

REVIEW: *THE RAASAY MILLS: MUILNEAN RATHARSAIR*, REBECCA S MACKAY,

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The Isle of Raasay, in the Scottish Inner Hebrides, has a particular place in the history of Australia's Celtic connections. In the 1840s, the MacLeod 'chief' of Raasay sank beneath a sea of his own gambling debts, and the island was sold to George Rainy, just as the potato blight arrived. Much of the population had been cleared to make way for sheep in the preceding decades. Now they faced a mass clearance; and in the early years of the 1850s over half the remaining people were shipped away, some to Canada, the US and New Zealand, but most of them to Australia on the *Ontario*, the *Ticonderoga*, the *Borneuf*, the *Miltiades*, the *Georgina*, the *Edward Johnstone*, the *Hornet*, and the *Galgate*.

The Raasay Heritage Trust, in recent years, has opened an Emigrants' Walk on the island; a path through scenic woodlands, punctuated by memorials marking the ships that sailed, with a tree native to the country of disembarkation planted nearby. It is a beautiful monument to the island's loss.

The proceeds from the book under review will go to the Heritage Trust's restoration work on the 'Old Mill' in the township of Inverarish, and an associated heritage centre. The book itself deals with three distinct mills on the Isle of Raasay.

(a) The 'Old Mill' located at Mill Place, likely constructed in 1761 to grind grain, converted into a sawmill c. 1851, and defunct by 1915. (It is shown as the 'Old Meal Mill' on the map at pp 76-77.)

(b) A sawmill at No.2 mine, constructed about 1915, closer to the source of timber. (Its location is marked as 'No. 2 Mine' on the map at pp 76-77.)

(c) A third mill constructed during 1938-40. Its machinery was dismantled in 1950, but it was refitted by the Forestry Commission. This mill was still in operation in the late 1960s and was sold c. 1973. (It is no longer in operation. It is shown marked as 'Saw Mill' on the map at pp 76-77.)

There is much more to this book than an account of its mills. The story of the mills is placed in the context of the economic and social history of Raasay from the middle of the eighteenth century to the closing years of the twentieth. It contains forty plates, consisting of maps, archaeological and architectural drawings, and photographs.

The book opens with a fascinating account of the island's traditional agricultural economy and local agricultural practices. This account is firmly based in archaeological research and pays particular attention to the small settlements associated with run-rig farming, the role of the shieling (a small shelter associated with summer grazing), and on the harvesting and processing of grain.

The remaining chapters deal with each of the three mills, always with a detailed account of the social context in which developments unfolded. The original mill was built in 1761. (Mackay here corrects the previously accepted date of 1720.) It was one of the 'grand developments' each new chief visited upon his people; on this occasion forcing them to smash their hand querns and to pay him for the privilege of using his mill instead – in the process requiring them to travel considerable distances to grind small amounts of grain. Mackay gives a detailed account of the mounting debts of the chiefs, and of the concomitant poverty of their tenants. By the 1850s, so many tenants had been cleared to make way for sheep, that the mill was no longer viable. And so it was converted into a sawmill; but that too fell into disuse in the early twentieth century.

In 1912 the island was bought by Baird & Co, who opened a mine there. The advent of the First World War saw a renewed demand for timber, and a sawmill was built near the mine. It was operated by German prisoners of war, twelve of whom died in a Spanish flu epidemic.

The mine closed soon after the First World War, and the island was bought by the government. The third sawmill was constructed in the lead up to the Second World War, when once again the demand for timber increased.

This is a scholarly book. It is meticulous and well researched; crammed with the kind of economic and historical detail normally found only in the best academic writing. However, it is not primarily intended as an academic text, and so it lacks some of the apparatus that an academic reader might wish for. There is no index, which is great pity given the enormous amount of incidental information that is contained in each chapter. There is no glossary of the various Gaelic terms that occur in the text, which would have been both interesting and useful. Not all of the works referred to are listed in the Bibliography, and for some that are, dates are not provided. References to printed works do not always give a precise page number. However, it must be born in mind that much of the data presented here is the result of original research and based on interviews with the island's inhabitants.

The only typo that might cause any confusion occurs on p 17, where 'Feature 18' should read 'Feature 10', a reference to the accompanying map of the archaeological survey of North Fearn.

This interesting book makes a valuable contribution to the social history of the Scottish Hebrides, and will provide a mine of information for those seeking to trace their family histories back to Raasay. (A large number of individuals are named, and again an index would have been useful in that regard.) The book can be ordered from the Raasay Heritage Trust, 6 Osgaig Park, Isle of Raasay, by Kyle, Ross-shire, IV40 8PB, Scotland or email: osgaig@lineone.net Cost: £8.00 plus packing and postage.