

## **West Coast Exile: A Scottish-Canadian Bard in the United States at the Turn of the Twentieth Century**

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Résumé de l'article

La plupart des petits agriculteurs chassés de l'île de Lewis par la Grande Famine d'Irlande durant les années 1840 sont venus s'installer dans la région accidentée des Appalaches du Nord, à la frontière du Canada-Est (la province de Québec), où ils ont reproduit de nombreux éléments de leur société gaélophone très soudée. Leurs nouveaux peuplements étaient largement homogènes, mais le fait que les familles dépendaient du salaire des jeunes hommes et femmes séjournant aux États-Unis a entraîné une assimilation culturelle, une émigration permanente et une diminution de la population, de telle sorte qu'il ne restait plus grand-chose, au début du XX<sup>e</sup> siècle, de la communauté montagnarde jadis flamboyante. Les Écossais du Québec se sont largement dispersés à travers le continent au cours de ce deuxième exode, mais des communautés identifiables se sont constituées dans des villes américaines telles que Springfield, Massachusetts, Seattle et Washington où elles ont maintenu leur tradition d'entraide. Cet essai examinera ce réseau d'entraide ainsi que le coût émotionnel de l'émigration, en bonne partie à travers les écrits d'un barde né au Canada, qui a pratiquement passé sa vie adulte aux États-Unis.

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**Abstract**

*Most of the crofters forced off the Isle of Lewis by the potato famine of the 1840s became colonists on the rugged northern Appalachian frontier of Canada East (the province of Quebec) where they reconstituted many elements of their close-knit Gaelic-speaking society. While their new settlements were largely homogenous, the fact that families depended upon the wages of young men and women sojourning in the United States resulted in cultural assimilation, permanent out-migration, and population decline, so that there was little left of this once-vibrant Highland community by the early twentieth century. While the Quebec Scots became widely dispersed across the continent during this second exodus, identifiable communities formed in American cities such as Springfield, Massachusetts, and Seattle, Washington, where they continued to depend upon each other for support. This essay will examine that support network, and the emotional cost of emigration, largely through the writing of a Canadian-born bard who spent much of his adult life in the United States.*

**Résumé**

*La plupart des petits agriculteurs chassés de l'Île de Lewis par la Grande Famine d'Irlande durant les années 1840 sont venus s'installer dans la région accidentée des Appalaches du Nord, à la frontière du Canada-Est (la province de Québec), où ils ont reproduit de nombreux éléments de leur société gaélophone très soudée. Leurs nouveaux peuplements étaient largement homogènes, mais le fait que les familles dépendaient du salaire des jeunes hommes et femmes séjournant aux États-Unis a entraîné une assimilation culturelle, une émigration permanente et une diminution de la population, de telle sorte qu'il ne restait plus grand-chose, au début du XX<sup>e</sup> siècle, de la communauté montagnarde jadis flamboyante. Les Écossais du Québec se sont largement dispersés à travers le continent au cours de ce deuxième exode, mais des communautés identifiables se sont constituées dans des villes américaines telles que Springfield, Massachusetts, Seattle et Washington où elles ont maintenu leur tradition d'entraide. Cet essai examinera ce réseau d'entraide ainsi que le coût émotionnel de l'émigration, en bonne partie à travers les écrits d'un barde né au Canada, qui a pratiquement passé sa vie adulte au États-Unis.*

Many of the Scots Highlanders who migrated to British North America settled in reconstituted communities where they carried on their cultural traditions, traditions that came to be romanticized in Canada as in Great Britain and elsewhere.<sup>1</sup> Nova Scotia's Cape Breton Island and Ontario's Glengarry County are well-known areas of Canadian Highland Scots settlement, but a sizeable

Gaelic-speaking colony also took root in several Quebec townships located between the upper St Francis River and Lake Megantic in what was then northern Compton County.<sup>2</sup> Because this was a particularly homogenous community, its members being almost entirely from the remote west coast of the Outer Hebridean Isle of Lewis, it has been possible to examine closely their socioeconomic and cultural adaptation to the new-world environment (see Little, *Crofters and Habitants*). But the economic limitations of the settlement area meant that this adaptation process eventually led to the dissolution of the community as the Canadian-born generations sought out more promising locations, mostly in the United States.

In contrast to the trans-Atlantic experience, this migration was highly fragmented, with individuals and families scattering across the continent, making it almost as difficult for the historian to study their experiences as those of other English-speaking Canadians who quickly blended into American society.<sup>3</sup> But the Scots' emotional ties to the community they had established in Quebec remained strong, as reflected in the correspondence from locations south of the border that appeared in the newspapers of Sherbrooke and Compton during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Little, "Popular Voices"). One of those newspaper correspondents also assumed the role of community "bard" until, at the age of thirty-five, he and his wife joined his brothers and sisters in the city of Seattle. I have examined elsewhere the role of this people's poet, Angus MacKay, while he was still spending most of his time in Quebec's Eastern Townships during the 1880s and 1890s (Little, "The Bard"), but in this essay I will focus largely on his years in exile from the community where he had been a popular entertainer as well as spokesman on social and political issues. English-speaking Canadians who migrated to the United States quickly blended into the cultural mainstream, but the song-poems and newspaper articles published by MacKay reveal that the Highland Scots identity survived the second exodus for a generation or more even on the distant west coast of the United States.<sup>4</sup>

MacKay's people had experienced an internal exile before crossing the Atlantic in the mid-nineteenth century. The pacification of the Highlands, especially after the Battle of Culloden in 1746, had accelerated the disintegration of the clan system, and economic commercialization had provided the increasingly anglicized chieftains with the motivation to remove clansmen from their communally based interior settlements in order to make room for sheep. In Lewis this process began in the 1790s when families were relocated to individual crofts of two to five acres on the rugged west coast of the island. There they were forced to survive largely on potatoes, and to gather kelp in the cold waters of the North Atlantic in order to pay their rents (see Devine, *Great Highland Famine*).

After the Napoleonic Wars had ended, however, the price of the alkali produced from burning beach-dried kelp dropped precipitously because British manufacturers regained access to cheaper Mediterranean sources. With their numbers expanding rapidly, the Lewis crofters became an economic burden on the landlord who began in the late 1830s to arrange for their emigration to the North American colonies. The exodus accelerated when the potato blight struck repeatedly in the later 1840s, and 2,337 individuals booked passage to Canada at the landlord's expense between 1851 and 1855. A considerable number went to Bruce County in Upper Canada, but the majority settled in the remote and mountainous townships on the eastern frontier of Lower Canada's Eastern Townships. Some 400 families have been traced from the west coast of Lewis to the upper St Francis district of Quebec, and Angus MacKay's paternal and maternal grandparents were among the small first wave of fifteen families who settled on British American Land Company lots in the township of Lingwick in 1838 (Little, *Crofters and Habitants* 17–24; T. A. McKay 37–38).<sup>5</sup>

Born in 1864, the twelfth of thirteen children, MacKay led a rather unremarkable life in some ways, for he drifted from job to job and place to place, his main ambition being to entertain people with his song-poems and often-humorous social notes in the local newspapers.<sup>6</sup> Referring to himself as Oscar Dhu, MacKay assumed the role of a bard who spoke essentially to and for his local community.<sup>7</sup> MacKay developed a deep attachment to the Scottish settlement but his earliest years were spent in largely American-settled Ascot Township where his father worked in the Capelton mines producing copper for the Civil War market (T. A. McKay 45; W. Gillies Ross). The Scots may have settled together in a remote area of the province where their language and many of their customs survived for several generations, but they resorted to the same sojourning strategies that had enabled them to remain in their impoverished Lewis homeland as long as they did (Devine, *Clanship to Crofters' War*, ch. 10). To support their parental families on their marginal northern Appalachian farms, many young men worked in the granite quarries of New England, while their sisters gained employment as domestics in Boston, to name two of the more popular occupations. There they inevitably absorbed materialistic and individualistic North American values that would finally result in the permanent emigration of individuals and families.<sup>8</sup>

How long MacKay's family spent in Capelton is not clear, but by 1881 they were on a farm in the original Scots settlement of Lingwick Township. Angus was now seventeen years old, one sister had married a local farmer, two others were in New England, one brother was in Massachusetts, another was in New Mexico supervising the construction of a rail line, and a third was a quarry foreman in New Hampshire. Angus would soon return to Ascot Township with his younger brother to join the household of yet another sister in the town of Sherbrooke. There he would work in the city's large woollen mill, beginning, he would later write, "a storey below the foot of the ladder" in the

factory's damp, dark basement. MacKay's employment was quickly curtailed by rheumatism, which he would suffer from the rest of his life, and he retreated again to Lingwick where his writing career soon began (T. A. McKay 55–59).<sup>9</sup>

Angus MacKay was a great admirer of his community's Gaelic bards, particularly his cousin, Finlay McRitchie,<sup>10</sup> but his schooling was in English and many of his poems are in the romantic Victorian literary style. Limited though his formal education was, MacKay quoted well-known English and Scots poets rather than from the Gaelic oral culture. As in the folk tradition, however, his poems are not introspective, their subject matter is most often the local community, and they were meant to be recited or sung in public.<sup>11</sup> MacKay's three main themes were locally inspired satire, historical remembrance, and social commentary. His first and best-known publication, *Donald Morrison, the Canadian Outlaw: A Tale of the Scottish Pioneers*, is a 118-page epic account of his people's settlement in Quebec as well as of the incident that made one member of the community a famous fugitive from justice in 1888–89.<sup>12</sup>

Like Johnny Burke, the “bard of Prescott Street” in St John's, Newfoundland (St. Pierre), as well as Dawn Fraser, the people's poet of Cape Breton Island (Frank and MacGillivray), MacKay was a voice for the “little” man and woman, satirizing the powerful and defending those whom he felt had suffered from injustice. In 1897, for example, he criticized the monopolistic British American Land Company for laying charges against a local Scots farmer who had cut a substantial amount of timber on the company's land. After the farmer was sentenced to eight months of “hard labour,” MacKay wrote that the company had turned a blind eye to the practice during the previous fifty years, on the tacit understanding that stumpage would be paid by the settler at current rates, “and why they should so suddenly present such a cast iron front at this late date by incarcerating young Morrison, a hard-working, useful citizen passes our comprehension, but affords an additional proof of the truth of the old saying that ‘corporations have no souls.’” Criticizing the company for “pouncing like a beast of prey upon a single individual whose offence was not at all commensurate with the punishment meted out to him,” MacKay suggested a historical justification for the condemned act:

Ever since the first Scotch pioneer penetrated the wilds of Compton, fleeing the tyranny and extortion of the old country landlords, down to the present time, the B.A.L. Co. have hung like a mill stone upon the neck of the settler. This company's annual drove of fine cattle which passes westward from our locality attests to the drain upon the resources of many of the farmers who are still paying heavy interest on farms that were really paid for years ago, and if now and then an occasional settler strives, by chopping down a few trees, to rid himself of this never-ending incubus, who in heaven or on earth will blame him? (*Sherbrooke Gazette* 17 September 1897, reprinted in T. A. McKay 75–76)

The company responded by suing the impecunious MacKay for \$5000 in damages, charging that his article would undermine its ability to detect lumber thieves in a community “where the neighbors absolutely refuse to give information,” and that it would encourage others to engage in the practice. The company also denied that it was in the habit of settling with trespassers, but the court rejected this claim, simply charging costs against the defendant (T. A. McKay 77–78).<sup>13</sup>

MacKay made his living as a semi-itinerant worker, for he appears never to have owned land and, partly for health reasons, he spent winters in Springfield, Massachusetts where there was a sizeable Compton Scots community, including his brother, Dannie. MacKay reported from Springfield in March 1889 that “All the young highlanders are enjoying uniform success in the land of their adoption. And as is invariably the case with ‘Scotch Canadians’ are in great requisition in their respective capacities.” He added, however, that “although our young men and women are prospering with Uncle Sam, they are notwithstanding loyal to the core, as prosperity can never alienate their thoughts or affections from the country of their birth.” As a die-hard Liberal, MacKay blamed the exodus to the United States on the Conservative government’s protective tariff policy, arguing that the Canadian farmer “is in fact labouring under a double bondage of egyptianlike severity, and the wonder is that he so long tolerates a trade policy, manifestly adopted to discriminate against the many in favor of the few” (*Sherbrooke Examiner* 29 March 1889).<sup>14</sup>

Emotional attachment won over economic considerations in MacKay’s own case, for his brother hosted a party a few weeks later to help fund his return to the Eastern Townships. The occasion was memorialized in a lengthy poem published in the *Sherbrooke* press:

And following with stately tread  
Came Springfield’s royal Scotch brigade,  
All in their “Sunday best” arrayed —  
    Stiff collars and trim ties.  
When lo, a swain with strength galore  
Marched “Oscar Dhu” across the floor,  
And placed him trembling to the fore,  
    The victim of surprise.

He could not speak; each fibre thrilled  
When “Donald” said the party willed  
That he should have a purse well filled  
    With legal currency.

Having set the stage, MacKay proceeded to reward his hosts and benefactors in the traditional fashion:

Since Scottish heroes sang *duans*  
Upon the field of Prestonpans,  
So great a gathering of the clans  
Was surely never seen.

And brilliant Byron's "ladies fair,"  
Who danced in Belgium's balmy air,  
Could never with our maids compare  
In beauties' realm, I ween.

Bright highland girls from home were there.  
With dancing eyes and wavy hair,  
And roses, stamped by cooler air,  
On ev'ry blooming cheek.  
And other ladies fair and bright,  
Who are not Scotch, were there that night,  
Contributing the keen delight  
Of charmers, so to speak.

(*Sherbrooke Examiner*, 3 May 1889)

Three weeks later MacKay's Springfield social note in the *Sherbrooke Examiner* announced that he would be returning home: "The birds sang as sweetly in April here as they do in the maple groves at Gould Station in June—almost. Myriads of falling blossoms dispense their fragrance on the balmy air, and the face of nature is wreathed in her brightest smiles. But we aliens fail to appreciate Springfield's chiefest charm, inasmuch as it is not our home. Our home is in the north, and we look forward with pleasure to the day in the near future, which will mark our departure for Canada" (*Sherbrooke Examiner*, 24 May 1889). MacKay appears not to have returned to Springfield the following winter, for another of the city's Quebec Scots versified as follows on brother Danny's February 1890 party on Morris Street:

I know that each warm heart is true  
To the poetic "Oscar Dhu."  
And that his friends, both old and new,  
With all their hearts his absence rue.  
They often, Oscar, thought of you,  
When on their minds remembrance grew,  
As o'er their minds sweet memories blew,  
Which Morris Street calls up—of you  
Let me their true wish bring to view—  
May your life-sorrows be but few.<sup>15</sup>



MacKay continued to write for the Sherbrooke press and to perform at social functions such as weddings and concerts known as *ceilidhs*, but any remuneration for doing so would have been minimal, and he had a family to support after marrying his first cousin (a common practice among Highland emigrants) around 1891 (T. A. McKay 81–83, 93–94; Molloy).<sup>16</sup> In April 1894, after noting that three local Scots had left for Montana and Vermont, MacKay lamented that “It is not easy to see the strength and beauty of our township passing over to Uncle Sam” (*Sherbrooke Gazette*, 13 April 1894). But, looking for a warmer climate as well as more secure employment, he finally left the community himself in 1899, moving to the American southwest where his eldest brother, John, was managing the construction of a railway. MacKay’s feeling of homesickness in this arid region is described in his autobiographical “The Alkali Land:”

Yes, on as I plodded the limitless range,  
In that land of hot sand and eternal clear skies,  
How oft in my thirst did I long for a change  
To my own native hills, where the watersprings rise!  
O Compton beloved! what visions arose,  
Of thy hills and dark vales and thy cold mountain streams!  
And each fountain-like *fuadhran* which bubbles and flows,  
On the farm back at home in the land of my dreams!

(“The Alkali Land or A-Roaming I Would Go,” in MacKay, *By Trench* 131)

But rather than returning to Compton, MacKay moved to Seattle where one of his sisters already lived with her husband and family. Although MacKay was joined by his wife and newborn daughter, the other two children remained in Quebec with their grandparents until they reached adulthood.<sup>17</sup> Another of MacKay’s sisters and a brother, as well as John and his family, had also moved to the west coast city by 1900. Most members of this extended family lived for many years in a Latona district house they named the Castle, where other migrants from the Quebec Scots community gathered to carry on the *ceilidh* tradition, though they also sang the popular songs of Harry Lauder, who was a family acquaintance (T. A. McKay 101–11, 115–16).

Angus would continue to suffer from rheumatism, and to work at a variety of jobs such as surveying, logging, and carpentry, as well as real estate sales in the employ of a fellow Highlander from the Eastern Townships.<sup>18</sup> Having been uprooted from the community that he had spoken for, MacKay appears to have published very little in the west coast press, though an unidentified



newspaper did print his unabashedly boosterish “The Seattle Spirit” in 1907. One verse declared:

I'm ready for the fray.  
    And I'm fit!  
San Francisco on the bay  
    Raise your mit!  
And old Portland up the stream  
Pray awaken from your dream  
Long enough to hear me scream,  
    I am it!

(Reprinted in T. A. McKay 219–20)

But MacKay remained emotionally attached to his Quebec past, and his most moving works were nostalgic commemorations of the lives of pioneer Scots settlers, a form that had deep roots in the Gaelic tradition (James Ross 114-18). In the preface to his 1913 poetic eulogy in honour of his uncle and father-in-law, Murdo McLeod, MacKay complained: “They live, move and have their being among us for many, many years and their passing elicits no more consideration from the average country correspondent than does the ill-fated calf which ‘lost its life’ in one of the wells of Keith, or the ‘valuable horse’ which ‘broke its leg’ at Canterbury.” The Scots community may have been dispersing, but MacKay’s self-appointed role was to honour the generation that had experienced the migration from Lewis:

In this distant Western City  
    I was saddened when I read,  
That the “Grand Old Man” of Lingwick,  
    On the “North Hill” road was dead.

He’ll be missed by all the neighbours  
    As they missed no other man  
Who hath “rested from his labors”  
    Since their settlement began.

They will miss him in the winter  
    When the nights are long and cold,  
And they gather at the “kaley,”  
    To retell the tales of old.

They will miss him in the summer  
    As they congregate around  
To exchange their harmless gossip  
    On the evening trysting ground.

[...]

Keen of brain and strong of body,  
Brave and honest to the core,  
He is gone and we shall never  
See his equal anymore.

(*Sherbrooke Record*, 8 February 1913, reprinted with commentary in  
T. A. McKay 230–32)

MacKay also commemorated the lives of those who died far away from Quebec, as in the case of Donald McLeod, a cousin who had contracted smallpox while serving with the American army in Arizona in 1882. When the poem was written is not clear, but it was published in *By Trench and Trail* in 1918:

Among the lads so kind and true, who sought the land of golden hue,  
To meet amid its glittering hopes an early doom,  
Was Lingwick's strongest, lealest man, the joy and pride of all his clan,  
As brave a youth as ever graced a Compton home.

[...]

The air within the mountain camp was uncongenial, cold and damp;  
And springtide gales were moaning dismally outside:  
No loving hand was there to press his fevered brow with fond caress,  
No gentle voice to whisper comfort when he died.

[...]

And now he sleeps beneath the sod, where grand old mountain pine  
trees nod  
Their lofty plumes beneath the far-off distant dome!  
Oh, stranger, should you linger near, drop on this lonely grave a tear,  
In memory of the boy that sleeps so far from home.

(“In Memory of Donald McLeod,” 123–26)

The English translation of Finlay McRitchie's Gaelic poem mourning the same young man, as well as his own daughter who died the same year, illustrates how anglicized Angus MacKay's rhyming compositions were by comparison. Addressing “Death,” McRitchie's poem resembles an Old Testament psalm:

But though I grieve, wounded as I am by you,  
I regret that you seek out my friends.  
You took Donald McLeod, one who was the most valiant of heroes,  
From the meadow that reared him in his youth.

That youth was handsome, the fair-haired son of Murdo Donn,  
And you followed him out to mount Arizona.  
And you made his bed beside a tree  
under the feet of night-prowling beasts...  
And his friends mourning for him.

[...]

Surely you are a cruel herald,  
    neither do you cease from the chase.  
And the speed of the racer cannot outstrip you.  
Very enemy of the people; many a hand you made cold  
Since you put Abel in the grave.

(Original and English translation are in T. A. McKay 252–57)

Given McRitchie's deep immersion in the Gaelic tradition, it is hardly surprising that he remained on his Red Mountain farm all his life while MacKay served as a voice for the dispersed Scots community.<sup>19</sup> Several of MacKay's eulogies were composed in honour of fellow Quebec Scots exiles on the west coast, such as his first cousin, the Lewis-born John "the Chicken" MacLeod:

He could sing the songs of loveland, as I've seldom heard  
them sung —  
Richest treasures of the Highlands flowed in music from his tongue.  
What a privilege and pleasure to have heard him in his prime,  
Ere his mellow notes were burdened by the cruel strains of time.

("The End of the Trail," in MacKay, *By Trench and Trail* 71; T. A. McKay 118)

In paying homage in a Sherbrooke newspaper to Colin MacIver, a Quebec Scot who had published a book of Gaelic verse before dying in Seattle in 1918, MacKay was also expressing pride in his own role as bard:

In his prime, he possessed a voice of unusual timbre and sweetness, and it was indeed a treat to hear him sing songs of his own composition, both sentimental and comic, at various neighborhood gatherings, so dear to the heart of the Highlander, such as new land clearing bees, quilting bees, weddings, to which everyone was invited, and other social and community events, where the services of the old-time minstrel were appreciated and enjoyed indeed. When it is considered that organs, pianos and the movies were unknown in those days, and that the French fiddle was frowned upon as an instrument of the devil by the austere Scotch Elders, it will be seen that a person who could compose, at will, songs upon any subjects, and sing them to any tune imaginable, held not only an enviable but unique position in any community; and such a position *Callam Beg* held for many years in the Winslow district, and with his passing has vanished a character if not an institution which will be hard to replace (*Sherbrooke Record*, 18 October 1918, reprinted in T. A. McKay 84).<sup>20</sup>

In 1918, after the appearance of his second book, *By Trench and Trail*, MacKay wrote to a friend in Quebec that a volume more specifically focussed on the Compton settlers would soon be published, but *Pioneer Sketches* (noted in the frontispiece to *By Trench and Trail*) never appeared, and the material MacKay gathered has not been found. *By Trench and Trail*, printed by MacKay's nephew in Seattle, included patriotic poems linked to the First World War in an attempt to attract a broader audience, but it failed to find a significant market.<sup>21</sup> MacKay's appeal, as well as his interests, was rather exclusively tied to a community that was fast dissolving. Another Quebec Scot wrote from Seattle after MacKay's death in 1923 that he had attempted to convince him to write about some of the city's figures, "but the next time that I would call on him, I would probably find that he had written up something about someone in Ballallan, or Red Mountain or Weedon, or wherever his fancy would carry him, the thing would be so immensely funny, the evening would pass away so pleasantly (he was such a princely entertainer) that you could not find it [in] your heart to criticize [sic]. And so the weeks, months and years passed on."<sup>22</sup>

Not all the Scots who moved to Seattle were so tied to the past, for MacKay and his wife were the only members of their Seattle clan not to become naturalized American citizens (T. A. McKay 103–104).<sup>23</sup> Before leaving Quebec permanently, he had challenged President Cleveland concerning the Alaska Boundary dispute of 1897:

Why rely on jingo blowing  
    If you're bent upon subduing  
Brave Canadians who've been growing  
    Since they met Montgomery?  
Drop your systematic hounding,  
    And your epithets loud sounding  
For we've pipers here abounding  
    Who could blow you out to sea!  
[...]  
Yea, at prospects of a battle  
    From old Bangor to Seattle  
Each Canadian would skedaddle  
    To defend his home and kin;  
And from Picton [Pictou?] to Vancouver  
    We would welcome each one over;  
Thus united, brother Grover,  
    Would you have a chance to win?

MacKay was certainly not anti-American, however, and he appeared to feel that Canadian absorption into the United States was inevitable. His poem continued:

There's another way that's better  
    Than coercion and the fetter,  
And we'll tell you in this letter  
    How to circumvent the end:  
Cultivate a better feeling  
    For your neighbor in your dealing—  
As you'll never see us kneeling  
    For the favors you can lend.  
Let events their course pursuing  
    Glide along as they've been doing —  
Let our people interwooing—  
    Intermarry—buy and sell;  
Let your friendly salutation,  
    Be extended to this nation,  
Let the law of gravitation  
    Do the rest—and all is well!

(“The Cleveland Message or How Canada and the U.S. May Become One,” in MacKay, *By Trench and Trail* 25–26)

A later poem on the same dispute advised:

We've emerged from clouds of discord  
    And should never more go back,  
Whether Skagway's 'neath Old Glory  
    Or beneath the Union Jack!

(“How We Settled the Alaskan Boundary Question,” in MacKay, *By Trench and Trail* 98)

Finally, in “The American Eagle,” one of his poems on the First World War, MacKay celebrated the strength of his adopted country, without forgetting the land of his birth:

Brave, determined northern neighbor, hold the “hills” so dearly won—  
Hold the hills until the Eagle strikes with you to crush the Hun!  
Courage! Allies, friends of freedom, in this war we're all akin—  
Carry on! Old Glory's with you on the red road to Berlin!

(MacKay, *By Trench and Trail* 122)

The fact was that the Canadian–American border was not as significant a dividing line for the Compton Scots as was the line between their home community and

the rest of the continent. Once they left that home permanently, in other words, it did not particularly matter whether they lived in Canada or the United States, in the east or in the west, so most of them simply moved to where they felt the greatest economic opportunities were to be found, though some clustered in cities such as Springfield and Seattle where they could rely on economic and emotional support from their own people. There they maintained a sense of community and cultural identity in social gatherings that preserved the *ceilidh* tradition and the memory of the Quebec community in which they had been raised. Many of the expatriates in both cities listened to Angus MacKay, alias Oscar Dhu, as he performed compositions that reminded them of the tight-knit social ties and distinctive cultural practices that had been transferred from the Isle of Lewis. MacKay, of course, had a particularly strong reason for feeling nostalgic in Seattle where there was only a small remnant of the community that had granted him admiration and respect despite his poverty and lack of material ambition. But the fact that the Sherbrooke press continued to publish MacKay's poems and eulogies even after he had left Canada permanently suggests that he had an audience that shared his emotional attachment to a time and place that had softened the abrupt transition from the conservative communalism of the old world to the liberal individualism of the new.

## Notes

1. For a recent example of such romanticization, see Bennett. For a critical examination of its impact on Nova Scotia, see Ian McKay.
2. See, for example, Campbell and MacLean; MacGillivray; Doucette. The Scots-origin population of northern Compton County peaked at about 3500 individuals in 1881, and then declined to less than 3000 in 1901, and approximately 1400 by 1931. Little, "From the Isle of Lewis" 43–46.
3. For one such study, based on oral interviews, see Burrill *Away*.
4. For an argument that the Highland migrants' sense of alienation in the new world has been exaggerated, see Kennedy. Much of my information on MacKay's life in the United States is from T. A. McKay. McKay is MacKay's grandnephew, and it appears that other members of the family also spelled their last name without the first "a".
5. Later arrivals were attracted to the fifty-acre free grants of crown land in neighbouring townships. See Little, *Nationalism* chs. 1 and 4.
6. This transience is a characteristic of folk poets. See Glassie 42.
7. On the evolution of the bardic tradition, see Thomson.
8. On this theme, see Little, *Crofters and Habitants* chs. 3 and 4.
9. T. A. McKay (241, 245) suggests that one of the McKay sisters may have died as a nurse serving in the Union army during the Civil War.
10. McRitchie, whom MacKay claimed was Canada's "greatest Gaelic poet," spent his entire life on his Red Mountain farm. On McRitchie and his compositions, see T. A. McKay 241–84.
11. On the characteristics of folk culture, see Oring 17–18.
12. On the social significance of this event, see Little, "Popular Resistance."

13. For other examples of McKay's political commentary, see Little, "The Bard" 63–67.
14. A social gathering reported in the Springfield press in early 1889 listed forty-four Canadian guests, at least twenty-nine of whom were females, and nearly all of whom were from Scots communities in northern Compton county. *Sherbrooke Examiner*, 8 March 1889; T. A. McKay 62–63, 66, 73.
15. Reprinted in T. A. McKay, 161. McKay's response is reprinted in T. A. McKay 164–65. McKay cites the *Sherbrooke Examiner*, 14 March 1890 and 28 March 1890 as the sources of these poems, but he is mistaken.
16. The *ceilidh* was originally a private informal gathering, but public events became more popular in the Highland Quebec community during the 1890s. See MacDonald 31; Little, "The Bard" 68–69; and Little, "Popular Voices" 146.
17. A third daughter was born in Seattle in January 1902. McKay family genealogy, Thomas A. McKay to author, Arlington, VA, 10 May 1992.
18. By 1917 Angus's wife, Gertie, was listed as a grocer. T. A. McKay 106.
19. McRitchie wrote a lengthy English-language poem in 1889 lamenting the departure of "Our Young Men" to the United States. Two of his own sons moved to Colorado, another to Oregon, and a daughter to Montana. T. A. McKay 246–49, 261–65.
20. MacIver's book was published as Caliean MacIomhair, *Orain Ghailig* (Sydney, NS: McTalla, 1902). Winslow Township is on the northern border of Lingwick.
21. Bishop's University Library, Eastern Townships Collection, Angus MacKay to John Leonard, Seattle, 16 April 1918; T. A. McKay 118–21.
22. Société d'histoire de Sherbrooke, Fonds Famille John Leonard (1855–1935), P98-1, Correspondence, 1891–1934, D. H. McAskill to [John Leonard?], Seattle, 192[3?], first page missing.
23. Szasz's *Scots in the North American West* provides accounts of a number of Scots, including those who migrated from Canada, who prospered in the west.

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