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‘That Nefarious Commerce’ St Kitts, Slavery and the West of Scotland c.1695-1735

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Abstract

The involvement of Scotland’s city of Glasgow in black slavery has always been a controversial subject. Any supposed lack of involvement is seemingly contradicted by the sheer scale of the city’s eighteenth century colonial trade.

This paper looks at the career of one of Glasgow’s earliest and most successful colonial merchants, Colonel William McDowall. Despite becoming one of the city’s most prominent and respected figures, very little has been known to date about his rise to fortune. Using new evidence from surviving letters, plus research on St Kitts and Nevis, it will reveal a career based on the personal control of enslaved Africans on sugar plantations.

The paper will show that in managing his own estates and those of several other planters, McDowall personally controlled, bought and sold thousands of enslaved Africans. The correspondence reveals the ongoing cycle of death and replacement of the enslaved due to overwork, maltreatment, lack of food and clothing.

On St Kitts he was part of a larger Scottish contingent, who rose out of the traditional English plantation system, to accumulate great wealth. Diverting his sugar trade from London to Glasgow, he effectively started the city’s large-scale Caribbean trade from the 1720s. By the

end of the eighteenth century the family firm also had plantations on many other Caribbean islands.

The new evidence presented in this paper suggests that a very dark chapter is missing from the colonial history of Glasgow. It suggests that Glasgow's most prominent merchants were deeply and personally involved in the fate of countless enslaved Africans on Caribbean sugar plantations.

Introduction

During the eighteenth century, Britain carried at least two million enslaved African men, women and children to the Americas. The vast majority went to the Caribbean islands. Through this period, Britain's Atlantic trade was dominated by the three expanding west coast ports of Bristol, Liverpool and Glasgow. Arguably, the first two have come to terms with their involvement in black slavery, but what about the west of Scotland, and particularly Glasgow?

Unlike Bristol and Liverpool, it is often stated that Glasgow played a negligible part in the slave trade¹. Before the Union of the English and Scottish Parliaments in 1707, Scots are almost absent from the abundant literature on the English West Indies. Glasgow is linked more strongly with Virginia tobacco than with sugar. However the sheer scale of Glasgow's West Indies trade is at odds with supposed lack of involvement in Caribbean slavery.

None of the early histories of the city acknowledge participation in black slavery. Instead, Glasgow's colonial merchants are celebrated as its most distinguished citizens. By the 1940s, Eric Williams was one of the first to suggest deeper Glasgow involvement². Despite this, academic sources continued to advocate denial. If Scottish merchants ever stooped to personally become slave owners, it was only by accident, or due to the bankruptcy of others³. More recently, the only mention of Glasgow in major studies of the subject, is to group the city with other 'small' British ports which had very slight involvement⁴. Deeper participation has been unearthed for a small number of merchants, but in operations based abroad⁵. The latest overview admits that 'the role of the Scots in the slave trade and the slave colonies remains controversial'⁶.

Until the facts surrounding Glasgow's involvement are clarified, it is impossible to move on to consider the much wider legacy of black slavery in Glasgow. It is often easier and less controversial to promote the involvement of enlightened Scots in the subsequent abolition movement. Yet until we know more about how much Glasgow merchants were actually involved in the first place, too much emphasis on abolition activities smacks of a cover-up.

The only accurate way to determine involvement in slave trading is by counting the slave ships. This has been carried out in great detail for Bristol and Liverpool ⁷. With Glasgow, the number of slaving vessels known to have left from the Clyde is growing ⁸. However the ultimate total is unlikely to exceed the number which left Liverpool or Bristol in a typical year ⁹. Slave *trading* was not the only feature of the business. Beyond the shipping of the enslaved from Africa, the suffering and death rate on sugar plantations was equally high ¹⁰.

This paper will challenge the supposed lack of Glasgow involvement with a case study of the career of one of its most celebrated merchants, Colonel William McDowall (1678-1748). This will be carried out using newly discovered archive material, plus recent research and fieldwork on St Kitts (St Christopher). Based upon McDowall's experience, the study will suggest that Glasgow merchants were deeply involved in the use and abuse of enslaved Africans on Caribbean sugar plantations.

II

William McDowall was born in 1678, to a middling landed family from south west Scotland. As the fifth son in the family, he had little hope of gaining the family inheritance. However his father had mercantile connections ¹¹, sending him in his late teens to the Caribbean. Although Glasgow is principally linked with tobacco, the Clyde ports began trading with St Kitts and Nevis from the 1640s ¹². The city built four sugar houses from the 1660s, a century before tobacco's much better-known success. Beyond the sugar trade, this also provided a ready passage route for apprentices such as William McDowall.

McDowall returned to Glasgow in his fifties as a very wealthy man. By his death in 1748, he was described as 'the most notable figure in Glasgow' ¹³. He featured surprisingly prominently in Eric Williams' groundbreaking book in the 1940s. Along with his sons and grandsons, the family rose to the very highest positions in the city as provosts, MPs, sheriffs

and rectors of the University. They also founded what became Glasgow's largest merchant house.

Although William McDowall came to dominate Glasgow, all that has been known to date about his rise to fortune can be contained in a single sentence. When serving as a soldier on St Kitts, he became exceedingly wealthy through marriage to a plantation heiress of 'opulent fortune'¹⁴. This tradition is repeated in almost every history of Glasgow, with emphasis on a commission in the British army and a 'fortunate' and 'romantic' marriage, which provided great wealth.

Despite William McDowall's celebrated military origins and St Kitts connection, the new evidence exposes the first of many paradoxes in his hitherto secret life. He started out as an overseer on a slave plantation on the adjacent island of Nevis. His first decade was spent apprenticed to Colonel Daniel Smith, a second generation sugar planter and island Councillor¹⁵. Despite the scant coverage of Scots in the early English Caribbean, his position was surprisingly common. In the Leewards in the 1670s it was proclaimed that 'Scotchmen we esteem the best servants'¹⁶. The white overseers generally were described as 'poor Scotch lads, who, by their assiduity and industry, frequently become masters of the plantations'¹⁷.

When McDowall arrived on Nevis in the mid-1690s, the planters were in the early stages of establishing a legal system to control a burgeoning slave population. Legislation was passed for increasingly brutal punishment for the most trivial offences. A Nevis Council minute in 1686 determined that: 'Any negro stealing sugar shall suffer.... for the second offence the loss of the other ear or 60 lashes, and for the third offence death'¹⁸.

By 1700 Nevis had 8,000 slaves, outnumbering the whites by five to one. McDowall played a key part in this, managing one of the largest plantations on the island. The wealth of the Leewards went far beyond their diminutive size and during his time there, the sugar exports exceeded the total combined trade of all the mainland colonies of North America¹⁹.

III

William McDowall's early years on the island were spent amidst ongoing warfare between the French and British. He served in the island militia, rising gradually from Captain to

Colonel ²⁰. He progressed rapidly through the plantation system and by 1707 was developing a plantation of his own on the adjacent island of St Kitts. For this he had purchased a dozen enslaved Africans ²¹, the first of many thousands who would be the hidden source of the family fortune. This modest St Kitts estate was also the first step in the spread of McDowall's family to many other Caribbean islands.

From 1711 peace was negotiated and the French half of St Kitts was shared out amongst British planters, with around half going to Scots. Nevis had been dominated by men from Bristol and London, but the former French lands on St Kitts provided a clean slate for Scots to settle. McDowall was part of a core group who had arrived before the Union of 1707, reaching maturity in the key decade after 1710. This included two Governors, Walter Douglas and Walter Hamilton, plus James Milliken, Augustus Boyd and Robert Cunningham.

McDowall then took a provisional grant of a large St Kitts plantation known as Canada Hills ²². This was two miles north of the capital of Basseterre and would form the family's core holding for the next century. Initially it contained a house, two sugar mills, boiling house and still house, and required the hard labour of 120 enslaved Africans. He married Mary Tovey, a planter's daughter, from an estate adjacent to where he had served his apprenticeship ²³. Despite the popular tradition, there was nothing fortunate about his marriage. To achieve the status of an eligible, suitor he had worked his way up through plantation society. His friend James Milliken married Mary Tovey's stepmother. Now related by marriage to a Bristol planter dynasty, Colonel McDowall and Major Milliken became partners and closest confidants.

Later when they returned to Britain, they relied heavily on their ranks as titles of respect. The irony is that their 'rank' was simply in the militia. This was thanks entirely to their growing influence as planters on the island Council and to their increasing slave ownership. A militia rank such as 'Major' effectively meant 'major slave owner'. Given the prominent place which these supposedly 'gallant and romantic' British soldiers hold in Glasgow folklore, this may be one of the biggest deceptions in the city's history.

IV

When they came back to Scotland, McDowall was exceedingly wealthy, and his correspondence reveals three main reasons. Firstly, he personally secured an estate on St

Kitts four times the permitted size.²⁴ Admittedly, much was either steep hillside or low lying salt marsh, but it had the potential to be improved by the labour of his unfortunate slaves. Secondly, he also worked additional slave plantations on behalf of associates. This included fellow Scot Walter Douglas (governor 1711-15), and the former French governor's 'Fountain' plantation, on behalf of his friend Walter Hamilton²⁵. Thirdly, he secured lucrative contracts as an 'attorney', to manage large sugar plantations belonging to absentee British planters.

Most of his opportunities came about through contacts from his original enclave of English planters on Nevis. In 1711 Walter Hamilton married into the Stapleton family, long-standing planters with estates in Montserrat, Antigua, St Kitts and Nevis, where their estate was adjacent to the Toveys and Smiths. Along with James Milliken, McDowall took a contract to run one of the Stapleton estates containing 200 negroes, lying between his own and Millikens²⁶. Shortly after, he worked a similar estate for the Mead family, who were relations of McDowall's original boss Daniel Smith²⁷. Each plantation cleared up to £5,000 profit per annum, an immense sum in the 1720s. In addition to his plantations, McDowall owned a house in the Nevis capital of Charlestown and one fronting the sea in Basseterre, which was later rented out to the Governor²⁸.

McDowall's correspondence reveals great personal detail of early eighteenth century plantation life and the treatment of the enslaved. He wrote that during his apprenticeship he was the only white man on the plantation, and that the enslaved under his control were 'indifferent'²⁹. To maximise production amidst such apathy, the full system of violent suppression was on hand. Slave insurrection was a constant threat, and minor revolts frequently occurred, such as in the summer of 1725. Two of the plotters were hanged and burned alive before a trial could be arranged³⁰. Another Negro gangmaster named Frank was implicated, but absconded. The ruthless Scottish militia officer, Major James Milliken, was sent to capture him³¹.

From a core group of contacts in Nevis, McDowall's empire expanded to take in his own family. His brother David, along with Milliken's brother Thomas, were brought out to captain their ships, and act as their roving agents. His cousins William and Alexander Houston also acted as shipping agents. Alexander Houston was later McDowall's partner in Glasgow's South Sugar House, and ultimately fronted Glasgow's largest merchant house. McDowall

also sent out his nephews, David and John Alexander, to manage his plantations³². His advice to his kinsmen on estate management reflects his own experience as an apprentice a generation earlier. He entreated them to keep ‘a sufficient stock of negroes, to make sufficient sugar to send home’³³. He was in the process of upgrading the high part of his estate, to create a new sugar plantation and slave village: ‘I am glad you have got all things necessary for my new settlement I think it will not be amiss that ten or twelve negroes more be bought for the new settlement’³⁴. He also built a new sugar works, ordering new coppers (sugar boiling pans) from London³⁵. In 1731 he ordered that a new windmill be built, which still stands today, overlooking the south part of island³⁶.

His intention was to create a new and entirely independent estate: ‘I propose keeping a separate gang of negro houses, entirely distinct from the other.... with an overseer having no other concern with the upper plantation’³⁷. Plantation life was harsh, particularly for new arrivals. He asked his partner Milliken to instruct his nephew David Alexander, hoping that, ‘by this time by your example and precept (he) has become a tolerable good planter’³⁸. McDowall also enlisted the help of other assistants writing, ‘the sense I have of your goodness in assisting my kinsman Alexander in the management of my affairs ... I beg your contrivance for some time longer until he is a thorough planter’³⁹.

Hurricanes were a constant threat to estate management, as was drought: ‘the extreme dry weather that seized your new plantation immediately after Christmas destroyed our crop’⁴⁰. David Alexander’s difficulties continued to escalate. He complained bitterly of Major Milliken’s treatment of himself, and that he bore the whole weight of McDowall’s affairs. The incentive was always future wealth, and McDowall asked for his patience, entreating him to act, ‘like a young gentleman putting out in the world, and you will very soon have the principal care of my affairs and live handsomely’⁴¹.

Alexander struggled to balance the day to day management of the lower plantation, let alone the development of the new upper plantation: ‘Mr Alexander could not spare negroes to attend the mason at the windmill’⁴². Efficient management meant moving the enslaved around between plantations, often on other islands: ‘You have a list... of the Negroes brought from Montserrat and put upon your plantation at Nevis’⁴³. Alexander continued to have great difficulty managing the enslaved: ‘I am sorry the overseer should give you so much uneasiness’⁴⁴.

McDowall advised him not to leave the plantation, ‘when I was upon the spot myself, I found always enough to do with my own affairs, and went seldom out of the plantation, but found some thing or another wrong when I came back’⁴⁵. To placate him, he offered his nephew a £50 pay rise, but the poor man had neither the will nor the constitution for the harsh life, and died shortly after⁴⁶. His brother John was sent out immediately to replace him⁴⁷.

V

The planters did not write home about specific acts of violence as part of day to day control. However the whole system of estate management was run on a policy of frugality in food and shelter. In this early period the nursing of the sick or dying was an avoidable expense. After writing, ‘I am not much surprised that you lose so many negroes’, McDowall favoured the assistance of an old woman, rather than ‘all the doctors in your country’⁴⁸. This tight-fisted policy was also applied to accommodation. McDowall’s managers continually suggested upgrades, but he strenuously opposed any improvements⁴⁹.

In the early years of English settlement, St Kitts had supported a variety of produce, including potatoes, oranges, lemons, bananas and grapes⁵⁰. Some of the Scots planters raised potatoes and corn on the steep sides of the gullies (mountain streams)⁵¹. However the intensity of sugar cultivation meant that less and less soil was spared for the enslaved to grow their own food. Thus they were largely at the mercy of imports of food and clothing by their masters. During his own apprenticeship, McDowall recalled that the ‘negroes fed upon nothing else (but) one ounce of salt provisions, herrings or some salted beef’⁵².

The impression in the correspondence is very much akin to a concentration camp, where economics kept health very finely in the balance, and were largely dependent on imports. Deaths were a regular occurrence, but escalated with the slightest hiccup in food supply or weather. In 1726 the situation descended into crisis due to drought. Cattle began to die and it was not long before the enslaved followed, in larger numbers than was familiar. James Milliken wrote home to Madam Stapleton, ‘several of your negroes are dead here, we must buy others’⁵³. Conditions were so bad that the enslaved risked escape and torture on recapture, rather than starvation. It is deeply ironic that men, women and children could starve to death on one of the most fertile islands in the world. The Scots overseers and planters literally had the power of life and death over their workforce, with no fear of legal consequence for lack of care, let alone for violence and cruelty.

The slave ships arriving at the islands served as much to replace the dead as to stock growing plantations. McDowall's accounts record the ongoing purchases, such as 'ten negro boys at £23 sterling each', totalling £230 in 1725⁵⁴. Nevis was the main slave market for the Eastern Caribbean and he authorised that, 'whatever negroes the Major thinks to be bought, I shall be satisfied'⁵⁵. Later McDowall's trusted assistant, Robert Colhoun, wrote that he had lost eighty negroes in the previous period⁵⁶. The inference from the records is that the price of success for each Scots planter was the mortality of several hundred African men, women and children.

McDowall was involved in direct slaving from the Clyde in 1719, when he sold the survivors of a Glasgow-based voyage at St Kitts⁵⁷. He also operated directly with his partner Milliken in the slave trade with their own ship⁵⁸. They had married into a Bristol merchant dynasty, who were closely involved in that city's origins in the slave trade. Two cousins, Bristol merchants Colonel Robert Yate and John Day, were close friends. In 1695 the Yates and Days had been sent to London to petition Parliament on Bristol's behalf for a share of the capital's slave trade⁵⁹. McDowall corresponded with John Day, of Bristol's Queens Square, whose family was responsible for more than fifty slaving voyages between 1698 and 1729⁶⁰. McDowall later visited the Yates at the Red Lodge, and he personally owned a house on the famous Bristol bridge⁶¹.

VI

McDowall had risen from overseer, to manager, to planter, to island councillor and colonel. The next move was as a political negotiator. After the new Scots planters had been working their estates for several years, they were repossessed by the next Governor. The situation was of such grave concern that McDowall sailed for England in the spring of 1724. He spent the following year in London petitioning Parliament and the King, personally courting Treasury officials including John Scrope, Baron to the Court of Exchequer⁶². McDowall proved to be a negotiator at the highest level of government. Over the next two years he travelled between London, Bristol, Glasgow and Edinburgh, developing contact with relatives, friends and the nobility.

Despite his Scottish origins, McDowall's sugar was shipped exclusively to London, partly in his own ships, including the McDowall, the St Andrew and the Mary. After thirty years of

slave control, his social status had increased immeasurably, all at the human cost of his enslaved victims. The overriding ambition of the Scots planters was to create a landed legacy for their eldest sons. Once home in London, McDowall managed the English schooling of the children of various planters, including Milliken's son Jamey, who attended Eton in the mid 1720s. The contrast is acute between Jamey dancing and fencing amongst London society, while his father built the family fortune by overworking and underfeeding enslaved Africans⁶³. Later, McDowall's daughter attended Chelsea Boarding School, while the enslaved on her father's plantations died of hunger during persistent dry weather⁶⁴.

By the time McDowall's St Kitts plantations were secured in summer 1728⁶⁵, he was fifty years old, and considering retirement. He had profited immensely within the English plantation system, and all of his business to date had been carried out with London. He decided that, 'Sugars will sell as well at Glasgow as in any other part of Britain'⁶⁶. In late 1726 he purchased a share of Glasgow's South Sugar house and the St Christopher Sugar Warehouse in Edinburgh⁶⁷. He then began diverting some of his sugar ships from London to the Clyde⁶⁸.

His fellow planters traditionally retired to estates in the London and Bristol regions, but McDowall decided to settle in the West of Scotland. In late 1726 he purchased a castle and estate west of Glasgow⁶⁹. The total cost was more than £10,000 Sterling. At the same time, he bought the earliest and most prestigious colonial town house in Glasgow, the Shawfield Mansion.

William McDowall had achieved his ambition, having risen from modest apprentice, to mix with Britain's top merchants and landowners. Along the way he had become a vain man, full of self importance. He wrote, 'there is neither Lord nor Lawyer in the Parish, being the greatest man myself'⁷⁰. By 1733 he was already considering standing as a Member of Parliament⁷¹. However his pride was short-lived and he became shocked at his lack of power over his estate tenants.

His experience illuminates the stark contrast between the treatment of his enslaved workforce in the Caribbean and his estate tenants in Britain. After thirty years participating in a violent culture of suppression and abuse, he was now powerless to control his minions. He wrote, 'such is the temper of the creatures here that they choose to live upon potatoes and oat meal

on their own dunghills’⁷². In this outburst about his Scottish tenants, we are given a hint of his attitude to his ‘indifferent’ slaves. The distinction in Scotland was that he did not hold the power of life and death over his underlings.

Family members were the trusted core of most Glasgow merchant businesses, and brothers, cousins and other kinsmen continued to be sent out. The suggestion that Scots planters managed their estates indirectly from home, as ‘absent’ owners, is another myth which promotes distant secondary involvement in slavery. In the early stages at least, not only did they spend their lives on the plantations, but they also groomed their own sons to become plantation managers. McDowalls opinion was that his ‘plantation can never be managed to advantage without some of us upon it’⁷³. In late 1728, James Milliken’s son sailed for St Kitts to manage McDowall’s Canada plantations⁷⁴.

VII

Colonel William McDowall passed away at Castle Semple in October 1748, aged 71. His sons and grandsons became partners in Glasgow’s largest merchant house, Alexander Houston & Company, which was fronted by his ambitious cousin⁷⁵. By the end of the 18th century the family empire had expanded to plantations on many other Caribbean islands, including St Vincent, Grenada, Antigua, Tobago and Jamaica. At home, accolades and epitaphs still persist, promoting the family as of noble pedigree, fine character, gallant, romantic, virtuous, talented, praise-worthy, and amongst the elite of eighteenth century Scotland.

Based on all the Caribbean estates which the three William McDowalls worked (father, son and grandson) through the 18th century, this one family were responsible for the enslavement, maltreatment and fate of many thousands of African men, women and children. The McDowalls continue to be celebrated today, while their countless victims remain unrecorded. The planters chose many Scottish names for their enslaved workforce and to Glasgow’s discomfort this invariably included the given name ‘Glasgow’⁷⁶. In Glasgow there is occasionally a token admission that its colonial imports relied on the secondary input of enslaved Africans. However this has rarely been extended to acknowledge the direct plantation involvement of its numerous merchant families.

This paper suggests that a very large and dark chapter is missing from the history of the early development of Glasgow. Unlike Bristol and Liverpool, Glasgow may have had relatively little direct involvement in the slave *trade*. However, from its earliest days as an Atlantic port, Glasgow's most prominent merchants were deeply and personally involved in the purchase, use and demise of countless enslaved Africans on Caribbean sugar plantations.

Acknowledgements

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- 62 Riley, P.W.J., 'The English Minister and Scotland 1707-1727', Univ. of London Historical Studies XV (Univ. of London 1964) p.162-5.
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- 64 NAS GD 237/12/47/4, Letter from Robt Colhoun St Kitts to Col. Wm. McDowall Glasgow 30th May 1757.
- 65 Col. Wm. McDowall London to Jas. Gordon St Kitts July 30th 1728, Wm. McD letterbook.
- 66 Col. Wm. McDowall Edinburgh to Major Jas. Milliken St Kitts, Nov 1727, Wm. McD letterbook.
- 67 Col. Wm. McDowall London to Patrick McDowall of Crichan Nov 22nd 1728, Wm. McD letterbook; St Christopher Sugar House papers: NAS GD 113.
- 68 NAS GD 237/12/50: Penelope Mead Accounts, Folio 18.
- 69 Nisbet, S., 'A Sufficient Stock of Negroes', Renfrewshire Local History Forum Journal Vol. 14 (2008).

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- 70 Col. Wm. McDowall Castle Semple to Wm. Mead London June 20th 1727 & to Robert Colquhoun Apr 13th 1730, Wm. McD letterbook.
- 71 Col. Wm. McDowall Castle Semple to Capt David McDowall, Loyds Coffee House, London Sept 29th 1733, Wm. McD Letterbook.
- 72 Col. Wm. McDowall Castle Semple to Daniel Smith St Kitts May 12th 1731, Wm. McD Letterbook.
- 73 Col. Wm. McDowall London to Jas. Gordon St Kitts July 9th 1728, Wm. McD Letterbook.
- 74 Col. Wm. McDowall, Glasgow, to Major Jas. Milliken, St Kitts Dec 25th 1728, Wm. McD Letterbook; close relatives continued to be sent out, in the 1750s it was William Milliken: NAS GD113/5/162c/262 & 113/5/262/14.
- 75 See Hamilton, D.J., 'Scotland, the Caribbean & the Atlantic World 1750-1820' (2005).
- 76 The major surviving collections of the papers of West of Scotland Caribbean planters include lists of hundreds of enslaved Africans with a variety of Scottish given names. All include enslaved Africans named 'Glasgow'. Perhaps one day this will be acknowledged by a statue of the enslaved African named 'Glasgow' amongst the city's prominent merchants: List of enslaved on estate of Wm McDowall, St Kitts (1750), reprinted in Hector, W., 'Selections from the Judicial Records of Renfrewshire', Vol.1 p.304 (1876); Inventory of negroes on Cunyngham estate St Kitts (1730), NAS CS96/3102; List of enslaved on Grandville Estate of Wm Cunningham of Craighends, Jamaica (1773), Glasgow City Archives T-LX 14/15.