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## Lochaber No More—Landscape, Emigration and the Scottish Artist 1849–1895

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Abstract:

Widespread emigration from the Scottish Highlands in the nineteenth century offered subject matter not only to genre painters but also to landscapists, who found inspiration in the desolate depopulated landscape. This article examines the works of four artists who engaged with this subject and, in so doing, became part of a larger phenomenon of cultural self-invention that characterized Scotland in the Victorian age.

## Lochaber No More—Landscape, Emigration and the Scottish Artist 1849–1895

by Robin Nicholson

The history of the Highlands of Scotland and its inhabitants during the nineteenth century is a history of upheaval, loss, and myth-making. Emigration on an unprecedented scale transformed, within a generation, a society that had endured for hundreds of years. As the biggest movement of population in British history it was superficially rich with material for the genre or history painter, combining themes of displacement, homelessness, and noble suffering, yet themes of emigration were sparingly used by nineteenth-century British artists. In a narrative sense the subject lacked resolution and rarely offered the opportunity for the introduction of any conciliatory sentimentality or pathos. Furthermore, it resisted compression into a single effective image; the emigrant experience was just too broad and, in a sense, unpainterly. Despite this a number of Scottish artists did attempt to engage with this problematic theme, both directly, but also indirectly, as the depopulated landscape assumed a new aesthetic identity. The desolate landscape lent itself to interpretations that were both picturesque and romanticized, yet were ultimately part of a larger phenomenon of cultural self-invention that characterized Scotland in the Victorian age. This article explores the response of Scottish artists to these related themes of an empty landscape and its exiled people.

The replacement of primitive and relatively populous agrarian communities with desolate—yet suddenly beautiful—landscapes of mountain and glen is a phenomenon so deeply rooted in the cultural collusions of writers, poets, and commentators as to be indecipherable without some appreciation of how quickly economic necessity became romantic imperative. The Gaelic-speaking crofters—subsistence farmers who inhabited simple dwellings known as "crofts"—who shuffled uncertainly aboard the Cape Fear-bound ships harbored in their bays, were the participants in a profound cultural dance, whose leaders were to be the artists, tourists, and even the poets of their own language who, over the years, explored the legacy of this disassociation of land and people.

The shift in southern perception of the extremities of "North Britain" in the eighteenth century was dramatic and coincided almost exactly with the first substantial wave of emigration in the 1750s and 60s. The Scottish mountains—described by one visitor in the 1720s as "monstrous excrescences...rude and offensive to the sight"—went from being considered one of the more barren parts of the British Isles to one of the most beautiful.<sup>[1]</sup> Furthermore, the high peaks and deep glens offered a taste of the excitement and terror identified in Edmund Burke's essay on the "sublime": "what so'er is fitted," he wrote in 1757, "in any sort to excite the idea of pain and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible [...] is a source of the sublime."<sup>[2]</sup> The picturesque and the sublime were to become the prevailing preoccupation of painters and tourists alike, as the Highlands were made more accessible in the aftermath of the unsuccessful Jacobite uprisings (1715 and 1745/6).<sup>[3]</sup> The troublesome clans may have been quelled on the battlefield, but the most significant strategy of the London government was a pioneering road-building project that initially facilitated army movements,<sup>[4]</sup> but ultimately transformed the ability of the ordinary traveler to view this previously remote region. The poet Thomas Gray visited Scotland in 1765 and wrote: "The mountains are ecstatic [...] none but those monstrous creatures of God

know how to join so much beauty with so much horror [...]."[5] Two years earlier, the etcher John Clerk of Eldin was boldly scaling Highland mountains and admiring the "dark clouds and fogs rolling in the deepest glens below us." [6] Like so many of his generation he was an admirer of the supposedly antique poetry of the bard "Ossian," transcribed by James MacPherson, and was delighted to discover that "his descriptions of these things are not exaggerated." [7] Other writers and artists agreed and flocked northwards in such numbers to experience the romantic reality for themselves that Thomas Pennant, crossing into the Highlands in 1771, found it "inondé with southern visitors." [8] Two years later, Dr. Samuel Johnson and James Boswell made their celebrated and unprecedented journey to the distant north and northwest. Johnson's account, *Journey to the Western Isles of Scotland*, was published in 1775 and Boswell's livelier *Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides* in 1785. Both were immensely popular. In the space of less than thirty years the perception of the Highlands had been transformed. It was no longer a wilderness inhabited by savage tribesmen, but an elemental and sublime part of the British landscape.

The nineteenth century finalized this transformation and its principal architect was Sir Walter Scott. His poetry, and especially his novels, created a literary vision for the landscape and populated it with idealized Highland heroes and heroines; the landscape and Scott's vision of the past became innately related. The Edinburgh philosopher Archibald Alison had recognized in his influential 1790 *Essays on the Nature and Principals of Taste* how "the beauty of natural scenery is often exalted by the events it has witnessed," and it was to be Scott who offered the enduring sense of landscapes of "association." [9] His distinctive vision of the Highlands extended southward so that when King George IV visited Edinburgh in 1822, it was Scott who ensured that all who attended the welcoming ceremonies, Lowlander and Highlander alike, adopted the costume and demeanor of his Highland Scottish archetype. [10] Just as tartan became the quintessential national fabric, so the Highland landscape became the embodiment of the Scots landscape.

Twenty years after George IV's Scottish visit, his niece, Queen Victoria, and her consort, Albert, cemented the royal relationship with North Britain by visiting Scotland and subsequently acquiring a property in the mountains of Deeside. The property was transformed, under Albert's stern gaze, into a suitably picturesque, turreted castle: Balmoral, which was to become the Queen's favorite home. Balmoral owed little to the Scottish vernacular tradition, and those artists that Queen Victoria patronized in Scotland—most notably the English painter Edwin Landseer—used similar license in adapting the existing landscape as an elaborate backdrop for their bloodthirsty sporting compositions. This was Scotland as perceived through the mindset of the landed sporting classes. Other landscape painters of Scottish—even Highland—origin also painted the landscape through a prism: that of the picturesque.

For an artist trained in England or Edinburgh in the early nineteenth century, the Scottish Highlands offered a landscape that was alien and strange, yet retained the comfort and familiarity of picturesque precept. The empty vistas could be molded to the preconceptions of both artist and audience. Indeed some of the most highly regarded portrayals of the Highland landscape—Thomas Miles Richardson, Louis Bosworth Hurt, Alfred de Breanski—were essentially English tourists. Yet they and their Scottish counterparts shared a very similar vision of the picturesque quality of the Highland landscape, be it with the niceties of

Italian classicism—Alexander Nasmyth—the smoothness of the Dutch school—Edmund Thornton Crawford—or the grandeur of the sublime—Horatio McCulloch and Peter Graham. Theirs was a safe and controlled space that only threatened at the edges, with the image of the approaching storm or the rising stream.

Although wild, the landscape is wholly under man's thrall, be it by the huntsmen in the foreground, or the ghosts of the ancient ruined castle on the rock. There is nothing new, only the past, and the emptiness of the present. And yet this is a construct that is lent credence by its picturesque interpretation. The landscape can only offer so much to the artist because it is empty and that emptiness is something wholly new and wholly artificial. The once populous Highlands had been denuded of their natives in the space of less than a hundred years. The picturesque scene was really a scene of bleakness and desolation, a consequence of emigration and exile.

Yet just as the theories of the picturesque allowed the artist to play around with the elements of a landscape to maximize their effect, so no one directly challenged the interpretation of the landscape as inherently and historically desolate. The empty Highland landscape became the epitome of the Scottish landscape of self. It was what was demanded and what was sought after, although the ultimate irony became apparent when the demands of the Victorian tourist began to usurp the desolation with wider roads, railways and paddle steamers. In 1846 Lord Cockburn could write: "I never see a scene of Scotch beauty without being thankful that I have beheld it before it has been breathed over by the angel of mechanical construction," without noting that a hundred years earlier these same landscapes would have been filled with crofts and cattle.<sup>[11]</sup> Queen Victoria's journals from Balmoral are also filled with references to solitude and her delight at the absence of humanity, although even this experience was only possible on her remote Lochnagar estate.<sup>[12]</sup> Places like Loch Katrine—eulogized by Scott, close to Glasgow, and accessible by rail and steamer—were inundated with tourists and trippers.<sup>[13]</sup>

This perception of landscape, although fundamentally romantic, was also deeply rooted in the order of Enlightenment thought. The associative elements of the landscape were enhanced by the vestiges of the past society that remained. True wilderness could not hold the same appeal as a landscape bathed in the lives and blood of the past. Depopulation ensured that the landscape was purely associative and not troubled by modernity, even in its most primitive form. There is a dichotomy: a previously populous landscape is made barren and then is swiftly repopulated by tourists seeking emptiness. If nothing else, this dichotomy enhances the sense in which the romantic and associative construct could effectively blinker the actual view of the landscape.

This blinkered view is precisely what we see in Horatio McCulloch's "Loch Katrine" of 1866 (Perth Museum and Art Gallery), and in his celebrated "Glencoe" (Glasgow Museums) of two years earlier; the major north-south road is diminished to little more than a drover's track. McCulloch became the principal painter of the empty Highlands and assumed the mantle of—in the words of the *Art Union* of 1847, a "purely national" painter, on a par with Constable in presenting the fundamental essence of what British landscape meant, both to its current inhabitants and to its past.<sup>[14]</sup> McCulloch's role, alongside Scott and Wordsworth, in fashioning Scottish self-perception cannot be underestimated.

Perhaps McCulloch's most popular work—and the one that most struck a chord with the English trippers—was *My Heart is in the Highlands* of 1860 (fig. 1). It remains one of the most popular works in the Glasgow Art Gallery to this day.[15] Unlike most of McCulloch's oeuvre, which carry specific geographical locations in their titles, this work does not appear to have been an attempt to depict a particular location and is, instead, a mixture of real and imagined Highland scenery, centered on a tree-lined loch. It is the summation of McCulloch's Highland ideal and, as the title suggests, intentionally nostalgic. However, this was not the original title; as McCulloch's biographer Alexander Fraser revealed, it was originally called *An Emigrant's Dream of His Highland Home*. [16]



Fig. 1, Horatio McCulloch, *My Heart is in the Highlands*, 1860. Oil on canvas. Glasgow Museums and Art Gallery [\[larger image\]](#)

This painting is the ultimate example of a landscape of association: one in which the artist has imbued the scene with greater import than mere delineation of natural features. It is idealized and without particulars, yet is arguably truer to the vision of many spectators than McCulloch's falsified depictions of Glencoe or Loch Katrine. The title by which it is known today is, of course, taken from Robert Burns's famous poem of 1789, which had been given further currency when it was quoted by Walter Scott in his 1812 novel, *Waverley*. The sentiments expressed by Burns are those of the exile: "Wherever I wander, wherever I rove/ The hills of the Highlands for ever I love." [17] There is no mention of humanity in the poem; the loss expressed is mostly for the landscape: "Farewell to the mountains high cover'd in snow / Farewell to the straths and green valleys below." Yet, without the sense that the landscape was part of a collective memory, a shared sense of former belonging, the emotion would not resonate. This was a place that once was lived in, but now is bare. The exilic remembrance of Scotland is expressed in a barren landscape that can assume an almost spiritual aura:

He can make you feel through his art the loneliness of mountain sides and great glens, and inspire you, if you will but open your mind to receive the impression with the feeling of religion and wonder, which growing out of the sense of that loneliness, has imbued his own spirit. [18]

In nineteenth-century Scotland the Highland experience of displacement became reified as a national experience shared by all. As Highland culture became absorbed into, and began to dominate, the greater Scots culture, so its historical representatives were removed and

forced into (largely North American) exile. Only recently has their actual experience and culture begun to be re-examined, and the results suggest that many took a far more pragmatic and less sentimental view of their past than those they left behind.[\[19\]](#) Nonetheless, it is the written and visual record of a predominantly Lowland cultural elite that established the parameters of nineteenth-century Scots identity, one based on themes of loss, nostalgia, and the empty landscape of a falsely-remembered past. The *Emigrant's Dream of His Highland Home* is just a dream, an imaginary fabrication that offers solace to emigrant, aristocratic landowner and southern tourist alike.

The speed with which this fabrication was assimilated was remarkable. The enduring, and largely oral, histories of Gaelic culture were subsumed not only by the apparent verisimilitude of Scott's fiction, but by the supposedly impeccable scholarship of a series of writers who enjoyed widespread acclaim during the first half of the nineteenth century. The most notable of their works were James Logan's *The Scottish Gaël; or Celtic manners, as preserved among the Highlanders*, of 1831 and his *The Clans of the Scottish Highlands* of 1845, and two works by the so-called "Sobieski Stuart" brothers, the *Vestiarium Scoticum*, of 1842, and *The Costume of the Clans*, of 1845.[\[20\]](#)

Together, these writers created an edifice of bogus scholarship that still—in instances such as the supposed historic origins of clan tartans—endures today. While the true descendants of clansmen and women were carving out a future in the wilds of America, an image was being created of a noble, sanctified, and ultimately doomed Highland culture wholly at odds with the realities of a largely brutal and simple tribal society. As this author has explored elsewhere, some artists were complicit in this dramatic transformation.[\[21\]](#)

The publication of these works coincided with the culmination of the depopulation of the Scottish Highlands. Emigration had been an ongoing process since the middle of the eighteenth century. The defeat of Bonnie Prince Charlie, and the Jacobite cause at Culloden in 1746, gave impetus to a social transformation that was already underway. Troublesome Highland clansmen were encouraged or press-ganged to join new British army regiments. Their families were given similar encouragement to move out of the fertile glens and make a living from the rich kelp beaches of the western seaboard. Their place was taken by the Cheviot sheep, which proved a far more lucrative use of the land for the Highland chieftains, many of whom now saw themselves not as holding land in trust for their clans, but as landowners in their own right in the English tradition.

The so-called "Highland Clearances," by far the greatest wave of emigration, occurred primarily between 1785 and 1850 and have been perceived alternately as an economically inevitable necessity, and as an example of ethnic cleansing and genocide. Tens of thousands of Highlanders emigrated, often traveling as entire communities at the behest of their chieftains or other senior clan members known as "tacksmen." The clan system was essentially tribal and patriarchal and based around a fragile subsistence economy. Once weakened by famine or population decline—or challenged by the alternate agrarian economy of sheep farming, which required large unpopulated areas of grassland—it was impossible to sustain, and emigration trickles rapidly tuned into torrents, often resulting in complete depopulation of swaths of the Highland landscape. In some cases removal was voluntary, in others it was enforced, sometimes violently, by landowners (most notoriously,

the Duke of Sutherland).[22] The result was the collapse of the clan system and a way of life that had existed for many hundreds of years. Although the provision for the evicted was often generous, the upheaval of a culture and social system had a profound impact on the Highland character and sense of identity. Gaelic poetry of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries is characterized by themes of lament and loss. The clan lands were inimical to the structure of their highly paternalized society. Presbyterian Minister Alexander Irvine wrote in his 1802 report on the Highland Clearances: "Those who are deprived of their possessions...feel a reluctance in settling anywhere else, conceive a disgust at their country, and therefore prefer leaving it...The connection once broken, they care not where they go." [23]

Having settled on the coast, many looked to the west. Declining yields of kelp, which for many was the principal source of sustenance, added to the impetus to depart. Well-established trade routes to the Americas made this the preferred emigration destination and soon emigrant ships became a common sight in the ports and harbors of the west coast and islands. An over-reliance on the potato led, as it did in Ireland, to disaster. The potato famine of 1846 resulted not only in a dramatic increase in emigration, but to a final fury of clearances by landlords, now claiming humanitarian motives in removing crofters from destitute plots of rotting potatoes. Finally those south of the Highland line began to take an interest in what remained of the declining population of Highland Scotland, but in practical terms they were too late and there was little that could be done anywhere.[24] The greatest exodus had already occurred and only the empty, echoing landscape remained.

Two masterpieces of Scottish painting offer commentaries on the Highland Scots' emigration, using the moment of departure as metaphor for the wider phenomenon: Thomas Faed's *The Last of the Clan* of 1865 (fig. 2) and John Watson Nicol's *Lochaber No More* of 1883 (fig. 3). Both are frequently reproduced in historical surveys of the period and have, to some extent, become iconic visual tropes of the Scottish emigrant experience.[25]



Fig. 2, Thomas Faed, *The Last of the Clan*, 1865. Oil on canvas. Glasgow Museums and Art Gallery.  
[\[larger image\]](#)



Fig. 3, John Watson Nicol, *Lochaber No More*, 1883. Oil on canvas. Fleming-Wyfold Art Foundation.

[\[larger image\]](#)

Thomas Faed (1826–1900) was born in Galloway on the southwestern-most tip of Scotland—as far as it is possible to be from the Highlands and still be in Scotland. The fourth son of a typically extensive lower middling Scots artisan family, Thomas escaped the dolours of the drapery business on the death of his father in 1843 and followed his elder brothers to Edinburgh. Like some other remarkable Scottish families—Nasmyths, Patons, Waltons—a whole generation of Faed siblings displayed unprecedented artistic abilities. Thomas's three older brothers were already engaged in artistic careers in Edinburgh and so there was no family opposition to Thomas entering the pre-eminent teaching institution, the Trustees' Academy.<sup>[26]</sup>

He was taught by two of the stalwarts of the academic Scottish tradition, Sir William Allan and Thomas Duncan, and was contemporary with some of the finest talents of the age Erskine Nicol, William Quiller Orchardson, Robert Herdman, and Robert Scott Lauder. One name, however, outshone all of these: Sir David Wilkie, whose early death in 1841 (commemorated in Turner's masterpiece *Death, Burial at Sea*) had left the nation in mourning.<sup>[27]</sup>

Of those who sought to follow and emulate Wilkie, few matched Faed's sheer technical brilliance and vision. A precocious student, he exhibited at the Royal Scottish Academy within a year of his arrival in Edinburgh. His reputation as the most significant painter in the Wilkie tradition was fully established in 1855 when his gloriously sentimental painting *The Mitherless Bairn* won acclaim at the Royal Academy.<sup>[28]</sup> Faed reworked Wilkie's rustic genre for the tastes of the Victorians and the power of his work can be summed up in one word: *pathos*.

*The Last of the Clan* saw him at the height of his abilities. As will be seen, Faed had for some years been interested in the plight of the emigrant. Here he addressed the theme in terms of the universal: of departure, of loss, of suffering. Exhibited at the Royal Academy of 1865 the picture had, as was not infrequent practice, a quotation added to the title:



When the steamer had slowly backed out, and John MacAlpine had thrown off the hawser, we began to feel that our once powerful clan was now represented by a feeble old man and his grand-daughter; who, together with some outlying kith-and-kin, myself among the number, owned not a single blade of grass in the glen that was once all our own.[29]

This is, of course, a fictitious quotation, a narrative device that offers only a limited enhancement to the strength of the composition. However, it does serve to emphasize the powerful visual conceit of showing those that are left behind, rather than the emigrants themselves. The figures are united by their helplessness, both to stop the ship that is slipping away from the quay and, on a greater level, the past that is slipping away even more irrevocably.

Within Faed's oeuvre it is an unusual and challenging work. More usually engaging with the particulars of domestic life—even if couched in general and universal terms—Faed rarely dealt with themes of such magnitude as this. Some have equated this work with the reportage of William Powell Frith, but in many ways he comes closer to the brutal social commentary of Frank Holl or Sir Luke Fildes who, with works like the latter's *Applicants to the Casual Ward* (Royal Holloway College, University of London), painted just nine years later, offered a direct questioning of the social values and policies that lay at the heart of the British Empire. Certainly the use of specifically contemporary costume emphasized the modern-day narrative of the painting.[30]

The figures in Faed's paintings are as destitute as the supplicants of Fildes's work, their eyes deadened and bereft of hope. The cheerful spring sky and choppy waves offer no solace. Of greatest poignancy are the scattered possessions and packing cases, some spilling straw, indicative of a final rush by the departing emigrants to board the vessel, discarding precious heirlooms and parting gifts alike as their unsought-after adventure unfolds. Those that are left behind must, literally, try to pick up the pieces, even though there is nowhere now for them to go.

In reality and in Faed's visualization it was a pathetic business. For the artist and his public emigration was not about hope and new horizons, but about despair and the fate of those left behind. As the hawser slips into the water there is no pulling it back, the point of no return was passed long ago and by the 1860s any commentary could only be sentimental or valedictory. It is really those on the ship who are the last of the clan, and those that remain the barren shadows that, like their Highland homeland, will eventually wither and die.

It is, ultimately, neither reportage nor social commentary, but a memorial, and this perhaps accounted for the image's commercial success. The original painting was bought for two thousand guineas by the art and print entrepreneur Louis Victor Flatou, who had previously bought works by Faed for their print potential. He commissioned a smaller version from the artist that was used by William Henry Simmons (1811–1882), the most prolific and sought after engraver of the Victorian period, as the basis for the mixed mezzotint engraving published by Henry Graves & Co., in July 1868, in a run of 200 artist's proofs and several thousand ordinary prints.[31] This ensured a broad circulation and appreciation for the image, which was renewed when the original painting was bought by Glasgow Art Gallery in

1981 for £40,000, a considerable sum for a Scottish painting at the time, but considerably less in relative terms than the amount originally paid by Flatou.[32]

Faed's confrontation with the theme of emigration troubled contemporary critics; there was a feeling that his technical brilliance hampered his ability to engage directly with the emotions of the subject or, indeed, the spectator.[33] Modern writers on Scottish art, while acknowledging *The Last of the Clan* as a masterpiece, find difficulty in accommodating it within what remains a largely teleological reading of their subject. Duncan Macmillan accuses Faed of a "disassociation of sensibility," which he defines as "an inability to treat people adequately while being brilliant in dealing with the material world." [34] Ensnared in London, he suggests, Faed could only engage with his subjects in a superficial manner and as a result *The Last of the Clan* is ultimately exploitative.[35]

Such geographical reductionism perhaps held true in Wilkie's early days, but by the 1860s a London-based Scottish artist could engage as readily with the Scots or Highland Scottish experience as could a resident of Edinburgh's New Town, although, arguably, that is not saying a great deal about anyone's ability to deal with a subject so distinct from their own cultural experience. The abiding characteristic of Faed's art is that of a sentimentalized past and in *The Last of the Clan* he uses it as a powerful tool to comment on the emasculation of Scottish identity. Macmillan compares the work unfavorably with Ford Madox Brown's *The Last of England* of 1855 (Tate Gallery, London) and William McTaggart's emigration-inspired seascapes of the 1880s and 90s (which this essay considers later), without acknowledging that both these artists were also preoccupied with the sense of memory and past: heightened and precise for Brown; fluid and detached for McTaggart.[36] For all three it is the epic quality of the experience that adds tension and poignancy to the narrative; Faed is the only one who dared to confront the emotional upheaval, without offering the consolation of a new horizon or a better future.

Ford Madox Brown's rendering of the emigrant theme, a major Pre-Raphaelite work and one his best-known paintings, examines the topic from a southern English perspective. A husband and wife are shown aboard ship among a crowd of emigrants, their hands clutched tightly together, emotions of hope and despair apparent on their faces. In the background can be seen hands clutched in prayer and a fist being shaken at the receding white cliffs. This ambivalent reading, in which any expectations for the future are overwhelmed by the present, is reflected in the only other Scottish work to consider the moment of departure, John Watson Nicol's *Lochaber No More*. Exhibited at the Royal Academy almost thirty years after Faed's treatment of the theme, the painting could almost be taken from the same storyboard. The highly finished paintwork and unerring delineation of the meager possessions of the emigrants recalls Faed's depiction of spilt belongings on the quayside. And the ship is that same universal emigrant vessel whose rope slips away from those who remain. Now we are on the vessel, with the dispossessed shepherd, his wife and loyal dog. She has her head drooped, he gazes into space; neither has the desire to watch the mist shrouded landscape of their home that recedes behind them. Unlike Brown's painting, which evokes desperation, strained hope, and anger, this is an image of complete hopelessness, of lassitude and despair and, in the case of the shepherd, an element of stoic indifference. It is the visual evocation of the Reverend Irvine's observation: "they care not where they go."

Nicol's reputation rests on this image; he never painted another work of comparable quality or emotional impact. Indeed, his father—Erskine Nicol—is the better-remembered artist. His facile, humorous and occasionally parodic depictions of the peasantry—especially the Irish—made his work much sought after both during his life and after. For Nicol senior the experience of the emigrant was that of the innocent abroad, coping with travails through a natural ingenuity and a certain imbecility. His work avoided particulars and just uses the emigrant as an alternate cipher for the traditional comedic figure of the rural bumpkin. It contrasts dramatically with his son's analysis, which offers both nobility and tragedy.

Like Faed, Nicol was based in London. Born in Edinburgh in 1856, his family had moved to London on the wave of his father's commercial success in 1863. No record exists of Nicol's training, but it seems likely that he formed part of the circle associated with two sketching clubs, whose members included many London-based Scottish artists. One such club, Auld Lang Syne, was a re-established version of the Edinburgh Smashers' Club and included among its members James Archer, Thomas and John Faed, and Nicol's own father. More significantly, its younger members included John Pettie, William Quiller Orchardson, and Tom Graham who went on to form their own club, known simply as "The Sketching Club." Nicol's work owes so much to that of Pettie in particular that it seems inconceivable that he was not a part of this set. Pettie's biographer records that unusual sketching themes—"destruction" for example—were encouraged at the club meetings and this could well account for Nicol's dramatic treatment of his precocious early work.<sup>[37]</sup> The artist was just 27 years old when it was exhibited and subsequently reproduced as an engraving in the *Art Journal*. For the London audience it was a satisfying piece of genre of the "every picture tells a story" variety; critics applauded the detailed rendition of the sparse possessions and the evocation of pathos in the cowed figure of the redundant sheepdog.<sup>[38]</sup>

It is not just an essay in pathos, however. The dog and the clasped shepherd's crook offer an ironic insight into the cumulative effect of emigration and depopulation. It was sheep that first supplanted the humans and so, surely, the shepherd should be the last to leave. In the departure of the shepherd we see the final degradation of the Highlands. The year 1882 saw riots in Skye—the so-called "Crofter's War"—against the oppression of the tenantry. Partial resolution came in 1886 after the appointment of a government commission, but the painting coincides with a period of bitterness and sense of loss without equal in the experience of the Highland communities.<sup>[39]</sup> Lochaber is the emotive homeland of one of the greatest and noblest of Highland clans—the Camerons—and "Lochaber no More" is one of the most evocative of musical laments composed in the form known as the pibroch. Nicol's masterpiece is an elegy for the Highlands and in the plaintive, stark figures of these emigrants—truly the last of the clan—we are forced to acknowledge that, finally, Lochaber is no more.

Three years after Nicol's picture was exhibited—and contemporary with the publication of the 1886 Napier Report on the effects of the Highland Clearances—Thomas Faed exhibited the last of a linked triumvirate of paintings thereby offering a further commentary on the theme of emigration to North America. The first painting in the series had been exhibited almost forty years previously and the time elapsed between first and last painting in the series highlights the extent to which themes of departure and transience preoccupied the artist throughout his career. Faed was just 23 years old when *The First Letter from the*

*Emigrants* (location unknown) was exhibited at the Royal Scottish Academy in 1849. It is a far more characteristic example of his work than *The Last of the Clan*; the setting, the cottage interior which figures in so many of his early works, demonstrates the ability at depicting domestic minutiae that was required of the successful genre painter. A young man is shown sitting at a window reading a letter to his assembled family. The slanting light and contrast of sun and shadow was a favorite device of the artist and allowed opportunities to draw attention to the varying emotions of those who are listening—rapt attention, boredom, and complacency. The implication is that the letter comes from a similar family group and so the spectator is invited to imagine a similar scene—but set in the wilds of North America—as the letter was composed. It is an optimistic work, full of the light and brightness that characterize the artist's early oeuvre. The letter acts as a symbol of the transmigration of the family unit and the hope and opportunity of the emigrant experience.

This implicit interpretation was made explicit in the follow up to this work, *The Scottish Emigrants' Sunday in the Backwoods* of 1858 (fig. 4), which takes a less optimistic viewpoint as the family unit is seen relocated to the North American forest. As with *The Last of the Clan* the artist offered a fictitious subtitle quotation, which is couched specifically in the form of a letter to those at home.



Fig. 4, Thomas Faed, *Sunday in the Backwoods*, 1858. Oil on canvas. Montreal Museum of Fine Arts.

[\[larger image\]](#)

We have no church here but our log house or the wild forest; and a grand kirk the forest makes—not even the old cathedral has such pillars, nor so high a roof; so we e'en take turns about on Sunday in reading the Bible. We are all well except Jeannie, and as happy as can be considering the country and the ties we have left.<sup>[40]</sup>

Here, perhaps, is the text of the letter that was being read in the earlier picture. If so, there is a degree of misinformation going on. The contrast between the humble, but satisfied, life of the recipients and the mournful and depressing portrayal of the emigrants could not be greater. There are eleven individuals in the emigrant family and their facial expressions range from boredom to despair to wholehearted misery. If they are "as happy as they can be," it is a poor advertisement for the emigrant life. The only glimmer of light is from a window at the back of their crude log cabin where a ray of sunlight falls on a portrait. That the portrait is of Robert Burns only serves to emphasize the heartfelt absence of Scotland.

This melancholy and dispiriting work was exhibited at the Royal Academy of 1858 where it was admired by the *Art Journal* for "the rarest excellence in its line of subject" and by John Ruskin for its "gentle pathos."[\[41\]](#) It sold for the substantial sum of 900 guineas to a Mr. Holdsworth of Wishaw, Scotland. It subsequently passed into the hands of Lord Cheslymore and then to Lord Mount Stephen, who gifted it to the city of Montreal.[\[42\]](#) It is now in the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts where it offers itself as a perpetual memorial to the Scots-Canadian emigrant experience. Faed painted two copies: a smaller but otherwise identical version, now in Wolverhampton Art Gallery; and a much smaller work which was bequeathed to Haworth Art Gallery, Accrington, as part of the Nuttall Bequest in 1925.[\[43\]](#) This last version makes an interesting alteration. In the earlier two versions the vista that can be seen over the elder daughter's shoulder is open and sunlit with figures of playing children. The Haworth painting has replaced the children with a group of Native Americans who may, or may not, be approaching the habitation in a threatening manner.

Further changes occurred with the engraved version, again a mixed mezzotint by Simmons, published by Graves.[\[44\]](#) Here the open vista has been replaced with a dark forest overshadowing the house and its occupants. The window at the back of the cabin is no more and the Burns's portrait is obscure in the gloom. It is conceivable that the publisher wanted the print to reflect more closely the title of the work, but there is also a possibility that Faed wished to offer his subjects no opportunity for redemption whatsoever. Although some contemporary commentators delighted in Faed's "unrestrained pathos" others noted his "tendency to blackness" during this period, an unremitting desire to show the extremes of emotional turmoil and stoical acceptance within simple domestic scenes.[\[45\]](#) The mezzotint of *Sunday in the Backwoods* is, literally, a "blackening" of Faed's earlier vision, enclosing the forlorn family in a claustrophobic and inescapable situation that even the Bible cannot redeem.

The final work in the triumvirate lays open this despair. *Oh Why Have I Left My Hame?* (fig. 5) shows an aged Highlander in kilt at the edge of a lake gazing at a setting, or rising, sun. The landscape recalls Scotland, but the location is possibly intended to be one of the Great Lakes, and it seems likely that the old man is looking eastwards towards his lost homeland. It is a sparse and unadorned composition that serves to emphasize the gnawing sense of dislocation which has clearly never left the central character and which cannot be recaptured even in a landscape that resembles his birthplace. Faed is making it clear that there is no solace in emigration for the Scot; even the presence of family, possessions, and familiar surroundings cannot replace the innate geographical sense of being and identity.



Fig. 5, Thomas Faed, *Oh Why Have I Left My Hame?* 1887. Oil on canvas. Sunderland Museum and Winter Gardens, TW Museums. [\[larger image\]](#)

The painting was completed in 1887 and a version is now in the Sunderland Museum.<sup>[46]</sup> There is a certain irony in that when Faed painted it he had been living outside Scotland for almost thirty-five years. It has been conjectured that his view of emigration was a direct response to the departure for America of his mother's family, the McGeochs, from their family farm in Galloway in the 1840s.<sup>[47]</sup> That would, however, suggest a sense of familial integrity that is at odds with the artist's self-imposed exile in London, and there is no record of any ongoing correspondence or contact with the emigrants. Instead, Faed is commenting as much on the broader themes of dislocation and the meaning of "home" as on any specific circumstances. The two paintings that established Faed's London reputation — *The Mitherless Bairn* of 1855 (National Gallery of Victoria, Australia) and *Home and the Homeless* of 1856 (National Gallery of Scotland, Edinburgh)—directly addressed the contrast between those who have the comfort of a sense of place—specifically their own hearth—and those without. The latter, for Faed, are the real poor.

When his wealth allowed, Faed frequently returned to Scotland, unselfconsciously adopting the role of the rich sportsman. Asking a member of the Agnew art-dealing dynasty to join him on one occasion he wrote, "think on it—*your native air*."<sup>[48]</sup> In a poem that subtitled his 1884 work *Seeing them Off*, he wrote

He couldna leave his highland hame  
Where he was born and bred;  
The purple heath, his childhood trod  
Must o'er him bloom when he is dead.<sup>[49]</sup>

For Faed the sense of place of Scotland is greater than the reality. He asked that artists "observe" but that "the things seen must pass through the alembic of the brain."<sup>[50]</sup> His interpretation is based on a need to belong, and his pictures consistently examine in unsparring detail those that belong; the readers of the emigrant's letter, those left on the quayside—and those who do not, the emigrants in the backwoods, the Highlander by the lakeshore. The emigrant experience was the ultimate rejection of belonging and one that Faed could not comprehend. His belief that the emigrant experience was inevitably negative informs the recurring elements of pathos that runs through his oeuvre.

Despite his antipathy towards American emigration—and despite there being no record of him crossing the Atlantic as a visitor—Faed became one of the most respected Scottish artists in America. The dissemination of his printed work, partly through the activities of the Art Unions, brought him before a huge audience. The *Encyclopaedia Americana* of 1886 could write, without risk of contradiction,

It has been truly said that Thomas Faed has done for Scottish art what Robert Burns did for Scottish song. He has made it attract universal interest and command universal respect.[51]

Faed's near contemporary and fellow graduate of the Trustees' Academy in Edinburgh, William McTaggart (1835–1910), remained throughout his career, (and, to a large extent, remains today), comparatively unknown outside Scotland. Yet, for many, he is the greater Scottish artist and in national terms his reputation now outshines that of any of the Faed family. He, too, was briefly to explore the theme of emigration in some of his finest and most expressive paintings.

Unlike the Faeds, McTaggart had direct experience of the Highlands. He was born at Aros in Kintyre to Gaelic speaking parents. His father, a laborer, eked out an existence on a poor small-holding and so an awareness of the despair and poverty of west coast life would have been apparent to McTaggart from the earliest age. The west coast remained an abiding motif throughout his career and although based in Edinburgh for practical reasons, McTaggart returned to the west annually, painting around the beaches and harbors of Campbeltown and Machrihanish.[52] Although he was primarily a landscape painter, there is a consistent element of symbolism within his oeuvre. Themes of memory, of childhood, of the insistent presence of the past, color nearly all his works and so it is perhaps unsurprising that he finally turned to consider emigration, a social phenomenon that was both past and present and which dominated so many of the communities and so much of the landscape of the west coast. As a child he must have seen the great emigrant sailing ships anchored off Campbeltown and it is these he depicts in the 1890s, even though by then they had long been supplanted by steam vessels. Ultimately, there is little that connects McTaggart with Nicol or Faed, other than their selection of subject-matter. Whereas the latter were attempting to evoke the particular experience through the generalized or universal image, McTaggart used his childhood memories of emigrants as metaphor for the universality of human experience. All the artists really share is a desire to explore a sense of loss in its broadest sense.

By the late 19th century McTaggart's extraordinary painterly evolution had reached maturity. The slight looseness of handling, which had caused some critical concern in the 1870s,[53] had now given way to an unabashed dissolution of paint and subject. McTaggart claimed (or at least pretended) to have been unaware of the French Impressionists; he admired Turner, Constable and Whistler,[54] yet fundamentally reached his style on his own. A comparison has been made with the American painter, Pinkham Ryder, who, interestingly, visited Scotland in 1882.[55] For McTaggart, all was subservient to the effects of nature: human figures coalesced with rocks and sea in a maelstrom of oil paint, tinted priming, and canvas texture. "You must trust to your observation," he wrote, "and give a frank rendering of what you see."

Sometimes a glint of sunshine will so modify the appearance of a boat or a group of distant sails that it becomes difficult to say what the actual form is, but one accepts that in nature for what it suggests, and in a picture one should do the same.[56]

McTaggart started work on *The Emigrants* (Tate Britain) in 1883, but did not complete it until 1889–1890.[57] A second work, *The Emigrants—America* (Private Collection, fig. 6) was painted 1891–1894, and a third, *The Sailing of the Emigrant Ship* (National Gallery of Scotland, fig. 7), in 1895. A number of variants of, and studies for, these three compositions also exist and all share a broad compositional similarity, with indeterminate figures gathered on a foreshore and the emigrant ship visible, anchored in the distance. The second, and largest, painting in the series makes the destination of the emigrants most specific by having a crate in the foreground painted with the word "America," but otherwise there is a sense of the indefinite and the uncertain in what is portrayed. A contemporary visitor to McTaggart's studio was mystified when the artist gave a thorough description of the second picture, even referring to a piper playing "Lochaber No More." [58] McTaggart was clearly offering the visitor a facetious interpretation; his treatment is far from literal. For McTaggart the paintings are really about the headland and the sea: the point of departure and the infinite expanse abroad. The foreground of *The Emigrants—America* is confused with figures, baggage, and boats caught up in a flurry of paint, line, and texture. Beyond lies a curtain of rain, a gleam of sun and the serene, distant ship. McTaggart is not simply suggesting that emigration offers hope, but is exploring more profound themes about the expectation of departure, the contrast between the landlocked present and a future of possibility. His earlier exploration of the innocent vision of childhood is here offered a counterpart in the adult vision of new horizons.



Fig. 6, William McTaggart, *The Emigrants - America*, 1891-4. Oil on canvas. Private Collection.

[\[larger image\]](#)





Fig. 7, William McTaggart, *The Sailing of the Emigrant Ship*, 1895. Oil on canvas. National Gallery of Scotland. [\[larger image\]](#)

Simultaneously with the emigrant series, McTaggart was painting another major work *The Coming of St Columba*, 1895 (National Gallery of Scotland). Again we have a headland and a distant boat, but here the theme is one of arrival, not just of an emigrant, but also of Christianity itself. The western sea brings and it takes away, whether it is the tide, the emigrant, or Christianity itself. There is a timelessness in all of McTaggart's work: the endless summers of the child, the returning tide, the annual harvest; and so it is with arrivals and departure. There is no melancholy in McTaggart's view of emigration; the dog may howl, but any minor tragedy is overwhelmed by the sweep of the past and the enduring landscape under which the figures are subsumed. As the ship breaks the line of the horizon in *The Sailing of the Emigrant Ship*, the foreground turns placid. Smooth brush lines begin to ease out the human presence; the old man and his wife, who watch the departing ship, are already transparent and, it seems, will soon fade away altogether.

McTaggart's abstraction of the emigrant experience emphasizes the challenges for the Victorian artist of engaging with an experience that was open-ended, morally ambiguous, and without the possibility of satisfactory resolution. It is unsurprising therefore, that the theme of emigration appears infrequently in British genre or history painting.<sup>[59]</sup> Faed and Nicol attempted to distill the essential moment of the experience, with mixed success; McCulloch presented a magisterial, yet self-centered, vision of landscape that was possibly inimical to the desperate emigrants it purportedly addressed, and McTaggart evoked an ethereality of the experience that was, ultimately, perhaps closest to the fatalistic attitude of many Gaelic-speaking travelers. These few painters, who persisted in attempting to understand and interpret the phenomenon in painterly terms, are worthy of consideration precisely because of their rarity. Several artists attempted to tackle the subject, but few continued beyond a single canvas, defeated by the sheer human scale of one of the greatest social transformations in British—and certainly Scottish—history.

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## Notes

[1] Captain Birt, a surveyor in the British Army, quoted in Peter Bicknell, ed., *Beauty, Horror and Immensity: Picturesque Landscape in Britain, 1750–1850* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), ix.

[2] Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origins of the Sublime and the Beautiful* (London: R & J Dodsley, 1757), 86.

[3] There were several uprisings fomented in the Highlands of Scotland by the supporters of the exiled Stuart kings. Those of 1715/16 and 1745/6 were the most significant.

[4] James Holloway and Lindsay Errington, *The Discovery of Scotland*, exh. cat. (Edinburgh: National Gallery of Scotland, 1978), 33.

[5] Bicknell, *Beauty, Horror and Immensity*, xi.

[6] John Clerk to Margaret Adam, September 4, 1763, quoted in Holloway and Errington, *Discovery of Scotland*, 59–60.

[7] *Ibid.*

[8] Arthur Humphreys, "The Arts in Eighteenth-Century Britain," in *The Augustan Age*, ed. Boris Ford (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 44.

[9] Duncan Macmillan, *Scottish Art, 1460–1990* (Edinburgh: Mainstream, 1990), 220.

[10] John Prebble, *The King's Jaunt: George IV in Scotland* (London: Collins, 1988) is the most thorough description of the royal visit to Edinburgh of 1822.

[11] Lord Cockburn, *Circuit Journeys* (Edinburgh: D. Douglas, 1888), 308.

[12] Jeanne Cannizzo, *Our Highland Home: Victoria and Albert in Scotland* (Edinburgh: National Galleries of Scotland, 2005), 9, 27.

[13] *Ibid.*, 104.

[14] Holloway and Errington, *Discovery of Scotland*, 109–11.

[15] Ann Donald, "Behind the Scenes at the Museum," *Scotland on Sunday* (Glasgow), June 29, 2003.

[16] Sheenah Smith, *Horatio McCulloch 1805–1867* (Glasgow: Glasgow Museums and Art Gallery, 1988), 85.

[17] The painting was engraved by William Forrest for *The Illustrated Songs of Robert Burns* (Edinburgh: Royal Association for the Promotion of the Fine Arts in Scotland, 1861) pl.3 with the lines quoted printed below the title.

[18] Iconoclast, *Scottish Art and Artists in 1860* (Edinburgh: John Menzies, 1860), quoted in Holloway and Errington, *Discovery of Scotland*, 113–15. "Iconoclast" was the pseudonym of J. MacLennan.

[19] Michael Newton, *We're Indians Sure Enough: The Legacy of the Scottish Highlanders in the United States* (Auburn, NH: Saorsa Media, 2001), 46.

[20] James Logan, *The Scottish Gaël; or Celtic Manners, as Preserved Among the Highlanders* (London, 1831), *The Clans of the Scottish Highlands* (London: Ackerman, 1845); Charles Edward Sobieski Stuart and John Sobieski Stuart, *The Costume of the Clans* (Edinburgh, 1845); John Sobieski Stuart, *Vestiarium Scoticum* (Edinburgh, William Tait, 1842). The last was supposedly a transcription of a manuscript discovered in the Scots College at Douai. It was subsequently exposed as a fake.

[21] Robin Nicholson, "Highland Habits: The Iconography of the Sobieski Stuarts," *Scottish Studies Review*, 4, no 2 (2003):48–65; "From Ramsay's Flora MacDonald to Raeburn's MacNab:

The use of Tartan as a Symbol of Identity," *Textile History* 36, no.2 (2005): 146–67. Both these articles explore how the work of Logan and the Sobieski Stuarts created several abiding mythologies about Highland Scottish culture and dress. One of the best surveys of this phenomenon remains H. Trevor-Roper, "The Invention of Tradition" in., *The Invention of Tradition*, ed. E. Hobsbawm and T. Ranger (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 15–41.

[22] John Prebble, *The Highland Clearances* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1963) gives a good overview of both the history and historiography of this event.

[23] Newton, *We're Indians Sure Enough*, 75.

[24] The Highland line, also known as the Highland Boundary Fault, is the geological separation of north and south Scotland, which has also broadly demarcated the social, linguistic, and political separation of the north and the south.

[25] Both are used as illustrations in Fitzroy MacLean, *Highlanders: A History of the Highland Clans* (London: Adelphi, 1995); they were also loaned to the exhibition *Trailblazers, Scots in Canada*, National Museums of Scotland, Oct 2003–Jan 2004, which had few period artifacts and in which their role was primarily illustrative.

[26] Mary McKerrow, *The Faeds* (Edinburgh: Canongate 1982), 87.

[27] *Ibid.*

[28] *Ibid.*, 95.

[29] Quoted in Bill Smith and Selina Skipwith, *A History of Scottish Art* (London: Merrell, 2003), 48.

[30] *Exiles and Emigrants: Epic Journeys to Australia in the Victorian Era*, exh. cat. (National Gallery of Victoria, 2005), 36.

[31] Hilary Guise, *Great Victorian Engravings* (London: Astragal, 1980), 164. This was a relatively large print run.

[32] Flatou's 2000 guineas would be the equivalent of over £100,000 today.

[33] McKerrow, *Faeds*, 111.

[34] Macmillan, *Scottish Art*, 217.

[35] *Ibid.*

[36] *Ibid.*, 218.

[37] William Hardie, *Scottish Painting, 1837 to the Present* (London: Studio Vista, 1990), 45–46.

[38] Helen Smailes and Mungo Campbell, *Hidden Assets: Scottish Paintings from the Flemings Collection* (Edinburgh: National Galleries of Scotland, 1995), 62.

[39] *Ibid.*

[40] McKerrow, *Faeds*, 99.

[41] *Ibid.*, and Guise, *Great Victorian Engravings*, 163.

[42] McKerrow, *Faeds*, 100.

[43] Information from Jennifer Rennie, Curator, Haworth Art Gallery, January 2004.

[44] Guise, *Great Victorian Engravings*, 163.

[45] McKerrow, *Faeds*, 105.

[46] *Ibid.*, 153. The posthumous sale of Thomas Faed's pictures at Christie's in London, as reported in *The Times*, February 18, 1901, notes the picture as being 43 x 60 inches (90 guineas to Lister); the version at Sunderland is 56 x 74 inches.

[47] McKerrow, *Faeds*, 99.

[48] *Ibid.*, 117.

[49] *Ibid.*, 120.

[50] *Ibid.*, 121.

[51] *Ibid.*, back cover of dust-jacket.

[52] Lindsay Errington, *William McTaggart, 1835–1910*, exh. cat. (Edinburgh: National Gallery of Scotland, 1989), 51.

[53] *Ibid.*, 48.

[54] *Ibid.*, 84–87.

[55] Hardie, *Scottish Painting*, 69.

[56] Ibid.

[57] Errington, *William McTaggart*, exhibition catalogue insert.

[58] Errington *William McTaggart*, 106.

[59] *Exiles and Emigrants: Epic Journeys to Australia in the Victorian Era*, at the National Gallery of Victoria, 2005, has been the most comprehensive exhibition of such paintings and included many with indirect or tangential associations.

## Illustrations



Fig. 1, Horatio McCulloch, *My Heart is in the Highlands*, 1860. Oil on canvas. Glasgow Museums and Art Gallery [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 2, Thomas Faed, *The Last of the Clan*, 1865. Oil on canvas. Glasgow Museums and Art Gallery. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 3, John Watson Nicol, *Lochaber No More*, 1883. Oil on canvas. Fleming-Wyfold Art Foundation.  
[\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 4, Thomas Faed, *Sunday in the Backwoods*, 1858. Oil on canvas. Montreal Museum of Fine Arts.  
[\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 5, Thomas Faed, *Oh Why Have I Left My Hame?* 1887. Oil on canvas. Sunderland Museum and Winter Gardens, TW Museums. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 6, William McTaggart, *The Emigrants - America*, 1891-4. Oil on canvas. Private Collection. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 7, William McTaggart, *The Sailing of the Emigrant Ship*, 1895. Oil on canvas. National Gallery of Scotland. [\[return to text\]](#)