

FCRC SEMINAR – ‘PROLOGUE – WOMEN’S LIVES BEFORE TRANSPORTATION’, HOBART, OCT 23, 2016.

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Mary Lindsay was my great great grandmother. She was born in Inverness in far north Scotland, and before she was transported to Hobart in 1835, she lived as a Highland Traveller.

The Travellers are an ancient nomadic Scots community tracing their roots to the times of the Picts, who pre-date the Roman invasion of Britain in the first century. Even now many Travellers speak a patois of Gaelic called *Beurla-reagaird*, which their children proudly declared was their ‘secret language’.

It appears that the Romani gypsies with whom they are sometimes confused extended as far north as Perthshire from the early 16th century, but respected the original Travellers’ identifiable and confined bailiwick further north.

Traditionally identified as the *Ceàrdannan* (Gaelic for ‘craftsmen’), they were best-known for their craft as *tinceard* (or tin-men or tin-smiths), from which the term ‘tinker’ derives, and was often applied to travelling groups. Mary’s husband Isaac Williamson identified his trade as ‘tin-smith’.

The Travellers remain a recognisable Scottish sub-culture, living primarily in and around Sutherland County fronting the North Sea.

Their rich and separate culture was oral rather than written, and survives in their unique story-telling and music. Their family groups were monogamous and closely knit, frequently deeply religious, but always separate from mainstream Scots.

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While she carried the Lindsay name, it is doubtful that Mary ever knew the family crest. Most likely she would have thought the buckled belt more useful for supporting her husband's trousers; the swan a morsel for that evening's supper; while the motto would have meant nothing since she and her fellow Travellers could neither read nor write.

In the mid-19th century about 100 separate Lindsay families lived in the Scottish lowlands and highlands, some with noble pretensions from the marriage of William Lindsay to the daughter of Henry, Prince of Scotland, and later David Lindsay's elevation as the Earl of Crawford in 1398. It is intriguing to wonder just how someone carrying that surname became the illiterate and impoverished wife of the leader of a group of Highland nomads.

She married into perhaps the most famous of Traveller families, the Williamsons, when wedding Isaac in about 1832, but retained her maiden name (an enduring Highland Scots tradition). Isaac led a troupe which comprised his brother James, and wife Nancy Miller; his sister Margaret and her husband Archibald McAlister; and Archibald's younger brother, John. Inter-marriage within Travellers' groups was common, with iconic Scots clan names like Stewart, MacDonald, Cameron, McAlister, MacGregor and Williamson frequently found.

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According to their convict records, Mary was born in Inverness, her husband Isaac in Invergordon (north-west of Inverness); Isaac's brother James was born on the Black Isle near Invergordon; and others of the troupe were born in Banff – west of Aberdeen. All their birthplaces were along Travellers' traditional paths.

In warmer weather they walked with their horses and carts along their established tracks, chiefly between Inverness and Aberdeen. In winter they camped at sites along the paths, venturing out to hunt for food and firewood as weather permitted.

In addition to tin-smithing, the Travellers harvested freshwater mussels which frequently held pearls of varying colours and sizes. The mussels supplied food and items for cash sale.

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This narrow lane runs between the villages of Muir-of-Ord and Marybank – north of Inverness – and may well have been trod by Mary and her troupe. Since she was born in Inverness, and Isaac in Invergordon – both very close by – that possibility is hauntingly real.

It is likely that their enforced winter encampment was occupied with story-telling and music-making, traditions which continue to this day among the dwindling number of Travellers living their traditional lifestyle. Fewer than 500 now identify as Highland Travellers.

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This Travellers' campsite was only identified by Scottish historians as recently as 2013. Even now there survives a pile of hearthstones, which would have supported cooking fires and stoves during their winter sojourn. And once again it is fascinating to wonder whether Mary Lindsay and her group may have spent winters here.

Travellers' illiteracy and their scorn for bureaucrats meant that my search for birth and marriage records at the outstanding Inverness Highland Archive proved fruitless. Records were probably never kept, rather than being lost over time.

While Travellers were suspicious of authority – and in particular medical doctors (who at one stage they suspected of body-snatching) – they generally lived happily alongside their settled countrymen, who regarded them as benign if colourful. Men and women kept alive a vibrant musical tradition with such portable instruments as bagpipes, piano-accordions and mouth-organs.

The menfolk readily adopted traditional Highland dress of kilt and sporran, and latterly busked for tourists in exchange for cash.

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Group members owned or shared a cart and a horse, on which they carried children, bow tents, musical instruments and personal possessions.

The tents comprised lengths of canvas stretched over hoops of saplings – easily and quickly erected, dismantled and repaired – and capable of simple extension as required.

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The bow tents provided basic accommodation, with dirt floors, no windows, and frequently no form of heating. Others used small combustion heaters which must have constituted a major fire risk – there were no OH&S inspections in mid-19th century Scotland.

I have found no reference to ablution or toilet facilities – inside or outside the tents – and am not surprised that Travellers' personal hygiene was sometimes lampooned.

Recording his memoirs for posterity, Alec John Williamson recalled that, in recent days when Traveller children attended school, cruel chants mocked their condition. One such doggerel ran as follows:

Tinker, Tinker, toadbags

Go to the well and wash your rags.

Tinker, Tinker stink bags

Father drunk and mother a hag!

I hasten to add that available evidence does not suggest that Travellers were heavy drinkers, and in fact they were more likely to be abstemious, not least since many adhered to a form of primitive Presbyterianism.

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Perhaps offering a degree of improved winter comfort, the network of caves dotted along the North Sea coast – adjacent to the Travellers’ bridlepaths – offered alternatives to spending the colder months in unheated tents.

Many became known as “tinkers’ caves”, where Travellers sheltered during winter rather than camping out. This one has special interest for me, since it was and is known as ‘The Lindsay cave’ at Covesea north of Elgin, and east of Inverness. Speleologist and author Anthony Oldham tells me it was home to one George Lindsay and his extended family, who occupied it semi-permanently from 1887 to 1898.

Frustratingly since the Travellers were until very recently largely illiterate, there is no way of connecting George to my forebear Mary or to the group of which she was a member. But its location is smack bang in the middle of the bridlepaths used by Isaac, Mary and their kin.

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While Highland Travellers were usually noted for their peaceful integration into Highland society, Mary's troupe for whatever reason fell foul of the law on that fateful day of March 26th, 1835. At the tiny hamlet of New Pitsligo – west of Aberdeen – James Williamson's wife, Nancy Miller, entered a shop and selected a range of foodstuffs valued at 7½ pence. She also tried to buy an iron pail worth 1/8d, which the storekeeper refused to sell to her, probably fearing her inability to pay. Suitably angered, she threw the food at the storekeeper and left. This historic image shows a typical shop with attached residence in new Pitsligo. It just may have been the same store.

The troupe moved on to an outpost called Sweetie Hillock – barely a mile from New Pitsligo – where Nancy Miller and Mary Lindsay entered the shopkeeper's residence and helped themselves to items of women's and children's clothing, plus tea, sugar and eggs, while their menfolk raided the liquor and tobacco stores in the shop.

The storekeeper demanded that they pay £1 for their purchases, which James Williamson promised if Scott came to their cart. (While this may seem a trifling amount, recall that a Scottish labourer's *annual* wage was £5, which explains Scott's insistence on payment). In fact James paid only 4/6d after a group of locals including Scott pursued them.

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On the following day the shopkeeper Scott led the local constabulary to arrest them all, leading to their arraignment at the Aberdeen Court of Justiciary on 14th April, 1835, where they were sentenced to 14 years 'across the seas'.

When submitting his summary of evidence to the prosecution, the Crown Agent wrote "...the accused are a formidable band, and they have long infested this part of the country; and that, from their number, and their conduct, they prove a terror to the people who live in thinly inhabited districts. It is evident, from their number, and from their not following any occupation whereby they could gain a livelihood, that they must subsist by plundering the public".

These are harsh words to describe members of a supposedly peaceable underclass of Highland society, not noted for their violence. And while Isaac Williamson and Archibald McAlister were quoted as threatening storekeeper Scott, and had prior form for alleged threatened assault, they appear to have never actually assaulted anybody.

At this distance in time, and with no written records for guidance, we can but ponder whether in fact the troupe deliberately placed themselves at risk of transportation, to reach what they may have deemed a better life in Australia. Certainly

at the time of their crimes there was heated debate within the British Government – echoed by the Anti Transportation League in Tasmania – about whether conditions in the new colony were becoming less a punishment and more a reward for those transported, which led eventually to the discontinuation of transportation.

The Highland Travellers' very survival involved a lot of chance: the uncertain supply of fish and other seafood to augment their diet; the willingness of those along their bridlepaths to engage their paid labour, and purchase their handiwork; and the hazards of North Sea weather systems, which routinely meant maximum temperatures seldom rising above 5°C for six months of the year. It seems that much of their offending at New Pitsligo and Sweetie Hillock involved threats and bluster which did not translate into actual violence, and items they stole related not so much to their survival, as to perhaps bringing them to the notice of the judiciary.

We shall never know for certain, but it is an intriguing possibility.

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The Highland Travellers continue to this day, but as a group that is increasingly integrated into mainstream Scottish society. Until as recently as the mid-1950s – as shown by the motor car in the photo on the left – male Travellers wearing traditional Highland garb busked for tourists in hope of money.

But their children's attendance at regular schools has meant their distinctive language has all but disappeared – despite official encouragement to maintain links with Gaelic – while horse-and-cart for transport has been replaced with caravans, vans and trucks. Most now live in Council houses or Highland shacks, and many have become published writers, recording previously oral traditions.

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Annual treks along onetime bridlepaths have ceased to offer any remotely viable lifestyle, and it is probably surprising to note that, as late as 1978, the last such journey was recorded between Ardgay, north of Inverness, and Loch Assynt. Here we see Johnnie, Peter and Katie Williamson with their one-horse cart, loaded with their bow tent and personal effects, taking off for a largely symbolic trip beginning north of Invergordon – birthplace of my great great grandfather Isaac Williamson. I feel sure I am related to this trio.

Colette McAlpine tells me that 1672 Scottish convicts were transported to Tasmania. As for Mary Lindsay and her group, they may well have been the only Highland Travellers among that number. But thanks to the community's illiteracy, we shall probably never know.

Thank you for listening.

SOURCES:

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