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'This is almost like a spiritual quest for us'

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By Jim Gilchrist

FOR the American or Canadian of Scots descent, the archetypal ancestry is one of emigration from the "old country" to the New World, often involving being forced from ancestral lands. The Clearances and a sense of injustice may loom large in many a Scots-American's view of his or her lineage, yet there is a glaring paradox – many of these forced immigrants would pass on the pain, in their displacement of the original North American peoples.

The irony is far from lost on Sandra Muse, right, as she looks forward to coming to The Gathering from Canada next year, when she will visit the lands of her ancestors – some of them, that is. Muse, from Hamilton, Ontario, claims MacRae lineage but i

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s also half Cherokee. A journalist who has worked mainly in Canadian radio but also edited a newspaper for the Six Nations Indian Reserve, Muse is doing a PhD on English literature at Hamilton's McMaster university. Her dissertation is on Cherokee literature and she is also studying diasporas, giving her a unique standpoint from which to comment on the Scots-American phenomenon.

"There is a tremendous irony there (in Scottish immigrants involved in the oppression of the First Nations)," says the 51-year-old, "and it happened in both Canada and the United States. A lot of soldiers in the Indian wars in the US, when the last of the Indians were being rounded up and put on reservations, were of Scottish descent."

She also refers to Duncan Campbell Scott, a renowned Canadian poet but also a reviled head of the department of Indian Affairs between 1913 and 1932. He made it compulsory for native children to attend Residential Schools that, often amid appalling conditions, attempted to eradicate all traces of native culture and language. It was Scott who declared in 1920: "Our objective is to continue until there is not a single Indian in Canada not absorbed into the body politic and there is no Indian Question."

Muse goes on to contrast his attitude with the many Scots settlers who integrated and intermarried with the Cherokee people. "The Scots-Cherokee connection is very strong," she says, citing the famous John Ross, born in 1790, who, though only one-eighth Cherokee by descent, became principal chief of the Cherokee nation, as well as a charismatic politician and orator, deeply committed to his Native American heritage.

Even Ross's eloquence could not prevent the mass "removal" – clearance all over again – of 18,000 Cherokees

from Georgia to the official Indian Territory in Oklahoma in 1838, which became known as the "Trail of Tears" and on which Ross's wife was among an estimated 4,000 who died on the way. Other high-profile Scots-Cherokees range from Major John Ridge, a Cherokee officer in the Confederate Army during the Civil War, to Grammy-winning singer Rita Coolidge. Muse's own lineage is pretty well half-and-half, with some Irish and Dutch thrown in, she says. "My mother was a MacRae and we've been able to learn a great deal about her Scottish heritage. My great-great-grandmother married in 1789 in North Carolina."

North Carolina is where so many immigrant Scots arrived during the 18th and 19th centuries that it can now boast more citizens of Scots ancestry than the homeland itself. Muse grew up in Detroit, but came north to Canada after marrying a Mohawk, and has two children: "So they are also Mohawk, and Cayuga, and Cherokee, and some Irish..."

"I've been reading up on Scottish history, because I grew up not knowing about my Scottish heritage. It was only maybe five years ago I began going to Highland games here, especially the big ones at Fergus, Ontario – I'd always wanted to go but I'd been a single mother for many years, then a student, so didn't have a lot of time. At Fergus I marched in the clan parade two years ago wearing my buckskin dress with my MacRae tartan scarf and that got me quite a bit of attention."

Quite apart from the Scots-Cherokee links through contact and intermarriage, Muse sees similarities between the two cultures in their rootedness in the land and in "warrior culture" of both native American and Gael. "Listening to some of the Scottish songs and their pride in battles and the people who were lost... there really is a close connection."

She has been reading about the Scottish Enlightenment, and points to 18th-century Scots novelist Henry MacKenzie, best known for *The Man of Feeling*, but whose later work, *The Man of the World*, seems to have been influenced by Rousseau's theories of "the natural man" in extolling the virtues of the Cherokee as being "honesty, truth and savage nobleness", compared to those of the European.

And she refers to Sir Walter Scott, who in his introduction to *Ivanhoe*, comments that barely 60 or 70 years had passed "since the whole north of Scotland was under a state of government nearly as simple and as patriarchal as those of our good allies the Mohawks and Iroquois". "That's an area I'd really like to research some day," she says, "the role North American natives played in early Scottish literature."

Muse has no overly romantic illusions about Scotland, which she'll visit for the first time next year as one of a party of 82 MacRaes, and agrees the Scottish diaspora can sometimes have unrealistic expectations. "I think many Scottish people in North America, who have never been in Scotland, expect to go there and find it the way it was in the past. My daughter said, 'I want to go with you and see all the men in kilts.' "I told her that wasn't realistic. I'm longing to come over and learn more, but I'm a realist, I'm not expecting to see lots of men in kilts."

WHEN Bruce and Judy McRae lead a party of 82 New World MacRaes to Eilean Donan after The Gathering next summer, it will be their third visit to the castle, which has strong MacRae associations – and this time, they will renew their marriage vows there, 25 years after they first tied the knot.

The couple, who live in Colorado, take their clan lineage very seriously: Bruce has backed up his genealogical research with DNA testing which, he claims, suggests distant ancestors of his were constables of Eilean Donan. He says: "When I got to around 30, I started thinking, 'Where did I come from, what is my family?'" So the computer specialist, now 58, started on the long journey back: "My father was born in Texas, his father in Mississippi. The more I traced back, the more I met other families, until I made it back to North Carolina, where the Highland MacRaes came to North America, during 1790-1810. I was so excited to feel I was a part of that, that they'd emigrated from another nation for a better life. I just felt tied to them and there was something inside me wanted to know more."

McRae had his DNA tested and says he was within two or three markers of a man who also claims descent from the MacRae constables of Eilean Donan.

He and Judy will encourage other members of their party at The Gathering to have DNA testing, "so we can

start making some assumptions with good data". Judy claims no Scots blood but is even more passionate about the clan: "It really is important discovering your roots; we both feel it speaks to your identity. I believe it is because so many people that came here from Scotland were forced off the land. This is almost like a spiritual quest for us."

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