

Sad history of cruel voyage to the Americas

Ceremony: Dornoch event commemorates 80 who perished in desperate 1773 crossing



SUSY MACAULAY

The Sutherland clearances of 1807-20 are notorious, well-documented and never to be forgotten in the Highland psyche.

But few remember the wave of emigration from Sutherland that took place 50 years before for equally traumatic reasons.

A recent ceremony at Dornoch beach restored to local memory the harrowing tale of a group of desperate people who sailed from that shore 250 years earlier in search of a better life in the New World.

Led by civic dignitaries, including Provost of Dornoch Patrick Murray, Rev Graeme Muckart and Dr Andrew Senior, co-chairman of Dornoch Heritage, and Deputy Lord Lieutenant of Sutherland Catriona Whitefield, some

60 people gathered for a service of commemoration and wreath laying in the Firth.

The piper for the occasion was Pipe Major William Fraser.

While Kara Mackay sang and recited Ged Tha Mi's Choill' Am Falach (Although I Am Hidden In The Forest) and Fear A Batha (The Boat Man).

On September 17 1773, the brig Nancy carried 280 desperate people away from the shores of Sutherland heading to New York.

The ship was recklessly unsanitary and ill-provisioned - 80 desperate emigres would die on the way in horrific conditions.

This emigration wave was not to make way for more profitable sheep for the landlord, but driven by fall-out from the massive social and economic changes after the failed Jacobite rebellion of 1745.

"Clan chiefs and other leaders in Highland society saw an opportunity to profit from the clan lands

they were entrusted with and abandoned their role as paternalistic caretakers for their clansmen so they could act as commercial landlords," writes Kyston Jones of Washington University in his history undergraduate thesis.

"This social upheaval forced many to abandon the Highlands."

Each of the two preceding harvests had failed, driving the people deeper and deeper into debt arrears and famine.

Landowners had also begun to question why they needed tacksman any more in their drive to modernise farming practice, so the Sutherland estates tacksman, one Robert Gray of Creich, began to look to his own interests.

As tacksman he rented land from the estates, subdivided it and rented it on to the crofters, giving him a fearsome amount of power.

Professor David Bell of Stirling University has looked into what happened to the Sutherland emigres as a result of Gray's ruthlessness.

He was inspired to follow up a mysterious card he found in his late father



IN MEMORY: Deputy Lord Lieutenant of Sutherland Catriona

Whitfield carries flowers to be cast into the Firth in memory of The Nancy's lost emigres.

“Captain said he would be happy if all the passengers died, then he wouldn't have to sail to New York

James's papers, titled The Nancy.

James Bell was the founder and prime mover of the Dornoch Heritage Society. His research led him to a detailed account of the ill-fated voyage of The Nancy, printed in The Scots Magazine the following year.

He said: "Gray organised a visit to Dornoch by some Glasgow merchants who were interested in taking a cargo of 'servants' to America.

"This would likely be to enter indentured servitude, where individuals work for nothing until they have repaid a loan.

"Emigration could work well for more affluent communities but those

wishing to leave from Dornoch struggled to meet the costs of the voyage, three guineas a head."

The Nancy was owned by William Parker of Leith, and was captained by George Smith.

Gray had chartered it for 650 guineas, with half the sum due in July 1773, the rest due on embarkation.

But the money simply wasn't there, so the voyage was delayed out of the weather window for a calmer Atlantic crossing until September.

David said: "It was decided to set sail on September 17 even though less than half of the sum had been paid.

"This caused the ship to sail with inadequate

provisions even if the voyage had gone smoothly. "The ship was extremely cramped for 280 people - bunks were inadequate."

She ran into bad weather almost immediately, and had to take shelter in Stromness and off the coast of Ireland, the miserly provisions dwindling all the while as the captain refused to take the passengers ashore at points where they were close to the coast.

"There was no cook and the food was inadequate for already malnourished crofters, who had never even been to sea before," David said.

"Smith and his crew fed well and refused to share with the emigrants.

"Nevertheless, realising that they could not sail the ship themselves, the passengers decided against mutiny.

"Gradually passengers succumbed to starvation, disease and some to injury caused by the crew."

Smith and most of his crew displayed extreme brutality and callousness towards the passengers, even beating up one crew member who tried to help them.

All but one of the 50 children aged four or under died. Of the seven pregnant women who were

delivered on board, all died but one, as did all their babies. In total, 80 passengers died.

"Unbelievably, Smith charged 6d for each of the passengers the crew committed to a watery grave," David said.

"He even went to far as to say he would be happy if all the passengers were dead, then he wouldn't have to sail to New York and could go straight to the Carolinas."

The Nancy eventually arrived in New York in December 1773, at which point Captain Smith scarpared to the Carolinas. It didn't take long for the

people of New York to hear of the plight of the wretched Sutherland emigres and take pity on them.

The one ray of light in the terrible saga was the presence of Reverend Dr John Witherspoon (inset, opposite page and left).

He would achieve fame as one of the two Scots to sign the Declaration of Independence and as the respected president of Princeton University.

David said: "He preached a special sermon in the Presbyterian Church which raised £80 for the relief of the stricken survivors of The Nancy."

And there the survivors' stories end, as there is no further knowledge of

what happened to them after their arrival in New York.

As for Parker, Smith and Gray, they got off scot-free.

"There was no retribution for Robert Gray," David said. "The captain and owner of The Nancy both sought to exonerate themselves from blame."

But Lynne Mahoney, curator of Historylinks Museum in Dornoch is determined not to let the tale of The Nancy rest there.

She is travelling on other business to New York later this year and plans to visit the city archives to see if any trace can be found of Nancy survivors and what happened to them.



Dr Andrew Senior, co-chairman of Dornoch Heritage; Rev Graeme Muckart; Patrick Murray, Provost of Dornoch, and Pipe Major Willie Fraser.



Prof David Bell researched The Nancy.



A trading brig of the late 1700s.

