CHAPTER 1

The Conditions for Plantation. The Scottish Context Pre 1598

Introduction

The Northern Hebrides centring on the Island of Lewis on the Atlantic coast of Scotland and the wider Gaelic speaking region of the Highlands and Islands are sometimes viewed from within Scotland, Britain and further afield, as peripheral, remote and isolated. Such modern geographical perspectives were not always adopted in earlier centuries and were certainly not held by the indigenous inhabitants of the Gaidhealtachd.\(^1\) Shipping bound to or from the Netherlands, Scandinavia or the Baltic which attempted to pass through the narrow Straits of Dover, was often vulnerable to harassment from French, Flemish or English pirates or privateers. This together, with the prevailing south westerly wind, meant that Northern European shipping often attempted the longer, more hazardous sea route past the storm-lashed north of Scotland when trafficking with the wider world in the sixteenth and seventeenth century.\(^2\) Despite being adjacent to a busy international shipping route the Hebrides had hitherto been relatively insulated from the demands of Edinburgh governments in terms of control exercised by the latter and the revenue they were able to extract. This changed during the reign of James VI of Scotland 1567–1625, a monarch determined to exploit all possible resources and bring all corners of his realm to heel. There are several reasons for James VI’s interest in a corner of the realm largely, if not completely, ignored by his predecessors.\(^3\) One of these was the Irish and British dimension: the Macleods of Lewis and most of their Hebridean neighbours had been active participants in England’s Irish wars.

\(^1\) R.A. Dodgshon, *From chiefs to landlords. Social and economic change in the western Highlands and Islands, c. 1493–1820* (Edinburgh, 1998), 11–12.
\(^3\) Fifteenth and sixteenth century Stewart monarchs, James I, James II, James III, James IV, James V and Queen Mary all intervened in the Highlands with varying degrees of success. None of these monarchs enjoyed a lengthy reign and none imposed their will on the Highlands and the Islands for a lengthy period. J. Cameron (& N. MacDougall, ed.), *James V: the personal rule, 1528–1542* (East Linton, 1998), 228–242, 245–248. See also chapter 2, below.
This activity had been tolerated, if not tacitly encouraged, by Scottish monarchs but by the later 1590s James, as the most likely heir to Elizabeth I of England, stood to inherit this conflict. Adopting the English fashion for Irish-style plantation and implementing this in Gaelic Scotland might show his future English subjects that James was suitably tough on Gaelic barbarity and prepared to deal with the causes of it (Chapter 3). Another pressing factor for an impecunious king was the boom in the herring fishery in the later sixteenth century, much of it driven by stocks in Hebridean waters. The coastline – and the seas of the North Minch basin were, moreover, dominated by the Macleods of Lewis, a family who, from a governmental perspective, obstructed the progress of commerce and thus impeded the flow of tax into the royal coffer.

These were some of the many pressures which led to state sanctioned intervention in the Northern Hebrides. This was to result in fierce competition between five different groups of people both native and stranger, from both within and outwith the northern Hebridean region, for control of this area, the Isle of Lewis in particular, over a fifty year period. The approaches taken by these different groups of people, both native and newcomer, to the same unit of land, over a relatively short time period, can give fresh insights into processes such as state formation and plantation. The number of rival groups contesting this space also affords a convenient means of structuring the book. This, essentially, is a series of case studies exploring how a number of successive groups attempted to control and exploit the same set of resources in a discrete area over a half century from different perspectives. Chapter two examines the native Macleods of Lewis, or Sìol Torcaill, a Gaelic-speaking clan who had been established in the island since the fourteenth century but whose land was taken from them, despite their stout resistance, initially by Lowland Scottish colonists or planters in 1598; a job finished off by the Mackenzies of Kintail in 1610. This chapter considers what it was about Sìol Torcaill that made them, more than their neighbours, vulnerable to predatory outsiders.

Other than Gregory’s pioneering history (1836) and William C. Mackenzie’s History of the Outer Hebrides (1903) no detailed evaluation of the Fife Adventurer plantations of Lewis, 1598–1607, has ever been attempted. This has mainly been due to the lack of readily accessible source materials. Yet this, arguably, was the first Scottish plantation under the auspices of the Scottish Crown (different from the numerous Scots stranger communities in Europe), predating attempts at Scottish settlement in Ulster by a number of years and anticipating later Scottish plantations at Acadia (1629) and at Darien (1695). New evidence is presented here (chapter three), drawn largely on a range of evidence and including under-utilised archival sources, to try and explore some of the pressures faced by these Lowland planters during their attempts to establish a viable settlement in Lewis.