

Croker Prize for Biography

Entry 1508

Isle of Skye to OZ
–Roderick and Ann
McLean

ISLE OF SKYE TO OZ – Roderick and Ann McLean

From the lush fertile rain-soaked lands of Scotland's Isle of Skye (the Gaelic being *An t-Eilean Sgitheanach* or *Eilean a' Cheò*), to the bustling new settlement of Sydney and then on to the open arid plains of the Goulburn/Bathurst region. What a major culture shock that must have been!

My Granny always knew that her ancestors were from the Isle of Skye and, in fact, had spent many hours on her travels around Scotland scouring the graveyards on Skye looking for evidence of her family. She never did find anything significant and what she possibly didn't know at the time was that her great grandfather and his family (including her own grandfather) had left Skye as Government Bounty Emigrants. She would be terribly excited by what I have now uncovered through the wonders of the modern internet world. On my own visit to Scotland in 2009, I also visited the Isle of Skye and was able to pinpoint the estate on which my 3xgreat grandfather worked. I also walked around the ruins of the estate homestead which was on Old Corry Road in the Corry/Broadford district. I have made contact with the current land owner, Mr D.J. MacLennan, who has given me additional information regarding the estate and the local area which has helped in my research¹.

Roderick (Rory) McLean was born 1794 on Isle of Skye to John McLean (farmer) and Mary Robinson². Roderick married Ann (Nancy) Kinghorn on 11 June 1824 in Corry, Strath, Isle of Skye³. Ann was the daughter of Abraham Kinghorn (farmer) and Margaret McNab⁴. Roderick and Ann lived in Corry, a village just north of Broadford in the Parish of Strath. At this time, the whole area around Corry was worked as a tack or large farm by the MacKinnons and there would have been many people working on the estate. Roderick was working as a shepherd on the estate and possibly lived in a hut in the hills overlooking the main estate house⁵.

In 1825 Roderick and Ann started their large family with the birth of Farquhar on 15th June in Corry, then on 4th June 1827 John was born at Shien (christened 13 June), William born on 19 April 1831, Mary was born on 11th May 1833 (christened 2 October) and Abraham born on 17th January 1836⁶. Mr MacLennan told me that Shien is almost certainly from a place called "Sithean" or Fairy Knoll which is directly opposite the old estate ruins, on the Broadford to Elgol Road. Abraham is my great great grandfather.

In the early 18th Century, Scotland was in the grips of the Jacobite uprising which saw the Clan system and their lands being broken up. The "Highland Clearances" saw many families leave their homeland for new Lands. The whole Hebrides at this time was also famine-stricken. In the 1830s-1850s, the British Government started the "Bounty Scheme" where they commissioned ships for the Emigration of Settlers to new Lands. Some were Government assisted passengers, others assisted by Supporters.

On 1st June 1837 the *William Nicol* was commissioned in Greenock to transport emigrants to Australia. Dr Boynter, a Government agent for emigration, was sent to the Highlands of Scotland by the Right Honorable Lord Glenelg "to select individuals of a description and character who would prove both an acquisition to the Colony and a benefit to themselves"⁷. With the prevailing conditions in Scotland, Boynter had no trouble finding

willing families to migrate to Australia. On 6th July 1837 the *William Nicol* set sail from the Isle of Skye, Captained by John McAlphen with 321 emigrants on board. Many of those on board were crofters, shepherds and there were also some craftsmen who would be well utilised in the new Colony⁸.

Roderick McLean was listed on the Passenger List as a shepherd, aged 35, with his wife and 5 children although Roderick was actually 43 at the time of emigration! He must have taken some years off his actual age at the time of emigration to make himself appear younger and therefore more appealing for emigration. Roderick was indented to L. McAlister Esq. at £20 per annum plus rations at Brisbane Grove which is in the Goulburn district. His wife and children were included in this agreement. Also on board the *William Nicol* were Ann's mother Margaret, sister Betsey and brother James and his wife Isabella and their children⁹.

The *William Nicol* was described as being fitted in the most commodious manner possible and all who visited her were satisfied that the comforts of all the emigrants had been minutely attended to. She was furnished to accommodate 250 adult passengers, each being allowed 18 inches width to sleep in!¹⁰ The majority of the emigrants were Gaelic speaking which made it difficult for the surgeon on board to communicate with those who needed treatment. The Surgeon's remarks on the journey shows that the trip was very hard, particularly on the women and younger children, as they sailed through the tropics and many suffered severe bowel complaints and diarrhoea. During the day, when conditions allowed, the passengers were on the deck and the ship was ventilated and air circulated to allow for better conditions below decks. Unfortunately, there were 19 deaths during the voyage with 17 being children under the age of six and 2 women who died after childbirth. The men in general were in good health. The surgeon reported that on arrival in Port Jackson, the emigrants were in perfect health.¹¹

The *William Nicol* arrived at Port Jackson, Sydney on 27th October 1837¹², after 114 days at sea, the McLean family and other indented emigrants, would have been put on a bullock dray for transport to the large McAlister estate of Brisbane Grove¹³. The journey south-west from Sydney to Goulburn was approximately 195km and would have taken many weeks as the Great South Road was a primitive scarcely formed bullock track and many drays got stuck in the mud if it rained. By comparison, the trip today is by car on the dual carriageway Hume Highway and takes approximately 2 hours.

As Bounty Emigrants were only required to work for their sponsors for twelve months, we are unsure just how long Roderick and Ann stayed either on the McAlister estate or indeed in the Goulburn area although they were "settlers at Brisbane Grove" in 1841¹⁴. However, we do know that by 1849 they were living at Black Horse Square, George's Plains approximately 12km south of Bathurst¹⁵. Roderick and Ann had another 7 children: Alexander (born c1838), James (born 1841), Rodrick (born 1846), Charles (born 1849), Margaret, and Anne (born 1844) and one other although no registration of a birth has been found.

The trip to Bathurst would have taken the family through the south-west reaches of what is now known as the Blue Mountains National Park South. The narrow track wound its way between various ranges, through Rockley and on to George's Plains. We have driven this

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Goulburn-Taralga-Oberon Road and found it to be a quite inhospitable mountainous road which must have been quite dangerous as it would have been a perfect stronghold for the bushrangers who lived in the area during this time.

The Bathurst area was in drought by 1836 which lasted for more than three years with the country turning into a dust bowl. Thereafter, an economic depression set in for six years.¹⁶ These were harsh times and Roderick must have wondered what he was doing in Australia with these conditions! The farming would have been completely foreign to anyone coming from the rain soaked Skye.

Roderick McLean died on 17th September 1889¹⁷, at Burwood, aged 95. The cause of death was “Natural Decay accelerated by shock from fracture of right head femur”. He still had 5 sons and 3 daughters living. Ann McLean died on 23rd April 1894¹⁸ at Burwood at the residence of her son-in-law on Broughton Street, Concord¹⁹, in her 87th year. They are both buried at Rookwood Cemetery.

Roderick and Ann McLean emigrated from the beautiful green mountainous Isle of Skye to the arid plains of Goulburn/Bathurst. They left a fertile land that has a yearly rainfall of approximately 1350mm to the much drier Goulburn area which has a yearly rainfall of approximately 535-643mm²⁰ so they had to learn how to farm in drought prone areas. They also had to learn a new language. But they certainly seemed to have prospered in their adopted country. They both lived to a very old age and they left quite a McLean legacy in the Bathurst/Orange region with their children living full and active lives in this area²¹.

My Granny would be very proud of her diligent hardworking ancestors and I have enjoyed following in their footsteps from Skye to Goulburn and then around the Bathurst region.

¹ Letter from D.J. MacLennan of 1 Old Corry, Broadford, Isle of Skye

² NSW BDM Death Certificate Registration No. 1889/002864 for Roderick McLean which stated he was 95 on his death

³ FamilySearch IGI Record of Marriage for Roderick MacLean and Ann Kinghorn, Batch No.7230503, Sheet 59, Source Call No. 0822580

⁴ NSW BDM Death Certificate Registration No. 1894/3883 for Ann McLean

⁵ On a visit to Isle of Skye, I was able to find the ruins of the MacKinnon Estate and saw myself the huts on the hills overlooking the estate.

⁶ FamilySearch IGI Records - Birth Registrations in Strath, Inverness, Scotland

⁷ Letter from David Boytner RN Dr to Edward Dea Thomson Esq, Colonial Secretary dated 5 July 1837

⁸ Port Philip Immigration Registers for Ships Sailing from Scotland with Bounty Emigrants under the Government System, 1837-1840.

⁹ Passenger list for the *William Nicol*

¹⁰ Edinburgh Courier 10 July 1837 reporting on the embarkation of the *William Nicol* at Ornsay, Isle of Skye

¹¹ Remarks by George Roberts, Surgeon Superintendent, *William Nicol*

¹² Medical and Surgical Journal of the *William Nicol* Emigrant Ship by G. Roberts

¹³ Dixon's Map of NSW 1837 showing the Goulburn Plains, which forms the core of the study area, the Goulburn Mulwaree Local Government Area (Engraves by J. & C. Walker. SR Map 4617). Notes on the map is L. McAlister, 16,300 Acres Strathaird as well as a smaller lot to the west.

¹⁴ NSW BDM Baptism of son, James, born 1841 in the Parish of Bathurst Registration No 8513 Vol: 45C

¹⁵ NSW BDM Baptism Transcription (Early Church Records) of son Charles McLean Ref No. Vol150 No.279

¹⁶ Extract from a History of Bathurst – copy of pages sent to me by the Bathurst City Library

¹⁷ NSW BDM Registration No. 2864/1889 in Burwood

¹⁸ NSW BDM Registration No. 3883/1894 in Burwood

¹⁹ Sydney Morning Herald Death Notice of 24/4/1894

²⁰ www.holiday-weather.com/isle_of_skye/averages/ and www.bom.gov.au, Australia.gov.au. The Australian Bureau of Statistics abs.gov.au as well as www.wikipedia.org

²¹ Various articles in the newspapers of the time – sourced from the online Trove Digital Newspapers