

Scotland and the Slave Trade

We take a brief look at the part played by many Scots who became wealthy due to their close involvement with slave labour.

It has always been a 'bone of contention' in my mind just why ~ in my generation ~ the Scottish education system seemed to teach so little about the real history of my country. During the 1930s the subject of History focused heavily on broader aspects of the then British Empire, as depicted by all the 'pink' areas of a world atlas ~ but even here it seems that certain subjects were, to say the least, never highlighted to any great extent.

Britain's involvement with the African slave trade seemed forever a subject carefully edited for public consumption. As a child, I honestly believed that Brits were God's own disciples, going forth to spread enlightenment among the less fortunate of our earthly brethren. The possibility that so many of the same brethren were being cruelly exploited never entered my mind.

In later life, it came as something of a shock to learn that many Scottish plantation owners became rich on the backs of unfortunate black African slaves, particularly in the Caribbean area.

It is estimated that 20,000,000 Africans were bought or captured in Africa and transported to the Americas. The Scottish-Caribbean link is centuries old, but from the beginning of the 18th century it expanded rapidly, until Britain eventually controlled the West- Indies ~ and Scottish slave owners played a prominent part in what was described as Chattel Slavery.

In 1800, Jamaica, an island (146 miles long, by 50 wide) held some 300,000 black slaves; 10,000 Scots and about the same number of English. This island was a main producer of sugar, coffee, rum and spices, much of which came into the ports of Greenock, Port Glasgow and Leith. Indeed, it was the slave-grown tobacco and sugar which created many Scottish millionaires, often referred to as 'Tobacco Barons'!

Many of the Scots had children by their female slaves, and today there are more people of the name Campbell in Jamaica per acre than in Scotland!

Other prominent surnames are Douglas, Robertson (or Robinson), Reid, Russell, Lewis, **McFarlane**, McKenzie, McDonald, Grant, Gordon, Graham, Stewart, Simpson, Scott, Ferguson, Fraser and Farquharson!

Tartan-clad slaves

Some planters dressed their Negro slaves in tartan livery. The cloth was generally woven in Scotland and shipped to Jamaica. This marked the workers as property of their owners, and possibly assisted as a

means of identifying 'escapees'. Among the records of leading tartan weaver William Wilson & Son, of Bannockburn there are many references to this trade, including the following letter from Jamaica, which reads: *"Please send 200 yards of Lindsay to the enclosed pattern. As it is for Negro wear it must be low price, not above one shilling a yard if you can."*

Following the 1707 Act of Union, many young Scots sought their fortunes in the West Indies as slave masters, slave doctors and administrators. Later, in 1786, our own Robert Burns was tempted and went so far as paying a nine-guinea deposit for a berth on the brig 'Nancy' out of Greenock. He was promised a three-year contract by his friend Sir Patrick Douglas, at £30 per annum. His intention was to migrate with Mary Campbell (Highland Mary) but he changed his mind when his first book of poems was published.

However, many Scots **did** submit petitions for the abolition process, but the British trade WAS legal and controlled by a government of MPs from a privileged class whose careers did not depend on public vote. And whilst we know the names of abolitionist like Wilberforce, Clarkson and Wedderburn, less well known are the many slave masters and merchants who became multi-millionaires; including Gladstone (father of British PM William Gladstone); Wedderburn, Spiers of Elderslie; McDowall; Glassford; Buchanan; Stirling of Keir and James Ewing, of Glasgow. And from our own Clan, we note **Andrew MacFarlane**, son of John MacFarlane 8th of Gartartan & Auchantroig.

British slavery also reached deep into the Church. Several Churches owned and actually branded slaves. Moreover, the Church of Scotland never officially petitioned against slavery!

Caribbean slavery did much for the Scottish economy of the 18th century and cities prospered as a result. Likewise, many of those Scots who became wealthy from the plantations were given knighthoods and lordships for their efforts.

In spite of the foregoing, it should also be remembered that whilst a multitude of poor working-class Scots of the period were also suffering near slave conditions in their own country, nothing could compare with the harshness and inhumanity meted out to those African victims plucked from their nativity and subjected to exploitation of the worst kind. It is not therefore surprising to learn that, even today, many Scots are angry that they were never told of these terrible historical links.

The present Scottish Government has since issued an official open Apology.

Malcolm Lobban.

Reference source: *The Forgotten Diaspora* by Professor Geoff Palmer, 2008. SCOTLAND The Official Online Gateway.