

Scots in eighteenth-century Jamaica

Acquired during Oliver Cromwell's 'Western Design' project in 1655, Jamaica was a classic first phase English settler colony. By 1713, Jamaica had superseded Barbados as the premier sugar producing island in the British Empire, and just sixty years later produced more than all other islands combined. Jamaica was the largest of all British colonies in the West Indies and provided commercial opportunities for Scots both before and after the Union of 1707. In the years 1750 to 1799, historian Douglas Hamilton estimated between 6,000 and 10,000 Scots migrated to Jamaica, making the island the premier destination for Scots in the Caribbean. Indeed, planter-historian Edward estimated in 1774 that a full one third of the white population of Jamaica were Scottish or of Scottish descent (that is, 4,000 of 12,000). Considering Scots comprised just fourteen percent of the British population between 1801 and 1831, it is likely they were significantly overrepresented on Jamaica. Many of these – like the Stirlings of Keir – were sons of the gentry whilst others were skilled tradesmen with rudimentary education. Scots were involved at all levels in eighteenth and early nineteenth-century Jamaica: as merchants, planters, overseers, bookkeepers and tradesmen such as carpenters and masons.

Scots in the British West Indies have been described by historians as sojourners, temporary economic migrants who travelled in pursuit of wealth ideally before a quick return to purchase landed property in Great Britain. It is however likely that no more than 10 percent of Scots in colonial Jamaica became wealthy. The island had an international reputation as the 'white man's grave' due to the high incidence of tropical disease such as yellow fever. Even for those who survived, the large fortunes of the early eighteenth-century were no longer available, and only a small group accumulated enough wealth to purchase a landed estate in Scotland or to live an 'independent lifestyle' with a fortune of £10,000 or more. For most Scots in colonial Jamaica and even those who managed to return, the dream of a sprawling landed estate remained just that.

The digitised collection here also reveals the lives of the main wealth creators on the island: the enslaved population who laboured on sugar estates. The average number of slaves on a Jamaica sugar estate was c.150 in 1770 which rose to c.220 in 1832. As there were 236 enslaved people on Hampden in 1771, and 176 on Frontier in 1773, these estates were mid-level operations. The plantation inventory also tells us how the enslaved people worked on the estate: they were put to work in task gangs based on age, gender, skills and physical strength. Adult skilled and manual labourers – the field men – undertook heavy work such as digging holes whilst the elderly, women and less effective men undertook less arduous tasks

such as weeding. It was common for enslaved people to be trained as carpenters and masons which increased their value. Children were introduced at an early age – usually before the age of ten - and field boys and girls were introduced to light tasks in the sugar fields which would have been their place of work for the rest of their lives as they progressed through the gangs. All would have been supervised – brutally through the use of the whip and arbitrary punishment – by a white supervisory class of overseers, many of whom were Scots. The enslaved of the West Indies and North America were legally ratified as chattel property. They had no right to life and were regarded as sub-human property to be worked to death in the cane fields or sold on. All of these exploitative activities increased the profits of those at home, including gentry families like the Stirlings of Keir.