

Sugar and the Early Identity of Glasgow: Glasgow Planters in the Leeward Islands, c.1650–1750

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The rise of Glasgow from a regional market town to a transatlantic port city depended partly on those who transcended the traditional role of home-based merchants and spent careers abroad. By investigating archive sources well beyond Scotland, this paper uncovers a surprisingly rich picture of several generations of Glasgow sugar planters in the Caribbean. This reflects the growing view that Scots played a significant role in the early colonies, both before and after the Union, and brought back experience which was important for the early development of Glasgow.

The histories of great cities can be surprisingly parochial. This doesn't mean that they have been poorly researched, or badly written. Simply that they have invariably been written by residents, natives, or academics based in and around the city. One writer's solution to this dilemma was to write about Glasgow from an Edinburgh base.¹ The motive may have been slightly tongue-in-cheek, but it does emphasise the problem.

One of Glasgow's most prolific twentieth-century historians, Charles Oakley, described his excitement when first entering the city's Mitchell Library:

I was quite astounded. There were shelves and shelves of books about Glasgow, standing upright and bristling with the challenge to read them.²

Although most traditional Glasgow histories contain original research, they tend to repeat and embellish what has gone before. From the Victorian period, right through to the mid-twentieth century, they cover the same ground, often without reverting back to original sources. Oakley admitted this tactic himself, writing 'it might be remarked that I had not done much actual research'.³ Out of the hundreds of Glasgow books available, he selected twenty Victorian volumes as the source material for his own writing on Glasgow, including his popular 'Second City'.

Despite the parochial issue, Glasgow's history is founded on a rich base of primary material. The standard published sources, such as the *Extracts from*

¹ D. Daiches, *Glasgow* (St Albans, 1982), xiii.

² C. A. Oakley, 'They Wrote About Glasgow: A Tribute', in (ed.) K. McCarra and H. Whyte, *A Glasgow Collection: Essays in Honour of Joe Fisher* (Glasgow, 1990), 117–23 (119).

³ *Ibid.*, 123.

the Records of the Burgh of Glasgow, illuminate the early development of the city. Occasional new research illuminates narrow aspects but has less impact on the overall picture. Yet home-based records become less appropriate when considering the city's external connections, particularly its associations with the new American colonies from the mid-seventeenth century. The period spanned in this study, 1650–1750, is perhaps the most difficult in Glasgow's evolution with the first half having been described as the most interesting but most controversial in the city's development.⁴ The definitive modern study of Glasgow noted how the second half is hampered by a glaring gap in knowledge about foreign trade, due mainly to the loss of customs accounts before 1742.⁵

In Glasgow's colonial history, it is impossible to underestimate the importance of the tobacco trade. Due to the city's success with tobacco in the generation after 1750, any earlier mercantile history has tended to be explored from a tobacco perspective. Despite this, in recent years the leading historian of the Virginia trade has admitted that historians 'have been bewitched by the extraordinary success story of Scottish merchants in the Chesapeake tobacco trade and have marginalised other key aspects of transatlantic commerce'.⁶ It is well known that other commodities, particularly sugar, were a speciality of the Clyde in the nineteenth century following the demise of tobacco. However, numerous commentators from Gibson in the eighteenth century to Smout in the twentieth have noted sugar's much earlier significance.⁷ Unfortunately, in the earlier period, the patterns and statistics necessary for sound historiography are lacking. Unlike tobacco imports from the 1750s, evidence for sugar imports in the preceding century are sparse. The issue is not only how far back we go in seeking sugar connections, but how early colonial influence made a significant impact in Glasgow's development. As the decade in which both Port Glasgow and the first sugar houses were founded, the 1660s are a good starting point. This period also marked a tentative recognition of the connection between wealth and culture derived from colonial connections. The erection of important civic buildings in Glasgow 'could never have been successfully floated unless patronage had been buoyed up on ... a wave of mercantile activity'.⁸ However, like archive sources, architectural evidence is hampered

⁴ T. C. Smout, 'The Development and Enterprise of Glasgow 1556–1707', *Scottish Journal of Political Economy*, 7 (1960), 194–212 (201).

⁵ G. Jackson, 'Glasgow in Transition, c.1660–c.1740', in (ed.) T. M. Devine and G. Jackson, *Glasgow, Volume I: Beginnings to 1830* (Manchester, 1995), 63–98 (76): 'the absence of statistics before 1743 prevents the accurate timing and analysis of change'.

⁶ T. M. Devine, *Scotland's Empire* (London, 2003), 227.

⁷ J. Gibson, *History of Glasgow* (Glasgow, 1777), 246: 'from the sale of these (sugars), and of spirit distilled from their molasses, the first fortunes were acquired, in the way of business, in Glasgow were made'; T. C. Smout, 'The Early Scottish Sugar Houses, 1660–1720', *Economic History Review*, 2nd series, 14 (1961), 240–53.

⁸ F. A. Walker, 'Origins and First Growth', in (ed.) P. Reed, *Glasgow: The Forming of the City* (Edinburgh, 1999), 9–23 (19).

by lack of surviving evidence.⁹ Due to extensive Victorian redevelopment, very few physical remnants of Glasgow's original Merchant City still remain.

To understand the early stages of Glasgow's development as a global trading city, this paper suggests that we need to look beyond its well-documented merchants who spent most of their careers within the city and its social scene. The city's success also depended on a more elusive group who transcended the role of home-based merchant and spent whole careers abroad. Before the tobacco period, some of Glasgow's most successful merchants went out to the colonies, not just as supercargoes, traders or ships' captains, but as sugar planters. The role of planter was one of the very few routes to incredible wealth at the time. By mixing on an equal scale with planters from England and Europe, it could also lead to a much quicker rise in social status than was possible for those who spent their whole careers at home. On return to Glasgow, economic success may not have been the only yardstick.¹⁰ Their contributions to the city's development included international connections and maritime knowledge, as well as technical, political and architectural expertise.

Unfortunately we know little about the career of Glasgow's sugar planters at the colonial end. They have always been viewed as something distant, secondary and almost unimportant to the city's history. Perhaps the biggest barrier to Scots operating in the Americas before the Union has been the English Navigation Acts. Yet though the Acts restricted trade with Scotland, they placed little or no restriction on Scots living and working in the colonies. The other big drawback, the failure of the Darien scheme, has concealed the fact that, rather than following organised colonial projects, many Scots ventured out under their own steam, in what has been dubbed 'imperialism by stealth'.¹¹ Traditional negative views of lack of involvement have been complimented by a seeming disbelief that, given the dire nature of the late seventeenth-century climate and home economy, Scots could hardly have been successful abroad. Despite this, the view depends on which side of the Atlantic the commentator is situated. Looking from the western side, and at planters rather than traders, raises a more positive picture of involvement before the Union. The much more optimistic view is reflected in the success of Glasgow's seventeenth-century sugar houses:

High hopes and subsequent failure are the familiar themes of Scottish economic history between the two Unions (1603 and 1707). It is a refreshing change to contemplate such a story of complete success.¹²

⁹ C. McKean, 'Architecture and the Glasgows of the Imagination', in McCarra and Whyte, *A Glasgow Collection*, 99–106 (99).

¹⁰ T. M. Devine, 'An Eighteenth-Century Business Élite: Glasgow-West India Merchants, c.1750–1815', *The Scottish Historical Review*, 57 (April 1978), 40–67 (53): the 'return flow of successful, experienced and confident men was clearly of positive benefit to both the society and economy'.

¹¹ Devine, *Scotland's Empire*, 4.

¹² Smout, 'Sugar Houses', 253.

This paper seeks to resolve these issues by investigating archive sources for the hitherto elusive colonial success of sugar planters. This is achieved by focusing on two of the Leeward Islands in the Caribbean, Nevis and St Kitts (St Christopher). Hints of deep connections between these islands and Glasgow are hardly difficult to find. First, the Clyde ports had been trading with Nevis and St Kitts from the 1640s.¹³ Secondly, the islands were a main source of sugar for Glasgow's first sugar houses from the 1660s.¹⁴ Thirdly, Nevis and St Kitts were 'by far the most important' of the four Leeward Islands in the seventeenth century, with St Kitts regarded as the 'Mother Colony' of the British Empire.¹⁵ Fourth, much larger islands with similar strong Scottish connections (particularly Jamaica) didn't come to the fore until later, well into the second quarter of the eighteenth century.¹⁶ Fifth, Nevis, along with Barbados was the first island to become dominated by sugar monoculture and was the destination of the earliest Glasgow-owned ship to cross the Atlantic, much earlier than any tobacco ship as traditionally supposed.¹⁷ Sixth, in the late seventeenth century, the Caribbean sugar colonies were the richest in the British empire, with imports from there exceeding those from North America.¹⁸ Seventh, it has been suggested that the former French sugar estates on St Kitts were dominated by Scots directly after the Union of 1707.¹⁹ Finally, when the Port Glasgow customs accounts become available from the early 1740s, they show that the Leeward Islands were the main source of imports (beyond tobacco).²⁰ Despite the numerous connections, it was noted that the early comments in McUre's history about connections with the 'Caribby' islands including St Kitts 'for some inexplicable reason escaped the attention of later historians'.²¹

Instead of being an obscure outpost of empire, some of the earliest and most prominent Glasgow merchants not only traded with Nevis and St Kitts,

¹³ T. Barclay and E. J. Graham, *The Early Transatlantic Trade of Ayr 1640–1730* (Trowbridge, 2005), 12.

¹⁴ National Records of Scotland (hereafter NRS), CS233/G/1/2, Gemmell v. Hamilton, 1671, describes taking a cargo of sugar, and of writing several letters from Nevis.

¹⁵ R. S. Dunn, *Sugar and Slaves: The Rise of the Planter Class in the English West Indies, 1624–1713* (North Carolina, 1972), 18.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 18, 21, 31. It was a question of concentration as much as output – despite being more than 120 times the area of Nevis, in 1686 Jamaica had barely double its sugar production: N. Zahedieh, *The Capital and the Colonies* (Cambridge, 2010), 200.

¹⁷ Smout, 'Development and Enterprise of Glasgow', 207.

¹⁸ H. M. Beckles, 'The Hub of Empire: The Caribbean and Britain in the Seventeenth Century', in (ed.) N. Canny, *The Oxford History of British Empire Vol. 1: The Origins of Empire: British Overseas Enterprise to the Close of the Seventeenth Century* (Oxford, 2001), 218–40 (226).

¹⁹ R. B. Sheridan, *Sugar and Slavery: An Economic History of the West Indies 1623–1775* (Barbados, 1974), 158.

²⁰ NRS, E504/28/1, Customs Accounts, Port Glasgow, from 1742.

²¹ Smout, 'Development and Enterprise of Glasgow', 208.

but settled there as planters. In the 1680s, it was hinted that ‘there are many Scots men already planted in these islands’.²² Like McUre’s list of Glasgow’s late seventeenth-century ‘Adventurers’, such generalities often appear in overviews of the period, without further investigation.²³ The purpose of this paper is to try to get beyond the generalities and illuminate the sources available for investigating ubiquitous Glasgow merchants who ventured beyond the mid-Atlantic. Although one Glasgow mercantile family network will hardly change our understanding, McUre hints that they were far from being alone in their overseas connections. This group were also the basis of Glasgow’s largest merchant house, and achieved all the top posts in the city. Thus their experience is pertinent to Glasgow.

A vast amount of records survive in The National Archives in London, covering the early colonial period. Many of these have been published, including the *Calendar of State Papers* or *Journals of the Lords of Trade and Plantations*. Unfortunately such metropolitan sources are not ideal for illuminating what was actually happening at the colonial end. In reality, the planters did not favour laws and taxes imposed on them by a Governor ruled from London.²⁴

To get to the root of Scottish or Glasgow involvement in the colonies, we need to focus less on metropolitan records, and more on primary material at the colonial end. Unfortunately, the Caribbean has been a much less stable environment for the survival of archive material than London. Hurricanes are the most frequent hazards, but the devastation from volcanoes and earthquakes on Montserrat and Haiti in recent years has demonstrated the broader extent of natural disasters, to which can be added war and administrative indifference. Fortunately, a variety of letter books and papers have been located in a wide range of locations, covering Glasgow planters operating in the Caribbean.

St Kitts was settled shortly after the Union of the Crowns in 1603. It is ironic that, given Glasgow’s deep tobacco heritage, the founding of the sugar colonies was triggered by the voyages of Walter Raleigh, the alleged ‘founder’ of the tobacco trade. Raleigh anchored off St Kitts in 1618 and wrote several letters home.²⁵ Five years later, one of his group returned with a settling party and overall control was given to James Hay of Kinglassie. Unfortunately, much of the early history of colonisation of the Caribbean is entrenched in a narrow English imperialist perspective. In British history, Hay’s Scottish identity is concealed by his title of ‘Earl of Carlisle’. By the 1660s, following experimentation with various crops, economic success was achieved through intensive cultivation of sugar. It was hardly a coincidence that it was in this decade that Port Glasgow and Glasgow’s first sugar houses were founded. Clearly the sugar houses needed sugar, but where the sugar came from, how it

²² G. P. Insh, *The Company of Scotland Trading to Africa and the Indies* (London, 1932), 126.

²³ J. McUre, *History of Glasgow* (Glasgow, 1830), 165–70.

²⁴ N. A. Zacek, *Settler Society in the English Leeward Islands 1670–1776* (Cambridge, 2010), 212–13.

²⁵ R. Trevelyan, *Sir Walter Raleigh* (London, 2002), 504.

was acquired, and the connections involved, have played little part in Glasgow's history.

At the Glasgow end, perhaps the best-documented merchant was Walter Gibson, the transatlantic trader and city provost. However, he couldn't operate without contacts and one of the first significant examples of a Glasgow merchant on the Caribbean side of the Atlantic was William Colhoun. In the 1680s he imported sugar from St Kitts to Glasgow with Walter Gibson.²⁶

Born in the 1640s, Colhoun had a modest landed lineage at Craigton, west of Glasgow. Despite the scant background at home, Colhoun was one of Glasgow's late seventeenth-century 'sojourners' or 'adventurers' whose career was spent on the Caribbean side of the Atlantic.²⁷ Colhoun countered the perceived negativity of Scots in the Caribbean, and transcended Glasgow's traditional home-based mercantile role, becoming a planter on St Kitts. It is difficult to overestimate the achievement of becoming a sugar planter in this early period. Colhoun overcame disease, violence and hard work, and settled successfully into the Anglo-Irish plantocracy. By 1678, he was a member of the St Kitts assembly, a powerful political role, exclusive to plantation owners.²⁸ It is claimed that the lives of such sugar planters in this period 'will remain forever obscure'.²⁹ However, we know a growing amount about Colhoun, thanks to the survival of the family papers of Christopher Jeaffreson and William Freeman.³⁰ Along with the Pinney archive, these three sets of papers are the only contemporaneous first-hand source for sugar planting on Nevis and St Kitts from the 1670s, the key period during which intensive sugar cultivation was first introduced.³¹ The efforts of this pioneering generation of planters gradually transformed the landscape from a beautiful and bountiful wilderness to a scene which was as much industrial as agricultural:

For as we passed along near the shore the plantations appeared to us one above another, like several stories in stately buildings, which afforded us a large proportion of delight ... As the holes under our sugar coppers are all on the western side of

²⁶ The various spellings of Colhoun, including the Scottish 'Colquhoun' and American 'Calhoun', are standardised here as Colhoun, as used in the Colonel's letters; NRS, E8/40, Petition for Wm. Colhoun of Craigton & Walter Gibson merchant in Glasgow ... the petitioners having bought home a cargo of sugar in a ship of her own for the use of said manufactory (1 July 1687).

²⁷ Although several Colhouns (or Colquhouns) appear in McUre's lists, some of whom may be kinsmen, William Colhoun is not one of those specifically listed.

²⁸ Memorial concerning the Scots plantation to be erected in some place of America, *Register of the Privy Council*, 3rd series, VII (1681–82), 599–600, 651–5, 664–5 (665); *Calendar of State Papers* (hereafter *CSP*), X (1677–80) (America and West Indies), no. 620, 5 March 1678. Thanks to Doug Hamilton for highlighting this source.

²⁹ Dunn, *Sugar and Slaves*, 119.

³⁰ J. C. Jeaffreson, *A Young Squire of the Seventeenth Century 1676–1686*, 2 vols. (London 1878); D. Hancock (ed.), *The Letters of Wm. Freeman, London Merchant, 1678–1685* (London, 2002).

³¹ R. Pares, *A West India Fortune* (London, 1950); Hancock, *Letters of Wm. Freeman*, vii.

our boiling houses, so during crop time when they have a fire in them, they must of course cause a dazzling show in the night towards the bay.³²

Jeaffreson and Freeman have traditionally been used to characterise an Anglocentric view of early plantation life. Despite this, in recent decades it has been admitted that the English were complemented by thousands of Scots and Irish who ventured out, mostly as indentured servants. The old historiography of early empire, with meagre Scots involvement before 1707, has begun to be reversed. It is now accepted that the large numbers of Scots involved were the first sign of Britishness (as opposed to Englishness) in the early empire.³³ On the other hand, the Scots are still perceived as being subservient to an English planter elite.

Perhaps most interesting is that William Colhoun's success was not simply economic, but he became a valuable member of the plantocracy, integrating with the best-documented English planters. Christopher Jeaffreson describes Colhoun as a 'Scotch' merchant who had lived on the island for many years, complimenting his intelligence and knowledge of the islands.³⁴ From the 1660s, Colhoun corresponded with William Freeman regarding their sugar and provision business. Colhoun imported his sugar to Britain via Liverpool in various ships including *The William & Anne*, *The Hannah & Elizabeth* and *The Endeavour*.³⁵ The choice of English ports is one reason why evidence for sugar imports to the Clyde in the period is poor. Colhoun also owned his own ships, which were requisitioned for transporting provisions on St Kitts during ongoing conflict with the French.³⁶

By delving into archive sources which have traditionally been considered to be exclusively English, the old image of Scots as downtrodden servants begins to be reversed. The implication is that Colhoun was not simply a merchant or planter, but a figure with much higher status in the Leewards, and his experience made him extremely valuable once back home in Scotland. A committee set up in 1681 by the Privy Council to consider Scots colonies in the Americas asked the advice of:

William Colhoun, now resident in Glasgow, who hath been a planter amongst the Carribee Islands these 20 years and thereby hath acquired a considerable fortune that he hath now settled here in this country, is the only person fit for giving information for further encouragement to the settling of a colony.³⁷

³² R. A. Ligon, *True and Exact History of the Island of Barbados* (London, 1673), 20; W. Smith, *A Natural History of Nevis* (Cambridge, 1745), 309.

³³ N. Canny, 'The Origins of Empire: An Introduction', in Canny, *Oxford History of British Empire*, 1–33 (23).

³⁴ Jeaffreson, *A Young Squire*, I, 243, 3 January 1680.

³⁵ Hancock, *Letters of Wm. Freeman*, 5, 19, 38, 39, 66, 82.

³⁶ CSP, X (1677–80), no. 599, 11–25 February 1678, quoting Minutes of the Council of St Christopher's.

³⁷ Memorial concerning the Scots plantation, 599, 651.

Plantation ownership would lead to Colhoun's family being active in the Caribbean over four generations, rising to the highest heights of the British landed gentry.

William Colhoun was the direct inspiration for the next generation of Glasgow sugar planters who marked the real beginnings of Glasgow as an Atlantic port. In the traditional English perspective of the Caribbean perhaps the principal archive source is the papers of the Pinney family of Bristol, which cover more than a century of sugar planting in the Leewards.³⁸ The pioneer, Azariah Pinney, went out to Nevis in the generation following William Colhoun. Azariah was a contemporary of Glasgow's two best-known sugar pioneers, Colonel William McDowall and Major James Milliken. Details of their careers as planters have recently been published elsewhere,³⁹ but their local background is repeated in almost every history of Glasgow to the present day:

The most famous ... were two officers who had served in the British army during the war. Colonel William MacDonald and Major James Milliken married the widow and daughter of the richest plantation owner on the island. They returned to Scotland flushed with financial success in the late 1720s, when they set up a direct trade in Caribbean sugar to Port Glasgow.⁴⁰

The implication is of fortunes made more through marriage than personal effort. In the maritime heritage of both families, Milliken's lineage stretched back to the founder of Glasgow's first sugar house in 1667,⁴¹ while Colonel McDowall's grandfather was a customs associate of Thomas Tucker, one of the earliest commentators on Glasgow's trade with the Caribbean.⁴² Tucker described Glasgow as:

a very neat burgh town lying upon the banks of the river Clyde ... consisting of four streets, handsomely built in form of a cross, one of the most considerable burghs of Scotland. The inhabitants are traders and dealers ... and some who have adventured as far as the Barbados.⁴³

In a three-volume history of Glasgow published in the early twentieth century, the brief account of the Colonel's military service and 'fortunate' marriage was

³⁸ Pares, *West India Fortune*.

³⁹ S. M. Nisbet, 'Clearing the Smokescreen of Early Scottish Mercantile Identity: From Leeward Sugar Plantations to Scottish Country Estates c.1680–1730', in (ed.) A. I. Macinnes and D. J. Hamilton, *Jacobitism, Enlightenment and Empire 1680–1820* (London, 2014), 109–22.

⁴⁰ Devine, *Scotland's Empire*, 229.

⁴¹ Milliken was a kinsman of Hugh Montgomery, who was the son-in-law of Peter Gemmel, founder of Glasgow's Wester Sugar Work.

⁴² F. D. D. Dow, *Cromwellian Scotland 1651–1660* (Edinburgh, 1979), 169.

⁴³ Report by Thomas Tucker upon the Settlement of the Revenues of Excise and Customs in Scotland, reprinted by P. Hume Brown, *Early Travellers in Scotland* (Edinburgh, 1892), 162–81 (163, 176–7).

stretched to fill an entire chapter, entitled ‘Colonel McDowall and the West India trade’.⁴⁴ Despite this, details of the life of Colonel and his associates on the opposite side of the Atlantic have hitherto been obscure. The metropolitan records provide more background, including the multivolume *Calendar of State Papers*, where dozens of entries document the progress of McDowall and Milliken.⁴⁵ Despite the value of such published sources, the biographer of his friend and fellow planter, Azariah Pinney, reflects a different perspective at the Caribbean end, admitting that ‘the Calendars do not tell the whole story’.⁴⁶

When Colonel McDowall came back to Glasgow in the 1720s in late middle age, he was a very rich man. Nevertheless, his status among the landed gentry depended less on his wealth, and more on his supposed military rank, which has long been accepted without question by Glasgow historians. However, several sets of personal correspondence belonging to the Colonel and his brother David reveal the truth about the Leeward career of Glasgow’s most eminent West Indies family.⁴⁷ If we look from the Caribbean end, cracks start to appear in Colonel McDowall’s pedigree. In fact, the ‘Colonel’ never served in the British army and his rank was in the poorly organised St Kitts militia.⁴⁸ Ranks in the militia were appointed by fellow planters, on the basis of plantation ownership and influence in island politics. Instead of a military career, the Colonel spent his first decade in the Leewards as a trainee plantation and slave overseer.⁴⁹

The letters reveal that the Colonel sailed to Nevis in the 1690s. At the end of his training he moved the short distance across from Nevis to St Kitts, acquiring land and rising gradually through the plantation system. From skirmishes with the French in 1702 followed by all-out war, Colonel McDowall and his friend Major Milliken were appointed to the island council and militia, and were involved in land disputes, developing sugar plantations, and even fighting pirates.⁵⁰ Papers in St Kitts archives illuminate the build-up of their sugar plantations, among intense rivalry, and distant London bureaucracy.⁵¹

⁴⁴ G. Eyre-Todd, *History of Glasgow*, III (Glasgow, 1934), 150–9.

⁴⁵ E.g. *CSP*, XXIII (1706–08), no. 906, James Milliken sworn onto Nevis Island Council; *CSP*, XXIX (1717), no. 425, William McDowall to fill vacancy on Nevis Island Council.

⁴⁶ Pares, *West India Fortune*, 343.

⁴⁷ National Library of Scotland (hereafter NLS), 301/107, Letter book of Col. Wm. McDowall of Castle Semple (c.1726–35); NRS, GD237/12/35, 45, Letters of Capt. David McDowall, 1728–33.

⁴⁸ McDowall was a Captain in the St Kitts militia by 1718: *CSP*, XXX (1717–18), no. 736, 26 October 1718; and a Colonel by 1720: *CSP*, XXXII (1720–21), no. 251, 29 September 1720.

⁴⁹ NLS, 301/107, Col. Wm. McDowall, London to Jas. Gordon, St Kitts, 9 July 1728 and 16 May 1732.

⁵⁰ See S. M. Nisbet, ‘A Sufficient Stock of Negroes’, *Renfrewshire Local History Forum Journal*, 14 (2007), 32–49.

⁵¹ St Kitts and Nevis Archives, Basseterre, Proceedings of the Hon. Wm. Matthew Lt. Gen. of the Leeward Islands, c.1726–28.

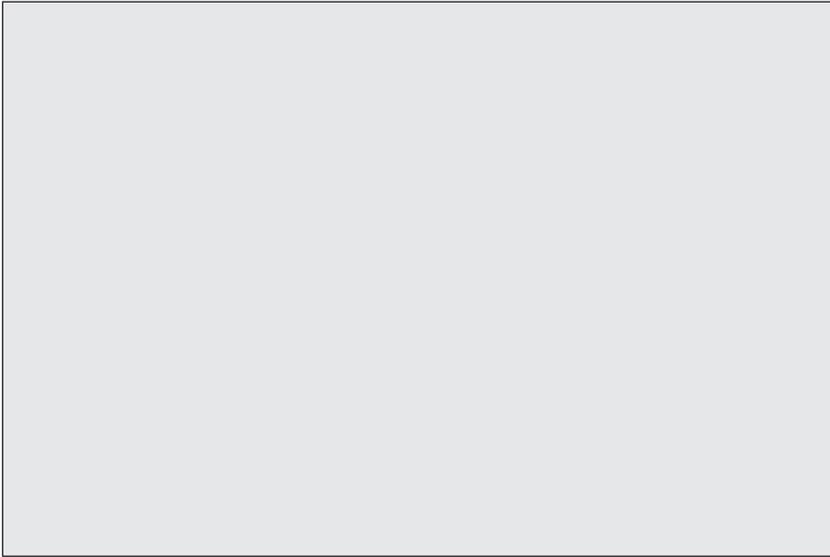


Plate 1 Canada Hills windmill, St Kitts, 1732.

Like William Colhoun, their success was much more than financial. They achieved leading roles in the plantocracy, and the Colonel returned to London in 1724 to petition the Lords of the Treasury on behalf of his fellow planters. Exploring McDowall and Milliken's Canada Hills and Monkey Hill plantations on St Kitts today, a great deal more built heritage survives than does in Scotland, including sugar works, ironmongery, houses and stone windmill towers (Plate 1). The island itself has deep Glasgow connections which persist to the present day. Despite the growing picture of Glasgow's pioneering sugar planters, the relative lack of written sources means that further understanding of the deep connections with Glasgow will depend on combining archive research with fieldwork on their plantations.⁵²

As the Scots became respected as tough and trusted planters in their own right, they also took on wider roles as managers or 'attorneys' for fellow sugar planters. One of the outstanding questions is how they climbed the ladder to success. Despite starting near the bottom, it is almost certain that Colonel McDowall did not arrive unannounced on a Nevis beach. It is likely that his training was prearranged by Glasgow's pioneering adventurer, sojourner, Leeward planter and St Kitts assemblyman, William Colhoun. The Colonel would return the compliment in the next generation, by employing Colhoun's

⁵² See S. M. Nisbet, 'Early Glasgow Sugar Plantations in the Caribbean', *Scottish Archaeological Journal*, 31:1-2 (2009), 115-36.

grandson. Their rise through the plantation system stemmed from ingraining themselves within a multinational enclave of Anglo-Irish planters in Figtree parish on Nevis, where the Colonel and Major trained as planters.

Their ultimate success as planters, both for their own social status and the subsequent progress of Glasgow, was arrived at by achieving equal status with the planter elite. Further papers for English and Irish planter families in Figtree parish, Nevis, provide the background. These include the correspondence in England and America of William Stapleton, a planter of Irish origin who defied the English stereotype and became Governor (1672–86).⁵³ Hundreds of Stapleton's letters survive, documenting plantation life in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century.⁵⁴ Many of the families were interconnected and William Colhoun's associate William Freeman, following his return to London in the 1670s, was the agent for the Stapleton family. In the hot and insect-ridden sugar islands, women were often more powerful than men, invariably outliving their husbands. When Stapleton died in 1699, his widow, Lady Frances Stapleton ruled the family estates for the next generation. Lady Frances later remarried to another former Figtree planter, Walter Hamilton, a Scot of Lanarkshire descent.⁵⁵ Again defying the English stereotype, Hamilton worked his way up from deputy Governor of St Kitts and Nevis in 1701, to Governor of the Leeward Islands in 1715.

The Stapleton papers also document the roles of Colonel McDowall and Major Milliken as 'attorneys' for Lady Stapleton's plantations in the 1720–34 period. Dozens of letters illuminate the Major and the Colonel managing the Stapleton plantations, along with their brothers, Captain David McDowall and Captain William Milliken, who commanded their sugar ships:

Madam, I advised you in my former that I should ship forty or fifty tierces (of sugar) on board my brother's ship called *the McDowall* ... Our duty to your Ladyship and best wishes for your health and prosperity and love to Jamey.⁵⁶

The Stapleton connection extended beyond business interests. Through the 1720s, the Major's son and heir, Jamey Milliken, was under the care of Lady Stapleton in London, where he attended Eton. The papers thus reveal how the Scots reached an equal footing with the English.⁵⁷

Another set of family papers reveal that Scots also took contracts to

⁵³ Hancock, *Letters of Wm. Freeman*, xxi.

⁵⁴ John Rylands Library, University of Manchester, Stapleton MSS, c.1680–1735.

⁵⁵ Walter Hamilton was born in Germany, but his parents were from Lanarkshire. Hamilton came to the Leewards in 1690 as a soldier, and in 1717 secured the 333-acre 'Fountain' plantation on St Kitts by a grant to Col. Wm. McDowall, in trust for himself: see R. V. Johnston, *The Stapleton Sugar Plantations in the Leeward Islands* (Manchester, 1965).

⁵⁶ John Rylands Library, Stapleton MSS, James Milliken, St Kitts, to Lady Frances Stapleton, London, 8 February 1726, transcript by Brian Littlewood.

⁵⁷ Harvard College Library, Stapleton MSS, Joseph Herbert, St Kitts, to Lady Frances Stapleton, London, 1 August 1729, transcript by Brian Littlewood.

manage the plantations of another Figtree planter family, headed by William Mead, president of St Kitts in 1698. Like the Stapletons, the Mead women were more resilient than their husbands. Following the death of William Mead in 1702, his plantations were run by his widow Penelope. She was also the mother-in-law of the two sugar planters under whom the Colonel and Major served their initial Nevis training. Once Colonel McDowall was established as a planter himself, he took contracts to manage Madam Mead's plantations. These contracts, covering the 1723–33 period, survive in Cardiff archives.⁵⁸ The Colonel's management of Madam Mead's plantations is also illuminated by further papers in Edinburgh.⁵⁹ As attorneys, the Scots were responsible for shipping all the sugar home to Britain. In Glasgow, Colonel McDowall and Major Milliken are often considered to be the originators of the Clyde sugar trade. While the trade had actually commenced a century earlier, they were certainly responsible for stepping it up a grade.

More detail of their sugar trade can be found in the London press. In the decade from 1727, for example, dozens of ship notices in the *London Daily Journal* record McDowall and Milliken's sugar vessels, including *The Hope*, *The Nelly*, *The McDowall* and *The Mary*, sailing between St Kitts and the southern English ports of Gravesend, Dartmouth and Deal.⁶⁰ For their first three decades in the Leewards, all their sugar had been sent to London or Bristol. After time spent in Bristol, where he owned property, and in London, where he resided with the Mead family, Colonel McDowall decided to retire to Britain.

In Scotland, he moved beyond commercial ventures into the world of land ownership, agriculture and public affairs. His full acceptance into society depended on actively engaging in improvement in a more practical 'enlightenment' than is promoted later in the eighteenth century, reflected in Gibson's 'new style in building, in living, in dress, and in furniture'.⁶¹ At the heart of cultural improvement was architecture, in country houses and townhouses. After considering a country estate in the south of England, the Colonel decided to settle in Scotland. In late 1726 he bought Lord Semple's Castle Semple Estate in Renfrewshire and Daniel Campbell's Shawfield Mansion in Glasgow.⁶² At the same time, he purchased a share in Glasgow's South Sugar House, resolving to change the destination of his sugar ships from London to Glasgow. In a key moment for the mercantile development of Glasgow, the Colonel declared that 'sugars will sell as well at Glasgow as in any

⁵⁸ Glamorgan Archives, DMW/305/19, Matthew Papers, Indenture between Wm. McDowall and Penelope Mead, 29 March 1723.

⁵⁹ NRS, GD237/12/50, Accounts of St Kitts plantation rented from Mrs Penelope Mead by Wm. McDowall, 1723–30.

⁶⁰ Many more ships appear in the Mead accounts, NRS, GD 237/12/50.

⁶¹ Gibson, *History of Glasgow*, 115.

⁶² S. M. Nisbet, 'Shawfield Mansion of Glasgow: A "Sugar Lord" Villa', *Scottish Local History*, 84 (2012), 3–9.

other part of Britain'.⁶³ Following hundreds of voyages to London and Bristol, the Mead papers record the Colonel's first sugar ship *The McDowall* sailing to Glasgow in 1728.⁶⁴

The experience of Colonel McDowall and Major Milliken paved the way for thousands of Scots to venture out to the Caribbean in the third generation. Immediately following the Colonel's death in 1748, his son founded Glasgow's first bank. However, the family's commercial achievements in shipping and trading don't account for the whole of their success. To gain full respect and position among the landed elite they needed to achieve the ethereal quality of 'gentility'. In Glasgow, the Colonel was regarded as a gentleman of fine character and the most notable figure in the city.⁶⁵ Through the eighteenth century, his son and grandsons achieved the highest posts, from provost, to rector of Glasgow University, to Member of Parliament. By the 1790s, Brown's *History of Glasgow* was dedicated to the Colonel's grandson, William McDowall III, for his 'exertions for the prosperity of the city'.⁶⁶ Perhaps the ultimate social accolade was the claim that Colonel McDowall 'was the darling of the city, and did much to shape its *social and human qualities* [my emphasis]'.⁶⁷ However, one of the earliest historians to disclose McDowall's Caribbean background hinted at his misgivings about the honesty of landed families who had made fortunes from overseas careers, noting that:

Some gentlemen, of a very blameless character have declined furnishing him with that information which was within their power. In such cases he has been obliged to proceed on that information, which the public record affords him.⁶⁸

Despite the success of the McDowall family at home, our primary interest is in their colonial careers. Although accounts of Scots in the Caribbean story are often about rich 'absent' planters who rarely visited their estates, in the early stages it was very much a family affair. Colonel McDowall's overall policy had been that his 'plantation can never be managed to advantage without some of us upon it'.⁶⁹ In other words, his aim was to keep control strictly in the family. Rather than becoming absent planters, a succession of sons, nephews and other trusted young men were shipped out to manage the Scots' sugar plantations. In 1726, the Colonel sent out his nephew David Alexander;⁷⁰

⁶³ NLS, 301/107, Col. Wm. McDowall, Edinburgh to Maj. Jas. Milliken, St Kitts, November 1727.

⁶⁴ NRS, GD237/12/50, Mead accounts, f. 18; from 1728 onward the *London Daily Journal* records *The McDowall* arriving and departing from Port Glasgow and Greenock.

⁶⁵ *Glasgow Journal*, 31 October 1748; Eyre-Todd, *History of Glasgow*, 151.

⁶⁶ A. Brown, *History of Glasgow* (Paisley, 1791), frontispiece.

⁶⁷ C. A. Oakley, *The Second City* (Glasgow, 1946), 9.

⁶⁸ G. Semple, *History of the Shire of Renfrew* (Paisley, 1782), vi.

⁶⁹ NLS, 301/107, Col. Wm. McDowall, London to Jas. Gordon, St Kitts, 9 July 1728.

⁷⁰ NLS, 301/107, Col Wm. McDowall, London to Major Jas. Milliken, St Kitts, 9 April 1726: 'I hope my nephew Alexander is safe with you'.

in 1729, it was Milliken's son Jamey, who had lived with Lady Stapleton in London. At the Scottish end, the Colonel wrote in 1730 of bringing his cousins into the business, 'my two kinsmen William and Alexander Houston, desiring you'll give them what assistance you can and let them have my warehouse and cellar'.⁷¹ The Houstons followed the established Glasgow pattern of one brother as ship's captain, and the other as merchant: William Houston captained one of the Colonel's ships and Alexander Houston managed the South Sugar House in Glasgow.⁷² Alexander later fronted the family firm, Alexander Houston and Company, which became Glasgow's greatest merchant house.⁷³ One of many surviving family letters describes a 'hazardous voyage' from Greenock to St Kitts by another relative, William Milliken, in the autumn of 1739.⁷⁴

The Colonel also sent out a young man to whose family he was deeply indebted. This was Robert Colhoun, a grandson of William Colhoun, the Glasgow 'adventurer' and planter who had provided the original opportunity for the Colonel to come out to the Caribbean himself.⁷⁵ In late 1727 Colhoun was introduced as: 'a young gentleman of my particularly acquaintance and on who I have a very great word for'.⁷⁶ Beyond family and close contacts, the Colonel was contacted by landed gentry at home, seeking roles on St Kitts for their younger sons and wayward daughters. In the 1730s, Robert Colhoun rose rapidly through the system, purchasing a plantation directly north of the Colonel's main 'Canada Hills' plantation. Colhoun became treasurer of St Kitts, marrying the daughter of the Colonel's friend, Judge Matthew Mills, and having several children on the island.

Robert Colhoun named his son, William McDowall Colhoun, indicating his deep affection for his mentor. By the 1750s, Colhoun and Mills led a Glasgow–Atlantic network, which is illuminated by another set of family papers.⁷⁷ Their

⁷¹ NLS, 301/107, Col. Wm. McDowall, Castle Semple to David Alexander, St Kitts, 25 September 1730.

⁷² Captain Houston was first mentioned in NRS, GD237/12/35, 45, Capt. David McDowall, London to Col. Wm. McDowall, Glasgow, 26 August 1731; South Sugar Management in NRS, GD113/1 and GD113/5 (Papers of Innes of Stow *re* South Sugar House, Glasgow), e.g. GD113/5/151a/5, Letter from Jas. Anderson to Mrs Jean Innes, St Christopher's Sugar Warehouse, The Red Lyon, Edinburgh, 31 December 1730.

⁷³ Alexander Houston and Co. have been described as a 'giant' in Glasgow and the city's 'outstanding firm': Devine, 'An Eighteenth-Century Business Élite', 42.

⁷⁴ NRS, GD113/5/162c/12.

⁷⁵ William Colhoun of Kenmuir, who was Colonel McDowall's manager in St Kitts from 1729, was the son of Alan Colhoun of Kenmuir, who had married Margaret Colhoun of Craigton, daughter of William Colhoun, the seventeenth-century sojourner.

⁷⁶ NLS, 301/107, Col. Wm. McDowall, Edinburgh to John Poplay, St Kitts, 8 December 1727.

⁷⁷ Originals privately held in Lancaster, transcribed in: D. W. Thoms, 'West India Merchants and Planters in the Mid-18th Century, with special reference to St Kitts' (unpublished MA thesis, University of Canterbury, 1967).

sugar was shipped home to Glasgow and on the return journey, supplies of food and clothing were shipped out for the enslaved workforce. The third leg of the classic trading triangle is hidden in Glasgow, but the letters illustrate Colhoun and his partner purchasing enslaved Africans for their plantations from Glasgow's best-known slave trader, Richard Oswald.⁷⁸

Robert Colhoun died in 1763, when his son William was still a minor. The next generation of the McDowall family arranged the marriages of Robert Colhoun's St Kitts daughters to Glasgow merchants. These matches were business deals, rather than romances, such as the union between the middle-aged Glasgow merchant, John Wallace, and the young Jenny Colhoun:

Milliken & Mr McDowall seem to have no objection to his proposal, he offers to Settle £20,000 Sterling on the sons of the marriage and, in case of no sons, £10,000 on the daughters ... he is rather too old for a young girl but as she hath no objections to him we think in point of bargaining the offer he hath made is very good. Messrs Milliken & McDowall or Mr Houston will give you a more particular account of this gentleman.⁷⁹

The second daughter, Fanny Colhoun was to have a more notable marriage. As Renfrewshire estate owners, the Colonel's family mixed with the gentry and one of the best-known landed families in Glasgow and Renfrewshire are the Maxwells of Nether Pollok. In the early 1760s, the third son, James Maxwell, sailed to St Kitts as an trainee overseer.⁸⁰ He went on to marry Fanny Colhoun in 1764:

Mr Colhoun's second daughter, Fanny, is to be married very soon to Sir James Maxwell, a gentleman of great estate near Glasgow, much to the satisfaction of all her guardians, the marriage articles were signed by Messrs Milliken & McDowall.⁸¹

Following the unexpected death of his elder brothers and nephew, James Maxwell succeeded to Nether Pollok, as Sir James, the 7th Baronet. Thus, St Kitts blood penetrated to the heart of Glasgow's old landed gentry, dominating Nether Pollok through the next three generations, although their wealth and social connections derived from the Caribbean are absent from the city histories. In Glasgow, little is known about William McDowall Colhoun, son and heir of Robert Colhoun of St Kitts, and brother-in-law of Sir James Maxwell of Nether Pollok. Again we need to look to English archive sources to uncover his success. William McDowall Colhoun was the principal agent

⁷⁸ Thoms, 'West India Merchants and Planters', Thos. Mills, St Kitts, to Mr John Mills, London, 20 April 1754; to Wm. Woodley Jr., 22 April 1754; and to Mrs Bridget Woodley, 23 April 1754.

⁷⁹ Ibid., Thos. Mills, London, to Alexander Douglas per Capt. Martin, St Kitts, 22 August 1764.

⁸⁰ W. Fraser, *Memoirs of the Maxwells of Pollok*, I (Edinburgh, 1863), 108–10.

⁸¹ Thoms, 'West India Merchants and Planters', Thos. Mills, London, to Geo. Aitkin, St Kitts, 29 November 1764.

for the Pinney dynasty of Bristol, occupying a whole chapter in Professor Pares' account.⁸² Furthermore, he became a very successful merchant as, apart from St Kitts, he also managed a plantation on Nevis and owned the 430-acre Mount Pleasant sugar plantation on St Croix.⁸³ In Britain, he preferred the south of England to Scotland, acquired three estates in Norfolk and was MP for Bedford from 1784 to 1802.⁸⁴

The Colonel's family continued to thrive on St Kitts for the rest of the eighteenth century. Their fortunes at home in Scotland depended directly on income from their Caribbean estates and the improvement of Castle Semple, particularly from the mid-eighteenth century, was tied up with expansion to other Caribbean sugar islands. Following more than a century of French rule, St Vincent and Grenada were acquired by Britain in 1763 at the end of the Seven Years War. The Colonel's son acquired a plantation on St Vincent, which he named 'Millikens'.⁸⁵ The family were more successful on Grenada, which was dominated by Scots in the late eighteenth century but, like St Kitts, the deep connections are barely visible at home. Again, it has taken visits to the islands to understand the impact of the Glasgow merchants. Like the Leewards, archives on the Windward Islands have not survived well, apart from many deeds for Scots plantations in Grenada's Court House. Before travelling to Grenada, one source was found in Scottish archives covering the McDowalls' plantations on Grenada.⁸⁶ Their main plantation was Mount Alexander in the north-west of the island, which is still dominated by their windmill atop a terraced hill (Plate 2). As on St Kitts, more physical heritage of the Glasgow planters survives on Grenada than written sources. Glasgow's Alexander Houston Jr. purchased Belmont Estate in 1781 from John Aitcheson, a planter from Airdrie.⁸⁷ Houston served as Governor of Grenada (1796–1802). Despite the invisibility of Grenada connections in Glasgow, Houston's Belmont estate survives today as the island's main plantation museum.

On the bankruptcy of Colonel McDowall's grandson shortly after 1800, their Castle Semple estate in Renfrewshire was taken over by the Harvey family, fellow planters on Grenada. Again we find details of the Harveys in English family papers. A century after Colonel McDowall trained as a planter on Nevis, John Harvey served a similar role for an English planter on

⁸² Pares, *West India Fortune*, 280–92.

⁸³ Thanks to Phil Morgan and his colleagues at Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, for data on Colhoun's plantation on St Croix.

⁸⁴ Pares, *West India Fortune*, 280, 316.

⁸⁵ V. L. Oliver, *Caribbean: Being Miscellaneous Papers Relating to the History, Genealogy, Topography and Antiquities of the British West Indies*, III (London, 1919), 19.

⁸⁶ NRS, GD237/12/56, Indenture of release to trustees of late Wm. McDowall, 1777.

⁸⁷ D. Watson, 'Monklands and the Slave Trade', *The Raddle, Journal of Monklands Heritage Society*, 5 (2000), 32–4; Bristol University Library, DM 1781/BRA 2630, Sale and Inventory Belmont Estate, 10 October 1781.

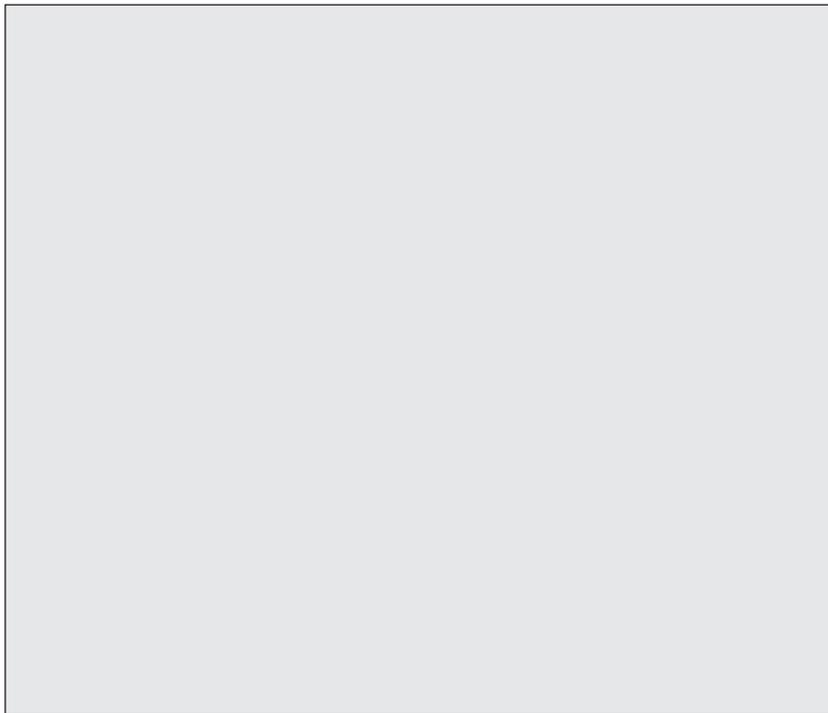


Plate 2 Mount Alexander windmill, Grenada, 1773.

Grenada.⁸⁸ The Harveys gradually controlled various plantations including Morne Fendue, Chambord, Plains, and Upper and Lower Conference.⁸⁹ By the mid-nineteenth century, Glasgow's sugar merchant-planters were an elite group, dubbed the city's 'Old West Indians'.⁹⁰

Glasgow's traditional histories from McUre to Oakley are still valued today for a variety of uses, from defining the city's identity, to providing the backdrop for new writing and anthology. Historians have always recognised the link between overseas connections and civic advancement, but have been less diligent in bringing the two together, partly due to a lack of source material.

⁸⁸ S. Seymour, S. Daniels and C. Watkins, 'Estate and Empire: Sir George Cornwall's management of Moccas, Herefordshire and La Taste, Grenada, 1771–1819', *Journal of Historical Geography*, 24:3 (1998), 313–51.

⁸⁹ Glasgow Sheriff Court SC36/48/16, Testament of John Harvey, 9 March 1821; S. M. Nisbet, 'The Harveys of Castle Semple c.1700–1815', *Renfrewshire Local History Forum Journal*, 17 (2013), 17–22.

⁹⁰ Anon., *The Old Country Houses of the Old Glasgow Gentry* (Glasgow, 1870), lxxiv.

This paper has suggested that we need to look well beyond Glasgow to achieve a full understanding of the early stages of the city's mercantile development. The city's rise from a regional market town to a transatlantic trading city did not depend solely on merchants who restricted their careers to the city and its social scene. In the twenty-first century, it is hardly satisfactory to gloss over the lives of those who ventured abroad in vague statements about 'spending time in the Indies'. Economics was not the only yardstick, but success depended on a range of skills and contacts. Perhaps the most important quality was gentility: to achieve the necessary social status to mix with the leading players from London, Bristol, and across the Atlantic to the Americas. To achieve the greatest success, the city's merchants had to compete with other transatlantic ports, on a scene which was not simply Scottish, British, or European, but global.

This article has shown how a variety of archive sources from well beyond Scotland can provide a surprisingly rich picture of several generations of Glasgow sugar planters in the Caribbean. This reflects the wider view that Scots played a significant role in the early colonies, both before and after the Union. The hitherto hidden colonial roles of the city's leading merchants revealed in this article suggest that there is still much to learn about the origins of the wealth and experience which raised Glasgow onto the global stage. Researchers should be confident that a rich amount of source material survives for Scottish planters in the early Caribbean, often in unexpected places. This encouraging news comes with a health warning, that delving into such sources may challenge the traditional cosy image of Glasgow's mercantile elite.⁹¹

⁹¹ For details of the wider involvement of the merchants in this paper in the ownership and trade of enslaved Africans, see S. M. Nisbet, 'Scottish Sugar Planters and the Genesis of Black Slavery c.1660–1730', in (ed.) T. M. Devine, *Recovering Scotland's Slavery Past* (Edinburgh University Press, forthcoming 2015).