

Migrations: Journeys in Time and Place

By Rod Edmond

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Reviewed by Alex Calder

‘O pity the poor immigrant’

‘Shall I ever return / To the Land of Heather and Thistle / From the Land of Kauri and Fern?’ So the Scottish immigrant, John Liddell Kelly, wondered, in a poem of 1887. Kelly, one of our more prolific 19th century bards, seldom strays from standard Victorian sentiments about shifting hemispheres and seasons, but what Allen Curnow calls ‘the shock of so distant a migration’ registers in his verse in a curious way: he is fascinated by the thought of progeny—of his ‘blood coursing in others veins’. On the far side of the world, cut off from immediate forbears, he finds a compensatory continuity in genealogies yet to come.

Visit the Aberdeen Family History Society, says Rod Edmond, and you will hear the accents of New Zealanders, Australians, Canadians, and Americans in search of the locations their Scottish ancestors left behind. Most are in their sixties; most come from nuclear families. They look back beyond grandparents to see the likes of John Kelly looking forwards. We all find a home in deep time.

Rod Edmond’s ‘journeys in time and place’ in search of his Scottish antecedents extend from a kirkyard on the Aberdeenshire coast to a small village in northern Vanuatu, and from a ruined croft in the Western Highlands to the backblocks of Tasmania. Edmond, in his mid-sixties, with adult children, and recently retired from a professorship in English at the University of Canterbury in Kent, is demographically primed for these pursuits. Lest the reader’s interest suddenly pall, I hasten to assure you this book, with its too modest cover, is superb. Like an excellent travel writer, Rod Edmond engages the reader in his motivations and sensations, and the result is a very companionable and engaging account of his journeys in search of his family’s history.

There is an important difference between Edmond and his fellow genealogists crowding the tables in the Scottish research libraries. They have crossed the ocean in search of distant forbears; Edmond, an expatriate, has driven up from Kent. The uprooting journeys made by his progenitors are ones that, as a young man, he repeated in a counter-direction, at once attenuating and amplifying his connection with New Zealand as home. Because their experience of dislocation has, in some measure, already been his own, his re-enactment of their travels is a journey into a layered experience of place and time.

Most books of this sort focus on the earliest settlers. Edmond quickly by-passes his family’s first-comers—including a Mayor of Dunedin who made a scandalous marriage—in favour of his maternal great-grandfather and paternal great-grandmother. Charles Murray was a Presbyterian missionary while Catherine McLeod’s people were crofters, poor tenant farmers who had been railroaded into an emigration scheme by landlords who wanted the land cleared for sheep. A search for Charles Murray’s forebears brings Edmond to a small coastal cemetery where ‘all the graves were looking out to sea’. Nowadays, St Fergus is the place where North Sea gas is piped ashore. A massive industrial plant towers over the tomb wherein Edmond’s

great-grandfather's grandfather is laid—but reading an inscription cut into old stone is enough to make the modern conglomeration seem 'ephemeral'.

The material survival of the old-world past in Scotland's contemporary landscape is apt to surprise a new world sensibility. At Ardmair, on the shores of Loch Broom in the Western Highlands, Edmond discovers the one-roomed croft where great-grandmother Catherine McLeod once lived. It is derelict, but still there, animating the author's sense of how life would have been in those precarious times—'Struggle certainly, but with food in your belly it would have seemed a precious place'. In Tasmania, by contrast, where the McLeods arrived in 1854, Edmond finds that his ancestors seem to have vanished: 'it proved easier to have located three ruined crofts than to identify a 3,000 acre farm'. They come back into the archive later, with deaths and marriages registering a move to suburban Melbourne, but traces of a small community of Gaelic-speaking farm labourers are now over-mantled by something far more threatening to public memory than the St Fergus Gas Plant. From Hobart to Launceston, a so-called 'Heritage Highway' links a chain of bijoux colonial villages. Edmond writes: 'I found them dreary places, empty of people, hollowed out to commemorate a past that had been cleared of all trace of the indigenous inhabitants'.

There is nothing exceptional in the story of Catherine McLeod, but the same could not be said for Charles Murray. Following in the footsteps of his elder brother William, he took an MA at the University of Aberdeen before entering theological college where his studies for the ministry were supported by a bursary which required him to evangelise among the city's poor. The Murray brothers, newly graduated and newly married, would each set out for the Presbyterian missions on the remote outer islands of the then New Hebrides. William was first to arrive on Ambrym. Within a year, he was so debilitated by tuberculosis that he was sent back to Sydney, where he died in 1885 at the age of 30. Charles and Flora Murray took his place. There were soon other deaths: Flora died with her new baby in March 1886, leaving Charles to soldier on, not quite alone—there was another missionary couple in the vicinity—but in significant psychological isolation. Like Malinowski a generation later, he began keeping a diary.

The people of Ni-Vanuatu had been in contact with Europeans for not much more than a generation. They were in the midst of a population collapse from European diseases (like the TB that would have come ashore with William Murray). They also suffered the depredations of 'black-birders'—kidnappers providing labour for the sugar plantations of Queensland. Missionaries intent on doing good generally entered this world in a cocoon of false assurance. Charles's diary records the day by day, month by month, dismantling of that self-protective envelope. He suffers the fevers and chills of malaria, he can't drum Christianity into native heads, he quarrels with the chief, women are banned from the station area, his one 'helper' vanishes, the ways of the Lord seem unfathomable—by the end of May 1887, he has had a nervous breakdown and is on his way to New Zealand.

Ambrym is almost as isolated now as it was in Charles Murray's day. From Port Vila, the old mission station is a plane and then a boat trip away, yet 21st century Ranon boasts two 'rustic beach-front bungalows' that can be booked online. Rod Edmond arrived for a week's stay with the diary of his great-grandfather for company. After two nights, he wonders if he will hold out as well as his ancestor did. He has the trots, a gashed arm, and the beach-front cottage—a hutch—is over-run with rats. He finds teeth marks on shoes and soap; he stares at his

toothbrush, wondering if the tufts have been nibbled down. In this dark night of the tourist soul, the tenacity of his forbear becomes less easy to dismiss.

Charles Murray failed to make a single convert. Although he was always on the outer of Ni-Vanuatu, his diary would become his apostate great-grandson's passport into a deeply Christian world. Edmond encounters people who recognise the names of their grandparents and great-grandparents. They show him the site of the first church, the first school, and Charles Murray, it would now seem, is venerated as the apostle who brought the Good News to Ambryn. Edmond senses history is being made up on the spot. More disconcerting still, the people of Ranon want to hold a 'sorri' ceremony to atone for having driven God's messenger away. Edmond tries to assure them it wasn't like that at all, that they have nothing to apologise for, but his great-grandfather's agency is just as irrelevant to local priorities now as it was in the 1880s. There has been a rash of 'sorri' ceremonies going on around the Islands; only two weeks earlier, descendants of John Williams were flown in from all points of the globe to memorialise and set to right his martyrdom on the beach at Errongmango. In Edmond, the people of Ranon have their own injured descendant to forge a recuperative relationship with, narrating in their own way not so much the arrival of Christianity as its indigenisation. I am reminded of Marshall Sahlins's contrast between prescriptive and performative histories, and Edmond is an eloquent witness of power of the latter to create new realities. Asked where he is from, Rod tries to convey what it means to have homes in two countries, New Zealand and Britain, and is touchingly corrected: he must come from three places because he belongs to Ranon as well.

Charles Murray soon recovered his health and went on to lead a life not unlike that of the fictional George Plumb, another Presbyterian with a puritan conscience, based on novelist Maurice Gee's grandfather. Murray had ministries in the Wairarapa and in Christchurch, campaigned tirelessly for temperance and spoke out strongly for Pacifism during the Great War. Did he ever, like John Kelly looking forward, think wonderingly of his forthcoming brood of descendants? Perhaps no other family has been as voluminously represented in New Zealand letters. One of the things I like best about *Migrations* is the way it moves between past and present in a manner that not only tells Rod Edmond's story, but gives a larger background and a different sense of scale to the more closely-focussed memoirs of other members of this extended family, especially the well-known autobiographies by Lauris Edmond and Martin Edmond. Rod, their nephew and cousin, is a less intimate writer but also more of a public intellectual, able to bring a lively knowledge of place, history and human interaction to the migration stories he recounts. I also like the way this book has been thoughtfully composed. It was a fine touch, for example, to end these 'journeys in place and time' with a contrasting story. On a recent visit to Auckland, he and his brother Murray encountered a rare pygmy sperm whale that had become beached at Whatipu. Despite their efforts, the poor thing could not be refloated. Yet this extraordinary traveller had followed its own journey in space and time, reminding us that the movement of humans and other species from place to place remains ordinary and ongoing, amazing and perilous.