

MEN OF SPIRIT AND ENTERPRISE. SCOTS AND ORKNEYMEN IN THE HUDSON'S BAY COMPANY 1780-1821

by Suzanne Rigg.

Published by John Donald £25 ppbk ISBN 978 1 906566 37 1

REVIEW BY CATHERINE TURNBULL

Many impoverished Orcadians sought to better their fortunes through temporary contracts with the Hudson's Bay Company (HBC) in the fur trade during the late 18th century. There was a constant drain of men to the wastes of sub-arctic Rupertsland, which became part of Canada, who signed up with the HBC agent in Stromness when the company's ships called in. Despite the perils of labouring in the isolated land and the drudgery of work for the unskilled men, clerks and officers at the remote fur trade forts, there was the prospect of advancement and financial support for their families at home.

Orcadians making up 80 per cent of the HBC workforce of 418 men in 1800 – were employed in Rupertsland during this period – and the story of these men who faced the hardships of the fur trade and the fierce competition with the rival North West Company (NWC) which employed fellow Scots, is a fascinating scenario. The majority of the literature examining the fur trade has been researched and published by historians based in Canada. They have examined the history of the HBC and its business dynamics and pressure on employees, analysed interracial fur trade families (Scots and Native Canadians) and the unique short-lived society in which these families moved and the individuals' experiences. The role of women and native people have been explored too and riveting eye witness accounts are provided through letters and journals.

In Rigg's welcome book she attempts to write a history of the fur trade through a Scottish perspective. She examines the rationale and evolution of the HBC's recruitment drive. Orkney was the main stamping ground but gradually Scots from other areas including Shetland, the Western Isles, the Highlands and to a lesser degree Lowland Scots were recruited which meant few areas of Scotland were untouched by the HBC.

But most of this volume is concerned with the experiences of Orcadian employees. Disillusioned inhabitants signed up, spurred on by the grapevine of other Orcadians

who had gone before, despite reports of them enduring frostbite in temperatures as low as minus 50C and the dangers of being murdered by the natives (very rare as the two races traded together in a co-dependant relationship on the whole). Orcadians were considered hardy and sober by the company.

Rigg interprets the trading conflicts with the NWC which led to violence between Scots when Lord Selkirk brought settlers from Sutherland and the mixed race offspring of the Scots and natives rose up in rebellion. Finally the struggles abated when the two fur trade companies merged in 1821.

The author argues that engagement in the fur trade went far beyond a contract in a commercial enterprise – there were social and cultural circumstances in which Orcadians temporarily left their homeland and families to become transient migrants with three to five year contracts of employment. However some men who had children and partners in Canada (and sometimes back at home too), settled in Canada permanently to be with their mixed race children and wives in Selkirk's Red River Settlement.

Rigg's chapter examining the impact of the fur trade on British societies is a valuable one, as much work has previously been done on the impact on indigenous societies in Canada. She has garnered several examples of men sending support money home and there are well-known examples of men returning home with considerable fortunes who used this to benefit the home community, such as William Tomison who endowed a school. But some labourers returned home only to find their money drained away quickly and the skills they had acquired in Rupertsland, such as handling a canoe, were of no use in Orkney. Certainly fortunes were not made to the same degree as enjoyed by many who went to India, the American tobacco colonies or the Caribbean sugar plantations. And there was a shortage of male farm servants at home in Orkney while the men were away.

The Orcadians' ties of kinship and clanship came to the fore both in the fur trade and back at home – they often stuck together to increase bargaining power within the company. This is not new material.

Rigg concludes that the Scots diaspora, largely Orcadian, had been truly remarkable as generations uprooted themselves temporarily to the territory that now forms vast swathes of Canada and adapted to work in sub-arctic lands. She argues in the final sentence that these were men of spirit and enterprise, although the feel of the book does not reflect this.

Indeed many of them were men with these qualities. But I feel Rigg fails to relate this fascinating story with enthusiasm. It is told through narrative rather than action. I would have liked more eye witness accounts and examples of that spirit and enterprise which would have made this a more engaging and complete tale for a general readership.

Catherine Turnbull is a freelance journalist, reviewer and author based in Orkney.