MY OWN ISLAND HOME

The Orkney Homecoming

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Abstract
The notion of 'home' has become a powerful motif in the contemporary popular and academic project to (re)locate identity in a globalized world of movement. Home is, however, also materialized in 'homeland' and, as the discourse of 'diaspora' has been ever more widely appropriated by a diverse range of dispersed populations, so the phenomenon of diasporic 'homecoming' has burgeoned – journeys, that is, in which members of diasporic communities 'return' to lost homelands as heritage-tourists and pilgrims. This article provides an account of 'The Orkney Homecoming', a packaged event in which over 150 Canadians of Orcadian descent travelled to their ancestral islands off the north coast of Scotland. Drawing extensively on the comments of participants and organizers of the event, the author argues that, through its materiality, the Orkney heritage-landscape provides a fertile soil into which the Canadian homecomers can root their identities.

Key Words ◆ Canada ◆ diaspora ◆ genealogy ◆ heritage-tourism ◆ homeland ◆ identity ◆ Orkney Islands ◆ Scotland

The question of *who* we are is readily answered with reference to *where* we come from. But, in an era where the transnational state of 'diaspora' is increasingly general and more and more people – a *mélange* of dispossessed and dispossessors (all displaced) – find themselves living in a 'new country', separated from the 'old', the question of *where* one comes from is not always so easily answered. It is no surprise, then, that the issue of identity is so prevalent in both academic and popular discourse and the desire to 'find oneself' has become one of life's imperatives (Giddens, 1991; Rapport and Dawson, 1998; Sarup, 1996).

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Finding oneself may be equated with finding 'home'. Home, a house, a family, a locus of belonging as mobile as it is static, a phantom, perhaps, or an imagined community. Yet home is also given substance in home*land*; that capacious concept and all that it connotes is given material form. This article, drawn from a broader exploration of the construction of a Scottish homeland in the Scottish diasporic imagination (Basu, 2002), is concerned with a 'homecoming' event that took place in 1999, in which over 150 Canadians of Orcadian descent travelled together to their ancestral islands off the north coast of Scotland. It considers how, through the processes of genealogical research and journeying, such homelands 'of the mind' (Rushdie, 1992: 10) become materialized and thereby provide 'fertile soil' into which those members of diasporic communities who 'are haunted by some sense of loss, some urge to reclaim' (Rushdie, 1992: 10) may re-root their identities and find nourishment.

Genealogical research has become an almost global pastime in recent years, and, aided by the Internet and relatively cheap air travel, family history-related cultural tourism – 'roots-tourism' – has become an important niche tourism market (Scottish Executive, 2000: 26–8). This is certainly true in the Scottish Highlands and Islands where roots-tourism is a burgeoning phenomenon and there are few 'bed and breakfast' operators in the region who do not have stories to tell of their North American, Australian, New Zealand, South African and even English guests' quests to locate deserted family crofts or forgotten gravestones or ancestral names inscribed in parish registers. But what is it that these visitors really hope to find amongst the rubble of ruined houses, lichen covered slabs and mildewed pages? It is a question that is posed by the Canadian poet, Gary Geddes (1999), recalling his own genealogical journey to Orkney:

> After checking out the home-place, doing
> my graveyard rollcall of Pottingers,
> Mowats and Houries, all paid-up members
> of that exclusive underground club, I stopped
> at the Brough of Gurness to put it all
> in perspective. Between flagstone walls
> a pale blue vinyl pup-tent had been pitched.
> The camper, blue with cold, was warming
> hands over a propane stove he'd fired up
> for tea. A Czech working at a health-care
> facility in Inverness. Homesick, finding –
> what? – solidarity with the dead.
>
> Gary Geddes, *Ancestral Slums*

The answer that Geddes proffers perhaps requires a question mark of its own, but it seems that some 'solidarity' *is* found in ancient places,

and profoundly so when the connection with place is more than merely incidental.

ORKNEYINGA SAGA

Genealogy is nothing new in the Orkney Islands: the *Orkneyinga Saga* – a 'secular scripture' for many Orcadians (Pálsson and Edwards, 1981: 9) – is, in effect, a genealogical history of the 10th and 11th-century Norse Earls of Orkney written by an anonymous Icelander in about 1200 AD. Perhaps the most significant difference between such medieval chronicles and modern-day 'family histories' is that, whereas the earlier litanies of great names and great deeds were necessary for the legitimization of élite status, contemporary genealogy is largely a middle-class pursuit, directed towards other goals. And whereas it was the storyteller's art to laud his patron's noble blood, it is left to the modern family historian to find what virtue she may in her own lineage (and, in fact, a rogue in the family is quite as good as a knight).

More than once in history has the location of the Orkney Islands, at the northern passage between the North Atlantic and mainland Europe, become strategically significant. In the medieval period the Islands were literally at the hub of the Norse empire; in the world wars of the 20th century they harboured the British naval fleet; and in the intervening years they provided the last 'watering hole' for ships bound for the 'New World'. Such ships included those of the Company of Adventurers, or as it later became known, the Hudson's Bay Company, which, through royal charter, represented British trading and colonial interests in what was to become Canada. As well as taking on water and provisions at the Orcadian port of Stromness, the Hudson's Bay Company also took on recruits and, in the 18th and 19th centuries, the Islands became one of its main sources of labour.

A standard Hudson's Bay contract was for a period of five years, after which time Orkneymen, who left their native islands as sons of tenant farmers and agricultural labourers with few prospects, could return with money in their pockets to set up in business or even to purchase land. Many, of course, stayed on with the Company and settled in western Canada, establishing what we might call part of an Orcadian or, more broadly, Scottish diaspora.

> I mean if you look up the phone book in Manitoba, it's got far more Fletts or Isbisters or Inksters, Groundwaters . . . all these Orkney names . . . which, if you looked up a Scottish phone book would be in the minority. But if you look up a Canadian phone book, there's loads of them! (CT, Kirkwall, Orkney)

The idea of a 'Homecoming' for the descendants of these settlers was conceived in 1995 at a meeting between Cameron Taylor, the then Chief

Executive of the Orkney Tourist Board, and Max Johnson, the president of a specialist tour operator based in Winnipeg, Manitoba. The Homecoming was seen as both a commercial opportunity and an occasion to celebrate the cultural connections between the two regions. Planned for 1999, the event would also mark the new millennium. It was promoted on the Internet as follows:

> The histories of Canada, Orkney and The Hudson's Bay Company are intertwined. That historical connection is a source of great pride among Orcadians, and the family and emotional bonds are strong. There are the well-known figures of Governor Tomison and the explorer John Rae. But there are also many lesser known individuals, the hardy, self-sufficient Orcadians who left their homeland to link their fortunes with those of the Hudson's Bay Company.
>
> Resonances of the Orkney connection abound in Canada: in place names, personal names and family histories; in museums and archive collections; and in the buildings and artifacts of northern Canada – Lower Fort Garry in Winnipeg, for instance, built by Orcadian masons. Or York boats, distribution network for the traders, based on the design of the traditional Orkney yole and crewed by Orcadian sailors. For an Orcadian visitor today, the journey is as much about understanding his own past as understanding Canada's.
>
> During the 18th and 19th centuries, as many as 90% of the Canadian-based employees of the Hudson's Bay Company were of Orcadian descent, and it is our intention to celebrate this unique heritage with a major Millennium project, The Orkney Homecoming.
>
> This 'Homecoming' event will offer a package comprising flights to Scotland, rail and ferry transport to Orkney, accommodation, a programme of tours and excursions, genealogy investigations and various other activities. A grand gala evening at which Orcadians and Canadians can celebrate their shared heritage will take place in Kirkwall's new leisure centre. (Great Canadian Travel Company, 1998)

Given the specialized nature of the event and the broad geographic spread of potential 'Homecomers' throughout western Canada, the event was niche-marketed using the Internet, both through the 'Orkney Homecoming' web-site and via numerous genealogical email discussion lists relating to Orkney and Scotland. The event also generated a great deal of press and media attention, and, indeed, was covered by both national and regional news services, and was the subject of a Canadian Broadcasting Company radio documentary, *The Search for Norquoy* (CBC, 1999).

The motif of departure and return is evoked in this documentary through the story of one Hudson's Bay Company recruit, a James Inkster from Orphir Parish, Orkney, who left for Rupert's Land (later to become part of the Province of Manitoba) in 1824:

> **Narrator**: In three months, the summer sailing season arrives and James Inkster finds himself on his way to work as an official labourer in the Company of Adventurers. Like most children of Orkney crofters, or tenant farmers, he would have been out in a small row boat fishing, but he would also likely have never been away from home before. Now he's headed half way around the world to a place called Rupert's Land. He doesn't know it, but he'll never come home again. What he does know is that for the next five years he'll be earning real money: fifteen pounds sterling each year. He leans on the ship's rail and watches his misty green island disappear . . .
>
> [*Timeless sound of wind and waves, then the sounds of a modern ferry, Canadian voices, a Tannoy announcement*]
>
> **Narrator**: 175 years later, two more Inksters are leaning on a ship's rail, crossing the same stretch of water, looking at the same coastline James would have seen: James's great-great-granddaughter, Lee, and his great-great-grandson, Greg Inkster. Two Canadians, a brother and a sister, on their way to Orkney in search of the place that James Inkster called home. (CBC, 1999)

The 'ship' – the St Ola ferry – bedecked in full colours, bearing the Canadian Maple Leaf flag at its prow, sounded its horn as it approached Stromness harbour and was met by the Stromness Pipe Band, welcoming banners, and a large crowd of local people (Figure 1). 'This is where it all began,' one Stetson-wearing Canadian was overheard saying to

FIGURE 1 Arrival of the St Ola ferry, Stromness, Orkney.
Photograph, Paul Basu

himself, 'this is where it all began'. It was an emotional scene as the Canadians disembarked and followed the pipe band off the pier to waiting coaches, which would take them to their lodgings.

That week's *Orcadian*, the local newspaper, carried a Maple Leaf and a bold red headline: 'WE WELCOME OUR CANADIAN COUSINS'. Indeed the sentiment was repeated throughout the islands with Maple Leaves flying from hotel flagpoles, adorning shop fronts and placed in the windows of houses. 'There's not a family in Orkney that doesn't have Canadian links', one of the event organizers told me. And so began a busy week of tours and excursions, concerts, lectures, dinners and a special 'Homecoming service' at St Magnus' Cathedral, Kirkwall at which a sermon was delivered on the theme of the return of the Prodigal Son: 'one of the most profound and beautiful stories in the world' (Rev. Ronald Ferguson).

I accompanied one party of Homecomers on a tour of Orkney's East Mainland and the islands of Burray and South Ronaldsay. One of the highlights of the tour was a visit to the now derelict Tomison's Academy. This was a school established in 1851 by a South Ronaldsayman who, like so many, joined the Hudson's Bay Company and left for Canada. Unlike many of his contemporaries, however, he could read and write, and gradually moved up the ranks of the Company, eventually becoming factory Governor and 'Chief, Inland'. On his retirement, William Tomison returned to his native island and founded the academy to provide the islanders' children with an education so that they, too, might have the opportunity to excel. The school eventually closed in the 1960s when, with the Churchill Barriers connecting South Ronaldsay to the Orkney mainland, it became easier for children to travel to school in Kirkwall. It now stands empty, but many local people would like to see it turned into a museum celebrating Orkney's unique links with the Hudson's Bay Company and Canada.

Our next stop was at an old church where several members of the group were keen to brave the elements and examine gravestones for family names. Others huddled into the back vestry of the church to look at a Pictish carved stone. The small room was cluttered with old brooms and dustpans, and there on the floor was the remarkable stone. 'Think of Disney, then think of this', one Canadian remarked. 'I think this is much better,' another agreed, '*leaving things in their place*.' 'Yes, it's quite some distance from Disney World.' The comparison seemed to refer not only to qualitative differences between touristic experiences, but to more profound contrasts, as if North America was somehow equated with Disney World – colourful, comfortable and yet contrived and commercialized – whereas Orkney, with its cold and rain, drab fields and ancient stones in broom-cupboard vestries, was more 'natural' or 'real'. They had crossed a distance between perceived artifice and perceived authenticity.

I asked Cameron Taylor and Max Johnson, with whom the event originated, about this apparent desire to 'connect' with place.

> **CT**: It's got to be an emotional thing. It's back to your sense of place . . . that people frequently – always, I should say – talk in terms of where they come from. And it's a physical thing. A physical place.
>
> **MJ**: And a lot of North America . . . is about the most placeless society that one can imagine . . . Partly because – particularly in Canada – people are encouraged to be 'hyphenated Canadians'. One is a Ukrainian-Canadian, or a German-Canadian, or a Japanese-Canadian . . . or an Aboriginal-Canadian, but nobody's allowed to be 'Canadian'. So people are permanently linked to another culture, even if they're fourth generation. And it's positive to a certain extent because it's not good to lose cultures, but, on the other hand, it creates some sort of . . . not necessarily instability, but it creates a feeling that maybe this isn't the real home.

Johnson also suggested that the evident antiquity of Orkney's human environment offered a sense of security, of durability and continuity that North America, particularly the West, lacked. He bleakly described the consequences of this absence of continuity for a fiercely competitive society:

> In North America, we are told obliquely, if you fail, you're out of it. Success is everything. There is no community, you are for yourself . . . And the idea of failure is so frightening. You lose everything. It's gone, and there's no society to back you up, there's no place to come back to with your tail between your legs and say, 'well, I tried, but failed.' It just doesn't exist.

This definition of 'home' – a place to come back to when all else is lost – was a theme of Rev. Ronald Ferguson's sermon on Luke 15:11–32, the parable of the return of the prodigal son, at the special Homecoming service at St Magnus' Cathedral, Kirkwall. 'Every time I walk into this beautiful cathedral,' he said,

> I feel that I am coming home. I feel a sense of the ancestors, the spirits of the people who built this place, lovingly crafted as a sermon in stone . . . And you know we need not just a physical home, but a spiritual home: a place where we belong. And the Bible tells us that we belong to God, you and I. That ultimately God is our true home . . . St Augustine said, 'our hearts are restless till they find their rest in Thee'. This is the true Homecoming.

Many Canadian visitors commented on how moving they found the service at St Magnus', one described 'an almost magical feeling' as the sun shone through a stained glass window onto the congregation, another imagined how her great-grandmother would, at some time, have worshipped in that very place.

During the service, a treaty of friendship was signed between Hugh Halcro-Johnson, Convenor of the Orkney Islands Council, and Winston

Hodgins of the Government of the Province of Manitoba. The objectives of the treaty, 'to reinforce existing bonds and create new ones', are concerned mainly with the enhancement of economic co-operation and trade, as well as encouraging cultural and educational exchanges (Gordon, 1999). It is significant that it was the cathedral that was chosen as the location for the signing of the treaty: a 'sermon' crafted 'in stone' – a *material* symbol of Orkney's heritage, and a spiritual 'hub', not only for the islands, but for people of Orcadian descent worldwide.

Rev. Ferguson ended his sermon with an impassioned statement which took into account the plurality of 'home', but which ultimately identified its 'true' or transcendent aspect.

> I say to you today, welcome home: to Orkney, to this cathedral, to God. And as you leave this place and return to your home in Canada, or wherever you may live, may you find God there before you.

Although the 'true home' – Augustine's resting-place – is identified here in specifically Christian terms, the notion of this transcendent quality has resonances in more secular contexts.

> Yes, it's sort of like the religious pilgrimages isn't it: the pilgrimage to Mecca or wherever you go for your pilgrimage. There's something in the ritual of doing it that can be deeply personal, but you . . . I suppose if you really wanted to get close to your god or whatever you believed in, the best thing would be to go nowhere, just sit and meditate, but there's something about the ritual of going to a sacred place that's not so far removed from what's going on here. (GG, British Columbia, Canada)

This was reflected in a conversation between two sisters whom I accompanied to the Orcadian island of Hoy, where their ancestors had lived. Although we visited numerous graveyards and ruined crofthouses, we were unable to locate an old family farmstead in the parish of Walls that was mentioned in a 19th-century obituary. As the ferry started on its return sailing to the Orkney mainland, one of the sisters gazed back at Hoy, 'There's a sadness about leaving. You know, I don't want to leave.' She elaborated, 'I don't feel the same way about Orkney. It's a foreign country. But Walls, that's my heritage.' I asked about the Homecoming. 'It's like a crusade.' 'A crusade for *what*?' her sister interjected. 'I don't know. What did the Crusaders go to Jerusalem for? Did they know?'

> 'Did you feel anything?' she asked her sister.
>
> 'No. I would have if we'd found something more substantial. But I'm not a searcher.'
>
> 'But I'm like that with everything . . .'
>
> 'Like a detective?'
>
> 'I'm a believer.'

Pilgrimages, quests, crusades . . . being a searcher, a believer. This is the language with which many 'roots-tourists' describe their journeys and themselves (Basu, in press). But, if it is not 'God' in any orthodox sense they are seeking, then what secular grail is their goal? A professional genealogist based in Stromness who had been assisting a number of Canadian visitors to find their ancestral homes, was of the opinion that the 'New World' desire to find 'Old World' roots is a consequence of the depersonalizing forces of modernity.

> I think people who have grown up in 'the Colonies', you know, they suddenly reach middle age or towards old age, and they desperately want to pass onto their children 'roots': foundations that are beyond the modern worlds they live in. You know, too much of them now are all numbers . . . you know, you've got an insurance number, you've got a bank number, a this number, a that number. You're a number in the world. Whereas, when you come back to look at your ancestry in the 1700s and 1800s, these were real people. (LM, Stromness, Orkney)

She also spoke of an alternative 'spirituality', redolent of T.S. Eliot's *Little Gidding*, (Eliot, 1974) a 'New Age' melding of Buddhism and Jungian 'Individuation', a closing of the circle of the self:

> I think people come back to some sense of themselves. They come back to find themselves. It's not just saying, 'I want to look at the steading that my people had.' I think it's a much deeper need than that. Because most of the people that I've ever spoken to who have come back from Canada and Australia to see . . . they say when they land here, they suddenly feel, 'I'm home!' The affinity is there, the atmosphere is right, they've completed the circle where they felt there was a gap. You know, the circle is now complete and they're happy. This gap as to 'who I am' and 'where did I come from' has been closed, just by being here. (LM, Stromness, Orkney)

The genealogist, not native to the islands herself, drew a contrast between 'the Colonies' and the ancestral homeland that seemed to exclude modernity from Orkney, as if Mackay Brown's description – 'The Orkney Islands: "Like sleeping whales . . . beside an ocean of time" ' – which featured prominently on brochures advertising the Homecoming (Figure 2), was being taken to heart. And, whilst she maintained that native Orcadians living in Orkney had little interest in their genealogy – 'They know who they are, they're Orcadians, so they don't need to know anything else' – I met several local people who had, on the contrary, compiled very detailed family histories.

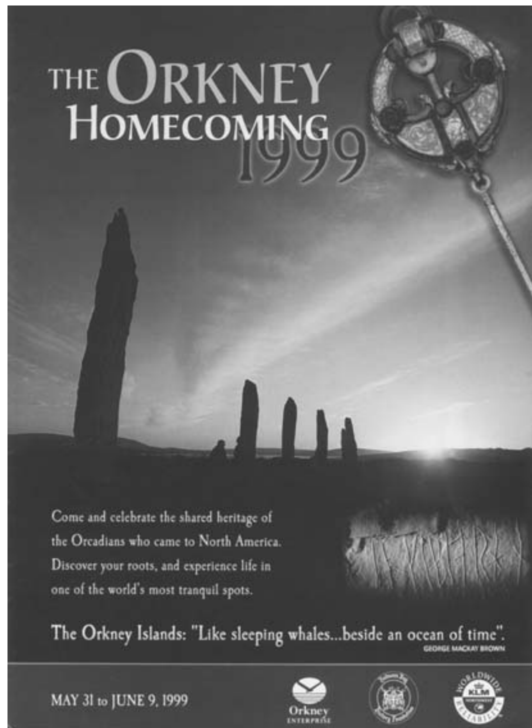
The difference between 'homeland' attitudes to genealogy and that of the 'diasporan' Orcadians, is that locally there is a greater sense of continuity. Ancestral places are not fetishized in the same way because they are part of the living fabric of the community. 'The family survives here very well', one local man told me as we leafed through a family

history he and his son had researched. He suggested that this was related to the unusually high percentage of owner-occupied farms in Orkney compared to many other areas of the Scottish Highlands and Islands:

> I mean there's farms here that have been in the same family for hundreds of years. Now, that means that, if you're in a rented farm you're going to be in it for . . . how many years? You put a certain amount of investment into it, but it's, you know, it's a business. But if it's a family farm, you're running the family farm until you retire and then your son or daughter, whatever, somebody in the family will be taking it over. So everything you put into it is not just for yourself, but it's for the family. Now one of the things we have in Orkney, which has got a lot weaker in many places, is we still have a very strong family. I would say that is probably the most important thing. It's nothing to do with all the history and environment and everything, which is all fine, but none of that's any use in my opinion if you don't have a strong family. (CT, Kirkwall, Orkney)

Conversely, the diasporan view of genealogy and ancestral places is defined by discontinuity. Here, then, is the 'gap' that the Stromness genealogist spoke of: 'It's *themselves* they want to complete,' she reiterated, 'they want to complete this gap that's always been in their life as to "*who am I?*" ' With ever more mobile lifestyles and a consequent weakening of family bonds, and without tangible indicators of continuity in the landscape itself, it is a loss of *identity* that has been felt. This is further exacerbated by the depersonalization and competition of a consumerist society, leading to an increasingly 'atomized' or 'individualized' existence – an implicit demand for self-reliance, an absence of a place *to come home to*.

FIGURE 2 Orkney Homecoming promotional brochure.
The Great Canadian Travel Company Ltd



This would seem to

be particularly evident in the 'settler cultures' of North America and Australia, where one reaction is to immerse oneself in genealogical research, to 'recover' one's roots, and to reappropriate a heritage that one has a legitimate, if vicarious, claim to. The Homecomers I spoke with in Orkney were not interested in merely assembling the names and dates of their ancestors into a family tree. They wanted to know how their ancestors lived, where they worked, why they left their native islands, in short they wanted to know *who* their ancestors were: and this because, in some way, who their ancestors were affected who they were themselves. What this amounts to is not only the recovery of identity – a closing of the gap, a crossing of the distance – but the recovery of a specifically *social* identity. The mobile, atomized self is reconnected with its history, its people and its place (see Berger et al., 1973; and Rapport and Dawson, 1998).

But what of that place – that material manifestation of home? Why is it necessary for such ancestor hunters to actually travel to the places associated with their forebears? A further excerpt from the radio documentary, *The Search for Norquoy*, is both telling and telling of nothing. With the help of a native Orkneyman, the Canadians, Lee and Greg, had tracked down the location of 'Norquoy', the croft where their ancestors had lived and farmed before emigrating. There was nothing of the old home left, however, except for a deviation in the thickness of a stretch of stone wall. Still they traipsed through a field of long, sodden grass, bracing themselves against the wind and rain, to stand on the site where, they believed, the house once stood.

> **Greg**: There isn't actually a physical building we can touch and say, 'here it is', but none the less, it's just as real to see the hills in the background and understand that these are the sights they would have seen, and this is the environment that they would have been living in on a day-to-day basis . . .
>
> **Lee**: It makes it very personal. To read about it at home, and see it on a family tree, to get off the ferry and know that we're getting close . . . but to actually stand on the field that they would have farmed, it's very moving. . .
>
> **Greg**: It's more an emotional thing, I think, than any kind of factual relationship, because it was a long time ago, it was 175 years, you know, that they left here, so there's that distance in time, and certainly the geographic distance is great, but when I'm standing here looking out, it doesn't seem so great, it seems as though it could have been 50 years ago or less, and I don't get that sense of distance or distance in time when I'm here.
>
> **Lee**: (tearful) It's a very emotional thing. Our family has always been very important to us, to see where our earliest recorded ancestors actually worked and made a living, and to see the things that they saw, looking over the bay, it's . . . it's very emotional. (CBC, 1999)

There is no doubt that the culmination of the search is very moving, but their explanations provide little insight into the reasons for such emotional responses. Greg and Lee struggle to put into words what, in fact, their journey has articulated for them. As with pilgrimage, the physical journey – to a destination which is constituted in the journey itself as somehow 'sacred' – narrates and enables a corresponding 'inward' journey: a cognitive homecoming, a recognition of identity, made possible through the material reality of the landscape (Basu, 2001).

Such 'pilgrims' are often keen to separate their journeying from ordinary 'tourism', yet the Orkney Homecoming was undoubtedly a touristic event. From the arrival of the St Ola Ferry at Stromness to the Cathedral service with its prodigal son sermon and Treaty of Friendship signing, and from the many other events that reinforced awareness of the cultural connections between the Orkney Islands and western Canada to the 'fond farewells' as the ferry left the port a week later, the Homecoming was a carefully orchestrated piece of interactive theatre, staged to maximize the emotional engagement of its participants. 'Homecomings R Us' Max Johnson rather cynically joked as we discussed other homecoming events his company was planning. But to suggest that the enterprise exploited the 'spiritual' needs of its participants would be to misrepresent, and there is no doubt of the sincerity of the sentiment as the massed group of Canadians joined their Orcadian cousins in an old Orkney song:

> There's a place on this earth
> It's the land of my birth
> A land that I'll love all my days
> And where e're I may go
> I'll return there I know
> There'll be welcome to greet me always.
>
> In the Islands of Orkney
> It's a place that I love best
> Its beauty and grandeur are great to behold
> Its hills clothed in purple and turning to gold
>
> The sun sinking slowly
> Away in the west
> The skies ever changing
> As day goes to rest.
>
> The memories will linger
> Where e're I may roam
> Of the Islands of Orkney
> My own island home.

CONCLUSIONS

> He that cannot live as he desires at home, listens to the tale of fortunate islands, and happy regions, where every man may have land of his own.
>
> Samuel Johnson, *A Journey to the Western Islands*

From a perspective at the beginning of the 21st century, a paradox is apparent in this short quotation from Johnson's *A Journey to the Western Islands* (Chapman, 1970), which has to do with changing perceptions of 'home' and its 'elsewheres'. In the 1770s would-be emigrants listened to tales of 'fortunate islands and happy regions' embodied in the idea of America – *the New World*. Such people sought escape from the drudgery of poverty and the narrow prospects of home in an uncharted future. Now, 230 years later, many descendants of those emigrants find that they cannot live as they desire in the societies their ancestors built in the New World, and, for them, the tales to which they are now prone concern the 'fortunate islands and happy regions' of a past of imagined certainty and stability embodied in *the Old Country*.

For the critic there is no doubt that such regions – whether of the future or of the past – are constructs of the imagination: reflections of the inadequacies of the 'here and now'. But these imagined worlds are not perceived to be imagined by those who invoke them or else they would be redundant. Our objective, therefore, should not be to lampoon such imaginary homelands as utopian, but to understand what aspirations they conceal. Similarly, the informants' quotations, which pepper this essay, are as telling of the homeland's impressions of the diaspora, as of the diaspora's impressions of the homeland. They speak of an unidentified malaise, evinced only in this search for an elsewhere to call 'home'. There is *something* in 'western' settler society – perhaps epitomized in the 'New World' cultures which comprise so many diasporas (the Scots among them), perhaps a consequence of rampant consumerism or the inhumanity of 'numbers', perhaps the moral complexities of 'belonging' in a place on which one has no ancient claim – that provokes a desire to seek beyond the rationalistic, bureaucratic conflation of nation and identity, and instead to establish alternative senses of belonging built on more personally meaningful grounds.

Genealogical research provides one key to finding such personal 'meaning'. But this is not perceived to be about *constructing* senses of individual identity arbitrarily from the 'spoils of history'; on the contrary, it is effective precisely because the connections it establishes are *apparently* non-arbitrary: not constructed, but *discovered*. It is a matter, then, of discovering continuities with that which is beyond the self and its inventions and imaginings; a locating of the narrative of the self within broader narratives of families, cultures, nations and

diasporas; an identifying of the personal within the extra-personal. It is, without doubt, a matter of *social* identity.

But genealogy is not, in itself, an adequate support for this renewed sense of belonging, and this is revealed in the difficulty many people have in verbalizing their motivations for family history research. There is frequent recourse to alternative modes of exploration/expression: drawing and annotating a family tree, writing poetry, keeping a journal and, most profoundly, making journeys to ancestral places. 'Home', the *concept*, however vaguely understood, becomes the destination of a physical journey to the homeland, and it is the *materiality* of this home – its blatant tangibility – that empowers the experience, making it unequivocally 'real' and therefore essential in terms of identity.

There are, of course, many other facets to this intriguing theme. For instance the relationship between the 'substance' of homeland and the 'insubstance' of its representation on the Internet and in other media where so many homecoming journeys begin and end (Basu, 2002: 96–122). Or the nature of the heritage landscapes through which these pilgrims travel. As Geddes' poem suggests, solidarity with the past is not restricted to the townships, crofts and cemeteries with which 'homecomers' may establish documented links. Indeed the Highlands and Islands of Scotland are renowned for the quality of their *pre*historic remains, and, far from being uninterested in such sites, many roots-tourists are drawn to them in profound ways. This is perhaps a reaction to the growing awareness in 'White' North America and Australasia of aboriginal/native systems of thought regarding 'ancestral spirits' in the landscape. Conscious that they have no place within such cosmologies, that they have no deep spiritual attachment to the lands they inhabit, there is a desire to look to other landscapes to which they might claim at least the *possibility* of aboriginality: landscapes inhabited by their own ancestral spirits (Basu, 2002: 123–48, 190–204). Until genetic science proves otherwise, who is to say that Scotland's ancient monuments were not erected by the ancestors of those diasporan visitors who now gather around them?

These are matters for elaboration elsewhere however. For now, I leave the last word to one of the Orkney Homecomers who wrote to me from Canada some months after the event, recalling her and her sister's journey to the Orkney Islands with their elderly parents. Her comments attest to the many ways in which the materiality of the Orcadian landscape and its archaeological remains, together with souvenirs of the journey, interact with memories of the shared visit and, in so doing, root the family's collective identity in their own ancestral island home.

> We all talk about our trip to the Orkneys occasionally – with such fond memories. We would all like to make a return visit.

For Dad, the best part of the whole thing was just getting to the Orkneys. He had wanted to go for a long time – the trip we made was actually his third attempt to get there. He just wanted to see some of the Orkneys because his grandfather was born there. His two wishes were to set foot on the Orkneys, and to find any relatives that might be around – both wishes were accomplished.

Mom's most powerful lasting impression was the visit to St. Magnus church . . . She is not sure that she has ever been in such an old building. My sister and Mom mentioned how beautiful it was when the sunlight poured through the window at the back of the church during the service.

For some reason the visit to Birsay has a strong hold on my memory. When we walked across the causeway to the island in the pouring rain, I could look to either side and see huge ocean waves crashing in the distance. The experience was breath-taking . . . And then to stand in settlements like that and Skara Brae and Maeshowe, and realize that people were living in these locations up to 5000 years ago!!!

Probably my most important souvenir is the ring which I purchased . . . a Celtic knot design with an amethyst (my birth stone). I wear it always. So my thoughts are never far away from the islands.

We always wondered if we really came from the Orkneys – and now we know. We will always treasure that journey together. (JF, Manitoba, Canada)

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