

# INTRODUCTION: FAMILY, WEALTH AND COLONIALISM: NORTH EAST SCOTS IN THE CARIBBEAN AND INDIA, C.1690–C.1840

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Introduction for the Special Issue.

**I**N June 2021, we organised the first international conference that explored in what ways and in what manner individuals and institutions from the North East of Scotland participated in Britain's growing empire during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Nearly thirty senior, middle, and early career scholars, independent researchers, artists, graduate students, activists, curators, and heritage industry professionals gathered, with many more in attendance for a two-day virtual event supported by the University of Aberdeen Museums and Special Collections and the Institute for Advanced Studies in the Humanities at the University of Edinburgh. The broad range of interests from the participants reflected the importance of acknowledging the legacies of scholarship from outside academic institutions and how public and private research in areas such as genealogy, family history, private archive curation, and social justice activism contribute to uncovering all aspects of Scotland's national story beyond its borders.

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The articles presented in this special issue of the *Journal of Irish and Scottish Studies* began as conference papers delivered by speakers on panels that highlighted colonial investments, institutional legacies, and the effects of empire on the North East Scottish landscape and within individual families. Scotland's North East region, treated in this special issue as Aberdeenshire, Moray, Angus, Banffshire, the Buchan Coast, Kincardine, and Nairnshire, contributed a considerable number of merchants, doctors, soldiers, administrators and enslavers in the service of Britain's imperial project. Building on the work of scholars from Scotland and formerly colonised nations, our conversations sought to destabilise historical approaches that continue to consider the Scottish diaspora as solely the story of migration. Instead, we conceptualise Scottish history from the eighteenth century onward as colonial history with entangled legacies of dispossession, violence, and trauma enacted on people living in the Caribbean, South Asia, the Americas, and Africa.

The failure of the Darien Scheme in 1695 did not signal the end of Scotland's participation in colonial expansion. The end of the Royal African Company's monopoly on trade and the rise of the East India Company in the seventeenth century allowed people from across Scotland to become involved in settling, managing, and enforcing the Empire. Benefitting from the geographical and political changes, North East Scotland underwent administrative changes in the eighteenth century, such as building roads to connect expanding parishes and burghs. Taking a regional approach brings to the surface much more starkly how family and kin interests were the foundations of the early British Empire. The capital these families accumulated in the colonies facilitated their activities in Scotland. The articles presented in this issue demonstrate that the proceeds from the transatlantic trade in enslaved peoples and colonialism from North East families funded philanthropic giving, investment in landed estates and building projects. These undertakings represent the financial, institutional, and physical legacies that link this region to the larger story of Scottish involvement in colonial projects.

Studies of the role of families in the economic development of Britain in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries are well established. This role was mirrored in the intergenerational role of colonial families in the imperial project.<sup>1</sup> Families were a vehicle for managing the financial risk of going to empire, navigating colonial careers, and capital accumulation that was

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1. Margot Finn, 'Family Formations: Anglo India and the Familial Proto-State', in David Feldman and Jon Lawrence (eds), *Structures and Transformations in Modern British History* (Cambridge, 2011), 100–17; Naomi Tadmor, *Family and Friends in Eighteenth-Century England: Household, Kinship, and Patronage* (Cambridge, 2001); Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall, *Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class 1780–1850* (London, 1987).

converted into social and cultural capital.<sup>2</sup>As Andrew Mackillop notes in his article, kin interests ‘branched out into global patterns of participation’, and many articles in this edition surface these relationships. Using the *Statistical Accounts* as source text, he acknowledges that ‘[a] crucial insight offered by the North East at a Scottish, British, European, and global level is that it points to less obvious, circuitous, and multi-lateral modes of interaction with world empire’.

This issue elucidates the collective power of interconnected and intergenerational family praxis in a regional context. Recent scholarship points to the family’s foundational role in the developing slavery-related mercantile concerns in Glasgow and West Central Scotland.<sup>3</sup> This collection puts the regionality of Scottish families and networks at the centre of its analysis. Whilst this edition elaborates a North East story with its particularities, this perspective points to regional variations in Scotland’s colonial connections in the long eighteenth century. It presents a powerful addition to the mercantile approach in West Central Scotland or studies of Edinburgh and the eastern Lowlands as East India Company metropolises.

Gentry and aristocratic families – who often achieved this status through their involvement in colonialism – dominate the regional histories presented in this issue. Barely visible from this force are the family and kin of African, Indian, and First-People descent. Subjugation and dispossession disrupted, destroyed, and reinvented the potential for the family to act as the basis of affective relationships and capital accumulation among enslaved and colonised people.<sup>4</sup> The privileged place of family and the availability of their archival material has facilitated this issue. A fuller and truer history would connect the family histories of enslavers and the enslaved, the coloniser and the colonised.

The utility of (family) archives was a key concern for contributors to this special issue. For North East Scots, networks formed through family, social,

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2. Finn, ‘Family Formations’, 101.

3. Stephen Mullen, *The Glasgow Sugar Aristocracy: Scotland and Caribbean Slavery, 1775–1838* (London, 2022); Katie Donington, *The Bonds of Family Slavery, Commerce and Culture in the British Atlantic World* (Manchester, 2021); Emma Rothschild, *The Inner Life of Empires: An Eighteenth-Century History* (Princeton, NJ; Oxford, 2011).

4. Jennifer L. Morgan, *Reckoning with Slavery: Gender, Kinship, and Capitalism in the Early Black Atlantic* (Durham, 2021); Marisa J. Fuentes, *Dispossessed Lives: Enslaved Women, Violence, and the Archive* (Philadelphia, 2016); Saidiya V. Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Social Upheaval* (London, 2019); Durba Ghosh, *Sex and the Family in Colonial India: The Making of Empire* (Cambridge; New York, 2006); Indrani Chatterjee (ed.), *Unfamiliar Relations: Family and History in South Asia* (New Brunswick, N.J., 2004); Catherine Hall and Daniel Pick, ‘Thinking About Denial’, *History Workshop Journal*, 84 (2017), 6–7; T. M. Devine, ‘Lost to History’, in T. M. Devine (ed.), *Recovering Scotland’s Slavery Past: The Caribbean Connection* (Edinburgh, 2015), 21–40.

and business connections expanded in colonies in the Caribbean and South Asia. The foundations of this colonial expansion were in the ownership and management of people and land. Thomas Archambaud's article explores how John Macpherson's Skye kin network was threaded through his academic career in Aberdeen and then onto India. Economic capital seeped back into such kin networks. It was recirculated through institutions that continued to intersect familial bonds with intellectual endeavours, in this case, King's College and Inverness Academy.

In South Asia, the white familial framework, which Margot Finn describes as a 'proto-state', served to extract resources, loot, expropriate land, and colonise native power structures to take command of vast geographies. The white European model of the patriarchal family also created a cultural ideal of dominion and paternalism that gave moral cover for such practices.<sup>5</sup> In a cruel reversal, colonial spaces were also those in which non-Europeans were very often denied family and kinship. As Jennifer L. Morgan argues, kin communities were torn apart by enslavement.<sup>6</sup> This dehumanisation was dependent upon distancing African-descended people from family connections in an attempt to show that they lacked interiority and to give logic to their enslavement and commodification.<sup>7</sup> The futurity of Black African women was one of perpetual enslavement for their descendants. The labour of mothers and families whose offspring were taken from Africa is also obscured from the study of Scottish imperial families.<sup>8</sup>

Eloise Grey's article argues that families in the North East contributed to the creation of the white imperial class in the nineteenth century. Using letters found in family archives in the University of Aberdeen Library, Grey shows how women in Aberdeen, impoverished and dependent on other family members employed by the East India Company, were responsible for creating bonds that 'served to form boundaries and identity'. The labour of forming strong *white* families through emotional bonds is key: '[N]urturing love between family members, and the ways in which non-Europeans were excluded, played a role in creating a white imperial class.' Strong horizontal and diagonal kinship bonds were formed across oceans to provide opportunities for kinfolk throughout the British Empire. Marriage patterns and their relationship to empire emerge within several studies in this edition.

Following the 1763 Treaty of Paris, those family networks in the Ameri-

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5. Sudipta Sen, *Distant Sovereignty: National Imperialism and the Origins of British India* (New York, 2002), 85–118.

6. Morgan, *Reckoning with Slavery*, 177–82.

7. *Ibid.*, 188–205.

8. Diana Paton, 'Gender History, Global History, and Atlantic Slavery: On Racial Capitalism and Social, in Reproduction', *The American Historical Review*, 127 (2022), 726–54.

cas multiplied and expanded. Scots became the majority of settlers in East and West Florida, St Vincent, Tobago, Grenada, Dominica and larger Grenadine islands such as Carriacou. Telling histories rooted in archival research often results in reproducing historical silences. Contributors to this issue were aware of that effect when attempting to reconstruct the lives of people enslaved by North East Scots in the Americas. The infrequency of white women settlers in both the Caribbean and the Indian subcontinent led to increased sexual relationships with African-descended and South Asian women. These ranged from rape to sexual relationships rooted in imbalances of power. In small but persistent numbers, mixed-heritage children in the North East of Scotland punctured the white ideals of family and the securing of property to legitimate white members.

Désa Osborne's article recovers the lives of Sophia and Margaret Ross, sisters born in British East Florida to a Scottish father and an enslaved African mother. They were sent to spend the rest of their lives in Scotland, including years spent at Arnage Castle in Aberdeenshire. Although members of the region's large and interconnected Leith/Leith-Ross family, the girls were conspicuously erased from the family narrative. Their presence remains a ghostly one in the many files and boxes in the University of Aberdeen Library. Osborne charts the complicated ways this transition from property to kin took place through the language of relationships between family members. In this work, the erasure and the irregular surfacing of mixed-heritage children are intersected with the varying interests of fathers.

Where Osborne plots this through language, Grey plots this through emotional attachment. The mothers of these children were marginalised through their absence in correspondence, the control of their emotions by North East Scots, and their separation from their children. Scottish men and women performed the management of relationships with colonised people both in the North East and in colonial spaces, often in concert. The efforts to marginalise or keep mixed-heritage children at a safe distance suggest the financial and social risk they held for Scottish families of the North East. Osborne suggests this tendency was rooted in shame and thus reflected moral and social failure. Grey takes a materialist approach, suggesting that emotional investments were bound to capital accumulation and lines of inheritance.

Family bonds were equally tenuous for enslaved African men. Elise Mitchell's article also attempts to reconstruct the lives of the enslaved using the archive of an Aberdonian in the Americas. Galen was an enslaved Jamaican 'doctor' under the training of Scottish-trained medical practitioner Alexander Johnston, who arrived from Aberdeen after 1763. For Johnston, the lack of 'suitable' marriage partners in the Caribbean led him to seek masculine status through professional success and ownership of property and people. This search for wealth

and respectability induced Johnston to train and use Galen's medical skills. The fragments of Galen's life pulled from Johnston's ledgers and letter reveal how 'racialised notions of masculinity created and foreclosed opportunities to become a medical practitioner in the early modern Caribbean'. Like many other North East Scots, Johnston's archive is located outside Scotland.

The universities in Edinburgh, Aberdeen, and Glasgow educated administrators, doctors, tradesmen, and attorneys who migrated to the Caribbean. Alan Short's article on two branches of the Gordon families of Cairness and Cluny, based on archives located at the University of Aberdeen Library, demonstrates how the Gordons benefitted from the enslavement of hundreds of men, women and children in the Caribbean. This reliance on enslaved people shows the reality of European dependency on the knowledge and physical and reproductive labour of Black Africans and native Indians, which required violent and non-violent coercion and control. Future studies might tie these connections more directly. The goal of enrichment through enslavement and resource extraction was also bound to the futurity of the white family by investment in heritage.

During this period, Scottish colonial settlers returned from South Asia and invested in land and building projects. Rory Lamb's article argues that the Barclay-Allardyce family's wealth came indirectly through family and colonialism in Pennsylvania and the Caribbean. Often, sojourning in the empire was a strategy for capital accumulation in order to marry.<sup>9</sup> As Lamb notes in his examination of James Playfair's career, returning 'nabobs' purchased estates and commissioned architects to design homes that signalled their newfound wealth. These investments in land and houses aimed to ensconce people with successful colonial careers within North East Scotland's social and political elite. The trajectory of Playfair's career underscores that Scots with connections to the colonies became active patrons of architecture and art. Their goals were not entirely philanthropic. Their investment in estates was part of a strategy designed to ensconce them in North East Scotland's social and political elite.

Sian Loftus, David Younie, and Kirsty Haslam offer a reflection on how Gilbert Ramsay's marriages to two wealthy heiresses in Barbados had the multiplier effect of enriching his family members in Birse, Aberdeenshire, as well as the Episcopal clergy and Marischal College. This final contribution illustrates the strength of community engagement confronting the now seemingly invisible sources of material wealth spread across the North East. With wealth made from his marriages and as the enslaver of hundreds of men, women, and children captured and forced to labour on his Barbados plantations, Ramsay gave a significant bequest to Marischal College. He used his wealth to endow a chair

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9. Finn, 'Family Formations', 105.

and provide scholarships at his alma mater. Ramsay's bequest to Marischal College forms part of the link between the present-day University of Aberdeen and the proceeds of enslavement. His philanthropic endeavours extended to building a school in the parish of Birse. Both elite and popular educational institutions in North East Scotland benefitted from funds tied to colonialism and enslavement. The parish of Birse's current residents opted to examine their community's historical links to Atlantic slavery. The research that Loftus, Younie, and Haslam present in their article was part of a suite of activities designed to interrogate this aspect of Birse's past. Their work represents ongoing efforts to reverse the 'collective amnesia' or 'disavowal' that has stymied a proper reckoning with Scotland's colonial connections.<sup>10</sup> While Birse's inhabitants have taken on this task, similar work remains undone in far larger towns and cities, not least Aberdeen.

Wealth built up in the colonies was central to change in the Scottish countryside. The Gordons of Cairness – discussed by Lamb and Short – undertook both housebuilding and agricultural improvement projects. The money that funded these projects was derived from enslaved people's labour on a Jamaica plantation. Like the Powis Gateway at the University of Aberdeen, the homes designed by Playfair reflect a desire among Scots with links to the Caribbean and South Asia to assert their economic, social, and political status. Houses like Cairness underscore the clear but hitherto unacknowledged legacies of colonialism and enslavement in North East Scotland.

At the roundtable discussion that closed the conference, the participants discussed what responsible and inclusive historical research on the Scottish role in enslavement and colonialism should look like. Scotland's extensive involvement in the transatlantic slave trade and colonisation has remained until the last 20 years without serious critical evaluation. However, there is a growing bibliography of original research in recent years by Scottish historians and historians based in Scotland. We have been fortunate to work with many of these scholars. Some of this scholarship, however, focuses on a seemingly unidirectional flow of people from Scotland to the Empire. This tendency risks downplaying the back-and-forth circulation of people – free and enslaved – goods, capital, and ideas between Scotland and colonised spaces.

Crucially, only a few of those scholarly voices emanate from marginalised and purposefully underrepresented research communities. In many cases, the contributions of these scholars, public historians, and researchers have not been acknowledged or cited for inclusion in discourse. This issue is not a complete corrective to the conceptual and practical considerations that influ-

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10. Hall and Pick, 'Thinking About Denial', 6–7. Devine, 'Lost to History', 21–40.

ence the current scholarship on Scotland's ties to enslavement and colonialism. These articles focus on the role of Scots in the Empire and the impact of colonial wealth on the process of change in North East Scotland. We hope that further studies of the region's relationship with enslavement and colonialism inaugurate wider conversations that centre marginalised research communities and historical actors.