The Scots abroad: Migration and mission

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A migrant people – the Scots abroad

‘The Scots are a notoriously migratory people’, observed G. T. Bisset-Smith in 1909. Jeanette Brock’s more recent study concludes that ‘[…] it is justifiable to describe the Scots as an exceptionally mobile people.’ This claim can be made, first, on the basis that Scots have been migrants over a very long period of time. Tom Devine observes that ‘From the thirteenth century to the present, Scots have been leaving their homeland in significant numbers.’ Secondly, by the nineteenth century, when it becomes possible to make comparisons, it appears that ‘Scotland had a higher rate of outward movement on a per capita basis of its population than virtually any other country of the time.’

Where have the Scots been going across all these years of migration? England, Poland, Scandinavia and Ireland were popular destinations for Scottish migrants from the thirteenth century onwards. Over generations there developed what Brock has termed ‘a culture of emigration’ which equipped Scotland to embrace the opportunities which presented themselves following the Treaty of Union with England in 1707. This gave Scotland greatly increased access to England’s colonial empire. As Marjory Harper comments, ‘That constitutional change heralded a steadily growing Scottish participation in transatlantic trade and settlement alike, so that by the end of the eighteenth century Scots had a significant, and sometimes dominant, influence in many of the American colonies.’ The extent of Scottish influence in the American colonies during the eighteenth century is indicated by the fact that there were thirty Scottish governors and lieutenant governors in the seven decades before the Revolution.

Harper’s analysis of the records reveals that ‘Scotland sent
1,841,534 citizens to non-European destinations in the years 1825–1914 [...]. Of the emigrants 44 per cent went to the United States, 28 per cent to Canada and 25 per cent to Australasia.'⁹ So far as the USA is concerned, President Woodrow Wilson remarked that his country’s history ‘was a line colored with Scottish blood.’¹⁰ Tom Devine points out that ‘In 1940 [...] 45 per cent of the notables listed in Who’s Who in America had either fathers or mothers bearing Scottish surnames.’¹¹ This bears out Andrew Carnegie’s oft-quoted remark that ‘America would have been a poor show but for the Scots’.¹²

In proportional terms, the influence of the Scots on Canada was even more marked. Stanford Reid went so far as to say that ‘the history of Canada is to a certain extent the history of the Scots in Canada.’¹³ As Jenni Calder observes,

The map of Canada is peppered with Scottish names. They have been given to rivers and mountains, towns and counties, bays and inlets. Canada’s telephone directories are filled with them. [...] Formative aspects of Canada’s history were dominated by Scots, in particular the Hudson’s Bay Company which determined so much of the character of British North America, and the Canadian Pacific Railway which made the vital coast-to-coast connection. Scottish names are prominent in the government of Canada. There are nearly five million people of Scottish descent in Canada, while Scotland’s population is not a great deal more than that, and declining.¹⁴

By the mid-nineteenth century, Australia and New Zealand had also emerged as areas which attracted large-scale Scottish emigration. So far as the latter is concerned, this included the South Island province of Otago, centred on Dunedin, which was developed by the Free Church of Scotland as a Presbyterian colony from the 1840s. 80% of those arriving in the province between 1848 and 1860 were Scots-born and, unsurprisingly, the prevailing culture was unambiguously Scottish.¹⁵ Scots also formed a significant part of the European migration into many other parts of the southern hemisphere during the colonial era.
The missionary dimension of migration

Scotland has long been famous for its missionaries. When the historic World Missionary Conference convened in Edinburgh in 1910, its organisers explained the venue by stating: ‘Edinburgh was a fitting place of meeting. In the earlier missionary enterprise which evangelised Europe no country was more prominent than Scotland, and no country has in proportion to its size contributed to the evangelisation of the world during the last century so large a number of distinguished and devoted missionaries.’\(^{16}\) Many of the latter, such as Alexander Duff, Robert Moffat, David Livingstone, James Legge and Mary Slessor, have enjoyed a high profile. Less noticed has been the missionary impact of the great numbers of Scots who went overseas primarily as migrants.

Wherever they have gone, the Scots have taken their faith with them. Historically, they have been predominantly Presbyterian, with Roman Catholic, Episcopalian and other denominations forming significant minorities, and this has been reflected in the influence of the migrants. This can be seen from the seventeenth century in relation to Northern Ireland, where ‘successive waves of immigration of Presbyterian Scots was the main cause of the Presbyterian community in Ireland which now numbers more than 300,000.’\(^{17}\) It was also evident in England where Scots formed Presbyterian churches as well as exercising remarkable influence within the Church of England.\(^{18}\) As Scots became participant in the British Empire during the eighteenth century, it was observable that they carried with them the distinctive institutions of Scotland, including the church, which were undisturbed by the Union. As Tom Devine observes, ‘the export of integral parts of Scottish civil society to the Empire, such as education and Presbyterianism […] left a distinctive mark and elicited considerable contemporary comment from non-Scots.’\(^{19}\)

Although social and economic factors were the primary drivers of migration, there was also a faith dimension to it. Marjory Harper points out that

\[\text{[…] by 1914 assisted emigration had been incorporated into a variety of charitable ventures which attempted, from both}\]
a national and regional perspective, to alleviate problems of overpopulation, unemployment and destitution. In the virtual absence of state welfare provision, churches and charities shouldered the burden of rescuing and rehabilitating needy men, women and children [...] Undergirding the relief programmes of most of these charities was an evangelical Christian commitment to offer both practical and spiritual help to needy individuals [...]’

Organisations like the Salvation Army and the Young Men’s Christian Association (YMCA) were leading agents in organising and supporting emigration from Scotland to the colonies. They enjoyed the support of the Presbyterian Churches which shared the sentiments voiced by the Free Church Monthly Record: ‘[…] how good a thing it is for outgoing young people to be welcomed in the colony by kindly churchmen and women, ready to find them employment and to give them the guidance and supervision of Christian friendliness.’

The experience of migration, for many, was framed in biblical and spiritual terms. In his account of the 300 Lewis people who embarked on the Metagama to sail to Canada in 1923, Jim Wilkie reveals how their experience was framed by their faith. On the Sunday prior to departure the text from which their minister preached was from Genesis 12:1: ‘And Jehovah said unto Abraham, get thou out of thy Country and from thy kindred and from thy father’s house unto the land I will show thee.’ As they boarded the ship each of them was given a Gaelic Bible. Gaelic psalms were sung by the crowd on the pier, sermons were preached as they prepared for departure and a Gaelic prayer was offered on the deck of the ship as they set off. No wonder it was reported that, during the subsequent years, the Gaelic Free Church in Toronto was always full of Lewis people – ‘just like being in the island’.

This was but a small part of a large movement in regard to Canada. As Bauswein and Vischer observe, ‘Among the settlers and fur-traders to come to this newly available land were many Scots. Presbyterian Scots and Scots-Irish would make up the bulk of most Presbyterian congregations until very recent years.’ They also brought their faith
to bear on the society to which they had come. Jenni Calder observes that ‘Scottish Calvinism remained a strong current in Canadian life’, while Scottish Catholics also played a leading role in the growth of Catholicism in Canada. By 1925 the Presbyterian Church was the largest Protestant body in Canada. When the United Church of Canada was formed in that year, two-thirds of the Presbyterians joined the new church while one-third remained in the Presbyterian Church. Both of these nationwide churches have a history rooted, to a significant degree, in the arrival of Scottish migrants in Canada in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

As regards the USA, the settlement of Scottish immigrants in the mid-Atlantic coastal area of New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Delaware and Maryland led to the first Presbytery being established in Philadelphia in 1706. The first General Assembly met in 1789, just as the USA was emerging as an independent nation. Today the Presbyterian community numbers around four million and has a nationwide presence.

Scots arriving in Australia from 1802 formed Presbyterian churches which in due course would constitute around one-third of the Uniting Church in Australia when it was formed in 1977 as well as finding expression in the ongoing life of the Presbyterian Church of Australia which did not enter the union. Australians of Scottish Presbyterian stock numbered around half a million by the end of the twentieth century.

The Presbyterian Church of Aotearoa New Zealand traces its origins to a congregation founded by the Church of Scotland in Wellington in 1840 for settlers arriving from Glasgow. From the mid-nineteenth century Free Church members also emigrated in growing numbers, settling particularly in Dunedin, and ministers were sent to care for them. By the end of the twentieth century the Presbyterian community had grown to more than half a million people.

Countries where Presbyterian churches resulted from Scottish migration but remained small include Argentina, Bahamas, Belize, Bermuda, Chile, Fiji, Guyana, Malaysia, Singapore, Sri Lanka, and Trinidad. In Kenya, Malawi, South Africa and Zimbabwe, Presbyterian churches which resulted from Scottish migration united with churches resulting from missionary work among the indigenous population. Congregations affiliated to the Church of Scotland were also formed
in cities on the continent of Europe.

When the Pan-Presbyterian Council, forerunner together with the International Congregational Council, of today’s World Communion of Reformed Churches, was formed in 1875 it was largely made up of Scottish Presbyterian churches and churches which came into being as a result of the Scottish diaspora. When it met in Glasgow in 1896, for example, the vast majority of delegates came from the Scottish Presbyterian churches, the Presbyterian Church of Canada, the Presbyterian Church in the USA, smaller Presbyterian churches in the USA, the Presbyterian Church of Australia and the Presbyterian Church of New Zealand.28 Through migration, what had once been a localized national church had come to have significant presence worldwide. To this extent, it represents a significant missionary achievement.

The distinctive character of the Scottish migrant churches

Giving an address on the occasion of the centenary of the Church of Scotland Committee on Colonial Churches in 1933, John Buchan made the following observation about its work:

It has not been a missionary task in the strict sense, for it has not dealt with ignorance and savagery [sic]. Its business has been to provide the means of worship for our own people in distant lands, to preserve the continuity of the religious life of the most far-wandering race on the globe. But that is an aspect of our Lord’s command which is as vital as normal missionary work. It is as much our duty to establish and confirm men and women in the faith as to bring new converts into it.

I would look upon the work done during the century as a debt due to our Scottish tradition and our national character. I have said that we are the most far-wandering people on the globe, but we are also eternally homesick. We carry with us our household gods wherever we go, and our strength lies in the fact that we can acclimatise ourselves in strange places and still keep the link with home.29
As Scots emigrated to these new lands they reproduced the culture, architecture and institutions which were familiar from their homeland.\textsuperscript{30} In Cairns Craig’s terms, they were ‘Xeniteian migrants’, who ‘do not arrive in their new territories as victims dreaming of a return to the homeland but as architects who carry with them the plan by which they will rebuild the familiar structures of their homeland in a foreign place.’\textsuperscript{31} In this context, no symbol of Scottish identity was more highly valued than the church. As Marjory Harper remarks regarding Scottish institutions cherished by migrant communities,

Probably the most vital – certainly the most familiar – was the Church. For innumerable Scots the cultivation of religious roots was the crucial way to maintain memories of the old country, and until the end of the nineteenth century founding or joining a Scottish church was probably the major mechanism through which Scots throughout the world acknowledged their origins and anchored themselves in a new community.\textsuperscript{32}

The drive behind the establishment of Scottish churches was the desire of the migrants to worship in the pattern to which they were accustomed. An appeal for a Presbyterian minister sent by a group of early Scottish settlers in Cape Breton asked for ‘a pastor to tak care of our souls we have non of our Way heir only of the church of ingland and We was never Brought up in that Way’.\textsuperscript{33} Responding to such appeals, migrant churches cultivated Scottish identity as a fundamental part of their raison d’être. The Scots Kirk in Colombo, for example, proudly declared in 1920 that it was ‘a rallying-point for Scottish sentiment and tradition’.\textsuperscript{34}

The distinctiveness at which they aimed was to be as similar as possible to the church life which the migrants remembered from their upbringing in Scotland. As Alex King, Secretary of the Church of Scotland Colonial and Continental Committee, observed in 1938,

Where our people congregate furth of Scotland, sentiment about all things Scottish becomes stronger. The very man who was lightly attached to his Church in Scotland frequently discovers in himself new enthusiasm for it in Africa, India
Migration and mission: intersection and divergence

The developments in industry, transport and communications which allowed aspiring Scottish migrants to set their sights on other continents also ushered in the modern missionary movement – the intentional effort by the churches of Europe and North America to take the gospel of Christ to parts of the world where it was unknown. Scotland, as noted above, played a disproportionately prominent role in this movement. In certain respects, the migrants and the missionaries had much in common. They went to make their life in a new context while maintaining a strong sense of Scottish identity. Often they used the same systems of transport and communication. During the nineteenth century they were usually people of faith, concerned to see churches planted and growing in the new lands to which they went. They differed, however, in one important respect: while church-planting was the primary purpose of the missionary, for the migrant it was a by-product of an enterprise which was primarily economic in its inspiration.

The contrasting character of the two movements came into view most clearly at points where they intersected. These were relatively few. The great majority of Scottish migrants settled in the USA, Canada, Australia and New Zealand – not areas which were principal destinations for the missionaries. The great majority of Scottish missionaries went to India, China and tropical Africa – not areas where there were many Scottish settlers. An exception to the rule was found in East Africa where, in Kenya and Malawi (Nyasaland), there were both significant numbers of Scottish settlers and influential Scottish missionaries engaged with the indigenous people.

Malawi, recently described by the Scottish Government as a ‘sister country’, bears particular scrutiny. It had been ‘discovered’ by David Livingstone and the great explorer’s death in 1873 prompted a movement in Scotland to fulfil in Malawi his vision of a centre of
‘Christianity, commerce and civilisation’ which would effectively counter the slave trade in Africa.\(^{37}\) It became a Scottish ‘mission field’ while at the same time attracting Scottish settlers who came to work as planters or to develop the infrastructure of what became, in 1891, a British colony.\(^{38}\)

The settlers came mainly to the south of the country where the Church of Scotland’s Blantyre Mission, under the inspired leadership of first Duff Macdonald and then David Clement Scott, during the 1870s and 1880s had made deep and far-reaching connections with the Mang’anja, Yao and Ngoni communities around them. Scott, in particular, was an eloquent exponent of the ‘translation principle’ of Christian mission.\(^{39}\) He was a gifted philologist, as evidenced by his monumental Mang’anja Dictionary.\(^{40}\) His commitment to vernacular languages indicated his confidence in indigenous culture to be the base from which a truly African Christian church would be built. He expressed his philosophy of mission in these terms:

> We must beware of woodenness in our development of African Life. To attempt to force on Africa the details of Church life and organisation at home is we believe fatal to true growth. African life must be met in its own way, and it will grow on its own lines. No one who understands the problem before him would dream for a moment of employing the same evangelistic methods in this country as one would do at home. Neither can we expect that native church life will move in the grooves cut out for it elsewhere. We have said it again and again, and we repeat ad nauseam that the African has got his own gift of Life and Work to present to the Church Catholic.\(^{41}\)

It is not difficult to see how such a vision would conflict with the characteristic concern of a migrant Scottish community to replicate, so far as possible, the pattern of church life which was familiar from the homeland. Scott charted an entirely different direction:

> It is intended to make the Native Service, when we can get into our new Church, the regular diet of morning worship. Mang’anja is well enough understood almost for everyone to
join intelligently in the worship, and the prayers are sufficiently
dignified and comprehensive to afford utterance of what is
common to all, European or native: the fervency of such an act
as this will, we are persuaded, do more than anything else to
breathe upon this land the Holy Ghost. 42

Scott was very clear that he was working against any separation of
the ‘migrant’ and the ‘missionary’ movements when it came to church
life:

We are working here for the unity of the Church, European and
African. It has been the aim of the Mission during all those past
years to bring and keep together the two parts of the Church –
native and foreign. It would be a great blow to the Church of
Christ should there arise in the future such a severance as we
confess exists in the Colony [South Africa] between the native
and European portions of it. Both portions will greatly increase
as time goes on. We long to see them increasing together – not
side by side, but as one […]. In God’s great wisdom the native
may be saved without us, but we doubt if we here can be saved
without the native. 43

On the basis of this vision, Scott strongly resisted any attempts to
provide a chaplaincy for the Scots who were arriving in Malawi in
increasing numbers by the early 1890s. He invited them instead to
join in the missionary adventure on which he had embarked. They
could be part of the African church now beginning to emerge and,
intentionally, running on quite different lines from anything known in
Scotland. This, however, was to run directly counter to the instincts of
the immigrant Scots who looked to the church to provide a familiar
environment and a rallying-point for themselves as exiles.

The Scottish settlers were dissatisfied with Scott’s approach on a
number of counts. They did not share his hostility to Cecil Rhodes’
British South Africa Company which they regarded as an ally but
which Scott viewed as a threat to the interests of the indigenous
population. They were suspicious of the high level of responsibility
which he entrusted to African leaders of the emerging church
movement since their operations were dependent on African labour which might be ‘spoiled’ by the aspirations being cultivated by Scott. A further point of divergence concerned the nature of the church. Criticism was levelled at the allegedly ‘ritualistic’ worship promoted by Scott which to the arriving Scots did not appear sufficiently Presbyterian. Furthermore, as Andrew Ross remarks, ‘Scott’s refusal to provide a chaplaincy service for whites clearly rankled, as did his insistence on communion, whether celebrated in English or Nyanja, being open to both races.’

So outraged were the Scottish settlers by Scott’s policies that they sent a series of complaints to the Church of Scotland Foreign Mission Committee. Such was the volume of complaint that, in January 1897, a Commission of Enquiry was established, to be chaired by Sir Charles Dalrymple MP and to report to the General Assembly. The outcome of the Enquiry was, as summarised in an editorial in The Scotsman newspaper, ‘The verdict [...] as respects Dr D. C. Scott and [his close colleague] Mr Hetherwick might be summed up as “Not Guilty; but don’t do it again.” Each head of complaint was set aside as unproved, yet it was followed by a reproof or censure in each case.’ For Scott, who had lost his wife the previous year and whose own health was weak at this time, it was the last straw. He resigned for health reasons, his hopes for the Blantyre Mission having apparently been frustrated.

Alexander Hetherwick, who had been mentored by Scott and shared much of his philosophy of mission, succeeded as Head of Blantyre Mission. Following the Commission of Enquiry, however, it was made clear by the Foreign Mission Committee that the church was to be regulated along the lines of Scottish Presbyterianism. The freedom to draw on African inspiration, of which Scott had dreamed, was no more. The Mission was pushed in the direction of providing what the Scottish settlers had been calling for: the familiar pattern of Scottish church life transplanted on to African soil.

Still Hetherwick held on tenaciously to the ideal of the oneness of the church, writing in 1904, ‘I want to see ONE church in Central Africa. I have fought for this in Blantyre here – latterly it has become more difficult with the greater variety of European elements in the country.’ In practice, however, by this time there were two congregations in Blantyre, one European, the other ‘native’. A
European Kirk Session was established which met and functioned separately from the African one. As his biographer concludes, ‘Dr Hetherwick’s hope for the unity in Blantyre of the religious life had not been realised. Theoretically the European and native congregations were one, with a single session, but in practice they formed two self-contained bodies and held separate communions.’

After the First World War, Hetherwick bowed to what now appeared to be the inevitable and began negotiations with the Committee in Edinburgh for the creation of a colonial congregation with its own minister in Blantyre. As Andrew Ross explains,

This was to be a totally separate body because the other Presbyterian Christians of the area were members of the Blantyre Presbytery of the CCAP [Church of Central Africa Presbyterian]. This was an acknowledgement of the total defeat in the area of racial unity in the Church, which had been fundamental to the thinking of D.C. Scott and to Hetherwick himself.

It was only with the political changes signalling the approaching end of colonial rule in the 1950s that these European congregations were reintegrated into the CCAP. The fact that they had to be separate for so long demonstrates the extent to which the two models of church planting were incompatible and at odds.

**Faith with Scottish roots: a river with two springs**

The Presbyterian churches worldwide owe much to people who left the shores of Scotland, particularly during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The range and scale of Presbyterianism bears witness to the missionary impact of this movement. On closer examination it becomes apparent that it was, in fact, two movements very different in character, though closely related and intertwined at points. The churches established by migrant Scots in their new contexts such as the USA, Canada, Australia and New Zealand, aimed to replicate as closely as possible the church life with which they had been familiar through their upbringing in Scotland. By contrast, the missionary
movement was deliberately aiming to operate on the terms set by the receptor community to which they had gone with the intention of introducing the gospel of Jesus Christ. The large churches which in due course emerged in such contexts as India, China, Korea, Nigeria, Kenya and Malawi, were founded on this basis.

To a great extent, the two movements, though sharing a common Scottish origin, took effect in different geographical areas. There were, however, some points, such as Malawi, at which they intersected. Here their contrasting approached to church-planting came explosively to the surface. Confidence in the vernacular world of the community receiving the gospel set the missionaries at odds with arriving Scots who wanted the church to be as similar as possible to what they had known at home.

Both with churches arising from migration and those resulting from the missionary movement, the Church of Scotland since the mid-twentieth century has pursued a policy of indigenization whereby full responsibility for the life of the church has been handed over to local leadership. It still operates a small number of congregations which originated in the migrant movement, mainly in cities on the continent of Europe. Today these congregations pride themselves on their international composition, with Scots invariably in a minority. They nonetheless follow the ‘migrant’ principle of replicating so far as possible the familiar Scottish pattern of church life and worship. Though fostering cordial relations with the local churches in their setting, they make no attempt to allow the language and culture of the local community to shape their understanding and expression of the gospel.

As we ask today about the implications of large-scale migration for Christian mission, perhaps the lesson from the Scottish experience is that the widespread dispersion of an ethnic group holding to the Christian faith does not necessarily lead to cross-cultural missionary engagement in their new contexts. Through assimilation and inter-marriage the faith which it holds may come, over time, to touch others. Its primary drive, however, is to sustain the migrants in their faith through providing a church life as familiar as possible to them, which therefore has limited possibility to cross ethnic boundaries. This stands in sharp contrast to missionary engagement which is
intentional in entering a new ethnic and cultural context and fostering the emergence of a church life which is very different from what the missionaries experienced in their homeland.

The difference between the church life arising from Scottish migration and that arising from intentional missionary effort is underlined by the fact that, until the early 1960s, the ‘Colonial’ and ‘Foreign Mission’ Committees of the Church of Scotland were entirely separate. Even after their integration in 1963 to form a single Overseas Council with responsibility for all the international work of the church, in practice a structure of sub-committees allowed the different cultures and expectations of the two movements to continue. This remained the case during my own tenure as General Secretary of the Board of World Mission, successor body to the Overseas Council, from 1998 to 2009. Even after more than forty years of organisational integration, the contrasting character of work based on Scottish migration and work based on intentional missionary engagement was plain to see.

It would be simplistic to conclude, from this brief review of the ‘Scots Abroad’, that migration and mission are two entirely different things. The migratory movement had a missionary dimension as Presbyterian churches were established in new locations. While these began as outposts of Scottish church life, through assimilation and inter-marriage across generations they gradually came to belong primarily in their new context, communities of faith open to all. The Scottish missionary movement, no matter how profound its engagement with indigenous culture, was inevitably stamped with much of the character of the homeland. It was a principal task of the first generations of local leaders to indigenize the church life which had begun under the inspiration of the Scottish missionaries. Nonetheless, whatever qualifications might have to be made, it remains clear from the Scottish case that the settlement of migrants and the practice of cross-cultural mission were, to a great extent, separate matters. For the most part they occurred in different places and, when they coincided, they tended to clash. Their principles of operation were diametrically opposed.
Notes

1 An earlier version of this paper was presented at the XIIIth Quadrennial Assembly of the International Association for Mission Studies on “Migration, Human Dislocation and the Good News: Margins as the Centre in Christian Mission”, Toronto, Canada, 15–20 August 2012.


5 Ibid., xv.

6 Brock, The Mobile Scot, 38.

7 Harper, Adventurers and Exiles, 18.

8 Ibid.

9 Ibid., 3.

10 George Shepperson, cit., Devine, Ends of the Earth, 135.

11 Devine, Ends of the Earth, 146.


13 W. Stanford Reid, ed., The Scottish Tradition in Canada (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1976), ix; cit., Devine, Ends of the Earth, 149.


23 Ibid., 153 f.


27 Ibid., 44.


29 John Buchan, *The Scottish Church and the Empire: Centenary Address* (Edinburgh: Church of Scotland, 1934), 3.


34 *Reports on the Schemes of the Church of Scotland, with the...*


41 Life and Work in British Central Africa, September 1895.

42 Ibid., March 1889.

43 Ibid., December 1891.


46 The Scotsman, editorial, 25 March 1897.


49 Ross, Blantyre Mission, 191.