

# Recovering Scotland's Slavery Past

The Caribbean Connection

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Edited by T. M. Devine

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*For Evan and Lena*

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The West Indies based on a map by Aaron Arrowsmith and Samuel Lewis (1812)



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The authors presented short preliminary papers, based on their proposed chapters, to an audience of fellow scholars and members of the general public. In addition, contributors and invited experts held a private seminar the day afterwards to consider key issues associated with the volume.

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*Tom Devine*  
*The University of Edinburgh*  
*31 January 2015*

## Foreword

Philip D. Morgan

SCOTLAND'S CONNECTIONS TO SLAVERY can seem tenuous, almost non-existent. After all, few vessels left Scottish ports for Africa to participate in the horrific slave trade. By the end of the eighteenth century, when England had a black population of about 15,000, perhaps fewer than one hundred black slaves resided in Scotland. Furthermore, Scots were in the vanguard of the abolitionist movement; and Scotland can pride itself as a pioneering abolitionist nation. A country that was about 10 per cent of the United Kingdom population contributed at times about a third of the petitions to Parliament advocating abolition of the slave trade. Iconic figures such as James Ramsay and William Dickson were in the forefront of the opposition to the slave trade. Moreover, in Duncan Rice's view, scholars of the Scottish Enlightenment 'perfected most of the eighteenth century's rational arguments against slavery'. Scottish philosophers discussed slavery at greater length than their continental counterparts. Adam Smith's famous *The Wealth of Nations* contains a condemnation of the slave trade and slavery not only as morally repugnant but as economically inefficient. Is it any surprise that many general histories of modern Scotland fail to mention slavery at all?

But the essays in this impressive collection make clear that, if Scots think their country has few or no connections to slavery, they are sorely mistaken. In effect, they are engaging in a form of collective amnesia, for in fact Scotland's connections to slavery were extensive. Scots participated fully in slave trading from ports such as Liverpool, Bristol and London. At the height of the slave trade, a fifth of the ship captains and two-fifths of the surgeons manning slavers out of Liverpool, the world's major slave-trading port at the time, were Scots. The image of Scots, dressed in tartan, playing golf by the slaving fort of Bance Island, Sierra Leone, points to the quotidian nature of Scottish involvement in that nefarious business. One Scottish slave trader thought so familiarly of slavery that he named his vessel after his daughter. This book shows that Scots owned and managed enslaved people in many New World slave societies – from Maryland to Trinidad, from St Croix to St Kitts. Scottish slave owners named many of their slaves and their plantations

in ways to remind themselves of home. According to Edward Long, the historian of late eighteenth-century Jamaica, one-third of the whites on that island were Scots. Other societies such as Grenada and the other Windward Islands, as well as Demerara and Berbice, also experienced heavy Scottish influxes. In the early nineteenth century, Scots accounted for about a third of the planters on St Vincent. Scots fulfilled many roles within New World slave societies: from indentured servants to bookkeepers, from merchants to bankers, from attorneys to planters, from nurses to doctors. The scale of Scottish involvement in the slave economies and societies of the New World was therefore wide and deep. If Scotland can boast of its abolitionists, it should also take ownership of the many Scots who defended and profited from the institution. Even the slaves themselves took note of Scots: in one colony they tagged shellfish that clung to one another as clannish Scotchmen.

The economic links between Scotland and New World slave societies were impressive. Slave societies provided markets for Scottish textiles, herring and a range of manufactured goods. In turn, those societies supplied Scotland with tobacco, sugar, rum, coffee and cotton. Capital from the Chesapeake and the Caribbean made its way into Scottish industries and landownership. Indeed, as Sir Tom Devine suggests in Chapter 11, the small scale of the Scottish domestic market and the nation's relative poverty probably accentuated the impact of the slave-based economies of the Atlantic. As he notes, there is evidence pointing to 'an even greater per capita Scottish stake' in British imperial slavery than for any of the other nations of the United Kingdom.

At the same time, this outsized Scottish involvement in the slave-based economies of the Atlantic must not be exaggerated. The Scots were not much of a presence in Barbados or some of the Leeward Islands. Between 1750 and 1834 only about 34,000 Scots travelled from Scotland to the West Indies, a small proportion of the Scottish population of just over 1.5 million in 1801. Furthermore, the Caribbean was a graveyard not just for slaves but for immigrant whites, many of whom died within a few years of arrival. A commercial handbook published in 1766 for 'men of business' in Glasgow recommended sending 'two, three or more' factors to the West Indies so 'that on the death of one', others could replace him. The famous volatility of the Antilles took its toll on Scots. The impact of slavery on the homeland was also limited in some respects. As Nicholas Draper emphasises in Chapter 8, only 'between 5 and 10 per cent of British elites were close enough to the slave-economy to appear in the compensation records, as owners, mortgagees, legatees, trustees or executors'. The other 90 to 95 per cent had no discernible

connections to slavery. Scotland, it is true, is over-represented among absentee slave-owning claimants, accounting for 15 per cent of them. Still, the point Draper makes about the general significance of slavery also applies to the Scots, namely that ‘slave wealth could be incidental in the sense that other sources of wealth appear to dwarf it in the composition of an individual’s overall net worth’.

More work therefore remains to be done precisely linking slavery to Scots at home and in the diaspora. The impact on Scotland – not just measured in investments but in everything from diet to country houses to material culture – will also need careful and precise calibration. But any claim that Scotland grew rich from slavery may not be easily sustained. The flow of profits from slaving and slave-related business, while notable, probably accounted for only a small proportion of domestic capital formation. The value added by the Caribbean sugar sector was approximately 2 per cent of British national income. As Devine notes below, ‘the origins of industrialism were far from being monocausal’. Rather, he adds, ‘the commitment of the landed elites to economic improvement, indigenous levels of literacy, the practical impact of improving Enlightenment thought, English markets within the Union, new technologies and the indigenous natural endowment of coal and ironstone resources, *inter alia*, were all part of the mix’. Slavery was important to Scotland’s development, as these essays abundantly and rightly demonstrate, but quite how profound the institution’s impact was awaits further investigation. Still, these splendid path-breaking essays point the way forward, by providing a sturdy foundation on which others can build.



**Map** The West Indies based on a map by Aaron Arrowsmith and Samuel Lewis (1812).

*Atlantic Ocean*





# Introduction

## Scotland and Transatlantic Slavery

*T. M. Devine*

I

**B**ETWEEN THE EARLY DECADES of the seventeenth century and the abolition of the British slave trade in 1807, ships of the Empire carried over 3.4 million Africans to a life of servitude, and often an early death, in the plantations across the northern Atlantic. That figure accounted for as many slaves delivered to that part of the New World over the period as the vessels of all other European nations combined. At the peak of the business in the 1760s, annual shipments reached an average of 42,000 slaves a year. As far as the history of black slavery in the northern Atlantic was concerned, Britain by all measures was the dominant force.

The system of bondage practised was chattel slavery, where the enslaved became the property of their masters until death, like their beasts of the field or their household plenishings, with no legal right to be treated as humans and with all the potential for exploitation and degradation which could accompany that helpless condition. The progeny of enslaved women also became the property of their masters at birth, either to be sold on from the plantation where they had been born or to spend their lives in hard labour within its bounds in perpetual servitude. Those modern sceptics who consider the contemporary poor at home, often eking out a miserable existence, or the indentured white servants in the transatlantic colonies, to be just as oppressed as black slaves, fail to take account of that stark and fundamental distinction. Colonial servants were bondsmen, indentured to labour, often under harsh conditions, but their contracts were not for life but for specific periods, usually an average of four to seven years, and were enforceable at law.

Throughout the Americas, the enormous increase in the output of the exotic commodities of sugar, tobacco, cotton, indigo and rum destined

for consumption in Europe would have been impossible without the magnitude of black enslavement. The extreme risks to the health of whites in the tropics and the arduous climatic conditions of the transatlantic plantations made it impossible to attract European field workers by the late seventeenth century on anything like the numbers required by the intensity of the new capitalist agriculture. Indeed, the British state for a long period had viewed the Caribbean as a place of terror and punishment, fit for transported criminals, traitors and other miscreants, but not a suitable location for free settlement. The notorious kidnapping trade in young lads, forcibly transported from their homeland to indentured service in the colonies by unscrupulous sea captains and crooked traders (immortalised in Robert Louis Stevenson's classic novel *Kidnapped*, set in the mid-eighteenth century), testifies to the emerging problem of white labour scarcity across the Atlantic.

At the same time, the growing addiction of the peoples of Britain and the Continent to sugar and tobacco became the decisive influence shaping the colossal expansion of the slavery system in the Americas. Ordinary consumers became just as dependent on the trade as merchants, slavers, shipowners, mariners and plantation owners. The mass enslavement of Africans was the inevitable consequence of the new and vast demand in the West for sweetness in all things, Britain alone taking around a third of all the sugar imported to Europe in the eighteenth century.

*Recovering Scotland's Slavery Past* is a study of the origins, nature and effects of involvement with slavery and the slave trade in one European country. It focuses mainly on the Scottish connection with the sugar islands of the Caribbean from the seventeenth to the early nineteenth centuries; the important American dimension of the tobacco colonies, with which Scotland had such a vital commercial relationship especially before 1776, is treated only briefly in this Introduction and again in Chapter 11. That topic will merit extended future study. Nor does the book consider abolitionism in detail but concentrates for the most part on the Scottish linkages with chattel slavery itself and the under-researched subject of anti-abolitionism. Studies of the important Scottish role in the successful movement for slave emancipation have already been published by C. Duncan Rice (1981) and Iain Whyte (2006). This volume does not claim to be the final word on a subject which has been long lost to history. Rather, as a pioneering study in the field, its primary purpose is to provide a platform of evidence from which future scholarship can develop the themes examined here and so progress into fresh avenues of research. The book focuses mainly on material, economic and migration aspects, and much scope therefore

remains for future work which can place the Scottish experience in a clearer international comparative context and consider also the political, intellectual, cultural and gender issues associated with the subject. This volume is an integrated study which looks both outwards and inwards by exploring the Scottish role in slavery on the one hand and the effect of that connection on Scotland itself on the other. Within that framework, five main topics are considered.

T. M. Devine and Michael Morris begin the book by probing collective slavery amnesia in both history and literature, and ask why it has taken so long to come to grips with an understanding of this dark episode in Scotland's past. Only in the last fifteen years or so has serious work started to be published on the country's historical links with slavery by scholars in Scottish universities. Most creative writing on the subject in Scotland also more or less dates from the same period.

The chapters which then follow seek to provide hard evidence of Scottish involvement in all aspects of West Indian slavery on the basis of original archival-based research. Stuart Nisbet, Eric Graham, David Alston and Stephen Mullen trace the development of increasing interest in the islands of the Caribbean and mainland South America from the seventeenth century to the 1830s. They demonstrate the impressive scale of Scots migration to the West Indies which at times and in specific locations was more extensive than that from the other nations of the United Kingdom when measured by the respective size of their base populations. These adventurers, unlike their mainly poorer predecessors who ventured to the Caribbean in the seventeenth century, were increasingly drawn from the minor landed, middling and artisan ranks of Scottish society. They sailed across the Atlantic in search of business opportunities and quick fortunes. Suzanne Schwarz in her contribution adds to this picture by describing the extensive part played by Scots mariners, and more especially physicians, in the slavery business of Liverpool, at that time the most successful slaving port not only in the British Isles but in the Atlantic world as a whole. Another striking feature was the very significant Scottish investment from the later 1790s in the 'frontier' lands of the former Dutch colonies of Demerara, Essequibo and Berbice (British Guiana from 1836, now Guyana) situated on the South American mainland. Even in the years immediately before the end of slavery in the Empire in 1833, these territories were still yielding substantial profits for plantation proprietors and slave owners.

These case studies illustrate the geographical range of the Scottish regions with strong migrant connections to the Caribbean. They spread

across the western Highlands, the north, the north-east and the south-west Lowlands. Hardly any part of Scotland was excluded. The chapters also describe the great wealth that some attained from the slave-based economies, with a minority returning to the homeland with princely fortunes beyond the dreams of avarice to become country gentlemen with elevated positions in society. Their dazzling material success inevitably inspired many more to follow in their footsteps to the sugar islands. Less well recorded, however, are the lives of those who succumbed to the diseases of the tropics or failed to make a substantial mark on the West Indies. They, unlike their wealthier peers, have left little documentary trace for the historian to research and assess.

Key questions arise from these contributions as the bigger picture is considered. Why did there appear to have been proportionately more Scots in relation to their share of British population throughout the plantations by the later eighteenth century? Was the Scottish presence there in any way distinctive in comparative terms? What impact did migration to the Caribbean and the profits made by the sojourners there have on the economy and society of the homeland? These broader issues are examined later in this Introduction and also in some of the chapters which follow.

Nicholas Draper then considers the vast sums paid out in compensation to slave owners for the losses of their 'property' when slavery came to an end in the British Empire in 1833. Crucially, he shows that at abolition the extent of Scottish slave ownership relative to population size was more than England's and much more than that of Ireland and Wales. Moreover, he finds that of the fifteen major British mercantile syndicates receiving most compensation after abolition, ten were either Scottish-based firms or businesses trading from England with earlier founding patterns of known Scottish origin.

Iain Whyte and Catherine Hall follow by examining the passionate public debates which were triggered around the momentous issue of slavery abolition. They focus also on the less familiar, though widespread, opposition in Scotland to emancipation. Not until the 1760s did chattel slavery begin to attract much moral criticism in the public sphere either in Scotland or Britain more generally. Before then the mass enslavement of Africans in the plantations was considered an unexceptional fact of life. Although some of the ideas of the Scottish Enlightenment eventually provided much of the intellectual tool kit for the abolitionist campaigns, their impact overall did not become really significant until later in the eighteenth century, in part because the writings of several of the literati on slavery were sometimes

complex, ambiguous in approach and not always entirely critical (see Chapter 9).

The cause célèbre at the Court of Session in Edinburgh in 1778 resulting in the liberation of the runaway slave Joseph Knight, brought by his master John Wedderburn of Ballindean from the Caribbean, was indeed a landmark judgement and served to increase awareness of the rarely publicised incidence of slavery in Scotland. The decision effectively outlawed chattel slavery in the home country more than half a century before it was declared illegal in the British Empire. But the judgement had no effect on the functioning of the mass system of bondage in the Americas. The Sheriff of Perth found in 1777, when Knight appealed to him, that ‘the regulations of Jamaica, concerning slaves, do not extend to this kingdom’. That ruling was confirmed by a majority of judges in the Court of Session a year later. It might equally have been said, however, that conversely, nor did the ‘regulations’ of Scotland apply to Jamaica.

Finally, T. M. Devine analyses the impact of profits derived from the slave-based plantations and their markets on Scottish economic transformation before c. 1830. He argues that these capital transfers together with the expansion of transatlantic demand for manufactured goods at the same time were influential factors among others in the origins of the Industrial Revolution in Scotland. The discussion also suggests that the economic effects of slavery in all its aspects may have been more important to industrialisation north of the Border than in England.

The next two sections of the Introduction broaden the lens by examining the slave economy of the West Indies in general terms and then provide an overview of the Scottish factor throughout the islands during the many decades from the early seventeenth century when the slavery system remained unchallenged.

## II

In the eighteenth century Britain’s West Indian colonies were universally regarded as crucial to the imperial economy. Even Adam Smith, the most eminent contemporary critic of the colonial system, waxed eloquent about their immense value: the profits of a sugar plantation in the Caribbean, he noted, ‘were generally much greater than those of any other cultivation that is known either in Europe or America’.<sup>1</sup> Edmund and William Burke also asserted in 1757 that nowhere in the world could great fortunes be made so quickly as in the West Indies. Their importance to the British state and economy was widely acknowledged. In 1700 the British islands accounted for about 40 per cent of

all transatlantic sugar consignments. By 1815 the figure had reached 60 per cent. At the end of the eighteenth century the Caribbean colonies employed, directly or indirectly, half the nation's long-distance shipping, their fixed and moveable wealth was reckoned at more than £30 million sterling, duties on West Indian produce accounted for an eighth of Exchequer revenues and the credit structures linked to the plantation economy were crucial elements in UK financial markets.<sup>2</sup>

The expansion of the British West Indian colonies was forged in the violent crucible of the titanic conflicts with France over transatlantic hegemony. The sugar islands were first settled by British adventurers from the 1620s, and by c. 1750 Barbados, the Leeward Islands (Antigua, St Kitts, Nevis, Montserrat) and Jamaica had all been conquered or annexed. Further large-scale territorial gains took place after both the Seven Years War (ending in 1763) and the Napoleonic Wars (ending in 1815). As a result of the first, Britain added Grenada, Dominica, St Vincent and Tobago (the Ceded Islands). By the second, the Empire absorbed Trinidad, Demerara, Berbice, Essequibo and St Lucia. The development of these new colonies depended on a number of factors. The British Laws of Trade and Navigation gave the islands a virtual monopoly of the protected home market for the products of tropical agriculture, where commodities such as sugar by the 1750s were selling at prices some 50 per cent higher than in continental Europe. The West Indies at that time also became the great source of rum for the crews of a massively expanding Royal Navy during the long wars after 1756. Then, after c. 1760, the plantations also fed the factories of the early Industrial Revolution with numerous cargoes of raw cotton. But sugar was king. It is reckoned that sugar consumption in England and Wales alone increased about twenty-fold in the period from 1663 to 1775. Between 1771 and 1775, colonial imports topped 1.8 million cwt. Consumption per head in Britain rose spectacularly from about four pounds in 1700 to ten pounds by 1748, and then to twenty pounds in 1800. Britons seem to have had a uniquely sweet tooth. As late as the 1780s, for instance, the French were only consuming about two pounds per head. The voracious national appetite for sugar and its derivatives was intimately linked to the new obsession for tea-drinking, which set in from the middle decades of the seventeenth century. Consumption per head of tea quintupled in the UK from 0.32lb per head in 1730–9 to 1.78lb in 1804–6. This was partly related to the much faster rise of real incomes in Britain in the eighteenth century compared to the countries of continental Europe. But an even more fundamental influence was the British rate of urbanisation. Under conditions in town and city tea was

more convenient than milk and, until Indian leaf displaced the Chinese after 1865, tea was usually taken without milk. In Britain as a whole, there was a very close correlation between the spread of tea-drinking and the rapid urbanisation of the country. In Scotland, in particular, tea was most commonly consumed in cities and towns before 1800. Sugar as a sweetener came in sugar loafs and semi-hard cones that required a sugar axe or hammer to break them up, and 'nips', a pliers-like tool, to reduce the sugar to usable pieces.

The Caribbean response to the burgeoning sugar markets in Europe was built on two key foundations – the evolution of the plantation system and the massive use of enslaved labour. Conceivably, given the vital dependency on African slaves, the plantations ought to have located in West Africa close to plentiful supplies of labour. But tropical Africa had a notorious reputation as the white man's grave and also, it was argued, slaves might more easily escape back to their homelands. Transporting Africans half way across the world, on the other hand, had several advantages. The Caribbean islands were certainly host to such virulent pestilences as cholera, smallpox and dysentery. But they were not only relatively free from malaria but also were regarded as less lethal than the deadly shores and jungles of Africa. Moreover, European settlement in the West Indies was facilitated by the trade winds, which partially tempered the unrelenting heat of the tropics. The Caribbean also had easy access to cheap sources of provisions in North America, while the prevailing winds were helpful to oceanic commerce and to the powering of the sugar mills which processed the canes.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, such were the capacities in the islands to service the booming markets in Europe that some colonies became little more than vast sugar plantations. It was said, for instance of Antigua in 1751, that the land was 'improved to the utmost, there being hardly one Acre of Ground, even to the Top of the Mountains, fit for Sugar Canes and other necessary Produce, but what is taken and cultivated'.<sup>4</sup>

These were also 'slave societies', in the sense of human communities which depended above all else on unfree, forced labour for their very existence. Without the slave, the sugar economies of the Caribbean would have been impossible. By 1750 Africans and those of African descent comprised about 85 per cent of the population of the British West Indies. It was scarcely surprising that the contemporary commentator Malachy Postlethwayt, writing in 1745 in *The African Trade, the Great Pillar and Support of the British Plantation Trade in America*, asserted that the nation's transatlantic commercial empire ultimately depended on an African foundation. Slaves outnumbered whites by six to one in

1748 and by twelve to one in 1815. They were sourced by British vessels from several regions in western Africa, particularly Senegambia, Sierra Leone, the Gold Coast, the Bight of Benin, the Bight of Biafra and west-central Africa. The trauma of the enslaved removed from these districts began long before their arrival in the colonies. William Wilberforce, in a speech on the slave trade to the House of Commons in 1789, reckoned that over 12 per cent died during the notorious and terrible Middle Passage from Africa to the Americas, and 5 per cent at seizure, on forced marches to the coast, incarceration there and final deportation. Another third, he suggested, would perish in the Caribbean itself during the initial period of 'seasoning' or acclimatising. During the transatlantic crossing male slaves were commonly chained two-by-two below decks for long periods to minimise the threat of disorder during the voyage. It was said that as a result the stench from slave ships could be picked up by other vessels from several miles away downwind.

The 'free coloured' populations of the Caribbean, sometimes of Scots descent, should also be recorded as part of the labour force. They were a larger group than the whites and in several islands were essential to the operation of the plantations as managers and overseers, so helping to make large-scale absenteeism of white owners possible. The children of Scots migrants and both enslaved and 'free coloured' women are also therefore an important legacy of Scotland and slavery. Most whites were transients, hoping to make a quick fortune and return home as quickly as possible with their gains, though, despite the fabled riches of the Caribbean, few actually managed to do so. But one consequence was that in the British West Indies the sojourners failed to develop 'integrated, locally rooted societies, comparable with the North American colonies'.<sup>5</sup> Scots did not establish schools or churches on the Caribbean islands where they settled in the manner familiar in other parts of the Empire. Janet Schaw visited Antigua in 1775 in the course of her travels from Scotland to the West Indies and North Carolina between 1774 and 1778. She was the daughter of a family of gentleman farmers near Edinburgh and was accompanying her brother to St Kitts, where he was to take up an appointment as a customs official. Schaw noted in her letters home how most planters left their families behind and those who did not do so usually sent their children back to Scotland to be educated. As there was no Presbyterian church on the island, she herself had to attend Anglican services on the Sabbath.

This was not the only point of difference between the two colonial systems. Another was in the stark contrast of the treatment of blacks. Not for nothing was the Caribbean known as the graveyard of the slaves.

Even by the arduous conditions of unfree labour in the North American plantation colonies for tobacco and rice cultivation, the suffering of the blacks in the West Indies was especially horrendous. About 1830, crude death rates in the USA and Jamaica were 20 and 26 per thousand respectively. The differences in birth rates were even more dramatic – 50 and 23 per thousand respectively. It was reckoned in the 1750s that a quarter of all slaves died within three years of arrival, though mortality rates could often be significantly higher than that. On the Codrington plantations in Barbados between 1741 and 1746, for instance, 43 per cent of all Africans died within three years of arrival. It should be remembered, of course, that slave mortality on the islands was also very much influenced by Africans picking up diseases on the Atlantic crossing and on the forced marches to the African coast. Partly high death rates were also based on an inhuman calculation. Planters generally believed until the later eighteenth century that buying ‘salt-water’ blacks, straight off the slave ships, was ‘cheaper’ than encouraging family life and reproduction of the existing ‘stock’. Thus, it was common practice then for plantations to buy slaves at crop time and set them to work with little or no time spent on seasoning. By definition also, slavery was an oppressive regime where work was only done under threat of punishment. Some scholars have suggested that coercion reached especially rigorous and exacting levels in the Caribbean because the grossly skewed ratios of whites and blacks generated rancorous fear and paranoia among British planters about the menace of slave rebellions. Sir Hans Sloane saw the responses in Jamaica:

The Punishments for Crimes of Slaves, are usually for Rebellions burning them, by nailing them down on the ground with crooked Sticks on every Limb, and then applying the Fire by degrees from the Feet and Hands, burning them gradually up to the Head, whereby their pains are extravagant.<sup>6</sup>

Crimes of a lesser nature were dealt with by ‘Gelding, or chopping off half of the Foot with an Ax [sic], while for trying to escape the slave was burdened with iron rings, chains, pottocks and spurs’.<sup>7</sup>

Essentially, however, the high levels of slave mortality were caused to a significant extent by the unrelenting nature of the plantation regime. The slave gangs on the sugar estates toiled from dawn to dusk in land preparation, in harvesting the canes and in sugar-boiling. In the Caribbean about 90 per cent of the slaves worked in these tasks. One scholar estimates that it was ‘probably one of the highest labour participation rates anywhere in the world’. Janet Schaw observed the regime

in St Kitts. She noted that every ten slaves had a driver, who walked behind them holding a long and a short whip in his hand. Both men and women were naked 'down to the girdle' and so she was able to make out the marks left by the use of the lash. Each slave had a basket which was carried up the hill filled with manure and then brought back with sugar canes for the mills: 'They go up at a trot, and return at a gallop, and did you not know the cruel necessity of this alertness, you would believe them the merriest people in the world.'<sup>8</sup> Schaw accepted that 'humane Europeans' would be appalled at this treatment but asserted that such reactions were misconceived:

When one becomes better acquainted with the nature of the negroes, the horror [sic] of it must wear off. It is the suffering of the human mind that constitutes the greatest misery of punishment, but with them it is merely corporal. As to the brutes it inflicts no wounds on their mind, whose Natures seem made to bear it and whose sufferings are not attended with shame or pain beyond the present.

The arduous toil helps to explain why about half the slave women in the British West Indies never bore a child in the mid-eighteenth century. On the American mainland there was never the same intensity of work on a single crop. Tobacco cultivation, tending farms, cutting timber and domestic service were just some of the varied range of tasks undertaken. Recent work on slave skeletal remains in Barbados burial grounds by nutritionists and anthropologists has added a new dimension to an understanding of slave mortality in the Caribbean. These results point unambiguously to malnutrition as a vital factor reducing the immunity of the black population to the epidemic diseases which infested the low-lying plantations and their malignant environments.<sup>9</sup>

Nor should the human factor be neglected in this account. The Caribbean was notorious for planter absenteeism, especially near the end of slavery. In 1832, 540 (84 per cent) of a total of 646 sugar estates were owned by absentees or minors. Proprietors were often keen to escape home from the tropics as soon as they had managed to make enough for leisured living in Britain. By 1800 it was often their attorneys, managers and overseers who actually ran most plantations in the West Indies. This class was committed to maximising production, not simply to satisfy the expectations of their masters, but because they also were determined to make money quickly and return to spend their last years in more congenial surroundings at home. The pervasive culture of avarice engendered a regime of unrelenting rigour on the slave plantations. Untold numbers of blacks were quite literally worked to death.

It is hardly surprising, therefore, that modern scholarship has identified the islands of the British West Indies as the location of the most deadly and destructive systems of slavery in the New World. Only in the later decades of the eighteenth century did the policy on most estates alter in favour of encouraging new generations of slaves to be born in the Caribbean itself rather than simply purchasing ‘salt-water’ blacks off the ships from West Africa. As a result, the trend towards some amelioration came to be established on the plantations.

### III

As Stuart Nisbet shows in Chapter 3, Scotland’s sugar trade with the Caribbean goes back to the middle decades of the seventeenth century. During and after the American War of Independence one hundred years later, however, the business rapidly became the dominant sector in Scottish overseas commerce, assuming the position that the tobacco trade had long occupied over previous decades. By 1815, 65 per cent of all goods exported from Scotland were destined for the West Indies, the country’s biggest overseas market by far at the time. The enormous increase in cargoes of cotton wool from the islands also became of strategic significance as the raw material of the first stages in the Scottish Industrial Revolution. Some of the nation’s most powerful and wealthiest merchant houses were now trading to the region and young Scots in increasing numbers became engaged in the management of plantations. The Caribbean connection may have been long forgotten nowadays, but in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries it was of central importance in the economic history of Scotland.

Two old myths about that relationship have been demolished by modern historical research.<sup>10</sup> The first was the belief that the relationship did not flourish until after the Anglo-Scottish Union of 1707 because only from then were Scottish merchants able to trade on a legitimate basis with the former English, now British, colonies across the Atlantic. However, there was no legal constraint on the actual settlement of Scots in the islands of the Caribbean before 1707 and so by the later seventeenth century they were to be found there in some numbers, a motley group of indentured servants, small traders, planters, prisoners of war banished by Cromwell, Covenanters forced into exile by Charles II and James VII, criminals and vagabonds transported to the plantations and even survivors from the ill-fated Darien expedition of the 1690s. A total of 4,000 to 5,000 Scottish settlers have been identified in the West Indies for the period 1660 to 1700.

Also, Scots were indeed legally prohibited from direct trading with the English transatlantic colonies for much of the period before 1707. But they found numerous ways of circumventing the official controls by smuggling, employment of English vessels as covers, trading from English ports and the use of counterfeit papers. So by 1700 a substantial Scottish interest in the Caribbean was well established. It was a local variant of Scotland's growing orientation to the Atlantic world as the ancient commercial links with Europe began to stagnate and decline in comparative terms from the middle decades of the seventeenth century, only then to be powerfully reinforced and energised again after the Union by the re-export trade to continental countries in imported colonial tobacco and sugar. Darien may have failed spectacularly but that ambitious project nevertheless signified the intention of the Scottish governing class to commit the economic future of the nation to seizing commercial opportunities across the ocean in the western hemisphere.

The second myth was that only after the American War of Independence and the collapse of the tobacco trade at that time did Scottish involvement in the West Indies really take off. It is correct to argue that from the 1770s there was a dramatic strengthening of the relationship, not simply because of diversification by the tobacco lords but as a result of the demand of the new Scottish textile mills for West Indian 'sea island' cotton and the growing popular appetite for sugar as national population and real incomes continued to rise. Yet, as the chapters which follow confirm in detail, Scots were flooding into the region long before 1783, especially after the British victories of the Seven Years War (1756–63) which released several former French Caribbean islands for plantation ownership and business exploitation. Indeed, to distinguish the sugar and tobacco trades one from the other before the American War is essentially to draw a false dichotomy. Several leading Clyde merchants had fingers in both pies, and transfer of capital from the much more extensive American enterprise became an important influence fuelling expansion in West Indian commerce in the eighteenth century.

Certainly also the Union was a necessary precondition for Scottish success across the Atlantic. Only the lethal force of the Royal Navy could provide effective protection to the British merchant fleets which sailed the seas during a century of endemic conflict with France and other continental powers for global supremacy. An independent Scotland did not have anything like the naval or military muscle to stand alone in this world of aggressive martial giants. Immediately before the Union, the Scottish 'navy' comprised only three or four vessels.

Nevertheless, 1707 cannot in itself be considered a sufficient explanation for the advance of Scottish enterprise in the West Indies and the over-representation of Scots in some islands as they often were elsewhere in the British imperial world. To understand that, it is essential firstly to take a long view of Scottish overseas ventures before 1700 and then secondly to probe those aspects of the society and culture of eighteenth-century Scotland which might account for a disproportionate Scottish presence in the Caribbean. The movement en masse of Scots into Jamaica, the Ceded Islands and Demerara/Berbice /Essequibo (later British Guiana) in the second half of the eighteenth century was a regional variant of their penetration elsewhere in the Empire. For centuries, as pedlars, soldiers, clerics and scholars, the Scots had been a nomadic people. Scotland was a country where emigration was the norm rather than the exception, with a widely developed culture of long-distance mobility. From long experience of trading in central and northern Europe since medieval times, they traditionally tended to avoid areas where competition was entrenched and instead struck out into fresh frontier territories which presented potential opportunities, as well as considerable risks, for bold interlopers and adventurers. It was that strategy which had led to earlier Scottish successes in Poland-Lithuania in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and especially across the hinterland of the great river Vistula. Smuggling, a brazen disregard for commercial regulations and the habit of trading in close kin-based networks in order to minimise risks and squeeze out competitors were also familiar traditional practices.

These old methods of doing business in alien and volatile markets were transferred en bloc, first across the Atlantic and then eventually to Asia as the British Empire in the west and east experienced massive territorial expansion after a succession of colonial victories over European powers. Indeed, on occasion, the new connections were forged not from Scottish ports but from Scottish mercantile colonies in continental centres such as Amsterdam and Rotterdam. Enhanced intervention by Scots in the West Indies ran in parallel with the business of the Glasgow tobacco houses with the small planter class in the back country of the Chesapeake, away from the London-dominated tidewater areas; the Nor'West Company's vigorous engagement in the Canadian fur trade in the Arctic wastes, eventually threatening the hegemony and then the very survival of the mighty Hudson Bay Company itself; and the 'private trade', anchored originally among Scots servants of the East India Company and then spreading across south-east Asia to China and Japan in the early nineteenth century. In the Caribbean, for example,

Scots adventurers were always under-represented in Barbados, a colony long settled by the English since the early seventeenth century; they made instead for other islands where unreclaimed land and limited existing settlement promised richer future pickings. Classic examples were their rapid penetration of the former French islands after 1763 and annexed Dutch colonies on the South American mainland in the 1790s and after.

Those who emerged in this period as plantation owners, merchants and professionals in the West Indies were often the kindred of the small laird and urban mercantile-professional classes of Scottish society. They were seduced by the reputation of the slave colonies for making quick and easy money despite the lethal threat to life from tropical diseases. Janet Schaw in her letters home, for instance, reckoned that at times these could kill as many as four out of five new arrivals in their first year before their 'seasoning' was completed.

Given the choice, these migrants might very well have preferred to try to make their fortunes in healthier climes south of the Border. After all, Scots had long found success in London and established Scottish trading communities had flourished there for several generations by the eighteenth century. Nevertheless, for many young neophytes, breaking into the opportunities and riches of the capital with its long-established patronage connections and metropolitan networks was often challenging. Even the professionals, such as physicians and surgeons trained in the famous Scottish medical schools, had difficulty because of the refusal of the London colleges to accept their qualifications. More typical therefore of the movement of younger Scots traders to London, who did not already have family or personal connections there, was to seek some success overseas before attempting to obtain a foothold in the capital, as Eric Graham describes in Chapter 4. Posts and jobs in imperial territories, often avoided by the progeny of English elites because of the risks to health in far-off lands, were easier to access by Celtic adventurers. This was especially so where Scottish family, regional and local connections were already embedded by the middle decades of the eighteenth century and capable of offering support to new arrivals.

In her travels, Janet Schaw noted the Scottishness of the island of Antigua. She landed 'at a Wharf belonging to a Scotch Gentleman' and soon met with many Duncans, Millikens, Blairs, Bairds, Hallidays, Mackinnons and Malcolms. She noted that 'many Scotch names' were inscribed on the tombstones of the local graveyards and in St Kitts there were 'many fine plantations belonging to Scotch people who do not reside in them'. She observed too that resident Scots gave their business primarily to Scottish merchant houses. Clanship may have been in

its death throes at home but neo-clanship (based on kindred ties and with profit-making rather than tribal security and martial purpose the new rationale) flourished in overseas territories. By the later eighteenth century, for example, a veritable plantation empire of Campbells of Argyll bestrode the western areas of Jamaica (see Chapter 4). Successful ethnic networks like these aroused a degree of Scotophobia among other whites in the slave colonies. Time and again the correspondence of the English in the plantations is peppered with dismissive remarks about 'the Scotch' as clannish, ubiquitous and doing very well for themselves.

This theme of the influence of Scottish networks on the promotion of business success is pursued again in several of the chapters which follow. Yet care must be taken. Scots were not alone at the time in employing family and personal connections for commercial ends. Only future comparative study can really tell us how distinctive and advantageous their networking was in relation to that of other ethnicities within the Empire.

Scots had also long been over-represented among the officer class of the British army even before 1707. From their loyal ranks, accustomed to unquestioning military obedience and to the enforcement of authority as determined by the state, were often recruited the governors and lower functionaries who administered the new colonies annexed during and after the series of eighteenth-century imperial wars. So it was that a number of Scottish governors were to be found in the Ceded Islands after 1763, the Leewards in earlier decades and, most importantly of all, in Jamaica when Alexander Lindsay, Earl of Balcarres, became not only the most important British grandee in the West Indies in the 1790s but one of the most powerful throughout the Empire. Once again, ethnic interest, clientage and influence in the Caribbean were likely to increase through the power of these Scottish colonial elites, though it would be an exaggeration to suggest that each and every one of them always and inevitably were keen to favour the interests of their fellow countrymen.

Closely related to the issue of opportunity abroad were conditions at home. While many of the nation's elites prospered, the later eighteenth century was also a time of increasingly acute economic and demographic challenge for a number of the Scottish laird classes and their cadet branches. On the one hand, the number of non-inheriting younger sons was increasing rapidly because of the significant rise in population at the time and the steep fall in infantile mortality which was one of its causes. Quite simply, there were now many more male offspring surviving well into adulthood than ever before. Genealogies show that it was not uncommon for some gentry families to have as many as six, eight, ten or even more surviving adult children by the early nineteenth century.

Because of the legal tradition of primogeniture, excluding all but the eldest son from the inheritance to family estates, remaining male siblings had to find alternative careers to avoid the threat of downward social mobility into the depths of genteel penury. An inherent difficulty was the tiny size of the Scottish civil administration, which meant that public posts available through patronage and family networking were few and far between at home. Annuities, pensions and dowries (in Scotland, *tochers*) needed also to be funded for the women of the family. Since they tended on average to outlive men, a pressing problem in eighteenth-century elite society was how to provide for the potential legions of surviving spinsters, widows and their dependants. Significantly, no less than 40 per cent of claims for compensation at the end of slavery in 1833 in Britain were made on behalf of pensioner females who were at least partly dependent on accruals from slave property for a regular income from mortgages on Caribbean plantations (see Chapter 8).

At the same time, confirmation of social rank in the eighteenth century was now more than ever being determined in the public sphere by display – material consumption, fashionable clothing, rich furnishing, trains of servants, domestic refurbishment and the building of houses which were designed to impress. Later in the century the increasing value of rent rolls on many estates did much to offset these costs. Earlier, however, and until around the 1770s, agricultural rents in Scotland were mainly static or only showed modest increases. A rise in indebtedness, often on a very significant scale, became therefore an anxious fact of life for many old landed families. In the Western Highlands and Islands, for instance, where these problems were often most critical, over two-thirds of estates changed hands (sometimes, ironically, to returning imperial adventurers who had been born and raised in Gaeldom) after c. 1800, as hereditary owners were squeezed out by overwhelming debt, encumbered lands and, for some, final bankruptcy and sequestration. That the influences were also Scotland-wide is illustrated by the fall in the number of smaller estates throughout the Lowlands as richer aristocratic magnates bought up more and more of the properties of less fortunate families.

Imperial opportunities in trade, the army, navy, administration and the professions often became one of the few routes of escape from the inexorably contracting vice of these twin financial pressures. Indeed, the availability of places in the expanding Empire came like a godsend to numerous impoverished but genteel kindreds the length and breadth of Scotland. A great exodus of young men, for the most part little older than fifteen or sixteen years of age, was propelled to the furthest reaches of

the Empire, not only to satisfy personal ambition and access careers but also to buttress decaying family fortunes through remittances sent back by those who managed to achieve some success in distant lands. Even those destined to succeed to the family property in due course as eldest sons went abroad when younger, such were the financial imperatives of the time. Unlike the Catholic gentry of Ireland, these Scots did not face discrimination on religious grounds, as their rights as Presbyterian subjects of the Crown were affirmed and protected by the Treaty of Union of 1707. The frontiers of this British world were always porous. Siblings of the same family settled in different colonies and often travelled between different territories across the oceans during the course of their lives. The complex connections of kindred and influence stretched from North America to the Caribbean to India and well beyond.

It is also important to remember, however, that the economic constraints on many families did not entirely negate the possibility of modest funds being made available by some, either on credit or on landed security or via kindred networks, to provide younger sons with some 'start-up' funds. The Glasgow merchant community may not have been representative but it had the tradition of reserving some capital to those male progeny who were unlikely to inherit family lands to enable them to gain an initial foothold in alternative careers. How widespread this practice was is a question which can only be resolved by future research. If it was at all common, some young adventurers would have been given yet another advantage in the imperial job market.

What added to the migration at a lower social level was the impact of the agrarian revolution throughout rural Scotland. As improvement gathered pace in the Lowlands and southern and eastern Highlands during the last quarter of the eighteenth century, so consolidation of smaller single and multiple tenancies into compact individual farms progressed inexorably. The practice became one of embedding impartible inheritance as the number of tenant holdings started to shrink to a greater or lesser extent across the country, just as the number of surviving offspring in tenant families began to rise. Also in the western Highlands and Islands, the expansion of single-croft tenancies held directly from landowners caused the contraction and eventual disappearance of the old 'tacksman' class of middling tenantry. Once again, as with elite families, the search was on for opportunities elsewhere among the young men of middle rank and artisan class in the countryside who were now failing to gain an expected position in a rapidly changing world. Because of the Scottish schooling tradition they were usually proficient in basic reading, writing and arithmetic and often much more, skills in great

demand in the counting houses of merchant companies trading overseas and the expanding imperial bureaucracies.

No one has yet worked out what became of these Scottish migrants in the mass during their sojourns in the West Indies. All we can say at this stage of knowledge is that many died soon after arrival, others, almost certainly a small minority, became rich, and the majority probably had relatively routine careers. Those who made their fortunes are remembered in the books and have left family archives for posterity to explore and help recount their successful activities. But the Caribbean, despite its legendary allure, was not always an easy route to material success. This was especially so in the crisis years between 1799 and 1807. It is reckoned that in Jamaica alone during that time, 65 plantations were abandoned, 32 sold for debts and 115 others had law suits pending against them. The many challenges included the volatility of climate and crops (there were three disastrous growing seasons, for instance, from 1789 to 1791), the continuing struggle between French and British forces until 1815, and the increasing incidence of slave revolt as in Grenada and St Vincent in 1795. The years 1793–4 were marked by the bankruptcy of numerous British merchant houses trading to the Caribbean and even the greatest enterprises were not immune from failure, as when the doyen of the Scottish sugar trade, the giant firm of Alexander Houston & Co., faced imminent bankruptcy with such potentially grave consequences that government itself had to step in to provide support to the partnership.

Uncertainties also applied to the more educated cadre of professional Scots. By 1800 Scotland had six universities (if the Andersonian, later Strathclyde, in Glasgow, founded in 1796, is included) compared to England's two and was reckoned to have more places in higher education per head of population by that date than any country in Europe. The orientation of the system had been reformed and transformed from an entire teaching dependency on classical languages, philosophy and theology to an additional focus on law, medicine, history and science. These were modern centres of learning, equipping their students with 'useful knowledge', to use the phrase of the time, for modern careers. But huge imbalances soon built up between limited opportunities in Scotland and increasing numbers of the trained and educated, especially when the products of the town grammar and better parish schools were also added to the growing pool of aspirants. Large-scale intellectual migration to all parts of the Empire became an inevitable consequence. Remarkably, therefore, it is estimated that between 1680 and 1780 as many as a third of the university-educated men who went to the American

colonies from Britain and western Europe had studied in only three Scottish centres of learning: Aberdeen, Edinburgh and Glasgow. In the Caribbean, for instance, the diaspora of physicians trained in Scotland was especially noted. They included those who used their medical earnings from working on the slave ships and treating the enslaved on the plantations to buy their way into the trade itself. The Scottish universities produced as many as 10,000 medical graduates between 1750 and 1850. Only a minority of this army of physicians could hope to obtain posts in the UK, in part because the major London institutions would only employ those with qualifications awarded by the London Royal Colleges. The majority made their careers throughout and beyond the Empire, including, for a time, the West Indies. By 1800 the evidence suggests that even there the medical job market was threatened with a glut as would-be physicians desperately fought for fewer openings than the numbers arriving in the islands warranted.

This, then, is the general background to the story of Scotland and Caribbean slavery. The chapters which follow explore several of the themes already briefly described in more depth and detail.

## NOTES

1. Adam Smith, *Wealth of Nations* (1776; London, 1937 edition), p. 366.
2. J. R. Ward, 'The British West Indies in the Age of Abolition, 1748–1815', in P. J. Marshall (ed.), *The Oxford History of the British Empire, Vol. II. The Eighteenth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 427. See generally, Nuala Zahedieh, *The Capital and the Colonies. London and the Atlantic Economy, 1660–1700* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010). For the relationship between the growing taste for all things sweet and the expansion of slavery discussed below, see Sydney W. Mintz, *Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History* (New York: Viking, 1985) and Elizabeth Abbott, *Sugar: A Bittersweet History* (New York: Overlook Press, 2010).
3. Ward, 'British West Indies', pp. 127–8.
4. Quoted in R. B. Sheridan, 'The Formation of Caribbean Plantation Society, 1689–1748', in Marshall (ed.), *Oxford History*, p. 402.
5. Ward, 'British West Indies', p. 433.
6. Quoted in Richard B. Sheridan, *Doctors and Slaves: A Medical and Demographic History of Slavery in British West Indies, 1680–1834* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), p. 190.
7. *Ibid.*
8. Philip D. Morgan, 'The Black Experience in the British Empire, 1680–1810', in Marshall (ed.), *Oxford History*, p. 470. All references to Janet

Schaw's diary come from *The Journal of a Lady of Quality being the Narrative of a Journey from Scotland to the West Indies, North Carolina and Portugal in the years 1774 to 1778*, edited by E. W. Andrews and C. McL. Andrews (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1939), pp. 19–143, 259–76.

9. See, *inter alia*, Michael Craton, *Testing the Chains: Resistance to Slavery in the British West Indies* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982); Elsa V. Goveia, *Slave Society in the British Leeward Islands at the End of the Eighteenth Century* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1965); Jerome S. Handler and Frederick W. Lange, *Plantation Slavery in Barbados: An Archaeological and Historical Investigation* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978); Sheridan, *Doctors and Slaves*, *passim*; Morgan, 'The Black Experience', pp. 467–73.
10. Full supporting references and more detail on the next two sections can be found in T. M. Devine, *The Transformation of Rural Scotland: Social Change and the Agrarian Economy 1660–1815* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1994, 1999), pp. 36–59, 111–35; Robert Dodgshon, 'The Clearances and the Transformation of the Scottish Countryside', in T. M. Devine and Jenny Wormald (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Modern Scottish History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), pp. 131–58; T. M. Devine, *Scotland's Empire, 1600–1815* (London: Penguin, Allen Lane, 2003), pp. 26–48, 221–49; T. M. Devine, *To the Ends of the Earth: Scotland's Global Diaspora, 1750–2010* (London: Allen Lane, 2011), pp. 1–31; John M. MacKenzie and T. M. Devine (eds), *Scotland and the British Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 30–53; Herbert S. Klein, Stanley L. Engerman, Robin Haines and Ralph Shlomovitz, 'Transoceanic Mortality: The Slave Trade in Comparative Historical Perspective', *William and Mary Quarterly*, LVIII, no. 1 (January 2001), pp. 93–118. On Scottish networks, see Angela McCarthy (ed.), *A Global Clan: Scottish Migrant Networks and Identities since the Eighteenth Century* (London: Tauris Academic Studies, 2006).