

Walking in the footsteps of the Barra land raiders.

It is always a delight when we see one of our students taking inspiration from our teaching and research and applying that to their own lives. Michael MacLeod runs his own tourism business offering historical walking tours on Barra. Michael comes from the island – amongst those where the positive and negative aspects of land and people intersect most visibly and dramatically across time. Thankfully there's barely a sniff of *Whisky Galore* in these words. Instead here's an ex-student who has taken our 'from below' methods to heart and set up a business that explores the somewhat less glamorous, but much more real world of famine, emigration and the land struggle. It is fascinating to see these time-deep expressions of the connections between land and people play a rightly central role in his tour. Please have a read and let us know what you think!

Dr Iain Robertson, UHI Centre for History.



It was with great pleasure that I received Dr Iain Robertson's invitation to write a post about my walking tour of Castlebay, Isle of Barra in which I attempt to weave the struggle for the land into my narrative.

The initial inspiration for the tour was a walking tour I went on in Dublin in 2008. This was entitled *The 1916 Rebellion Walking Tour* and was given that day by Dublin historian Lorcan Collins.

Lorcan was able to take one through the streets of Dublin telling the story of the Easter Rising in a way that made the events of the time come alive. The tour is still on going, as far as I know, and I would highly recommend it. This encouraged me to make use of my own island's history and share it with others at some future date.

At that time, I was, like many islanders, making my living in Glasgow, but on returning back home to Barra in 2010 I managed to get a year's placement in the local Heritage Centre. It was whilst there that I got to know the second inspiration for my walk, Mairi Ceit MacKinnon. Mairi Ceit was the powerhouse behind the Heritage Centre and chances are, if you read the acknowledgements' page of any book written about Barra during the last thirty years, you will see Mairi Ceit's name listed there. It was with her help and encouragement that I expanded my knowledge of Castlebay's history with its subsequent development as one of the leading herring ports in the UK.

Foremost of my hopes for my walk was to increase the knowledge and appreciation of the Land Raiders. Jim Hunter's seminal book *The Making of the Crofting Community* had been the first book I had read regarding the Clearances that did not allow the Landlords the economic get out of jail free card. Other books liked to paint the landlords as forced to act by economic necessity. I was determined to tell the story of the crofters and the cottars, the toiling class.

The following summer I decided to launch my Barra Historical Walks around Castlebay. I was initially worried that there would not be enough information to fill a 1 ½ hours walking tour but after a couple of test runs (walks) this notion was quickly put to bed. There is so much history in Barra that it would be impossible to shoehorn it all in. The Norsemen, the Politician and Tales of Whisky Galore, the MacNeil's of Barra and the Herring Fishing industry are all mentioned in my walk but the subject I am most passionate about is the long struggle for land and the people's natural right to it.

As we begin our walking tour we stop briefly and turn to look towards Kishmuil Castle with its colourful history, standing proudly, a silent and ancient sentinel in Castlebay's sheltered anchorage.

I then continue to explain to the group about the kelp industry and how rising rents and the subdivision of crofts at the turn of the 19th century led to the increasing poverty of the people of Barra. It was at this time that MacNeil of Barra decided to build an alkaline factory at Northbay to process the kelp. Recent evidence in Ben Buxton's new edition of *Mingulay* suggests that MacNeil cleared people from the islands south of Vatersay and installed them in barracks to work in the Northbay factory. The commercial venture was a failure and MacNeil of Barra went bankrupt.

Every decent story needs an evil villain, and this is where Gordon of Cluny enters the scene. Next I describe the terrible events of the Potato Famine of the late 1840s and the tragic events surrounding the ship *Admiral* in 1851 when islanders were hunted down and sent to Canada. Many died on passage and in quarantine. Gordon of Cluny's henchmen, such as the Rev Henry Beatson, ensured that people could not escape. I always point out that although the good Reverend was a Protestant and the majority of Barra's population was Catholic, he was very ecumenical in his approach. He targeted all to be rounded up, no one was spared. During his ownership, Gordon of Cluny offered Barra to the Government to be used as a penal colony. If the offer had been accepted the entire island would have been cleared.

In those troubled years events on the island of Barra reached their nadir. The people were on their knees and life must have been a daily battle for survival.

I now pause and silently reflect: is my narrative proving too depressing to the listeners? Perhaps they are wishing that they had done something else with their day - a trip to the Castle or to our wonderful beaches maybe? Thankfully for them and the islanders, my story now takes a turn for the better.

At the end of the 19th century with the development of the Herring Fishing industry in Barra the economic situation began to improve. People began to rally to the cause of the Land Reform.

Curing station at Castlebay



Our group has now progressed to the area in front of The Old School. As we look up at the disused building, I inform those around me that this building was known as Castlebay Public School and it opened in 1882, ten years after the Scottish Education Act was passed. This Act heralded the advent of free and compulsory education. Initially, the majority of pupils who attended this school did so rather reluctantly. Their preference was the wide outdoors. However, through time they did realise and accept that education could provide them with the passport to equality and a better way of life.

I continue my story as I introduce the group to the Napier Commission, which met in that school on the 26th May 1883. The main speaker who represented the landless people of Barra was Michael Buchanan, a cottar from the township of Borge on the west side of Barra. He was a very active member of the Highland Land League, an organisation which had led to the creation of the Napier Commission. As a young man Michael had attended evening school at the Parochial School at Craigston, Barra. He was very interested in the politics of the day and the struggle for land. Every Sunday after morning Mass, Buchanan stood outside Craigston church and gave a talk on land reform. This soon became known as Michael's Sermon and his information was readily received and much discussed by those present. Sadly in 1915 Michael passed away in a Uist hospital, disillusioned and in poor health. He lies in Hallam Cemetery in South Uist, in an unmarked grave. Hopefully in the future a memorial will be built to commemorate the life and death of this fearless champion of the people.

Sadly, the Crofters Act of 1886 did not solve the very real problem of the cottars of Barra, so there was a pattern of land agitation right through to the end of the First World War. I continue with my story describing the land raids organised in Northbay, Vatersay and Eoligarry. I tell of the written communications that I have read at the National Archives Office in which William MacGillivray,

gentleman farmer and factor residing at Eoligarry House, petitioned the Government to call up the Royal Naval Reserve to curb the land agitation. This letter was written in the middle of the war and, had the Government agreed to MacGillivray's request, Barra's blood price of 78 men could have been increased by the fall of those fighting on their own island to regain the land tenanted by their forebears.

In the past I have often wondered why there is no memorial for the land raiders on Barra as you see on the Island of Lewis. However, I have come to the conclusion that the resettled villages of Eoligarry, Ardmhor, Ardveenish, Bogach, Northbay and the Isle of Vatersay are all the memorial that are needed. The townships and their inhabitants are a living testament to the tenacity of their forebears.

After that first summer I started a degree with the UHI. Whilst I only managed 1½ years of study it allowed me a more in-depth analysis of the factors affecting my village of Ardmhor, my island, the Hebrides and the wider world in general. It also helped me look at sources and stories with a more critical eye. Sometimes the critic wins and I tell the story that can be proven. Other times the romantic wins, and I tell the story that is impossible to verify that has been passed down through generations. If you happen to be in Barra, look me up on Barra Historical Walks (Facebook) and hear the rest of my island's story.

I will now bring this sojourn full circle and leave the final word to the man who led the Rising which inspired the tour, which in turn inspired my tour:

‘Beware of the Risen people
who shall take back what you would not give.’ *Patrick Pearse.*



The resettled village of Ardmhor, with Ardmhor Rock (Clach Mhor nan Gleannan) in the foreground ©Michael MacLeod