CHAPTER 6

The English in the Isles and the British Fishery Company

Introduction

The Common Fishing or the British Fishery company in the Hebrides, 1629–c.1641, has, like much of the rest of the material surveyed in this book received its most detailed coverage in W.C. Mackenzie’s *History of the Outer Hebrides* (1903). While some scholars of the early twentieth century examined this theme it does not appear on the radar of most recent historiography with some notable exceptions, including Allan Macinnes’s study of Charles I’s government of Scotland, 1625–41 and, more briefly, Kevin Sharpe’s study of the same monarch from an English perspective.1 While the movement of Scots into England after 1603 attracted much contemporary and subsequent comment, little scrutiny has been given to the movement of Englishmen into Scotland in the first half of the seventeenth century.2 Indeed, English interest in the Highlands and Islands between the Unions of the Crown in 1603 and the Union of the Parliaments in 1707 is thought to have been negligible.3 Yet, while that might arguably be the case, there were a small but significant number of Englishmen in the Highlands and Islands of Scotland in the period under consideration here.4 The British fishery company in Lewis, c. 1630–1640,

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3 M. Rackwitz, *Travels to Terra Incognita: the Scottish Highlands and Hebrides in early modern travellers’ accounts, c. 1600 to 1800* (Munster, 2007), 19.
4 Some of these Englishmen in Lewis (and the Orkneys) are mentioned in the body and appendices of this chapter (appendix F1). Others in the Isle of Lewis and in different areas of the Highlands, 1603–1630, included the English pirate Captain Peter Love, from Lewes in Sussex with his crew, three other Englishmen, an Irishman, two Welshmen and a Cornishman who were captured on the west coast of the isle of Lewis by Niall Macleod’s men, 1610, and tried and executed in Leith for piracy. An English metallurgist, Stephen Aynescombe from Mayfield in Sussex together with a small number of gunfounders, Sir Robert Vernon of Fordham,
dominated by royalist and English naval interests was also to become a focal point for Anglo-Scottish rivalry, not least due to the perceived deprivation of Lowland Scots from, what they regarded as, their own fishery in the Hebrides.\(^5\)

**English Antecedence in the Hebrides**

Captain John Mason claimed in 1630 that the fisheries in the waters around Lewis were the richest this side of Newfoundland and the predominantly English, so-called ‘British,’ fishery company witnessed a significant burst of activity in Scottish waters in the following decade. English mariners had, though, long known of the Hebrides. Their knowledge of and involvement in the area can be traced as far back as the 1540s, to the Earl of Lennox and Dòmhnall Dubh’s rebellion, if not earlier. One of those involved in this rebellion, John Elder a ‘redshank’ or native Gaelic speaker from Caithness, wrote a long letter to Henry VIII around 1543 hoping to curry favour with the English king.\(^6\) Elder, a longstanding associate of the Earl of Lennox, supplied the English with detailed geographical knowledge of the west Highlands and Islands, probably providing much of the information that appeared in the maps of Britain by George Lily (1546) and Laurence Nowall (1564) which included the first reasonably accurate detailed cartographical depiction of Scotland.\(^7\) While these new accurate charts no doubt helped the English

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\(^6\) This has been printed in *Collectanea*, 23–32.