

## 'AYE, IT WIS AABODY': REFLECTING ON THE LINKS OF A RURAL ABERDEENSHIRE PARISH TO CARIBBEAN SLAVERY

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The Old School in the historic parish of Birse in the North East of Scotland, presents as a modest rural Victorian building, but contains fabric from an original school constructed in the 1730s. During consideration for the future of the site, it was recognised that the school owed its establishment to a legacy in the will of Rev. Gilbert Ramsay in the early eighteenth century. Even a cursory examination establishes that Ramsay's life, and wealth, were intricately interlinked with the trade in enslaved people and that, via Ramsay's financial support, the residents of the parish of Birse have been the beneficiaries of the proceeds of Caribbean slavery. A community project, which took place in 2018 and 2019 and was entitled 'Aye, it was Aabody', was set up to explore Birse, and Scotland's, links with slavery in the Caribbean via Gilbert Ramsay's legacies and to ensure that any knowledge gained was shared with the local community through a series of community events and activities. This article outlines some of the key findings of the project's research but also highlights some of the benefits and challenges of a community-led heritage project, and the role that local communities can play, particularly when supported by academic scholars, in uncovering and disseminating the legacies of Caribbean slavery in their own parishes.

**T**HE historic parish of Birse in the North East of Scotland, encompasses the communities of Birsemore, Finzean, Ballogie and the Forest of Birse. Adjacent to the current Finzean Primary School, built in the 1960s, sits the Old School, which presents as a modest rural Victorian building, but which contains fabric from an original school constructed in the 1730s. The Old School was acquired

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by Birse Community Trust (BCT) on behalf of the community, and during considerations for the future of the site, it was recognised that the school owed its establishment to a legacy in the will of Rev. Gilbert Ramsay in the early eighteenth century. Even a cursory examination establishes that Ramsay's life, and wealth, were intricately interlinked with the trade in enslaved people and that, via Ramsay's financial support, the residents of the parish of Birse have been the beneficiaries of the proceeds of Caribbean slavery. First summarised by Robin Callander in 1982, these legacies, and Ramsay's background, have now been further investigated in a community project initiated by BCT and funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund and Aberdeenshire Council.<sup>1</sup>

The project, which took place in 2018 and 2019, was entitled 'Aye it was Aabody' and was intended to explore Birse and Scotland's links with slavery in the Caribbean via Gilbert Ramsay's legacies and to ensure any knowledge gained was shared with the local community through a series of community events and activities. A series of activities were undertaken by the pupils of Finzean Primary School, the descendant institution of which Gilbert Ramsay had left the money to found. These included visits by Sir Geoff Palmer, Professor Emeritus and Chancellor at Heriot-Watt University, who initiated a link between Finzean Primary School and North Street Congregational School, Kingston, Jamaica—his former primary school. The project also published a graphic novel, 'Aye, It Wis Aabody', developed with the primary school and made available in print version to all Aberdeenshire primary schools and free online.<sup>2</sup> To coincide with its publication, Sir Geoff Palmer gave a public lecture in Birse and Feughside Church in September 2019, attended by approximately 100 people. The research group also developed exhibition interpretation panels currently displayed along the community path leading to the primary school. At the school itself a commemorative panel was created from clay tiles, each designed and made by people in the community in response to the project. In December 2020, during pandemic restrictions, it was unveiled in an online ceremony by Jackie Kay, the Makar of Scotland.

To produce these deliverables, research was conducted into Gilbert Ramsay and his legacies, both within the parish of Birse and more widely. This article outlines some of the key findings of this research. However, it also highlights the benefits and challenges of a community-led heritage project, in which research was conducted by volunteers without significant academic grounding in the histories of the trans-Atlantic slave trade or imperial history, although support was offered by academics from the University of Aberdeen. Given this, there

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1. R. Callander, *History in Birse*, vol. 2 (Birse Community Trust, 1982).

2. Magic Torch Comics, *Aye, It Wis Aabody: A Story of Scotland's Role in the Slave Trade* (Birse Community Trust, 2019), Available at [https://issuu.com/magictorchcomics/docs/ay\\_e\\_it\\_was\\_aabody\\_\\_issuu\\_](https://issuu.com/magictorchcomics/docs/ay_e_it_was_aabody__issuu_) [Last accessed 1 March 2022].

are avenues which would have merited additional research but which it was not possible to pursue within the remit of this project, and where this has been deemed to be the case, it is acknowledged within this article. It was not possible, for example, to travel to the Caribbean to consult archives, which would likely have enabled researchers to fill in some of the current gaps in our understanding of the accumulation of Ramsay's wealth, and the research presented within this article draws primarily on Scottish sources. Additionally, project participants did not always have the resources to access scholarly or archival literature, although the increasing digitalisation of sources was utilised as appropriate. It should also be acknowledged that working with volunteers also ensured that additional lines of enquiry were pursued depending upon the interests of the volunteers. While this article will therefore concentrate on the findings related specifically to Ramsay, acknowledgment will also be made as to the additional avenues that were explored during research for this project, and which help to further and develop an understanding of the links between chattel slavery in the Caribbean and this remote Aberdeenshire parish. Therefore, while the project did uncover new knowledge, it also demonstrates the role that local communities can play, particularly when supported by academic scholars, in uncovering and disseminating the legacies of Caribbean slavery in their own parishes. Therefore, this article will start by providing an overview of what is currently known about Gilbert Ramsay's life before considering his legacies in the short and longer term.

### **Gilbert Ramsay (c. 1658–1728)**

Gilbert Ramsay, the son of Alexander Ramsay of Midstrath, was born in the parish of Birse around 1658.<sup>3</sup> It is likely that Alexander Ramsay was a younger brother of Sir Gilbert Ramsay, 1<sup>st</sup> Baronet of Balmain, near Fettercairn in Kincardineshire, and a son of Sir David Ramsay of Balmain.<sup>4</sup> The link cannot be made definitively, and it would appear that Alexander did not come into any

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3. Ramsay's will notes that he died in 1728 at the age of 70. Will Registers, 1723–1729. Piece 621, Quire Numbers 91–135. RAMSAY, Gilbert. Probate Records. England & Wales. Prerogative Court of Canterbury, Wills, 13884–1858, [https://www.ancestry.co.uk/interactive/5111/40611\\_310286-00026?pid=699971&treeid=&personid=&rc=&usePUB=true&\\_phsrc=KOC3546&\\_phstart=successSource#?imgeld=40611\\_310286-00027](https://www.ancestry.co.uk/interactive/5111/40611_310286-00026?pid=699971&treeid=&personid=&rc=&usePUB=true&_phsrc=KOC3546&_phstart=successSource#?imgeld=40611_310286-00027) [Last accessed 10 March 2019].

A. Clark (ed.), *Clark's Lists, Balliol College Archive Vol. V, 1674–1698* (Unpublished, 1909), 56. Accessed provided by Balliol College Archives and Manuscripts, <https://www.flickr.com/photos/balliolarchivist/5246228629/in/album-72157625563269172/> [Last accessed 1 March 2023]. A Register of Deeds from 1682 in the Scottish Record Office describes Alexander specifically as a 'life-renter' on the Midstrath estate (Scottish Record Office (SeRO), *Index to Register of Deeds Vol XXII 1682* (Edinburgh, 1956), 410.

4. Brechin Commissary Court, Wills and Testaments 'Samuel Ramsay, 1632', National Records of Scotland (NRS), CC3/3/5/41.

property from his family, who held extensive land in southern Aberdeenshire and Kincardineshire. However, Alexander's son Gilbert, who is the focus of this article, left money in his will to his 'honoured cousin Sir Alexander Ramsay', fifth Baronet of Balmain.<sup>5</sup> Gilbert Ramsay was educated at Marischal College in New Aberdeen, graduating in 1674.<sup>6</sup> He studied for a doctorate at Balliol College, Oxford between 1682 and 1685, before his ordination into the Episcopalian Church in 1686.<sup>7</sup>

Ramsay's career was firmly focused in the Caribbean. He served first in a church in Antigua between 1689 and 1692 and then as Rector at Christchurch, Barbados between 1692 and 1724.<sup>8</sup> His life, which spanned the Act of Union between England and Scotland, recognises some of the complexity of identity in this period; Ramsay was Scottish born but ordained within the episcopal, rather than presbyterian, church tradition. While there were Scots who lived and owned land in the Caribbean, Barbados, in particular, was dominated by English colonists, and, as will be discussed, Ramsay was integrated into the English community on the island.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, there had been an English settlement on Barbados since 1627 and the island had been at the forefront of the development of the sugar industry in the mid-seventeenth century.<sup>10</sup> By the time Ramsay arrived, the island was dominated by sugar plantations and was densely settled.<sup>11</sup> However, Ramsay's career also spanned a period of flux for Barbados. By the

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5. Ibid.

6. P. Anderson (ed.), *Fasti Academiae Mariscallanae Aberdonensis: Selections from the Records of the Marischal College and University, MDXCIII – MDCCCLX* (Aberdeen, 1898), 243.

7. 'Anglican Servants in the Caribbean, c.1610–c.1740: A Database of as Many of the Clergymen, Chaplains and Schoolteachers in Service to the Church of England in the Torrid Zone as Have Been Retrieved', Lancaster University, <https://www.lancaster.ac.uk/fass/projects/caribbean/ministers,%20working.pdf> [Last accessed 30 November 2018]. Ramsay's decision to be ordained into the Episcopalian church is perhaps unsurprising—Aberdeen and Aberdeenshire were known to have strong Episcopalian followings in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries; see M. Lynch and G. DesBrisay with M. G. H. Pittock, 'The Faith of the People' in E. P. Dennison, D. Ditchburn, and M. Lynch (eds), *Aberdeen before 1800: A New History* (East Lothian, 2002), 300–1.

8. S. Barber, "'Let Him Be an Englishman": Irish and Scottish Clergy in the Caribbean Church of England, 1610–1720', in A. Macinnes and D. Hamilton (eds), *Jacobitism, Enlightenment and Empire 1680–1820* (Abingdon, 2014), 75.

9. T. Devine (ed.), *Recovering Scotland's Slavery Past: The Caribbean Connection* (Edinburgh, 2015), 11, 14. It was not uncommon for natal Scots who developed links to the trade in enslaved people to have integrated themselves into English networks, or to base themselves from English cities; see D. Hancock, *Citizens of the World: London Merchants and the Integration of the British Atlantic Community, 1735–1785* (Cambridge, 1995), 40, 45, 50.

10. H. Beckles, 'The "Hub of Empire": The Caribbean and Britain in the Seventeenth Century' in N. Canny, A. Low, and W. Roger Louis (eds), *The Origins of Empire: Overseas Enterprise to the Seventeenth Century* (Oxford, 1998), 226. For a detailed discussion of the early years of English settlement in Barbados see L. Gragg, *Englishmen Transplanted: The English Colonization of Barbados 1627–1660* (Oxford, 2003).

11. H. Beckles, *A History of Barbados*, second edition (Cambridge, 2006), 52.

beginning of the eighteenth century, the island's economic pre-eminence in the production of sugar was increasingly challenged by Jamaica and the Leeward Island.<sup>12</sup> A focus on the production of sugar had also led to the increased use of enslaved people on plantations rather than indentured servants.<sup>13</sup> While there were enslaved people on Barbados from the earliest years of English settlement of the island, it is likely that by the 1670s, the enslaved black population significantly outnumbered the white population of the island.<sup>14</sup> A census of the white population of the island in 1715 indicates that there were just under 16,900 white individuals on the island in that year. The black population of the island was not recorded, although in 1696 it has been estimated that the population was around 42,000 individuals.<sup>15</sup>

Barbados was dominated by a 'plantocracy', many of whom had owned land on the island since the mid-seventeenth century.<sup>16</sup> These families dominated the influential positions on the island.<sup>17</sup> Ramsay married twice while living in Barbados, on both occasions into the Barbadian plantocracy. His first marriage, to Ann Dorne, née Frere, in Barbados on 18 December 1694, connected him to the influential Frere family.<sup>18</sup> Ramsay's brothers-in-law through his first wife included Robert Lowther, Governor of Barbados 1711–14 and 1715–20 and Samuel Crispe, great nephew of Nicholas Crisp who pioneered trade in West Africa and was a significant investor in the Guinea Company that had established a foothold for the English slave trade in modern-day Ghana.<sup>19</sup> Lowther was succeeded as Governor in 1720 by his, and Ramsay's, nephew John Frere.<sup>20</sup> Gilbert's first wife, Ann, died in 1700, and he married for a second time, in May

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12. Ibid., 29.

13. Ibid., 232.

14. J. Handler, 'Custom and Law: The Status of Enslaved Africans in Seventeenth-Century Barbados', *Slavery and Abolition*, 37 (2016), 234.

15. P. Molen, 'Population and Social Patterns in Barbados in the Early Eighteenth Century', *The William and Mary Quarterly*, 28, 2 (1971), 294; Beckles, *The "Hub of Empire"*, 225.

16. R. Dunn, *Sugar and Slaves: The Rise of the Planter Class in the English West Indies* (North Carolina, 2000, second edition), 58.

17. Beckles, *A History of Barbados*, 53–4.

18. FamilySearch, 'Barbados Church Records, 1637–1887', <https://familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:QJ8R-X7YT> [Last accessed 2 March 2021]. The Freres were early plantation owners in Barbados and considered important members of the island elite in the seventeenth century. Dunn, *Sugar and Slaves*, 58.

19. The will of Mary Wilson, 1659, in Henry F. Waters, 'Genealogical Gleanings in England' [Parts i–xxiii, xxv] (Volume 1), 1901, 127–8. Also, the wills of Roland Wilson [the younger] and Roland Wilson [snr], *The New England Historical and Genealogical Register*, 48 (1894), 133–4. Also Wills of Samuel, Ellis and Tobias Crisp, in F. A. Crisp (ed.), *Collections Relating to the Family of Crispe* (London, 1882), 54–6. Also Wills of Samuel Crisp [snr] 1656, proved 1684, The National Archives, PROB 11/377/327 and Samuel Crisp [jnr] 1694, The National Archives, TNA Ref PROB 11/423/152.

20. J. H. Lawrence-Archer, *Monumental Inscriptions of the British West Indies from the Earliest Date* (London, 1875), 372.

1702, to Mary Downes. Their son David was born in 1706 but lived for only a few weeks.<sup>21</sup>

Ramsay was clearly a wealthy individual, although the specific source of his fortune is currently unclear. At present, it does not seem that Ramsay owned land in Barbados although his will makes clear that he did own an unspecified number of enslaved people.<sup>22</sup> His marriages into wealthy Barbadian, plantation-owning families also highlight the extent to which his fortunes were linked with the exploitation of enslaved people. As evidence of his wealth, Ramsay made significant gifts to his homeland throughout his lifetime, focused primarily on the parish community he had left behind and on education in the region.<sup>23</sup> This would culminate in the significant legacies he left in his will upon his death in 1728, and to which attention will now turn.

## Last Will and Testament of Gilbert Ramsay

There is increasing scholarship being published to highlight the interconnections of communities and organisations with the trans-Atlantic slave trade, and we have come a long way from the opening line of *Legacies of British Slavery*, published in 2014, which stated that ‘slave ownership is virtually invisible in British history.’<sup>24</sup> While conversations and research occurred prior to 2020, the Black Lives Matter movement, and the controversy surrounding the publication of pieces of research which, at least in part, consider the legacy of trans-Atlantic slavery, have ensured that the discussion is currently far more fore-fronted than might have previously been the case and much work is being published in this area.<sup>25</sup> Given the variety of potential engagements of individuals with the trade

21. FamilySearch, ‘Barbados Church Records, 1637–1887’, <https://familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:QJ8R-D9CF> [Last accessed 2 March 2021]; FamilySearch, Barbados Church Record, 1637–1887’, <https://familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:QJ8R-XJ9Q> [Last accessed 2 March 2021].

22. Will Registers, Ramsay Gilbert [Last accessed 10 March 2019]. Ramsay had links with the Royal Africa Company, who had a monopoly on the slave trade into Barbados during the period in which Ramsay lived there, through his friend and ‘cousin’ Alexander Ouchterlony to whom Ramsay left money in his Will. Ouchterlony was a merchant based in London and a Director of the Royal Africa Company and, if not a natural cousin to Ramsay then a cousin through Ramsay’s brother-in-law, James Ouchterlony of Tillyfruskie in Birse; see A. MacInnes and D. Hamilton (eds), *Jacobitism, Enlightenment and Empire, 1680–1820* (London, 2014), 135–52.

23. This was not an uncommon practice as those who had made their fortune abroad looked to invest in their home communities, often focusing on transportation networks, manufacturing and philanthropy; see Hancock, *Citizens of the World*, 301–8.

24. C. Hall, N. Draper, K. McClelland, K. Donington, and R. Lang, *Legacies of British Slave-Ownership: Colonial Slavery and the Formation of Victorian Britain* (Cambridge, 2014), 1.

25. The research commissioned by the National Trust which examined the links between properties in their care and trans-Atlantic slavery and/or the East India Company has provoked particular backlash; see S-A. Huxtable, C. Fowler, C. Kefalas, and E. Slocombe (eds),

in enslaved people, an essential component of each work is to announce clearly who was being identified as a beneficiary and the extent to which this was directly or indirectly linked to the ownership of enslaved people. Educational and religious organisations have focused on identifying financial gifts which were derived from the ownership of enslaved people, and how these legacies, bequests and donations were accepted and utilised by their institutions.<sup>26</sup> As will be seen, Gilbert Ramsay's legacies were particularly targeted at educational establishments and these studies provide the context for the research conducted as part of the 'Aye it was Aabody' project. However, the methodology adopted within the project provides a contrast to much of the research conducted by large establishments. The project worked from the individual donor to the institutions he wished to benefit. This serves to highlight that legacies derived from the sale or ownership of enslaved people were rarely made to a single institution, and often connected disparate organisations and individuals into financial networks that benefited, in part, from the proceeds of the trade in enslaved people.

Indeed, in his will, Gilbert Ramsay specified legacies to a number of individuals and institutions, totalling £6,949.<sup>27</sup> These are detailed in Table 1. Many of these bequests were to family members. However, as suggested, other money was left for education and poor relief, continuing a pattern Ramsay had established during the course of his life. The largest bequest within the will was £4,800 left to the Corporation of the City of Aberdeen. This capital was specified to be invested in land in Aberdeen, with the income of the investment to be split between the parish of Birse and Marischal College.

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'Interim Report on the Connections between Colonialism Now in the Care of the National Trust, Including Links with Historic Slavery' (Swindon, 2020), <https://nt.global.ssl.fastly.net/binaries/content/assets/website/national/pdf/colonialism-and-historic-slavery-report.pdf> [Last accessed 24 March 2024].

26. Examples include S. Mullen and S. Newman, 'Slavery, Abolition and the University of Glasgow' (Glasgow, 2018), <https://www.gla.ac.uk/research/az/slavery/report2018/> [Last accessed 16 March 2024]; Church Commissioners' Research into Historic links to Transatlantic chattel slavery (London, 2023), <https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2023-01/church-commissioners-for-england-research-into-historic-links-to-transatlantic-chattel-slavery-report.pdf> [Last accessed 16 March 2024]; S. Pender, Balliol and the Proceeds of Slavery: Project Report', [https://www.balliol.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/balliol\\_and\\_the\\_proceeds\\_of\\_slavery\\_-\\_project\\_report.pdf](https://www.balliol.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/balliol_and_the_proceeds_of_slavery_-_project_report.pdf) [Last accessed 16 March 2024].

27. Utilising the respected 'Calculated Worth' tool ('Five Ways to Compute the Relative Value of a U.K. Pound Amount, 1270 to present', MeasuringWorth, 2024, <https://www.measuringworth.com/calculators/ukcompare> [Last accessed 24 March 2024]) highlights that in 2022, the specified legacies in Ramsay's Will, not accounting for the residual of his estate, would be worth anything from £1 million to just over £181 million in today's money, depending on the measurement that is used. As relative labour, for example, the value of the legacy would stand at just over £17 million while the income value would be worth just over £19 million. However, as income bearing legacies, Ramsay's bequests to the university and Birse parish could have been worth considerably more over nearly three centuries.

| <b>Beneficiary</b>  | <b>Total</b>                   |
|---|--------------------------------|
| Corporation of City of Aberdeen   | £4,800                         |
| The poor Episcopal Clergy of Scotland   | £100                           |
| For the Propagating of the Gospel in Foreign Parts                              | £100                           |
| Scots Corporation in the City of London for relief of the distressed poor       | £30                            |
| Balliol College, for books  | £10                            |
| 'my honoured cousin' Sir Alexander Ramsay, Baronet, Laird of Balmain            | £200                           |
| 'my beloved sister' Elizabeth Garden, Widow of James Ouchterlony, Tillyfruskie  | £100                           |
| 'my nephew' David Ouchterlony of Tillyfruskie                                   | £200                           |
| 'my nephew' Alexander Ouchterlony, brother of said David Ouchterlony            | £200                           |
| 'my niece' Margaret Ouchterlony, sister of said David and Alexander Ouchterlony | £100                           |
| James Irvine, nephew to David Ouchterlony by his sister Jane Ouchterlony        | £100                           |
| 'my cousin' Mr Andrew Ramsay, son of Revd. Mr Alex. Ramsay, Edinburgh           | £50                            |
| 'my cousin' [ ] Fullerton of Kinnaber Esq in the Shire of Angus                 | £100                           |
| 'my beloved cousin' Margaret Strachan, wife of Mr David Rattray, Edinburgh      | £100                           |
| 'my good friend & cousin' Mr Alex. Ouchterlony, Merchant, City of London        | 20 guineas                     |
| John Turner, Doctor of Phisick, Penryn, Cornwall                                | 'my watch with two good seals' |
| 'my good friend' Mr John Robertson at Doctor Cheynes in Bath                    | 10 guineas                     |
| Vestry of Christ Church, Barbados, for a school for the poor                    | £500                           |
| 'my honoured sister' Madam Elizabeth Pilgrim of Barbados, for a mourning ring   | £10                            |
| 'my Godson' William Downes, Barbados 'to buy young negro woman slave'           | £25                            |
| 'my Godson' Thomas Earle, Barbados 'to buy young negro woman slave'             | £25                            |
| 'my Goddaughter' Eliz. Durant, Barbados, 'to buy young negro woman slave'       | £25                            |
| 'my Goddaughter' Eliz. Hall, Barbados, 'to buy young negro woman slave'         | £25                            |
| 'my niece' Margaret, Wife of John Harper of Barbados, Gent.                     | £50                            |
| 'my Negro man' Robert and his freedom   | £5                             |
| Thomas Maxwell, executor in Barbados  | 25 guineas                     |
| George Graeme, executor in Barbados   | 25 guineas                     |

**Table 1. List of Legacies in the Last Will and Testament of Gilbert Ramsay.<sup>28</sup>**

To help fund the legacies in his will, Ramsay ordered the sale of all the enslaved people that he owned, specifying that these individuals should be sold below market rate 'to such person or persons that will use them well'. The only specified exception to this was the request to free the enslaved man, Robert, who Ramsay had brought with him when he travelled from Barbados to Bath at the

<sup>28</sup>. Will Registers, Ramsay, Gilbert [Last accessed 10 March 2019].



end of his life. Robert was also left £5 and passage back to Barbados, although any further details of his life are unknown. While not common, it was certainly not unheard of for enslavers to free specific enslaved people within wills.<sup>29</sup> While it is harder to ascertain whether these wishes were always honoured it is known that there was a small community in Barbados of formerly enslaved people, primarily based in the towns, by the end of the seventeenth century.<sup>30</sup> Robert may have had kin or family in Barbados that he would have wished to return to although the possibility that he decided to remain in England, where black African communities were developing during the eighteenth century, particularly in port cities, cannot be ruled out.<sup>31</sup> However, Ramsay's will also specifies legacies for the purchase of enslaved people. He left £25 to each of his four godchildren in Barbados, to each purchase a young, enslaved woman. The challenge of recovering the voices of enslaved people, particularly from the earlier period of chattel slavery is acknowledged but it is possible that additional research, particularly of Caribbean archives, may be able to provide additional detail about the enslaved people mentioned within Ramsay's will.

Recognising this, attention will now turn to focus on the income derived from the £4,800 which Ramsay left to be invested by the Corporation of the City of Aberdeen. This money was to be divided between the creation of a Chair in Hebrew, Arabic and Oriental Languages at Marischal College, bursaries for Divinity students and Greek and philosophy students at the same institution, a new school and schoolmaster's salary in the Parish of Birse, and the poor fund in the Parish of Birse.<sup>32</sup> It is to these latter legacies that attention will first turn.

## Legacies From Gilbert Ramsay to the People of Birse Parish

Although Ramsay spent most of his adult life in Barbados, he clearly had not forgotten his 'place of nativity', as he described Birse in his will. Indeed, in 1716 he had donated £66 13s 4d to the parish to build a five-arch stone bridge over the

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29. Beckles, *A History of Barbados*, 85.

30. K. Block, *Ordinary Lives in the Early Caribbean: Religion, Colonial Competition and the Politics of Profit* (Athens, 2012), 197; Beckles, *A History of Barbados*, 85

31. Beckles, *A History of Barbados*, 82; Historic England, 'Black Lives in England', <https://historicengland.org.uk/research/inclusive-heritage/the-slave-trade-and-abolition/sites-of-memory/black-lives-in-england/> [Last accessed 7 November 2022].

32. The respective incomes were for the Chair in Hebrew, the income on £1,000, for the bursaries for Divinity students, the income on £2,000, for the bursaries for Greek students the income on £800, which was to be added to an earlier bursary fund created by Ramsay in his lifetime and for the parish school and the poor relief in Birse, the income on £500 each. Unusually, the income was capped on the sum specified for each cause rather than as a proportion of the capital held by the city. This saw the relative value of the legacies diminish over time.

local river Feugh, on the main route from the south.<sup>33</sup> He also gifted an expensive lectern Bible to the parish church which is now on loan from Birse Community Trust to Aberdeen City and Aberdeenshire Archives.<sup>34</sup>

However, as mentioned, Ramsay's legacies to Birse parish in his will was the income on £500 for a new school and teacher's salary and the income on £500 for the parish poor fund. Ramsay's legacy to the parish of Birse established the first free school in the parish, in the early 1730s.<sup>35</sup> The school building was built on land at Bankhead, Finzean, leased by Finzean Estate to the trustees of Ramsay's bequest for a period of 500 years.<sup>36</sup> Ramsay's Endowed School is now known as Finzean Primary School and the security of tenure and income, guaranteed by Ramsay's bequest, is likely a factor in the continuation of the school through to the present day.<sup>37</sup>

Under the terms of Gilbert Ramsay's will, the income from the capital investment for the first year funded the building of the school, and Ramsay also specified that 'immediately after the said Schoolhouse is built the said School-master is to be elected and placed in it, and his said Sallery to be duly paid him and his Successors for ever'. Ramsay was also clear in his will about the qualities he wanted in a teacher in his home parish. The appointed Schoolmaster had to be

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33. This was not the only bridge to be built in the parish with links to Barbados, as there is an account of one funded by William Robbie, sometime resident of Barbados, in 1730, crossing the Burn of Cattie at Milton (Ballogie); see R. Dinnie *Account of the Parish of Birse* (Birse Community Trust, 1999), 86–7.

34. The Bible is a surviving example of an imprint known as a 'vinegar bible', printed in 1717, which includes a number of printing errors, most famously that within the parable of the vineyard. The embossed leather cover of the Birse copy is inscribed with 'The gift of the Revd. Gilbert Ramsay of Barbadoes [sic] to the Parish Church in Birse, Scotland'.

35. Callander, *History in Birse*, 107. Also Register of Sasines, Country of Aberdeen, April 1876. Vol. 22 Folio. 251.

36. Register of Sasines, Country of Aberdeen, April 1876. Vol. 22 Folio. 251.

37. The original six-acre school and croft was reduced in size in 1962 when the Estate gifted 1.8 acres to Aberdeenshire Council [Registers of Scotland. Registered title ABN70882]. In 1963 a new school building was built, adjacent to the old school, and the old school buildings were adapted as an outdoor centre. In 2003 the Old School site was acquired by the community, through Birse Community Trust. Gilbert Ramsay was not the only individual whose bequest benefitted local parish schools in the North East of Scotland. A later legacy, the Dick bequest, left by James Dick in 1828, provided a substantial amount of money to rural parish schools. This is discussed in M. Cruickshank, 'The Dick Bequest: The Effect of a Famous Nineteenth-Century Endowment on Parish Schools of North-East Scotland', *History of Education Quarterly*, v (1965), 153–65, although mentions in this article of how Dick's fortune was amassed could be described as limited at best. A more recent project has highlighted the extent to which Dick made money from enslaved people and is championing for a re-consideration of how funds derived from this legacy should be utilised today, advocating that it should be returned to be used by schools in Jamaica; see D. Alston and D. Morrison, 'James Dick and the Dick Bequest: A Legacy of Slavery', <https://www.davidalston.info/documents/james-dick-bequest/james-dick-and-the-dick-bequest-a-legacy-of-slavery-v5.pdf> [Last accessed 10 March 2024]. The school Ramsay founded in Finzean received money from the Dick Bequest in the early twentieth century (Records of Dick Bequest Trust 1827–1990, NRS, GD1/4).

'pious, prudent and experienced' in order to instruct the pupils in the principles of religion, to be able to read and write in English and to understand both Greek and Latin and 'this he shall be obliged to doe freely without any other reward for his pains but the Sallary'.<sup>38</sup>

Ramsay also directed that the interest on a separate sum of £500 should be paid 'to the order Reverend Minister and Elders of the said parish of Birs[e] ... to be conscionably and impartially distributed yearly among the poor of the said parish of Birs[e]'. Ramsay went on to specify that this money should be distributed twice a year on the first Monday of January and July respectively.<sup>39</sup>

The interest rate on Ramsay's bequest varied between 4% and 5% per annum and ensured a contribution to the Birse Kirk Session for distribution to the poor of between £20 and £25.<sup>40</sup> The money was normally looked after by the schoolmaster of the school in Finzean which Ramsay had established. Ramsay's money would have been added to the general poor fund, managed by the Kirk Session, who kept a record of payments which survive for the Parish from the early nineteenth century. From the records in the first half of the nineteenth century, around eighty payments were made each year from the poor fund, of an average of five shillings and ninepence, sometimes in the form of food, commonly oatmeal, clothes and shoes or the covering of funeral expenses.<sup>41</sup>

## Legacies From Gilbert Ramsay to Marischal College

Similar to his actions in relation to his parish, Ramsay remitted, during his lifetime, over £5,000 to his 'alma mater', Marischal College in Aberdeen.<sup>42</sup> This included bursaries for four named students, most if not all of whom were related to Ramsay, which averaged nearly £65 per annum.<sup>43</sup> In his will, Ramsay left income on £3,800 to Marischal College for a Chair of Hebrew and Oriental languages and for eight student bursaries, four in Divinity and four in Greek and Philosophy.<sup>44</sup> The money Ramsay left for a Professor of Hebrew, Arabic and

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38. Will Registers, Ramsay, Gilbert [Last accessed 10 March 2019].

39. Ibid.

40. Birse Kirk Session- Minutes and Accounts 1765–1801, NRS, CH2/595/3.

41. Birse Kirk Session – Ramsay Mortification Minutes and Accounts 1800–1838. NRS, CH2/595/13.

42. Papers of Gilbert Ramsay's Bursary, University of Aberdeen Special Collections, GB 0231, MARISCHAL/3/2/1/4/39/1. The University of Aberdeen is currently examining the institutions connection to Trans-Atlantic slavery and held an exhibition in 2023 entitled 'Legacies of slavery: Transatlantic slavery and Aberdeen'.

43. University of Aberdeen, Special Collections, M387/5/36/1.

44. Hebrew had been taught at Marischal College in the seventeenth century although Oriental languages was only added to the curriculum the year prior to Ramsay's death. David

Oriental Languages supported five professors. The first, James Donaldson, was appointed in 1732 and the last, George Gordon McLean, was appointed in 1835 and retired when King's College and Marischal College were amalgamated to form the University of Aberdeen in 1860.<sup>45</sup>

The eight Ramsay Bursaries at Marischal College appear to have been, certainly in the early years, some of, if not the most generous bursaries at the College. Ramsay's will specified that those from the parish of Birse, or with the surname Ramsay, were to be the preferred recipients, although this became less of a focus in the nineteenth century. It is notable, although not unsurprising, given the period in which they were living that many of the bursary recipients went on to have careers across the British Empire. A number went to the Caribbean, particularly Jamaica, while others served as surgeons or officers with the East India Company or became coffee planters in present-day Sri Lanka.<sup>46</sup>

During the course of the 'Aye, it was Aabody' project, there was interest in identifying the individuals awarded Ramsay Bursaries. Particular research was conducted into the life of Francis Ramsay (c.1780–c.1845), no known relative of Gilbert, whose life formed a significant thread within the resources produced as part of the project. Francis Ramsay was educated both at the school endowed by Ramsay in the parish of Birse and also received a Ramsay Bursary at Marischal College in 1798.<sup>47</sup> Francis travelled to Jamaica as a trainee surveyor and bought property in St David's parish in the east of Jamaica, naming it Birse after his home parish in Scotland.<sup>48</sup> In the 1820s there were about ten enslaved people at Birse Estate, increasing to 23 in 1831 and 46 by 1832.<sup>49</sup> In the 1834 Abolition Act compensation records, Francis was awarded £170 and 10 shillings for nine

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Ditchburn, 'Educating the Elites: Aberdeen and its Universities', in Dennison et al. (eds), *Aberdeen before 1800*, 337.

45. The professors and their year of appointment were James Donaldson (1732), Alexander Donaldson (1754), James Kidd (1794), Robert Simpson (1832) and George Gordon McLean (1835); see Anderson (ed.), *Fasti Academiae*, 57.

46. During the course of research, 175 Ramsay bursars were identified up to the establishment of the University of Aberdeen in 1860, with the further careers of 46 firmly established. Of the 46, five served with the East India Company and four made careers in Sri Lanka (Compiled from bursary records held University of Aberdeen, Special Collections, Kings/7/1/12).

47. Burse books 1791–1836, University of Aberdeen Special Collections, GB0231, MARISCHAL7/1/2/4.

48. B. W. Higman. *Jamaica Surveyed: Plantation Maps and Plans of the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries* (Kingston, 2001), 39; 1829 land title, National Library of Jamaica, ST T 1102. Birse was near the current settlement of Eleven Mile, east along the coast from Kingston. The changing fortunes of Ramsay's 'Birse' plantation can be tracked through the Jamaica Almanacs for the parish of St David; see Jamaica Almanacs 1817 to 1840 (Parish of St David). Summarised UCL Centre for the Study of the Legacies of British Slavery, <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/lbs/estate/view/16735> [Last accessed 14 June 2022].

49. *Ibid.*

enslaved people.<sup>50</sup> In 1814 Francis' first child, Thomas Craig Ramsay, was born to a woman called Rebecca Tucker in Birse, Jamaica.<sup>51</sup> The records of Thomas' baptism indicate that his mother was of mixed race and descended from enslaved people through one, possibly two of her grandparents.<sup>52</sup> Francis returned to Scotland bringing ten-year-old Thomas, who was educated for a time in the Aberdeenshire parish in which his father had grown up.<sup>53</sup>

## Gilbert Ramsay's Legacies in Barbados

There was one legacy in Gilbert Ramsay's will that was never honoured. Ramsay left interest on £500 to establish a school for the poor of Christ Church, Barbados. Ramsay had seen for himself the neglect and mismanagement of charitable giving to the 'publick good of that deserving Island'.<sup>54</sup> It is possible that he anticipated that this wish would not be honoured. Certainly, he specifically reminded his executors in this clause of the will that they would answer God, their 'great patron' in their discharge of his wishes.

As an enslaver, it would be easy to assume that Ramsay's intent was to establish a school for the poor white population of Barbados. However, his views on the conversion and education of enslaved people possibly hint at a broader intent. He personally expressed views on the baptism and religious instructions of enslaved people as early as the 1690s, considering it desirable, describing

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50. 'Francis Ramsay', *Legacies of British Slavery Database*, <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/lbs/person/view/19528> [Last accessed 6 March 2022].

51. 'Jamaica, Church of England Parish Register Transcripts, 1664–1880', database with images, *FamilySearch*, <https://www.familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:VH6C-8NP> [Last accessed 23 May 2022]. Rebecca Tucker is referenced in the entry for Thomas Craig Ramsey, 1814.

52. Francis and Rebecca were not married but had five children together between 1814 and 1824. Thomas' siblings were Andrew, born 1818, William, born 1820, Catherine, born 1822, and Janett, born 1824. Rebecca was referred to as both 'free mestee' and 'free quadroon' in different baptism records for her children. See baptism record for William Craig Ramsay, 1820, 'Jamaica, Church of England Parish Register Transcripts, 1664–1880', database with images, *FamilySearch*, <https://www.familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:VH6C-RHR> [Last accessed 23 May 2022], Wm Craig Ramsay, 1820) and baptism record for Andrew Craig Ramsay, 1818, 'Jamaica, Church of England Parish Register Transcripts, 1664–1880', database with images, *FamilySearch*, <https://www.familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:VH6C-XHN> [Last accessed 23 May 2022].

53. Thomas Ramsay was not the only child of mixed-race who was educated in Scotland during this period. For alternative examples, and discussions of the reception these individuals faced in Scotland, including from their own family members, see D. Livesay, *Children of Uncertain Fortune: Mixed-race Jamaicans in Britain and the Atlantic family, 1733–1833* (Chapel Hill, 2018), 2, 175–6, 193–6, 227–30, 355–6. Informal parish census records made by the parish Minister indicate that, in 1824, Thomas attended the Forest of Birse School where his uncle, Andrew Ramsay, was headmaster (Rev J. Smith, 'List of inhabitants of Birse Parish', NRS, CH2/695/12). Francis returned to Jamaica in 1825 and it is unclear if Thomas stayed in Scotland or returned to Jamaica with his father.

54. Will Registers, Ramsay, Gilbert [Last accessed 10 March 2019].

enslaved people as ‘capable of instruction’, and lamenting the restrictions of authorities that prohibited this.<sup>55</sup> Ramsay was also, by marriage, connected to the Pilgrim family, notable Quakers, as well as the owners of enslaved people. The Quakers had championed allowing those they enslaved to meet for worship and it is possible that this connection also influenced his personal views.<sup>56</sup> Additionally, in 1711, Ramsay was appointed as one of the attorneys of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts (SPG) in Barbados, after the death of Christopher Codrington in 1710.<sup>57</sup> Codrington had left two estates in Barbados, together with the 300 enslaved workers who worked on the plantations, to the SPG with instructions to establish a theological college at the site. At the time, some viewed this gift as a foundation focused on the education and Christianisation of enslaved people.<sup>58</sup>

This was a contentious issue among clergy, both in the Caribbean and more broadly. While most clergymen supported the institution of slavery, and Ramsay’s will emphasises that he had no moral qualms about owning enslaved people,<sup>59</sup> the extent to which enslaved individuals should be the focus of conversion

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55. ‘Anglican Servants in the Caribbean, c.1610–c.1740: A Database of as Many of the Clergymen, Chaplains and Schoolteachers in Service to the Church of England in the Torrid Zone as Have Been Retrieved.’ Lancaster University, <https://www.lancaster.ac.uk/fass/projects/caribbean/ministers,%20working.pdf>. [Last accessed 30 November 2018].

56. Indeed, in his will, Ramsay left funds for a morning ring for his sister-in-law Elizabeth Pilgrim, whom he referred to as his ‘honoured sister’ as a token of their friendship. There has been significant research into the relationship between the Quakers and the slave trade. While later Quakers were often heavily, and famously, involved in the abolitionist movement, in the seventeenth century some Quakers were owners of enslaved people and plantations, particularly in Barbados (e.g. B. Carey and G. Plank, ‘Introduction’, in B. Carey and G. Plank (eds), *Quakers and Abolition* (Illinois, 2014), 2).

57. F. J. Klingberg, *Codrington Chronicle: An Experiment in Anglican Altruism on a Barbados Plantation, 1710–1834* (University of California Press, 1949), 23, 50. At the turn of the eighteenth century, the Codrington estates on Barbados, were the largest on the island. Christopher Codrington the elder was also the Governor of the Leeward Islands between 1689 and 1698 with his son, Christopher Codrington the younger acting in the same position between 1699 and 1704. Dunn, *Sugar and Slaves*, 118, 136, 324. While it is possible that Ramsay made the acquaintance of the Codringtons when he was based on Antigua between 1689 and 1692 it is also possible that the relationship was developed on Barbados. It was Christopher Codrington the younger who died in 1710, leaving his estates to the SPG; see S. Mandelbrote, ‘S. Codrington, Christopher (1668–1710) Colonial Governor, Plantation and Slave Owner and Benefactor. *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (ODNB). <https://www.oxforddnb.com/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-5795> [Last accessed 6 March 2022].

58. This was particularly the view of Bishop William Fleetwood who delivered a sermon in London, later called ‘the Charter of liberties for negro rule’ discussing the gift in the context of racial equality; see ‘The West Indies in Records from Colonial Missionaries, 1704–1950’, British Online Archive, <https://microform.digital/boa/collections/22/the-west-indies-in-records-from-colonial-missionaries-1704-1950/detailed-description> [Last accessed 21 June 2022].

59. M. Brennan, ‘Clergy in the Early Modern Caribbean (ca. 1650–1800)’, *History Compass*, 17, 6 (2019), 127.

efforts was disputed and did vary over time. Research by Katherine Gerbner has, for example, indicated that prior to the mid-1670s, those who claimed enslaved people as property in Barbados had been unenthusiastic about, but not hostile to, the conversion of those they enslaved and, indeed, the leadership in the Restoration Church of England actively encouraged the conversion of enslaved people.<sup>60</sup> However, an attempted uprising by enslaved people in the mid-1670s led to significant increase in control over enslaved people and the targeted persecution of the island's Quaker population.<sup>61</sup> After this period, attempts to provide enslaved people with education or Christian teachings tended to be limited, if not actively opposed, by the majority of the white population of Barbados. Indeed, Ramsay's concern about the likelihood of his own school for the poor being implemented was likely strongly influenced by the lack of action that characterised the early years of the implementation of Codrington's bequest to the SPG. Codrington's desire to consider the Christianisation of enslaved people as part of his legacy was trumped by the later overseers of the Codrington estate for economic gain.<sup>62</sup> Indeed, it was not until 1721 that building work for the school, which Codrington had ordered his plantation funds to be channelled into funding, commenced, and it was only in 1746, thirty-six years after Codrington's death and nearly twenty years after Ramsay died, that the college opened to white scholars only.<sup>63</sup>

## Remembering Ramsay in the Parish

While Gilbert Ramsay's legacy was largely forgotten in his modern home parish prior to the 'Aye it was Aabody' project, this has not always been the case. Indeed, in 1937, the new pulpit in the renovated Birse Kirk was presented in memory of Gilbert Ramsay by Ramsay Bursars from the university.<sup>64</sup> Memorialisation unselfconsciously celebrated Ramsay's philanthropy and the benefits that were reaped by individuals within the North East of Scotland. However, it is clear that Ramsay's legacy, which helped to shape the future of institutions and

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60. K. Gerbner, 'The Ultimate Sin: Christianising Slaves in Barbados in the Seventeenth Century', *A Journal of Slave and Post-Slave Studies*, 31 (2010), 59, 61.

61. *Ibid.*, 58, 68.

62. J. McLean-Farrell and M. Clarke, 'Missions in Contested Places/ Spaces: The SPG, Slavery and Codrington College, Barbados', *Mission Studies*, 38 (2021), 333.

63. The SPG has received a degree of scholarly interest such as T. Glasson, *Mastering Christianity: Missionary Anglicanism and Slavery in the Atlantic World* (Oxford, 2011), 141–70, concentrates on the Codrington Plantation. Codrington Theological College continues as a school of theology in Barbados (Codrington College, 'Codrington College', <https://codringtoncollege.edu.bb/> [Last accessed 24 March 2024]).

64. The heraldic windows of the Mitchell Hall at the University of Aberdeen, installed in 1896, also contains the crest of the Ramsays of Balmain, to commemorate Gilbert Ramsay.

individuals in the North East of Scotland for three hundred years, was, at least in part, derived from the ownership of enslaved people. Once links, whether direct or indirect, are established, attention must then turn to what should be done with this knowledge. As the University of Glasgow's report into the links of donations and bequests to the trade in enslaved people highlights 'the issue facing the University today is how to address this history?'<sup>65</sup>

The 'Aye, It Wis Aabody' offers one attempt to consider how this legacy can begin to be brought to light within local communities. The project has increased the understanding in the local area of the myriad ways through which a small rural parish was influenced by the income derived from chattel slavery. This community-led research has allowed the community, including the current school pupils, to recognise the links between our parish and slavery. There is no claim that this process could not have been improved or is complete; work is required to ensure that the knowledge and relationships derived from this project are not sidelined, and connections, such as that to the ongoing work being conducted by the University of Aberdeen in this area, are continued. This article has also acknowledged that there are gaps within the research, particularly when focused on Gilbert's life and legacy in Barbados. Particularly, it has also not been possible to uncover the voices, or indeed much information, relating to those enslaved people whom Gilbert claimed as property, such as Robert: the individual freed by Gilbert in his will. However, unpicking Gilbert's experience offers one attempt to consider how intertwined Scotland still is with the legacy of the slave trade and Empire and one option for beginning to consider how this history can be brought to light for communities across the country

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65. Mullen and Newman, 'Slavery, Abolition and the University of Glasgow', 3.