

# How wealthy was Donald McLean?

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## How you can use these notes

- Too much detail?: Read the summary first, to get the essence of these notes.
- Research: This is for serious researchers, rather than general reading. There are standardized headings and dot-points which are a framework into which new details can be placed so that the document can be occasionally updated.
- Sources: References are quoted throughout these notes. Much of it is from what is available on the internet - we have not yet directly researched original physical records.
- Searching: You can search this PDF document using Control/F, and relevant search word.
- Our other documents: This is one of a series of interconnected research notes. These can be found in the SMALL PRINT directory on the left of the homepage. Most relevant to Donald's wealth are:-
  - C10 – 'Setting the scene': Essential reading.
  - G20 – Donald's life – Overview – 1779 to 1855
- Feedback: Your corrections and comments will be welcomed - via 'Contact us' on the website homepage.
- Authors: Don Gordon, in collaboration with Lorna McLean. Don and Lorna are the GGG-grandchildren of Donald and Christina.

## Summary

Donald McLean lived near Fort William until he was 58 years old. In 1837, he migrated with his large family. He initially settled near Adelaide where he grew the first wheat crop in the new colony. After a few years, they pioneered to the Strathalbyn district.

In Scotland, he was the tenant of Duiskey farm where he built a dwelling house. Before migrating, Donald was described as "*a respectable Highlander ... with £632 at his disposal*" as well as other assets (a plough etc). We have calculated that this might have been worth over \$500,000 now. It is not clear how he came to be so well off when he was just leasing a modest farm in a poor area of Scotland.

As soon as he arrived in South Australia he purchased half an acre within the Adelaide township for £45, and he sent a son to Van Dieman's Land to buy £300 of agricultural equipment. He had pre-paid £80 for an 80 acre farm near Adelaide and he built a house there.

Subsequently, he purchased farmland in Strathalbyn where he built a substantial house. Over the following decade, he purchased over twenty farming properties around the district.

His final worth has yet to be calculated, but it is clear that he arrived in the colony with considerable assets and he greatly added to this in the next 17 years before his death.

# Donald's property in Scotland

## Sources

- We have only two sources which indicate Donald's connection to Duiskey – the BRB and the Ardgour papers.
- BRB:
  - 'The History of Donald and Christina McLean and their descendants' is a big red book (BRB).
  - "He grew up to lease the Duiskey Estate. From owning 100,000 acres the family now leased 12,000 acres" (p4) and "On attaining adulthood he leased 20 square miles of country known as the Douskie [sic] Estate, Ardgour [sic]" (p6).
  - The BRB obtained these details from the Mortlock Notes (our D25). These were placed with the Mortlock Library in Adelaide by Donald Henry McLean (born 1854) in 1922. Unfortunately, it is not known where Donald Henry got these details.
- Ardgour papers:
  - The only documentary reference to Donald in Duiskey was found in the papers of Alexander McLean, the 13<sup>th</sup> Laird of Ardgour (bundle 22, p59, NRAS3583). These papers are 144 pages of summaries of Alexander's correspondence and documents.
  - "Report by James MacGregor, who visited Duiskey with Neil MacLean [land surveyor], Inverness, Mr Mitchell of Inverscadle and Mr Duncan Boyd, as to the buildings on lands of Duiskey formally tenanted by Angus and Donald MacLachlan, 30 May 1853. A dwelling-house is noted as having been built by 'Donald MacLean, now in Australia'. There is reference to obligations by Mr Mitchell as incoming tenant".
- Research:
  - It would be useful to have some direct documentary support regarding Donald's involvement with the Duiskey farm. What other official records can we access? [[Research](#): Rate books etc]

## How big was Duiskey?

- The first impression from the BRB quotes (above), is that Donald had substantial property. This requires closer examination.
- Size: The quotes refer to 100,000 acres, 12,000 acres and 20 square miles (12,800 acres).
- Ownership Vs leasing: The quotes indicate that the family owned 100,000 acres and then the family leased 12,000 acres. And Donald leased the equivalent of 12,880 acres.
- Family: The BRB quotes made a confusion between Donald and 'the family'. The reference to 'the family' is in fact the whole McLean clan in Ardgour – or more particularly, the 13<sup>th</sup> Laird of Ardgour who was Alexander McLean.
- Map: The Strachan map of 1858 (our E20, NRS - RHP---00747-00003-0000) shows a huge area as the properties of Alexander McLean – a rough estimate of 55,000 acres [[Research](#): Check this]. On the other hand, Duiskey is a much smaller area, in the northern part of Ardgour - located on the southern shores of Loch Eil. The map shows South Duiskey as 4481 acres and North Duiskey as 748 acres – totaling 5229 acres. This is much less than 12,800 acres.
- Decline: The BRB implies a decline in McLean fortunes – from being owners to being just leasees. And from 100,000 acres to just 12,000 acres. The BRB statements have confused two separate things. Although Alexander McLean owned a huge area, Donald leased Duiskey which was a smaller (but still substantial) area. The BRB description of the decline should not have been about the time before Donald. In fact, when Donald was there, the entirety of the massive Ardgour estate was in the hands of Alexander McLean. However, in 1858, two decades after Donald left, half of the Ardgour estate (including Duiskey and Blaich) was sold to Earl Morton (Douglas clan). Then 14 decades later, Ardgour House was sold in 1996 – the year after the BRB was published.

## What was Donald's connection with Duiskey?

- Extent:
  - The Strachan map, shows South Duiskey as 4481 acres and North Duiskey as 748 acres – totaling 5229 acres. Did Donald lease both the South and the North – or just one of them? And if so, which one?

- The distinction between South & North Duiskey appears in the map of 1858 which was 21 years after Donald had left, but has not been seen in earlier maps for the era when Donald was living there.
  - Conclusion: We can think that, for Donald, Duiskey was just Duiskey of 5229 acres, rather than South or North.
- Lease:
  - What were the arrangements of the lease?
  - Unfortunately, we have not yet found documentary confirmation that Donald held such a lease.
  - The Ardour Papers (above) has John Mitchell of Inverscadle about to take over the lease from Angus and Donald MacLachlan in 1853. In those times, leases were normally for 19 years (starting on Whitsunday), which indicates that the MacLachlan's were the leasees from 1834. This calculation is not a confirmation that their lease commenced in that particular year. [Research: Check this]
  - There is nothing in the papers which state when (or if) Donald held the lease prior to 1834. If he did, he might have held the lease for 19 years from 1815. Who held the lease before that? Maybe Donald held it for the previous 19 years, from 1796 when he was 17 years old. Or wouldn't it be great if it was found that the previous leasee was Donald's father, Allan.
  - However, it is not clear how rigidly the 19 year leasehold was adhered to. Maybe there were shorter or longer agreements, or premature termination of the lease at the initiative of the leasee or leaser. Or maybe it was quite a different process of changes of tenancy such as in the Lochiel Estate where, for example, with John McPhee in Crieff it passed to the son after the father's death.
  - Donald left Scotland in 1837 which was three years after we assume that the MacLachlan's took on the lease. This indicates that he was not leasing Duiskey in the last couple of years before he left.
  - [Research: Look in contemporary rent records.]
- Dwelling:
  - The Ardour Papers provide the only documentary confirmation that Donald was at Duiskey.
  - McGregor's report in 1853 has "*A dwelling-house is noted as having been built by 'Donald MacLean, now in Australia'.*"
  - This implies something about the building and something about Donald himself. The building must have been substantial because it was still standing (and presumably still in use) after many years – at least 16, but maybe a decade or so longer, if Donald had built it for his family in the earlier years of his marriage. Donald must have been well known within the local community when he was living there, because McGregor quote specifically connected Donald's name with the building (so long after he had left the area) rather than describing it just as any dwelling house.
  - [Research: Can we see the full text of James McGregor's report, rather than just the summary.]
- Residence:
  - Did Donald live on Duiskey or was he an absentee leasee.
  - It was not unusual for a person to hold the lease on several properties – eg John Mitchell held Inverscadle as well as Duiskey in the 1850s – so he was living on each property that he was leasing.
  - There was speculation that Donald lived 2<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> miles away (Trevor McLean, p3 – see our G45).
  - Conclusion: Donald and his family were living on Duiskey in the dwelling house he had built.
- Crofting:
  - The Strachan map showed 10 cottages and 2 crofts on Duiskey (south & north), with a Loch Eil waterfront of one mile.
  - Typically, crofts consisted of a cottage and about 5 acres of farmland. This was rented from the tacksman who held the lease of the whole farm.
  - Conclusion: Donald must have had a larger stake in Duiskey than being just a humble crofter because otherwise he could not have been able to accumulate so much cash by the time he left the area.
- Workers:
  - Did he actually work it himself? Was he in charge of several workers or was he just a farm labourer himself.
  - We have no details of who was doing what. However, there can be no doubt that, particularly after the mid 1820s, as he was getting older and as his sons were reaching adulthood, the family undertook the practical farm-work and fishing. The roles of the various members of the household were being established which continued when they arrived in the colony where the girls were undertaking the heavy task of getting water, and the older boys were ploughing and establishing the Hilton farm.

- There were several cottages on the Duiskey farm, so it seems that others were living and working there, in addition to Donald's household. Some of these might have been cousins. So, there might have been about a dozen workers, including our McLeans undertaking the range of tasks required.
  - Conclusion: With all this, Donald was probably doing a great deal of the hands-on work, along with quite a few others, and it is easy to imagine Donald being the guiding force making it all happen.
- Laird:
  - What was Donald's relationship with the owner – Alexander McLean, the 13<sup>th</sup> Laird of Ardgour.
  - The laird was living in Ardgour House which is 30 kms from Duiskey. Alexander probably rarely visited Duiskey and Blaich, but when he did visit, his presence would have been quite an event for everyone living there.
  - Alexander was 15 years older than Donald.
  - Alexander would have known of Donald who was the leasee of one his 20 properties. [Research: Check the number of properties]
  - Donald would have been very aware of Alexander who was the powerful landlord from whom Duiskey was leased. As well as landlord, the laird was an important influence in many aspects of local farming and clan life. For example, Alexander reformed many aspects of farming practices (Ardgour Papers, p 34) which would have directly affected Donald.
  - Conclusion: Despite all this, there is no direct evidence that Alexander and Donald ever met personally.

## Donald's cash when he left Scotland

### How much cash did he have?

- Conveying - £632:
  - Donald was described as a "*respectable highlander .... with £632 at his disposal*" who "*wishes to know what would be the most prudent mode of conveying this sum to South Australia. To all enquiries respecting conveyance of money, you may reply that a South Australian Bank has been established*". This was in a letter from the Superintendent of Emigration in January 1837 (Mathews p7).
  - If he took this advice, he would have been given a letter of credit or draft in London which he could present in Adelaide. He would have been a major customer of the bank because, by the end of 1837, Donald's deposit would have been 9% of £7000 held by the bank (Hints p47 & 105).
  - If he did not act on this advice, maybe he carried his money with him on the Navarino. If so, how did he keep it hidden, taking into account the lack of privacy and space on the ship. This would have required some thought because, as we will see, this might have been worth a million dollars in today's terms and, just in physical volume alone (gold sovereigns?) was a challenge to keep secure.
- Fares - maybe £50:
  - The letter from the Superintendent of Emigration states that Donald "*must pay his own passage .... this would cost from £36 to £40 for himself and his, besides £5 for each of his children. This is the very lowest sum.*" (Mathews p7). For the adult children, steerage passengers were £18/10/- per head (Mathews p8)
  - There was some fudging of ages of children, but if we take it that, of the ten children, baby Hugh would not be counted, the five girls and Archibald were regarded as children, and the three oldest boys were adults. This might have added up to  $36 + (6 \times 5) + (3 \times 18.5) = £121.5$ .
  - However, this might not have been the '*lowest sum*' because there was some backs and forwards about the fares (Mathews p7&8). Donald's pre-purchase of land entitled him to take his adult children as labourers for free and there might have been other factors which meant that they paid much less than the £100 or so for fares. Maybe they ended up paying about £50.
- 80 acres - £80:
  - "*It is evident that he was not without resources as he was able to pay £1,000 in cash (in golden sovereigns, the family maintains) at London in July 1837 for a land section of 80 acres, 'sight unseen' at the new Colony of South Australia (Land Order no, 454)*" (BRB p8).
  - However, the £1,000 is not correct. In fact it was £80 – see our E52. Page 7 of 'The British Province of South Australia' which was published in 1835 specified a uniform charge of twelve shillings per acre whatever the quality of the land. On this basis Donald would have paid only £48 pounds but in fact,

the SA Commissioners initially set the price at £1 per acre – ie he paid £80 pounds (letter from emigration agent per John Mathews, p 8).

- VDL supplies - £300:
  - Four weeks after disembarking, Donald sent his oldest son, Allan, with plenty of cash to buy farming supplies in Van Dieman's Land (BRB p11).
- Half town acre - £45:
  - Just five weeks after embarking, Donald purchased half-town-acre 57 in Hindley Street.
- Other:
  - Travel: There must have been expenses for the large family travelling down from Scotland to London.
  - Cargo: We know they had a plough. A Scotch plough cost £4/4/- (Hints p62). Maybe they had other agricultural equipment. They also took many small items – cups and saucers, flag and family bible.
  - Living: There were expenses in London while awaiting, for about a month, prior to their embarkation
  - Set-up: Somehow they had to meet the costs of accommodation and food for the first few months before Allan was did some ploughing in April, and much later when they were able to sell produce after they had established their farm.
- Total:
  - All these come to a total of over one thousand pounds, but it was really less than this because of double counting.
  - We don't know whether, when he indicated that he had £632 at his disposal, had he had allowed for purchasing the land order, passenger fares and the incidental expenses before embarking in London. Soon after he disembarked, he probably used some of his £632 paid for the Van Dieman's Land trip and purchasing the Hindley Street property.
  - On the other hand, he might have started with more than £632, because he might not have revealed his total worth to the authorities.
  - Conclusion: Taking all this into account, there can be no doubt that he was worth at least £700 when migrating.

## Where did this cash come from?

- Sales: Did he sell any stock or produce?
  - The BRB states that *'Donald grew oats and barley, raised cattle and had interests in herring fishing.'* (p4).
  - We do not know how financially successful he was in his farming activities.
  - The extent of his interests in herring fishing is not clear. Was it a major business enterprise, or an occasional recreational activity? Did he do the fishing himself or did he have a fleet of boats going out on his behalf?
  - It is unlikely that one short period of sales would amount to the substantial sum which Donald ended up with.
- Savings: Had he accumulated savings?
  - Maybe, but substantial saving up is difficult for anyone.
- Relinquishing lease: Could he sell his lease?
  - There are no indications of this in the Ardgour Papers.
- Payout: Did he get some sort of payout when he left Duiskey?
  - We know he had built a dwelling house so maybe he received something for that because the landlord, Alexander (13<sup>th</sup> Laird) stated that *"When a man leaves his croft, from whatever cause, he receives two-thirds of the value of the house and offices, valued by the verdict of three sworn burleymen"* (Ardgour Papers, p 34).
- Maybe he was making whisky from the barley he was growing.
  - "Even if there was something in the rumour that he was involved in whisky distilling and under suspicion from the Revenue Men, he would have had to be a major bootlegger, not just barn shed dabbler, to be able to raise that much money"* (John Gladwell, email 3<sup>rd</sup> June 2020) see G45.
- Benefactor: Did he have a benefactor?
  - Maybe Alexander, as the owner of the property Donald was leasing, and in the laird's broad role within the local community, would have known of Donald's interest in migrating. In 1854, seventeen years

after our McLeans migrated, Alexander assisted 28 people from Ardgour to sail to Australia on the 'Derry Castle' (Gibson p191). Of these 28, nine were from Duisky. (Gibson p253).

- Conclusion:
  - Despite these ideas, we are left not being sure how Donald could have accumulated so much cash.

## How valuable was it?

- Was £700 a large amount? How can we estimate what this amount in 1837 in Scotland would be worth in today's values in Australia.
- There is a website, [measuringworth.com](http://measuringworth.com), which indicates that, in current Australian dollars, the £700 would now be \$105,400 (based on the CPI) or \$970,000 (based on incomes), or \$181,000,000 (based on output). The website provides guidance about the applicability of CPI, incomes or output, but the exercise is futile over almost two centuries and very different circumstances. It is enough to say that the results are so different that the website is a little assistance to us.
- Other ways of gathering an understand, are to imagine what else Donald could have purchased with his £632 – eg Land, houses and development:-
- Land: He could have purchased eight land orders instead of just one – ie 8 X 80 acres = 1600 acres. This would have been a substantial investment as he would have been among the six biggest land purchasers. We can make a comparison with those who paid for farmland when this was packaged with an incentive of one town acre. (Donald was too late to get this incentive, so he got less for his £80 than early birds, as we shall refer to them). There were 106 early birds listed in an 1840 map showing all the town acres in Adelaide. The largest purchaser was the South Australian Company which paid for about 100. Only 3 individuals purchased more than 8 allotments. These were John Wright 16 lots, NA Knox 9 lots, and Osmond Gillies 9 lots. There were a 2 who purchased 8 lots - John Abel Smith and John Morphett. All the rest of the 106 each purchased less than 8 allotments. <http://adelaide.sa.gov.au/sites/default/files/images/maps/b1831757.png>. Eighty acres near Adelaide being offered as a special arrangement for the commencement of the colony, cannot be compared with the same property today. However, 1600 acres near a small country town today could be bought for \$600 per acre – ie about \$1,000,000. Or anyone can made their own calculations based on another guess at, say, \$300/acre. Donald had a great deal of cash in any way you look at it.
- House: Manning prefab housing kits were being advertised when Donald arrived in the colony. A basic kit cost £15, and larger kits would cost more. The kits had everything for someone to arrange for the house to be erected. Donald could have purchased more than 40 of these kits. Today, a basic house flat pack is \$25,000 – ie for 40 units it would be \$1,000,000.
- Development: In 'Hints to Emigrants' published in 1838 it is recommended that a farmer, in order to develop the land, would need at least £150 for every 80 acres and that £1000 invested in sheep would yield enormous returns (Hints p53). With the £632 at his disposal, Donald had 4 times the amount recommended for developing his 80 acres, but would have been well short of investing in a major livestock venture. In these terms, it could be thought that Donald had \$1,000,000 in today's values.
- Conclusion: There can be no doubt that Donald had a considerable amount of cash at his disposal.

## How wealthy was Donald in the colony?

- The xxxxx book advised that: *"Small capitalists intending to turn farmers cannot do better than deposit their means in one of the banks for one year, whilst they look about them, with a view to pick up information as to country, mode of life, cattle, and many other matters. Nothing should be entered upon rashly, especially the purchase of cattle, which should never be done until a run or a farm be secured"* (xxxxx p106/107 para 6).
- It is not known whether Donald had read this book or heard of the advice, but he seems to have partly taken this approach. He certainly had the means of purchasing much more than 80 acres which must have seemed very small compared to the vast Duisky Estate and even less compared to the vision of unlimited expanses across the Great South Land. But it was a start. He had plenty of time to learn about alternative farming methods because he was forced to wait seven months until his farmland became available.
- He supported his large family for 3 or 4 years in Hilton. During this time, it is unlikely that he would have got a large income from the wheat and other crops he planted there.
- He purchased land in Strathalbyn – initially one lot in 1841. Initially he rented extensive farming land until the district land was surveyed and available for him to purchase over the next decade.

- He built a large barn and Auchananda's which was reputed to be one of the most prestigious buildings in the district around 1844.
- He had to sustain his large family during the period before the crops on virgin land began yielding reliable income.
- Arrears: After 7 years in Strathalbyn, Donald was in arrears with the rent on some farming land (the Aboriginal Reserve). But it wasn't because he didn't have the means of paying it. He disputed this debt because he believed that the rent should have been offset by the value of some improvements he had made to the property.
- Robbery: He had £76 (and some more hidden) when he was robbed on the highway not far from the Mountain Hut in 1847. He did not get this back.
- To ascertain the size of Donald's estate when he died it would be useful to examine the probate documents which are held in the Strathalbyn museum [Research: Check this]. We can get some ideas from the Will and codicils (attached to Donald's profile):-
  - Properties:
    - ✧ The original half acre in Adelaide (57 Hindley Street).
    - ✧ The original 80 acres in Hilton (country section 50).
    - ✧ Section 2603 - Auchanada's is on part of this section
    - ✧ Section 2605 – 2 acres of this was set aside as a burial ground
    - ✧ Section 2624 in Angus Special Survey
    - ✧ Bremer Sections 2819, 2814, 2817, 2813 and half of 2818
    - ✧ Strathalbyn Sections 2611 and 2612 - but there was some doubt whether he owned these sections (at least one was probably owned by William Morriss).
    - ✧ Country sections were usually about 70 acres, so the 11 properties totaled about 770 acres.
  - Livestock: 6 bullocks, a dray and 'furniture' of a complete team, 12 dairy cows
  - According to the probate papers, Donald's estate was valued under £3000.
  - Christina's estate (14 years after Donald), was less than £100 pounds. There was no property because it was not until some years later that the Married Women's Act allowed women to own property in their own name rather than it automatically becoming their husband's on marriage.
- Properties in the estate:-
  - The farming properties mentioned in Donald's Will totaled only 770 acres which does not sound a lot, but Donald purchased other properties in the nine years between when he signed his Will in 1846 and his death in 1855.
  - His executors would have had to compile a complete list of his properties, including those listed in the Will, which Donald had sold before he died as well as properties he purchased in his last nine years. Unfortunately, we have not found the executor's document which they were required to present to the Supreme Court by 4<sup>th</sup> July 1856 as follows "*Edward Stirling and Allan McLean are the two executors named in the said last Will and testament and that they would severally well and truly execute the same and that they the said Edward Stirling and Allan McLean would make and exhibit unto this Honorable Court a true and perfect inventory of all the goods and chattels rights credits and effects of the said deceased on or before the fourth day of July one thousand eight hundred and fifty six and also render a just and true account of their executorship when they should be lawfully called upon so to do and Allan Mclean believe that the goods and chattels rights and credits of the said deceased at the time of his decease within the said province and its dependencies did not exceed in value the sum of three thousand pounds*"
  - We have attempted to compile a list of the properties that Donald held when he died. We have identified 25 properties (our E56) that he owned at various stages. This requires further research to assemble a reliable list and then ascertain their value. [Research: This would be a complex project].
  - Although the list is tentative, and includes properties which he might have sold, it is reasonable to think that, in addition to the Hindley St, Hilton and Auchananda's properties, he owned about 20 properties at the time of his death.
  - Early in the process of settling the estate, for purposes of probate, the executors stated that the estate was estimated as being less than £3000. (The application for probate was on 4<sup>th</sup> Jan 1856, nine months after Donald died, and granted on 30<sup>th</sup> April, a year after he died). Maybe, after the executors had completed their tasks, the total value might have been more than £3000.
- By contrast, Donald's eldest son Allan, died a poor man. Allan built his own wealth but then, ironically about 25 years after his father's death, Allan sold everything he had around Strathalbyn - and tried to re-establish himself in Collinsfield. He lost it all within a couple of years.

## Where was the money?

- We wonder where he actually kept all his money.
- There are family stories about Donald's aversion to banks – except the bank of the River Angus where it is said he hid gold sovereigns. *“It is said that he did not believe in banks, hence the story of his hidden wealth and that when he needed any he would get it at night and was absent only for a little while”* (BRB p16). Many have searched for it, without success.
- Banks were not used much in the colony. For example, in 1850, twelve years after the McLeans arrived, there were still only 672 savings bank depositors (1% of the population) with total savings of only £11,772. Donald's cash was significant alongside this. It is unlikely that he had left money in any banks 'back home' in Scotland because he would not have been able to access these funds. In fact, he did use banks in the colony because this was mentioned in his Will.
- The State Library noted that Donald McLean *“was an investor with the South Australian Company”* (SLSA B 10408). This might be just a reference to his purchase of country section 50, or maybe Donald had other investments. [Research: More details needed].

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## References

How this  
is referred  
to in this  
document

How it can be accessed

Hints	'Hints to Emigrants' by Henry Capper, South Australia Company, 1838	In LIBRARY directory on the homepage of <a href="http://www.christinaanddonaldmclean.com">www.christinaanddonaldmclean.com</a>
Mathews	'Their Name Liveth' by John Mathews, 1998	Through 'Contact us' on the homepage of <a href="http://www.christinaanddonaldmclean.com">www.christinaanddonaldmclean.com</a>

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