



The Men Who Went Far, Far Away: Caithness & Patagonia **Ian Leith**

Patagonia is a long way from Caithness, both physically and mentally. Apart from the wide horizons shared by both lands, there is literally a world of distance between the two. Yet in the late 19th century a number of Caithness people took on the challenge of Patagonia.

In Patagonia they would find endless horizons, harsh weather and little if anything in the way of home comforts. Whatever their lifestyles at home in Caithness amounted to, what greeted them in Patagonia must have been well beyond their knowledge or imaginings.

The research questions, therefore for me, are around:

- Why Patagonia - what were the drivers and where did they find out about this far away land?
- What did they experience both en route and on arrival?
- What was life like?
- What impact and influence did these pioneers have on the cultures of a new and 'opening' society?
- How did they survive and thrive in this new land?
- What impact did it have on those left behind?
- How and did they manage to keep in touch with those who left?
- To what extent did the families benefit from the successes that many of these pioneers achieved?
- What happened to the pioneers? There were mixed successes and in some cases loss of life
- What and where are the now second and third generations of these pioneers?

So, while this is a tale of Patagonian adventure, it is also a reconnection with a past that has affected many in Caithness.

This presentation will aim to describe some of the conditions and experiences encountered in Patagonia, based on the lives of the men and women who made that long journey to an unknown and often unwelcoming land.

While family history research techniques are vital in a project like this, where I am trying to find out about people, their background, their lives and their success or failures, it is also very different from researching your own family; on one hand, because there is no collective family tree here, although because of the nature of their circumstances some families did become intertwined. Also, I have to be mindful of the fact that these are not my families, and, without the permission and support of current descendants, I have no right publish their details.

I am however in contact with a number of these Caithness Patagonian descendants, and they are co-operating and collaborating in the project. While I will highlight some of the people who we know went from Caithness to Patagonia, I will touch only on those parts where I have been given permissions, and on facts that are available in the public domain.

Born and bred in Caithness, Ian's interest in the history of Northern Scotland was largely developed during the time he worked in Wick and Thurso Libraries. Despite having moved away from the area, it is still his heritage roots that keep drawing him back.

A fascination with the Highland Clearances, and in particular the role of Patrick Sellar, led to the publication of the book 'The Man Who Went to Farr'.

Along with continuing research into the Highland Clearances (hopefully another book soon), Ian has been engaged in tracking the connections between Caithness & Patagonia. A number of Caithness people left these shores in the late 19th and early 20th century for a life in Patagonia. The question why and the consequences form the basis of his current research programme.

Ian runs his own commercial research and facilitation company (Baseline Research), which engages in historical, learning and corporate projects.