wilson, *Voyage*, ii, 23; *Episode in the Life of the Rev. Neil Mackenzie of St. Kilda from 1829 to 1843*, ed. J.B. Mackenzie (Aberfeldy, 1911), 17, refers to the 'undemanding landlord'; and T. Steel, *The Life and Death of St Kilda*. (London, 1965), 116, says that rents were always moderate.

2 On Mackenzie, see: Mackenzie, *Episode*, esp. 13, 22; G. Seton, *St Kilda Past and Present* (Edinburgh, 1877), 91, 95, 104; D. R. MacGregor, 'The Island of St Kilda', *Scottish Studies*, iv (1960), 42.

3 Mackenzie, *Episode*, 3–4; Wilson, *Voyage*, ii, 23.

4 Milner in 1848 said that they would do anything *except* emigrate with the present minister: W. M. E. Milner, 'Some Account of the People of St Kilda and the Birds of the Outer Hebrides', *Zoologist*, (1848), 2054–62. Milner was accompanied on his journey by the Rev. Neil Mackenzie. Mackenzie's improvements are described in detail in MacKenzie, *Episode*, 21 ff. See also MacGregor, 'St Kilda', 27.

of extraordinarily savage infant death rates (caused by neonatal tetanus which was not eradicated until the 1890s).[1] In general, contemporary opinion suggests that, though far from affluent, the St Kilda community lived in social and economic harmony as well as in demographic equilibrium. The people remained buoyant and independent. In the contemporary evidence, none of which emanated directly from the people themselves, there was no suggestion of landlord pressure nor the imminence of a population explosion. St Kilda was not regarded as part of the famine region and was not dependent on potatoes to any marked degree.[2] It is unlikely that there had been any sudden crisis in subsistence. St Kilda was spared the cholera epidemics and the worst of the potato blight in the late 1840s. Moreover, unlike so much of the Highland region, there had been no discernible accumulation of population over the previous several decades. The well-documented stability of population levels had been maintained. As MacGregor says, although trade contacts with the mainland had increased, 'as a community they were still vigorous and self-reliant'.[3]

If the economic circumstances of the St Kildans at the moment of their antipodean migration are relatively clear, their mental state is more obscure. The later recollections of a survivor of the emigration, Malcolm MacQueen, suggested a serious dislocation in the islanders' collective psyche caused by the repercussions of the Disruption. The people of St Kilda went over to the Free Church in 1846 and thereby aroused the ire of the factor. He, apparently, 'threatened to evict any who refused to go to Church', and generally created an unquiet in the minds of the people. The landlord himself interceded and totally guaranteed the people their security on the island, but this according to MacQueen, was not enough to dissolve their fear of the established church (which continued to seek the restoration of the islanders to its influence) and the factor. Consequently the community was in a state of spiritual tension during the years before the Australian emigration.[4]

III

The emigration to Australia in 1852,[5] and the immediately surrounding circumstances, are poorly recorded in Scottish sources.

1 Richards, 'Decline of St Kilda', 57–9 and n. 20.
2 Wilson, *Voyage*, II, 46.
3 MacGregor, 'St Kilda', 42.
4 Reported in D. A. Quine, *St Kilda Portraits* (Frome, 1988), 18–22, drawing on the reminiscences and recollections of Malcolm MacQueen as dictated to the Rev. Finlay MacQueen in Victoria. The provenance of this document is not clear. I am grateful to Jane Beer for bringing this reference to my attention.
5 An extraordinary range of dates and numbers of emigrants can be found in…

Australian shipping lists and immigration agency records, however, provided clear documentation that thirty six St Kildans left the island for Port Phillip, in the new colony of Victoria, in September 1852 under the auspices of the Highland and Island Emigration Society.[1] The costs of the passages were provided by the colonial governments in Australia via the Colonial Land and Emigration Commissioners. The commissioners provided assisted passages only to a narrow category of emigrants, and many less eligible migrants had to find at least £5 towards their fare. In addition emigrants were required to provide 'a suitable outfit of clothes' and to find their own way to the port of embarkation. These incidental costs were often an impossible hurdle to poor people: 'in many cases, and those for the very cases where emigration is most desirable, the poverty of the people, if no extraneous aid be afforded them, will oppose an insuperable obstacle, for they have neither suitable clothes, nor money to pay the required deposit and to carry them to the place of embarkation.' In the case of the Highland and Island emigrants, all the expenses beyond the passage money were jointly funded by charities in lowland Scotland and by landlords in the Highlands.[2] It was one of the several different mechanisms by which poor people were able to emigrate to Australia in the nineteenth century.[3]

The scheme was expressly designed to serve two purposes thought to be complementary—it would assist in the relief of the severe agricultural labour shortages created by the goldrushes in south-east

…the secondary literature. Thus MacGregor, 'St Kilda', 44, says that 36 people emigrated in 1856: Sands, *Out of the World*, 21, said that 35 people emigrated about twenty years before 1875, and that 'most of them' died of ship fever on the passage; C. Maclean, *Island on Edge of the World: Utopian St Kilda and Its Passing* (London, 1972), 125, says that 42 migrated to Australia in 1851 and 1856; A. A. MacGregor, *The Last Voyage to St Kilda* (London, 1931), 194, repeats the date 1856. F. Thompson, *St Kilda and Other Hebridean Outliers* (Newton Abbot, 1970), 26, refers to 'the 1856 migration'; J. Matheson, 'St Kilda', *Scottish Geographical Magazine,* xliv (1928), 77, says that 35 people left for Australia in 1855; Steel, *Life and Death*, 17, 101, 103, also gives odd dates but these are corrected in the 1975 edn: 140, 143, 194; Seton, *St Kilda*, 144, also gives the wrong date. The suggestion of a prior emigration to Australia in 1851 seems to be a misreading of Steel, *Life and Death*, 124: Gardner says that 'some emigration took place in 1851, when six people left for Australia, and again in 1856, when thirty-six people emigrated, again to Australia. Apart from them there appears from reconciliation of the registers and census data to have been no other emigration until the twentieth century.' (M. Gardner, 'Population in Decline, St Kilda, 1856–1891'; *Local Population Studies*, xxvi [1986], 29).

---

1 On the Highland and Island Emigration Society, see MacMillan, 'Sir Charles Trevelyan', 161–88; M. D. Prentis, 'The Emigrants of the Highland and Island Emigrant Society'. *Journal of the Royal Australian Historical Society*, Ix (1983), 39–47; Devine, *Great Highland Famine*, ch. II.

2 *Emigration from the Highlands and Islands*, 2.

3 See E. Richards, 'British Poverty and Australian Immigration in the Nineteenth Century', in *Poor Australian Immigrants in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. E. Richards (Canberra, 1991), 14–8.

Australia and it would simultaneously reduce the dire redundancy of labour and population in the west Highlands and Islands which had just passed through a succession of seasons blighted by the potato disease. The emigrants were selected in family formation to avoid the debilitating loss of single bread winners from the community, a common process in Highland emigration which rendered the remaining family members more vulnerable then ever. The Australian colonies at this time also preferred families on the supposed grounds that their natural cohesion would make them less likely to desert rural employment for the goldfields. *The Times* enthused 'we cannot but recognise the finger of God in working out a great scheme which will no doubt ultimately prove to be for great good.'[1] But the passages were free in only a limited sense because the emigrants were pledged to repay the society's advances in order to create a continuing cycle of self-financing emigration which would progressive1y drain the Highlands of its surplus people. In the words of the Victorian immigration official, Edward Grimes:

> The object of the Society is to assist the destitute inhabitants of the northern parts of Scotland to emigrate in groups of families by means of advancing certain sums of money to defray the expense of passage to those members of the families who from age or other causes would be ineligible for free passages under the Regulations of Her Majesty's Colonial Land and Emigration Commissioners. Then in the colony the passage moneys would be recovered to make similar advances to other needy migrants.[2]

Of the 5,000 people given passages to Australia from the region in the years 1852–6 many were, indeed, refugees from the famine, especially those who fled Skye. Some of the most pathetic and affecting descriptions of incoming migrants in nineteenth century Australia may be found in the papers of the Highland and Island Emigration Society. For instance, when the St Kildans eventually departed for Australia they were in the company of many poor west Highlanders from the estates of Macleod of Macleod and of Lord Macdonald in Uig and Skeabost. Some of these passengers bore the marks of the extremes they had suffered in the recent famine in the Highlands. Several were described as very poor or destitute, often accompanied by large families recommended on the grounds that they would be 'very desirable immigrants.' One man was described as 'short of stature who has suffered from want of food.' There was 'A very poor family, chief support shell fish' and another was 'A very poor family but a good one for Australia'. One family from Herbista, the Mc-

1 *The Times*, 6 Oct. 1852.
2 Melbourne, Public Record Office of Victoria [Vic. PRO], 12853/A57799, report by E. Grimes to colonial secretary, 9 June 1853.

Cuans; with their 6 children, had been originally rejected. Two sons, aged 19 and 17, were so poorly nourished that they were clearly shorter 'and possess much less physical power than many boys some years younger'. Taken together they were 'one of the most wretched families submitted for inspection. Their appearance truly appalling and their grief in being rejected most painful to be witness'. In the outcome the condition of the McCuans reached the attention of a Mrs Macleod of Kingsburgh who raised a subscription for them. After careful feeding their health improved to such an extent that they were permitted to join the emigrants for the emigrant ship. The *Inverness Courier,* reporting the emigration to Australia, noted that in some areas of the Highlands the emigration agent had rejected the weaker recruits who were therefore left behind 'to survive as they best can, or be a burden upon others'[1]

The philanthropic colouring of the Highland and Island Emigration Society scheme was also diminished by allegations that evicting landlords took the cynical opportunity to rid themselves cheaply of their unwanted tenantry. There were enough cases of this sort to give at least partial substance to the allegation.[2] Nevertheless most northern opinion praised the 'principles of humanity' under which the scheme was organised. As the *Perthshire Courier* put it, 'Nothing was to be done under coerced measures. All was to be voluntary.'[3] In mid-August 1852 the society was issued with instructions that any St Kildans 'as desire to go to Australia' should be accepted into the scheme. Trevelyan described them as 'simple, hardy, industrious people, and would make good Emigrants. They are very desirous to go and reported that their proprietor, Sir John McPherson McLeod, had made all the necessary communications on their behalf.'[4] It was at this time that prospective emigrants from the Highlands were particularly reassured about the safety of the voyage to Australia: the danger of the passage is almost imaginary' they were informed in the publicity material put out by the Emigration Society. The people were told that emigration to Australia was far less dangerous than working on the herring boats or in railway construction in the south.[5]

Unhappily there is no direct evidence about the precise manner in which the St Kildans were recruited into the scheme nor the circumstances which particularly precipitated their collective

1 *Inverness Courier,* 7 Oct. 1853, reproduced in *The Northern Highlands in the Nineteenth Century;* ed. J. Barron (Inverness, 1910–3), iii, 263.
2 See Richards, *Clearances,* i, ch. 13; ii, ch. 10; Devine, *Great Highland Famine,* 263.
3 *Perthshire Courier,* 14 Oct. 1852.
4 Scotlish Record Office [SRO], Highland Emigration Society MSS, HD 4/2/166, Trevelyan to Murdoch, 18 Aug. 1852.
5 *Emigration from the Highlands and Islands,* statement by T. Fraser, 18 Sep. 1851.

decision to migrate. They do not seem to have been organised by a specific leader from their number. They first appear in the society's scant lists, all described as farm labourers or domestic servants, and all were Presbyterian and illiterate.[1] They were mainly isolated from the noisy publicity that marked the society's activities in the rest of the west Highlands and Islands. It is likely that the landlord's factor conveyed the information about the prospects of a 'free' passage to Australia. In May 1853 Osgood Mackenzie reported that 'There did not appear to be any abject poverty or scarcity of food among them'.[2] Moreover it is unlikely that the St Kildans were entirely penniless as they departed the island. One unconfirmed report said that they sold their sheep to the landlord before their departure,[3] and that the most adventurous of the group, the recently married Ewan Gillies with his wife and infant child, had sold 'everything' for which he received £17, and joined the other thirty-three St Kildans whose hearts were set on emigrating to Australia.[4] According to Malcolm MacQueen, some of the St Kildans paid for their own passage: his own father paid £120 or £130 passage money. The landlord, McLeod, paid for all who were unable to pay their way. The fact that some of the emigrants met their own fares and carried with them substantial capital suggests a greater degree of social differentiation than is evident in most of the literature about St Kilda.

The St Kildans emigrated together in a group of eight families. Four of the families in the contingent were re1ative1y small—simply the parents and a single child or two, namely the families of Malcolm Ferguson, Ewan Gillies, Roderick MacDonald and Neil MacDonald. The other groups were larger: Donald and Ann McCrimmen had four children aged 1 to 9; Finlay MacQueen senior was accompanied by three grown children; Finlay MacQueen junior and his wife Catherine MacQueen (each aged 44) had seven children between 1 and 18. In a demographic regime in which neonatal mortality was

1 Vic. PRO, 1189/ 113–6, Highland and Island Emigration Society Lists (copies). Literacy levels in St Kilda had been a matter of concern: in 1830 only one person, a woman, could read and write (N. Heathcote, *St Kilda* [London, 1900], 202); in the 1870s the only English-speaking person was a Ross-shire woman (Sands, *Out of the World*, 27). Osgood Mackenzie, only a few months after the Australian emigration, said that all the islanders could read Gaelic despite the absence of a pastor/schoolmaster (Mackenzie, *Hundred Years*, 87). In the 1880s, however, some of the islanders required assistance when writing to the relatives and friends in Australia: see J. A. Mackay, *St Kilda its Posts and Communications* (Edinburgh, 1963), 8.

2 Mackenzie, *Hundred Years*, 89.

3 Seton, *St Kilda*, 129.

4 Steel, *Life and Death* (1965 edn), 26.

5 Quine, *Portraits of St Kilda*, 23; this is confirmed in Vic. PRO, 1189/113, Highland and Island Emigration Society Lists, 'Disposal Lists', under the name of MacQueen.

sometimes said to reach 80 per cent,[1] they were fantastically lucky to have such a family. Apart from the last family the level of dependency was not especially great.

The St Kildans were part of the flood of people leaving the Highlands for Australia at that time. In the week of their departure a clergyman near Fort William was reported to have signed (over the previous ten days) 'upwards of a 1,000 certificates, for persons desirous to leave the district' for Australia.[2] The Glasgow newspapers recorded the simple facts about the departure of the eight St Kildan families. They travelled from St Kilda by way of Harris to Skye where they stayed about a fortnight. They then proceeded by steamer, the *Islay,* from Portree, in the company of 400 people, mainly from Skye, and it was assumed (incorrectly) that they were all destined 'for the gold regions' of Australia. They arrived at the Broomielaw in Glasgow on the first day of October 1852, and travelled thence the next day (now accompanied by their landlord) in the *Princess Royal* to join the *Priscilla,* a Colonial Land and Emigration Commission ship, docked at Birkenhead.[3] In port for several weeks, the St Kildans impressed the emigration agent by 'the simplicity of their manners, their gratitude and above all their piety. They conduct family worship three times a day in the depot at the table assigned for their use; regardless of the noise and bustle by which they are surrounded.' The St Kildans themselves were astonished at the scale of the city and the crowds of people they encountered. One of the islanders remarked that it seemed as though the whole world had been brought together for the Day of judgement.[4]

A brief notice about the St Kildans in transit in the *Glasgow Herald* was in some degree contradictory. The reporter was complimentary about the condition and appearance of the St Kildans pointing out that this was the first emigration from the island and that the population had 'neither increased or decreased in the memory of the oldest inhabitant'. Nor had the cholera or the potato blight 'ever effected a landing on the island.' The people had lived principally by seafowl which they caught at great risk but which gave them a good subsistence. 'The appearance of the St Kilda people was remarkable for the freshness of their complexion, which may be attributed to their feeding so much on animal food and to the comparative ease they enjoy.' On the other hand, the reporter felt obliged to say that it would be best if 'all the inhabitants were removed from

1 This question is discussed in Richards, 'Decline of St Kilda', 55–75.

2 *Elgin Courant,* 1 Oct. 1852.

3 The original intention had been that the St Kildans would travel by the *Beejapoor*: SRO, Highland Emigration Society MSS, HD 4/3, 247, promissory notes.

4 *lllustrated London News,* 15 Jan. 1853; Quine, *Portraits of St Kilda,* 21–2.

the barren rock and the island converted into a penal settlement'.[1] In November 1852, Trevelyan, noting the departure of the St Kildans, observed that 'we expect soon to be called upon to send the rest of the population of the island. They are a singularly primitive people. Of the one hundred and ten souls of whom the population consists, only three or four had been on the mainland.'[2]

For the voyage the St Kildans were provided with 'every necessity' by McLeod, 'the humane proprietor' of the island who also 'came to G1asgow to see them, and it was very affecting to observe them around him, and in their own expressive language wish God bless him as each shook him by the hand.'[3] In the shipping lists it is clear that McLeod had also paid for the outfits of many of his sub-tenantry as well as the deposits for their passages. He could have entertained no prospect of recovering any of this outlay and there was, therefore, a considerable expense shouldered by the landlord in the St Kildan emigration. In fact McLeod undertook to repay all the advances for the emigrants from the island so that they would arrive at Port Phillip without financial obligations and with 'money for their immediate wants on landing.'[4] Nor could McLeod have anticipated any indirect gain from the emigration—on St Kilda (unlike other parts of the west Highlands) there was no suggestion that a smaller population could lead to better rents or a greater capital gain on the sale of the estate to another proprietor. A reduced population would in all likelihood produce a lower rental and capital value.

Ostensibly, therefore, the landlord's role had been selfless, even altruistic, simply responding to the declared wishes of the people of his island estate. The only jarring note in the entire episode was struck some three decades after the emigration in the evidence taken before the Napier Commission (inquiring into crofter conditions in the Highlands) in June 1883. The commissioners asked the Free Church minister for St Kilda, the Rev. John Mackay, if the emigrants to Australia in 1852 had left 'of their own free will'. He replied that 'It was poverty that made them emigrate.' Elaborating, he said that the factor, Norman, had induced the people to go because they were poor: 'he was giving them meal to get quit of them'. The factor 'got some papers from Government for them to sign, and when some of them saw their friends going away, more came afterwards and signed it'. Mackay declared that the proprietor did not know what was going on and when he heard about the proposed emigration he tried

1 This was reproduced in *The Times*, 6 Oct. 1852, and in the *Scotsman* on the same day, although the latter eliminated the suggestion about the prison colony.
2 SRO, McNeill MSS, GD 371/231/1, Trevelyan to Mackay, 8 Nov. 1852.
3 *Ibid*.
4 SRO, Highland Emigration Society MSS, HD 4/3, Trevelyan to Sir J. McNeill, 11 June 1853; *Illustrated London News*, 15 Jan. 1853.

to reverse the decision and offered 'to send a boat for them if they would come back' (presumably from Glasgow or Birkenhead). 'But as they had gone so far, they did not wish to return back': he had pleaded with them to return and 'would do them every justice he possibly could.'[1]

The essence of Mackay's retrospective allegation was that the people had been starving and that the factor had bribed them to sign the emigration papers in return for meal supplies over which he exercised a monopoly. The landlord himself was specifically absolved from all blame in the episode. The moral opprobrium therefore was transferred entirely onto the shoulders of the factor. Some of the elements of Mackay's account were confirmed in the oral testimony of Malcolm MacQueen recorded much later in the century. MacQueen remembered that the landlord had indeed accompanied the emigrants as far as Liverpool and had made extraordinary efforts to persuade them to return to the island, offering to pay their passages home 'and give them all they needed for two years'. These efforts to 'retain' the islanders (who told him that the remaining islanders would eventually join them in Australia) evidently failed.[2] But the rest of Mackay's allegations contained a number of improbabilities. In the first place, even if the factor had engineered the emigration it is difficult to see how any direct benefit could have accrued to him except in the diminution of his managerial responsibilities. A smaller population would have diminished his prospects of profiteering from trading on behalf of the island community. In the second place it must be said that Mackay's evidence was unconfirmed in any other source. And, finally, the role of the landlord, Sir John McLeod, must be placed in context. He was not only financial sponsor of the emigration of the St Kilda tenantry. He was also a serving member of the Committee of the Highland and Island Emigration Society. The factor could hardly have initiated and concealed the emigration from Sir John McLeod when he himself was intimately and directly connected with the very institution organising the emigration.[3] It is, indeed, much more likely that the proprietor knew about, initiated and sanctioned the emigration from its outset and then, between Glasgow and Liverpool, changed his mind about the wisdom of the emigration.

In the official list of the Emigration Society the St Kildans warranted no particular description to suggest that they were the special

1 *Report of the Commissioners of Enquiry into the Condition of the Crofters and Cottars in the Highlands and Islands of Scotland, P.P.,* 1884 (3980), XXXII-XXXVI *[Napier Commission]*, evidence, qq. 13564–71.
2 Quine, *Portraits of St Kilda*, 27–8.
3 SRO, McNeill MSS, GD 371/235/1, *Correspondence relating to her Majesty's Ship 'Hercules'* (London, n.d., but c. 1853).

objects of pity or charity, rather the contrary. Their arrival in Liverpool was featured in a special article in the *Illustrated London News*[1] and the publicity was welcomed by Sir John McNeill of the Highland and Island Emigration Society.[2] Indeed, compared to many of the 298 west Highlanders and Islanders who accompanied them to Australia aboard the *Priscilla*, which left Liverpool for Port Phillip on 13th October 1852, the St Kildans appeared robust and resolute in their quest for a new life. More serious, for their individual and collective future welfare, however, was their lack of immunity to a wide spectrum of diseases to which they were exposed as they entered new British and international disease environments. In the language of medical demography they were 'a naive population', inexperienced in the diseases of the wider world into which they now unwittingly ventured.[3]

I V

The voyage of the *Priscilla* lasted three months and the emigrants arrived at the heads of Port Phillip on 19 January 1853, mid-summer in Victoria. The port authorities at Williamstown then discovered that the ship had suffered many deaths during the passage and that sickness continued among its passengers.[4] Malcolm MacQueen recollected that the doctor on board was accused of incompetence.[5] Quarantine regulations were imposed and the disembarkation of some of the passengers was delayed for several more weeks, some as late as 26 February.[6] Illness broke out early in the passage.[7] The

1 *Illustrated London News*, 15 Jan. 1853.

2 SRO, Highland Emigration Society MSS, HD 4/3, 43–4.

3 Canberra, National Library of Australia [NLA], Highland and Island Emigration Society MSS, MS 156, List of Emigrants (copy). Passenger lists for Port Phillip are kept in the Vic. PRO. A M. Holohan ('St Kilda: Emigration and Disease', *Scottish Medical Journal*, xxxi [1986], 48) seems to suggest that the St Kildans may have known the risks attached to their migration: 'The islanders' much ridiculed belief in their susceptibility to the "strangers' cold" was to prove deadly in the fetid miasma aboard the *Priscilla*.' The fear of infection from abroad is well-attested: see for instance, Sands, *Out of the World*, 13. Osgood Mackenzie reported in 1853 that the St Kildans did not contract the diseases to which the people of Lewis were normally susceptible (Mackenzie, *Hundred Years*, 89).

4 *Argus* (Melbourne), 25 Feb. 1853.

5 Quoted in Quine, *Portraits of St Kilda*, 22.

6 Another Highland and Island Emigration Society ship, the *Allison*, arrived a week later and was also subject to quarantine on account of the large number of deaths reported: *Argus*, 9 Feb. 1853.

7 MacGregor, *Last Voyage*, 130, says that one of the passengers died before reaching Liverpool and that the likely cause of death was smallpox, but there seems to be no documentary confirmation of this. The ship list out of Liverpool contains all 36 St Kilda names and there was no mention of smallpox among the causes of death.

Melbourne *Argus* reported, inaccurately it turned out, that there had been 32 deaths on board, principally from scarlet fever and that on arrival about the same number still suffered from the disease.[1] The passengers were transferred to a quarantine vessel, the *Lysander,* at the Sanitary Station. One month later the total deaths had increased to be (12 adults, 24 children and 5 infants) 'principally from general causes.'[2] At the end of February 14 adults and 16 children were still being detained aboard the *Lysander* though 234 emigrants had been landed. Quarantine arrangements were undoubtedly inadequate and infected passengers from different ships were not properly segregated. It is clear, for instance, that the invalids from the *Priscilla* were disembarked alongside fever-ridden folk straight off another migrant ship, the *Confiance.*[3]

The shipping lists specify (as far as contemporary medical knowledge allowed) the causes of death among the passengers and this reveals the degree to which the St Kildans were differentially exposed to danger in their migration. The principal cause of death was neither smallpox nor scarlet fever but measles which was probably taken aboard in either Glasgow or Liverpool. Measles, one of the most widespread and contagious of all infections, was spread from case to case by air-borne droplets. Its incubation period was between 7 and 14 days and the attack lasted about a week. Where death followed it was usually associated with some form of secondary infection and was especially related to the effects of ship-board dehydration.[4] Measles broke out aboard the *Priscilla* early in the voyage and was accompanied by dysentery and diarrhoea. Adults were especially vulnerable and deaths began to occur in the last days of November. The entire McCrimmen family was wiped out in the epidemic early in the voyage though the mother survived until quarantine in Williamstown. The MacQueen families also suffered severely, leaving orphans to fend for themselves on arrival in Australia. Disease aboard the *Priscilla* took an appalling toll on the island emigrants long before they were within reach of Australia. More than half of the St Kildans were dead by the time the *Priscilla* was cleared at Williamstown.

Though the actual mortality figures are not entirely unambiguous,

1 *Argus*, 21 Jan. 1853.

2 The *Lysander* had been purchased in early 1853 for use as a sanatorium ship, probably as a consequence of an inrush of immigrants at that time *(ibid*., 1 Feb. 1853). At the end of May it was requested by the harbour master for use as a penal hulk in company with the *Sacramento*: Vic. PRO, Correspondence of Immigration Agent to Colonial Secretary, 1189/113, Grimes to colonial secretary, 31 May 1853. The *Priscilla* was wrecked at the end of December that year: see MacGregor, *Last Voyage*, 131.

3 Sydney, Mitchell Library [SML], Despatches of the Governor of Victoria to the colonial secretary, A2359, Jeffs to Grimes, 4 May 1853.

4 P. Wingate, *Penguin Medical Encyclopedia* (Harmondsworth, 1976), 281.

the main proportions are clear enough. The St Kildans accounted for 12 per cent of the passengers but for 45 per cent of the fatalities. Measles and re1ated ailments seem to have caused 50 per cent of all deaths but more than 75 per cent of the deaths among the St Kildans. In some cases no clear cause of death was recorded and therefore the figures may well understate the effect of measles.[1] It is evident, therefore, that the St Kildans had been disproportionately at risk. The ultimate cause of the differential susceptibility of the St Kildans was almost certainly related to the fact that the island's population had been too small to sustain measles (and therefore to provide a training in resistance to the disease). The medical literature indicates that the threshold population for measles is far greater than that of St Kilda in the mid-nineteenth century. 'If a community is small, the virus periodically disappears without any human intervention … because the chain of measles infection is readily broken'—and consequently the level of natural immunity is lost. Like Iceland, St Kilda was remote from the main population centres of Europe and therefore did not develop immunities to measles.[2] The geographical isolation of the St Kildans on their Atlantic fastness had clearly denied them resistance to certain diseases.[3] In this respect their fate was not unlike that of the Peruvians and the Fijians (amongst others) when first exposed to measles with similarly devastating infections from which most European populations had developed a builtin resistance. The Fijians and others were placed at appalling epidemiological risk essentially by the arrival of Europeans and emigrants.[4] The St Kildans were peculiar, though not

1 Holohan says that the death rate aboard the *Priscilla* was greater 'than any of the other 1852 emigrant vessels' ('St Kilda', 47). In fact the *Ticonderoga* arrived in December 1852 with 165 deaths among its 795 passengers, suffering from typhus and scarlet fever: *Fourteenth General Report* of *the Colonial Land and Emigration Commission*, *P.P.* 1854 (1833), XXVIII, App. 8, 96–9. See also G. Serle, *The Golden Age. A History of the Colony of Victoria, 1851* (Melbourne, 1963), *59*. The *Ontario* arrived in Sydney a little before the *Priscilla* arrived at Port Phillip. It carried 309 passengers, mainly from Skye, and 36 of them died on the voyage, mainly from typhus fever; *Votes and Proceedings* of *the Legislative Council of New South Wales* (1853), II, *Select Committee on Quarantine*, evidence of Surgeon-Superintendent T. Barker.

2 The epidemiology of measles in remote island populations is explained in A. Cliff and P. Haggett, 'Island Epidemics', *Scientific American*, ccl (May 1984), 110–7. For 19th century comparisons in the north Atlantic, see the evidence relating to the Faroe Islands in M. Burnet and D. O. White, *The Natural History of Infectious Diseases* (4th edn, Cambridge, 1972), 132. I wish to thank Dr Francis Brooks for these references.

3 Neither measles nor phthisis was known on St Kilda: *Napier Commission*, qq. 13519–20; the islanders had a greater fear of measles and smallpox, *ibid*., q. 13497. See also Gardner, 'Population', 30.

4 On the impact of measles on 'isolated' communities, sec A. W. Crosby, *Ecological Imperialism. The Biological Expansion of Europe, 900–1900* (Cambridge, 1986), 197, 241, 256.

unique,[1] in that they were exposed to this danger not by incoming migrants but by the fact that they themselves had joined the emigrant hordes.[2]

If the St Kildans were more vulnerable to the epidemiological perils of emigration than their fellow travellers, it is also probable that the Highlanders as a whole were more disease-prone than the rest of British emigrants to Australia in the mid-nineteenth century. It is likely that they arrived in Australia in worse condition than most other contemporary migrants. On the average the general mortality rates aboard the assisted migrant ships to Australia were better than those of the other great emigrant destinations. But during the years in which the Highland and Island Emigration Society sent out 5,000 emigrants the death rate among Scottish emigrants was significantly above those of either the English or the Irish (the latter being least likely to perish on the journey in the years 1849–56). Comparative ship-board mortality rates are available for assisted immigrants into Sydney in the years 1848 to 1855. The average death rate among the English and Welsh immigrants (26,999 in all) was 2.3 per cent; among the Irish (22,575) it was 1.4 per cent, and among the Scots (6,409) it was 2.5 per cent. The Scottish mortality figure rose to an average of 5.9 per cent in the two years 1852–3, which coincided with the increased intake from the Highlands and Islands.[3] This, if proven, may reflect the fact that the Scottish immigrants, at that time, were being selected from the least resistant and more famine-affected segment of the entire British population. In the eyes of colonial contemporaries the poorest of the immigrants were thought to be responsible for carrying diseases. For instance, some months before the arrival of the *Priscilla*, an epidemic of 'typhoid fever' aboard the *Wanata* was said to have been brought on to the ship in Glasgow by a 'Highlander' who was regarded as the first carrier of typhus onto the Victorian goldfields.[4]

Immigration officials in the Australian colonies believed that poverty

1 There is a parallel in migration history in the indentured Labour leaving India in the late 19th century which was sometimes unsuspectingly exposed to new disease environments: see R. Shlomovitz and L. Brennan, 'Mortality and Migrant Labour in Assam, 1865–1921', *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, xxvii (1990), 99.

2 Measles figured disproportionately in shipboard mortality among other Highland groups on vessels bound for Australia at this time: see for instance the report on the *Araminta* which left Liverpool in June 1852 in *Clyde Company Papers*, ed. P. L. Brown (London, 1963), v, 611.

3 This data is drawn from the returns of the immigration agent reported in the annual returns published in *Votes and Proceedings of the Legislative Assembly of New South Wales*, (1848–55). I am most grateful to Dr Richard Reid of the Australian National University for this information.

4 See J. B. Cleland, 'Contribution of the History of Disease in Australia', *Australian Medical Gazette*, 20 Dec. 1911, 737. My thanks for this information are to Dr F. B. Smith.

ignorance and disease all went hand in hand. In 1839, for instance, it was said that 'when emigrants are taken from a district labouring under any peculiar pressure of poverty or distress, there must be an increased chance of disease being engendered in their passage'.[1] The influx of peasantries from parts of Ireland and the Scottish Highlands in the late 1840s and 1850s, sometimes in poor physical condition on arrival in the colonies, created much the same sort of negative response. The possibility that these very people, by dint of their remote origins, were simply less resistant to common diseases, did not occur to the emigration or colonial authorities. A wider study of shipboard death-rates of emigrants (and the related causes of death) would help to test this proposition. Nevertheless it remains extremely difficult to separate the medical consequences of differential immunity from those of poverty.

V

The arrival of the *Priscilla* at Port Phillip in January 1853 was a headache for the immigration and quarantine authorities. They were already labouring under enormous burdens caused by the great 'torrent of Immigration' flowing towards the colony of Victoria in these months. The immigration officials found themselves coping with a flood of humanity now responding to the lure of the gold-fields. The flood was concentrated on the ports closest to the goldfields and the officials were under great stress.[2] Conditions in and about the ports had created confusion and squalor, mainly from the sheer scale of the expansion of population and the unplanned nature of the immigrant deluge. In 1852 15,477 assisted immigrants arrived in the colony. On top of this were 79,187 unassisted immigrants. The influx was at its greatest at the end of 1852. Edward Grimes from the immigration office spoke of 'the vast and hitherto unprecedented influx of population to this colony' which was continuing to increase: 'The accommodation afforded by this city to furnish even temporary shelter to the migrants now landing daily on our shores, has become a matter of serious and increasing anxiety.'[3] The arrival of another shipload of Gaelic-speaking Highlanders and Islanders, some of them penniless and sick, was a relatively small part of the much greater problems of the port.

The reception facilities were under strain. Even before either the

1 SML, A1220, 152–3.

2 Melbourne, State Library of Victoria, LaTrobe Library, Correspondence of the Immigration Office, 1853/A5779, Grimes to the governor, 9June 1853.

3 Vic. PRO, 1189/113, Grimes to colonial secretary, 9 June 1853. The best account of immigration into Victoria in the 1850s is in Serle, *Golden Age*, ch. 2.

Priscilla or the *Allison* had docked in Melbourne, Grimes was complaining vehemently about the congestion. At the end of January 1853 there were 322 people accommodated in the Immigration Depot; in the following few weeks an extra 1,240 immigrants were added. Grimes told the colonial secretary:

> consequently the depot was exceedingly crowded notwithstanding the number of engagements that were made. It was impossible to cook for such a multitude, unless a proper supply of utensils were provided, for which they process three, four, or even five times daily, morning and evening.

The supply of food was no less difficult and the accommodation, in wooden buildings, each crowded with wooden boxes, was dangerous, as well as congested, on account of the fire hazard.[1] These conditions were poor by standards established in the arrangements for Australian immigration by the mid century though, in comparison with the horrors experienced in the North American reception places at the time of the Irish famine, they were somewhat better than the worst standards of the time.[2]

The sick and the poor presented still greater problems. These now included some of the people of the *Priscilla*, notably some of the surviving St Kildans. The medical officer drew attention to 'the wretched family' of MacQueens whom he reported thus:

> They were from St Kilda and originally consisted of nine individuals, of whom the father, mother and one child are dead leaving six orphans viz. Donald aged 18 recovering from Scarlatina, Meron 8 ill of anasarca, Niell aged 6 and Findlay aged 3 dying of marasmus.[3]

Young Finlay died the following day. It is evident from this description that, having evaded the deadly grip of shipboard measles, the surviving MacQueens were then exposed to the added hazards of tuberculosis and scarlatina, both also beyond the infection experience of their island origins. But this was not the limit of the MacQueens' woes. As Dr. Hunt, the health officer, reported, 'They have had the misfortune to lose all their clothes by the burning of the bush hut the four younger ones were living in, so that they have nothing but the filthy rags which scarce cover them, left. They are at present on board the *Lysander* and as I see no probability of any of them being

1 Vic. PRO, 1189/113, Grimes to colonial secretary, 28 Feb., 4, 10 Mar. 1853; 53/B2246, Grimes to colonial secretary, 2 Mar. 1853, Hunt to Grimes, 20 Feb. 1853.

2 See for instance the descriptions of Quebec in T. Coleman, *Passage to America* (London, 1974), 180–90.

3 Phthisis was probably contracted in Liverpool; scarlatina may have been caught from a healthy carrier; the anasarca and marasmus were forms of debility probably connected with the measles outbreak and much exacerbated by dehydration during the voyage, a common problem of the sick on the very long journey.

able to leave the [quarantine] station for months, if ever, I have the honour to request that the requisite supply of wearing apparel may be forwarded to them'.[1] Grimes noted the predicament of these 'indigent Scotch children' and seconded the request for 'slop clothing.'[2]

Grimes was by now brim-full of complaints about the problems he confronted from the influx of indigent and sick immigrants of whom the *Priscilla* folk were merely a particularly good example. There were, for instance, no adequate regulations for restricting the movement of the immigrants under quarantine and newly arrived groups of sick migrants quickly circulated among those already present. Many of the passengers had meanwhile taken employment as labourers by farmers and lime-burners, some of them now located 15 miles distant from the station. A female passenger had absconded with a limeburner and married him in Melbourne, without the consent of her father and with no intervention by the medical officer. There were simply not enough buildings in which to house the large number of people detained in quarantine.[3]

The immigration officer came to a comprehensively negative view not only of the St Kilda folk but of the entire intake of Highland and Island Emigration Society migrants. They had little knowledge of agricultural or pastoral work and, Grimes suggested, it was extremely unlikely that they would 'prove a very great acquisition to our Labour Market.' He offered freely the view that the immigrants were a total waste of the colony's resources:

> Notwithstanding the large immigration that has taken place, the demand for Shepherds and Farm Servants continues unabated; but I do not consider that the inhabitants of the Islands of Scotland are well adapted to the wants of the Colony; their total ignorance of the English language renders it difficult to obtain employment for them, while their indolence and extremely filthy habits, have occasioned a general impression against them.

Grimes claimed that the Highland Scots had refused to accept employment offered to them even when the wages were high and he scoffed at the idea that these immigrants would repay their debts to the society: 'of all those questioned by me through an interpreter, not one appeared to be in any degree aware that he had entered into an engagement to pay any thing at all.'[4] He also declared that there was no 'prospect of the public coming forward with any subscriptions for the furtherance of Highland Immigration.' His indictment was

1 Vic. PRO, 1189/ r 13, Hunt to Grimes, 20 Feb. 1853.
2 *Ibid*., Grimes to colonial secretary, 2 Mar. 1853.
3 *Ibid*., Grimes to colonial secretary, 3 Mar. 1853.
4 Vic. PRO, 1853/A5779a, Grimes to colonial secretary, 9June 1853.

complete: 'For these reasons I am unwilling to recommend that any large number of passages should be placed at the disposal of the Society as long as any eligible emigrants can be obtained from other sources.'[1] On hearing such reports Charles Trevelyan (the leading organiser of the Highland and Island Emigration Society) dismissed them as blind prejudice. Grimes, he said, was 'a sturdy Anglo-Saxon John Bull' but he simply did not like Highlanders. His was a prejudice which, Trevelyan asserted, did not extend to the rest of the colonial community in Victoria.[2]

The final death-toll among the original 36 St Kildans was probably 19, leaving 17 survivors. It is not clear how and when this grim news was transmitted back to the island. Osgood Mackenzie visited St Kilda on 30 May 1853 but the tragic intelligence from Victoria had not yet arrived. Mackenzie reported that 'Nearly all the male inhabitants of the island were assembled to meet us as we landed, and well might they welcome us, for they had not seen a creature but themselves for nine long months, and they were anxious for news from Australia about their friends who had emigrated the previous autumn. Eight families containing 36 souls had gone. Only fifteen heads of families remained, the population now being but sixty persons.'[3] When reports from Australia at last began to arrive they generated immediate consternation and confusion among the officials of the Highlands and Island Emigration Society. At first (probably in June 1853) it was reported that 24 St Kildans had perished on the passage. Then, in mid-July, it was thought that only eight had died. But by October the full and accurate news of the extent of the disaster had reached the island. Its distraught proprietor asked for an explanation. But for another two months Trevelyan appears to have believed that only two of the islanders had been lost during the emigration. It was not until December that he received definitive information about the voyage and demanded the Surgeon's Report and other documents relating to 'this painful mortality on board the *Priscilla*,' intending to check the health precautions and general conditions aboard the ship. 'The mortality fell in such a fearfully large proportion upon the Emigrants from the single island of St

1 *Ibid*., Grimes to colonial secretary, 11 June 1853.

2 SRO, Highland Emigration Society MSS, HD 4/3, Trevelyan to Murdoch, 11 Apr. 1854. Devine, *Great Highland Famine,* 251, has remarked on Trevelyan's own 'strong racialist attitudes'.

3 Mackenzie, *Hundred Years,* 85–6. Mackenzie's population estimate docs not tally with other contemporary reports which put the post-emigration population at 70. The anxiety of Highland emigrants and their families would not have diminished when they received news at the end of September that an emigrant ship bound for Quebec had been wrecked off Barra with the loss of 360 lives: *lnverness Courier,* 13 Oct. 1853.

Kilda', he said, 'that the friends of the sufferers are naturally and justly anxious for information.'[1]

It is unlikely that the islanders ever received a sufficient explanation. The mortality of their kinsfolk aboard the *Priscilla* and the memory of the event became the more confused as time passed. When John Sands visited St Kilda in the 1870s the nearest he came to an accurate account of the Australian emigration was that 35 persons had left for Australia 'about 20 years ago' and that 'most of whom died of ship fever on the passage.'[2]

V I

The St Kilda emigrants had been desperately unlucky. They had been biologically, linguistically and culturally unsuited and unprepared for the colony of Victoria in the early months of 1853. They had arrived at a time of great difficulty even for the most able-boded and robust of immigrants. The entire prospect of emigrating 'to the goldfields,' for many of the newcomers, was now simply stuck in the mud of Port Phillip and its immediate hinterland. Only a few months earlier H. C. McDougall had written home to Jura from his Victorian property reporting the alarmingly high levels of wages caused by the goldrushes. Echoing the thoughts of many fellow employers in the colonial countryside, he cried out for more labour to replace those he had lost to the gold fields. Bemoaning the style and morality of the gold-diggers, McDougall pointed out the special possibilities for immigration from his homeland. 'If some of my honest also starving countrymen had but a portion of the wealth of these fellows [which they] squander on reckless debauchery, poor creatures I wish I had a few of them on this Station[.] what a acquisition they would be. It grieves me much to learn of the deplorable state of the country.' McDougall's letter back to Jura was one of the myriad persuasions enticing emigrants to Victoria in mid-1852.[3]

But the colonial economy, under the influence of gold, rapid immigration and a frenetic import boom, was in a highly volatile state. By the end of 1852 conditions of inflation, unemployment and congestion in Melbourne were reaching their nadir. There was bitter and general disillusionment among the immigrants then arriving in their thousands. As Geoffrey Serle says, 'Melbourne was swamped

1 SRO, Highland Emigrant Society MSS, HD 4/3, correspondence with Murdoch, 24 Oct., 28 Nov. 1853.
2 Sands, *Out of the World*, 21.
3 LA, M584 (derived from SRO, GD 64), McDougall to Campbell, 8 Sep. 1852; similar remarks on the desirability Highland labour in the colonies in late 1852 are to be found in Brown, *Clyde Company*, v, 358–62.

with unemployed and destitute migrants returning from the diggings at the close of 1852. There was no shortage of labour now in the colony.'[1] Spontaneous and planned immigration had responded too energetically to the labour shortages since the moment the rushes had begun at the end of 1851. As the *Priscilla* entered Port Phillip Bay reports were already being despatched back to Britain presenting graphic pictures to discourage any further precipitate emigration to Victoria. In the second week of February 1853 a 'gentleman' in Melbourne reported 'Many of our recent immigrants are I am sorry to say, suffering great privations and much distress from sickness and want of house accommodation.'[2] Before long the weather in 'Melbourne deteriorated and in May a merchant, F.J. Sargold, wrote of the 'amount of suffering endured by the fresh immigrant especially as the wet season set in: 'Those who have not witnessed a Victorian winter have little conception of the depth of water, and the filth, found in the streets of the rich city of Melbourne.' Sargold provided a picture into which it is not difficult to imagine the surviving St Kildans:

> The daily exhibitions of distress endured by the hapless stranger ... in this province at the present season, are truly heart-rending; females, young children, young invalids, all hurried from the newly arrived ship, to the steam boat, and as hurriedly, but more brutally, removed there from, to what is here (facetiously) called the Queen's Wharf, ankle-deep in Port Phillip mud, no friend to greet them, no friendly hand to point the way, or cheering voice to offer comfort to the perplexed; surrounded by, in too many instances, rapacious carters who hold all 'new chums' as fair game for extortion.[3]

In Melbourne itself there was public recognition of these mounting problems. In early March 1853 the *Argus* publicised the plight of the destitute among the new arrivals and the superabundance of orphans and wives left helpless by the death of relatives during the voyage. It instanced the case of a Mrs Macleod whose husband and two sons had gone to the gold diggings at Ballarat, and whose destitution was relieved by the Ladies Benevolent Society. Another civic response to immigrant destitution was the formation in April of the Highland and Island Society designed to collect and distribute (as well as to retrieve) money for the assistance of immigrants in the form of loans which, when repaid, could be used to help further immigrants in need.[4]

1 Serle, *Golden Age*, 245–6.
2 *British Banner*, 6 July 1853, letter dated 6 Feb. 1853. Equally adverse reports of reception conditions in Melbourne were carried in the *Scotsman*, e.g., 9 Apr. 1853.
3 *British Banner*, 28 Sep. 1853, letter dated 16 May 1853.
4 *Argus*, 28 Apr., 7 Mar. 1853.

Once the *Priscilla* immigrants passed out of the hands of the immigration authorities and beyond the reach of charities, their fate becomes more difficult to follow. The 'Disposal List' of the ship's passengers shows that most of the St Ki1da survivors were able to find employment in a relatively new settlement called Little Brighton, somewhat further along Port Phillip Bay from the older township of St Kilda.[1] Brighton had lost most of its first labour force in the gold rush during 1852 and had experienced difficulties replenishing its supply from new immigrants because of the competing attractions of both the goldfields and the city of Melbourne. Brighton was in its first building phase and had developed four brickfields in the 1850s, which were the most important employers of immigrants in the district.[2] One of the employers was George Walstab who recruited most of the surviving St Kildans at substantial wages supplemented by rations. Not all of the people went to Brighton—some of the surviving MacDonalds passed unrecorded and they seem also to have dispersed. The 18 year old Donald MacQueen went to Melbourne, whereas the younger children, as orphans, went 'with friends.' Neil MacDonald 'left on his own account.'[3]

Other sources indicate that nine year old Anne MacQueen was engaged by a family in Little Collins Street East, in Melbourne for £10 and that Malcolm MacQueen (24) went with Malcolm Ferguson to the Brighton/Mordialloc district to work at brick making for nine months. He married a woman from Raasay and then went farming at Sheep Hills before setting up as a market gardener at Highett in Victoria. He had two sons—one became Rev. Finlay MacQueen of East Kew, Victoria; the other son was Neil MacQueen, an engineer who later worked on the construction of a railway to Kalgoorlie and returned to Victoria about 1905. He married Ena Macleod, daughter of immigrants from Skye, and lived near Colac in Victoria.[4]

1 It is sometimes thought that the well-known suburb of St Kilda in Melbourne was named after the immigrants who arrived in 1853: see Steel, *Life and Death*, 143, and MacGregor, *The Farthest Hebrides*, 131. In fact the Melbourne suburb was named and settled at least ten years before the arrival of the St Kildans and is said to have derived its name from a yacht, the *Lady of St Kilda*, which indeed took its name from the island (L. Blake, *Place Names of Victoria* [Melbourne, 1977], 235).

2 See W. Bate, *A History* of *Brighton* (2nd edn, Melbourne, 1983), 49, 92, 153, 159.

3 Vic. PRO, 1189/113, *Priscilla* shipping list. Mackay, *Posts*, 66, reports a 'St Kilda tradition' that the emigrants established a farm near the port of Melbourne which they named after their island home, but this seems improbable in view of the accounts of their dispersal.

4 See D. Hellier, ' "The Humblies"; The Emigration of Highland Scots to Victoria in the 1850s via the Highland and Island Emigration Society' (Melbourne University M.A. thesis, 1983), appendices. See also Quine, *Portraits of St Kilda*, 23, which offers further detail.

The most remarkable story among the survivors of the *Priscilla* was that of Ewan Gillies, apparently known in St Kilda as 'California Gillies'. He and his wife survived the voyage though they lost their young chi1d. Gillies was one of the St Kildans to be taken on by Walstab at Brighton but after six months he is said to have been sacked for laziness, at which point he set off for the goldfields. He there accumulated enough income to buy a farm on which he struggled and finally failed. Within two years he returned to Melbourne where he left his wife and two children while he went to New Zealand, again in pursuit of gold. He was away for 18 months and during his absence his wife, assuming she had seen the last of him, re-married. When Ewan returned he found himself rejected and consequently left again, this time for California. He joined the Union army in the Civil War but in 186l deserted and joined a goldrush in California. He now made a fortune and, according to the story, returned to Australia, where he reclaimed his children. Then he returned to St Kilda but, though he found a new wife, he was not well received by the islanders. Within a few months Gillies and his family returned to Australia. The new bride did not take to Australia and they decided, after a stay of only 8 months, to go back to St Ki1da. Yet again Gillies found himself unable to get on with his island kinsfolk and in 1889 he finally departed, this time for Canada where he finished his days.'[1]

'California Gillies's' career was the extreme example of the post migration mobility which seemed to infect so many immigrants in Australia. But the other St Kildans also showed little of the communal solidarity which had been expected of them by the Emigration Society that had assisted their original emigration. Conditions in the labour market, as other Highland immigrants had demonstrated,[2] were loaded against collective cohesion and it was difficult to maintain Gaelic congregations. Employment in the colonies usually required mobility and flexibility, and thus most attempts at communal settlement failed. The fragmentary evidence that is available suggests that at least some of the St Kildans were able to transcend their first difficulties on arrival and accumulated enough capital to buy land, maintain their religious practice and educate their children. But they do not seem to have stayed together as a group. Mostly, however, the subsequent careers of the survivors are poorly documented. Of the seventeen survivors at Port Phillip in April 1853,

1 Maclean, *Island on the Edge of the World,* 125–7; Steel, *Life and Death* (1975 edn), 35–6.

2 See E. Richards, 'The Highland Scots of South Australia', *Journal of the Historical Society* of *South Australia,* iv (1978); J. Beer, 'Scottish Families in Victoria's Western District' (Melbourne University M.A. thesis, 1985); J. Beer, C. Fahey, P. Grimshaw and M. Raymond, *Colonial frontiers and Family Fortunes* (History Department, University of Melbourne, 1989), 12–78.

it seems that thirteen were still alive in 1862 'and appeared to be doing well, as they had sent occasional remittances to their relatives in St Kilda,'[1]

VII

The impact of the Australian emigration on the migratory propensities of their kinsfolk who had remained on the island is difficult to judge. In 1879 it was reported unambiguously that St Kilda was 'a place where there is no emigration',[2] but in 1884 it was said that an Australian emigrant (presumably Gillies again) had returned to stir up the people against their landlord to such a degree that all the St Kildans expressed a wish to emigrate. Within two years, however, they had completely changed their minds and resisted a new plan for their emigration. This episode and the vacillating behaviour of the islanders was reported, with some irritation, by Robert Connell, the special correspondent of the *Glasgow Herald,* who thought the islanders should emigrate and set up a 'New St Kilda' in Australia.[3] It was during these discussions on the island that an accumu1ation of 8 months worth of mail arrived at St Kilda. Of the nine letters addressed to the islanders, six were from Australia.

The survivors of the 1853 emigration were, indeed, good correspondents and most of the mail delivered to St Kilda after that date was, in fact, from relatives in Australia.[4] Connell described the contents of some of the letters—the very existence of which, thirty years after the original emigration, suggests a greater degree of continuity and literacy than might be expected:

> The St Kildians [sic] settled in that colony [Victoria] appear all to have done well, and, writing home to their relatives, they strongly advised them to betake themselves to the new country. In one instance the writer enclosed a sum of money to pay the passage of a recently married couple, undertaking also to find them a comfortable living on their arrival in Australia. All the letters spoke in the most tempting way of the good living to be obtained in Australia. Only one drawback was preaching of the Word in Australia gave her cause for much uneasiness. It was not so pure or so pointed as in St Kilda. She was, moreover, worried in spirit at the playing of godless organs and the singing of 'profane' songs in Church. To the St Kildians this matter

1 Seton, *St Kilda,* 144; Maclean, *Island on the Edge* of *the World,* 127; Steel, *Life and Death* (1965 edn), 103; Quine, *Portraits of St Kilda,* 25–7.

2 R. A. Smith, *A Visit to St Kilda in the Nyanza* (London, 1879), 38; see also J. Macdiarmid, 'On St Kilda and its Inhabitants', *Transactions of the Highland and Agricultural Society of Scotland,* 4th series, xi ii (1878), 247.

3 R. Connell, *St Kilda and the St Kildans* (London, 1887), 159.

4 Mackay, *Posts,* 8.

> is more important even than meal and potatoes. It was, therefore, satisfactory that another of the colonists reported hopefully on this crucial question. In this case the writer was a man, and he reported that the preaching of the Gospel in Australia suited his taste exactly.[1]

The letters from Australia created only a temporary enthusiasm and the plans quickly dissolved. There was no further emigration either to Australia or elsewhere until the First World War. The last effort to persuade the St Kildans to emigrate to Australia occurred only a short time before the final evacuation of the remaining islanders in 1930. In the previous year two 70-year olds visited St Kilda from Australia. They were MacQueens, the children of the original emigrants of 1853. They were, it was reported, greatly disturbed by the bad conditions prevailing on the island and tried to persuade the people to emigrate to Australia. Once more the suggestion was resisted and the islanders instead departed in September 1930 for the much closer destination of Ohan (and subsequent settlement in Morven and elsewhere in Scotland).[2]

VIII

For the economic, social and demographic history of the Highland and Islands, the St Kilda emigration of 1852–3 provides an instructive microcosm of the key problems of historical interpretation. It is often said that the Australian migration reduced the St Kildan population below the minimum demographic threshold and thereby rendered the eventual evacuation eighty years later virtually inevitable. In fact, St Kilda's pattern of out-migration was not significantly different from that of the region as a whole. Yet unlike many parts of the Highlands, St Kilda did not experience the three greatest dislocations of traditional life in the nineteenth century— namely, rapid population growth, eviction and famine. St Kilda throws into some interesting doubt the relationships between these key variables in the Highland story.[3]

The emigration from St Kilda in 1852 was, most of all, an act of volition by a community which, by that time, possessed greater knowledge of the world beyond the island. It was clearly also a collective action in a community which may have been disconcerted, in some degree, by the religious tensions of the 1840s. Any kind of emigration for these people posed great economic and psychological difficulties: the intercession of the Highland and Island Emigration

1 Connell, *St Kilda*, 159–60.
2 Steel, *Life and Death* (1965 edn), 17; (1975 edn), 194.
3 These questions are discussed in Richards, 'Decline of St Kilda', 35–55.

Society in late 1852, by its offer of 'free' and communal expatriation, solved both problems at once. But the most impressive aspect of the St Kildans' emigration was their individual and collective resolution to make a decisive break with the island. Their resolve, indeed; was put to a comprehensive examination by their own landlord—and he was unable to dissuade them to return home even though he offered them every practical facility.

For Australia, the migration of the St Kildans in 1852 was a miniscule element in the successive waves of immigrants whose number reached about 1.6 million over the course of the nineteenth century. Of the 36 originally assisted to Port Phillip only 17 survived and several of them were in the poorest condition on arrival mainly because they had migrated directly into an alien disease environment against which they had little natural protection. Their survival itself now seems remarkable. That they were prepared to recommend further emigration to Australia to the kinsfolk they had left behind on the island seems still more remarkable. At the time, as the colonial immigration officials did not hesitate to point out, the St Kildans were an expensive and uneconomic category of immigrant for the colonies. In the short term they were a burden on the receiving community—in the long run they merged into the Australian population and prospered sufficiently for them to send remittances to, and express pity for, their kinsfolk left on the island of St Kilda. Most of all, for Australia, the St Kildans represented the furthest reach of the recruitment systems devised by the colonial agencies to tap into the pools of potential migrants in the British Isles of the mid-Victorian period. The tentacles of the emigration agents reached into some of the poorest strata of the population of industrialising Britain. In St Kilda the Australian recruiters had intruded into an almost perfectly preserved pre-industrial community only then awakening to the possibilities of an alternative future far distant from the cliffs of Hirta.