

*'Very rapid and splendid fortunes'? Highland Scots in Berbice (Guyana) in the early nineteenth century* in *Transactions of the Gaelic Society of Inverness*, LXIII (2002-2004), pp 208-236 (Inverness, 2006)

## **'Very rapid and splendid fortunes'? Highland Scots in Berbice (Guyana) in the early nineteenth century**

History is written by the victors as much in economic as in military struggles. Thus the subsequent economic dominance of the USA and the corresponding economic decline of the West Indies have combined to both exaggerate the economic significance of the American secession from the British Empire and to obscure the central role of the Caribbean in British commercial expansion in the eighteenth century.<sup>1</sup> This has, at least until recently, influenced accounts of Scottish economic history. Markets in the Caribbean were, in fact, vital to the growth of the Scottish economy in the eighteenth century and were, from the 1770s, the most dynamic sector of Scottish overseas commerce. The importance of these colonies is described by Devine:

*By 1790 the sugar islands had become the Clyde's premier overseas centre of trade. It was not simply a question of intelligent diversification after the tobacco business was undermined by the American War of Independence. The Caribbean now became a strategic factor in the whole process of Scottish industrialization. In the early years, raw sea-island cotton from the Caribbean plantations helped to power the mills of the western Lowlands. Equally, the boom in the export trade was partly dictated by the demand for 'slave cloth', rough linen clothing produced in massive volumes by the spinners and weavers of the eastern counties.<sup>2</sup>*

The impact of these trade links was also felt in the Highlands. For example, by the time of Sir John Sinclair's *Statistical Account*, compiled in the early 1790s, emigration from the northern Highlands to the Caribbean was increasingly common;<sup>3</sup> and the large hemp manufactories established in Inverness and Cromarty, in 1765 and c.1772 respectively, each employing upwards of 800 people, were the largest 'proto-industrial' concerns in the north and produced bagging exclusively for the London–West Indies trade.

Each expansion of British control in the Caribbean during the eighteenth century increased the opportunities for commerce. Barbados and the Leeward Islands (Antigua, St Kitts, Nevis and Montserrat) were conquered by 1750, the Seven Years War (1756–63)

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Crayton, *Empire, Enslavement and Freedom in the Caribbean* (Kingston and Oxford, 1997), 104

<sup>2</sup> Thomas M Devine, *Scotland's Empire 1600–1815* (London, 2003), 232

<sup>3</sup> The minister of Tain reported that 'several young people go yearly to London, Edinburgh, Glasgow, Aberdeen, the West Indies and North America, some of whom have prospered well and been of service to their relations' *OSA*, iii. 392. From Kirkhill it was noted that 'some [young men] go to the West Indies . . . while the women remain' *OSA*, iv. 116.

brought the Ceded Islands (Grenada, Dominica, St Vincent and Tobago) and Britain gained effective control of Guiana from the Dutch in 1796. This comprised three territories – Demerara, Essequibo and Berbice – which later constituted British Guiana and now Guyana. Demerara and Essequibo had been joined as one colony in 1792, with Berbice as a separate administrative unit. The colonies were returned to the Dutch in 1802 under the Treaty of Amiens but retaken the following year, although the colonies were not formally ceded to Britain until 1814. The Caribbean by this time accounted for about twenty per cent of British imports and exports<sup>4</sup> and in 1808 anti-abolitionists claimed that over £5m. of British capital was vested in land, slaves, buildings and cultivation in Guiana alone.<sup>5</sup>

### Guyana



The purposes of this essay are to show the interconnections – through investment and migration – between Guyana, particularly Berbice, and that part of the east coast of the Northern Highlands, roughly from Inverness to the Dornoch Firth, in the closing years of the eighteenth and first decade of the nineteenth centuries; and through the papers of two families, Mackenzie of Seaforth and Fraser of Reelig, to explore the economics of these investments and the nature of plantation society in these colonies.

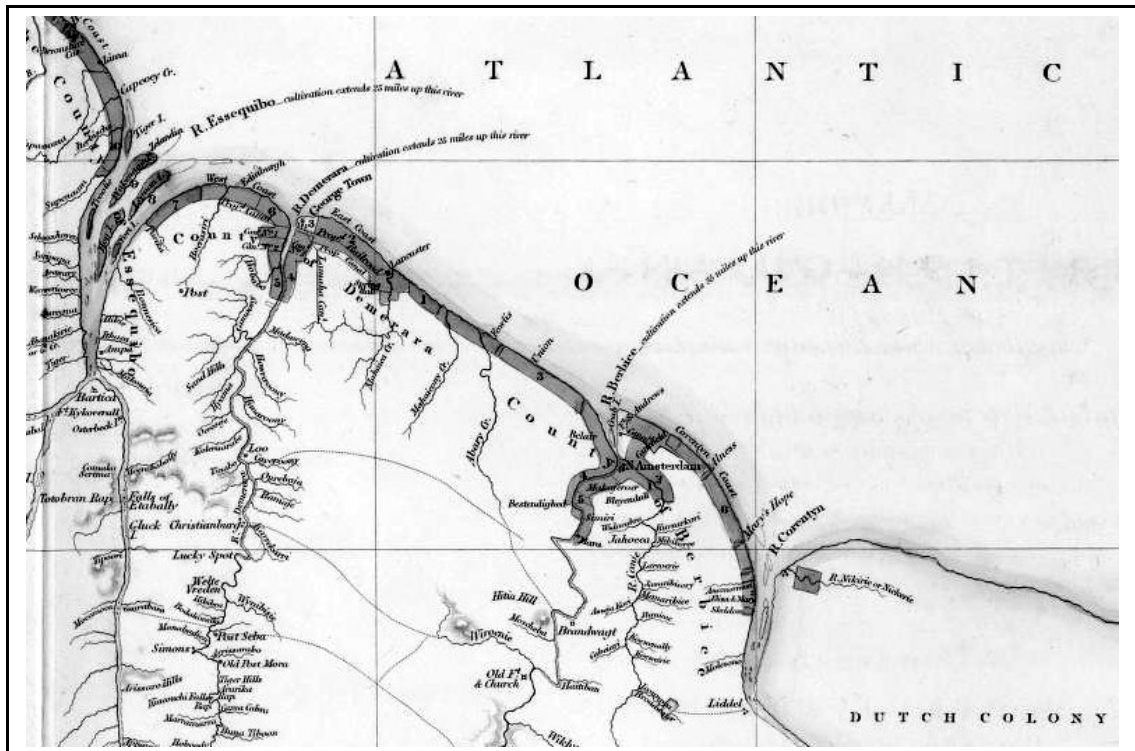
Berbice was fundamentally frontier territory, on the margins of the British commercial empire, until well into the nineteenth century. It was 'one of the most unattractive colonies in the New World' – subject to fickle changes in weather and epidemics of disease, and with only the one small urban community of New Amsterdam, which began to take shape in the last two decades of the eighteenth century. The older Dutch estates were laid out along the banks of the Berbice river, up to 100 miles inland, and exploitation of the more accessible coastal strip

<sup>4</sup> JR Ward 'The British West Indies in the Age of Abolition, 1740 – 1815' in PJ Marshall (ed) *The Oxford History of the British Empire: The Eighteenth Century* (Oxford, 1998), 413

<sup>5</sup> NAS GD46/17/31, p74 James Baillie to Lord Seaforth

was only possible by ‘poldering’, which required capital to finance the building of dams, drainage canals and sea defences, all of which then needed continued maintenance.<sup>6</sup>

There had already been an involvement of British merchants in Guiana under Dutch rule and, writing in 1800, Lord Seaforth, who was shortly to be appointed governor of Barbados, credited these merchants with a significant expansion in the number of plantations during a ten year period after 1782, when it was realised – contrary, he claimed, to the opinion of the Dutch plantation managers – that drained land on the coast was suitable for growing high quality cotton. In fact, the failure of the Dutch to bring this area into cultivation was part of a more general failure of the Dutch private sector to exploit the opportunities of plantations and the slave trade during the ten years of peace between 1784 and 1794.<sup>7</sup> He noted that subsequently ‘at the period of us taking possession, the influx of English, and still more of Scots, adventurers was truly astonishing’.<sup>8</sup>



John Arrowsmith, from *Map of British Guiana* (London, 1844) – shaded areas show coastal plantations mostly abandoned by this date

There is ample confirmation of this extensive Scots involvement, both in Berbice and Demerara–Essequibo. A commentator noted in 1807 that new sugar estates in Demerara generally had, in addition to slaves, a number of ‘negro and mulatto tradesmen’ from West

<sup>6</sup> Alvin O Thompson, *Unprofitable Servants: Crown Slaves in Berbice 1803–1831* (Kingston, 2002), 24

<sup>7</sup> Pieter Emmer, review article of David Ormerod, *The Rise of Commercial Empires: England and the Netherlands in the Age of Mercantilism, 1660–1770* (Cambridge, 2003) in *Reviews in History*, <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/index.html>

<sup>8</sup> NAS GD46/17/14, p337ff Draft memorandum to the Duke of Portland

Indian islands working under ‘merchants from England and Scotland, but principally from the latter’.<sup>9</sup> When Demerara presented evidence against emancipation in 1824, the secretary to the committee of inhabitants was a Scot, Alexander MacDonnell, who produced reports from five estate managers, four of whom were also Scots.<sup>10</sup> Rodway’s *History of British Guiana*, written in the 1890s, noted that the overseers, before the abolition of slavery in 1834, were ‘often young Scotchmen or Barbadians’.<sup>11</sup>

A list of estates in Demerara with their owners and attorneys – that is, factors who managed the estate for absentee owners – was published in 1832 and from this it is possible to provide some quantification of the extent of Scots involvement. Roughly one third of estates appear to have been either owned or managed by Scots.

<b>Estates in Demerara, 1832 (Local Guide, 1832)</b>				
Parish	Number of estates	Estates with proprietors having a Scots surname	Estates with attorneys having a Scots surname	% of estates with Scots in ownership or management
St Swithin	15	3	3	33%
St Luke	37	15	4	38%
St Peter	31	9	10	39%
St James	28	6	4	28%
St John	39	8	7	25%
Holy Trinity	34	7	2	23%

### **‘A speculation in Berbice’ – the enterprise network**

Recent studies have established the importance of networks of patronage and family connection in the development of Caribbean colonies, as, indeed, in many parts of the British Empire. The Caribbean colonies attracted few permanent settlers and such networks were important in easing access for new arrivals to jobs, credit and trading contacts. They also reduced risk by entrusting key tasks to trusted family members, while maintaining links between the colony and the home country, to which almost all intended to return. As a consequence, there was often a strong relationship between one area of a colony and a small part of Scotland from which the networking families originated. Devine cites the example of Tobago where ‘a single coherent Scottish network operated in the later

<sup>9</sup> Henry Bolinbroke, *A Voyage to the Demerary* (London, 1807), 211

<sup>10</sup> Alexander MacDonnell, *Considerations on Negro Slavery in Demerara* (1824), 146. The Scots managers were Donald Macdonald (resident for 24 years), John Maclean (resident for 14 years), George Rose (resident for 25 years) and A Macrae (resident for 18 years).

<sup>11</sup> J Rodway, *History of British Guiana* 3 vols (Georgetown, 1891–4), i. 156

eighteenth century by migrants from a triangle bounded by the towns of Elgin, Huntly and Banff.<sup>12</sup>

Seaforth justified his claim to advise government on the future of Guiana through his connections with such a network, noting that his 'attention was very early drawn towards this subject, from several Gentlemen in my neighbourhood being among the first speculators in Guiana'.<sup>13</sup> Seaforth's memoranda provide evidence that limited prospects in the homeland made many gentlemen – minor Scottish peers and gentry – eager to seek posts overseas, for he adds that 'of these, some never had any fortune, & others had exhausted what little fortune they were possessed of, yet, with very few exceptions . . . they all returned speedily with larger & some of them with immense fortunes.' This was a tantalising prospect for men such as Seaforth who were struggling both to balance the books on their Scottish estates and support their families according to the expectations of their social standing.

The 'first speculators' from Inverness and the Northern Highlands included Rose of Glastullich (near Tain), a number of Munro families (Easter Ross), Frasers of Belladrum (near Beaully),<sup>14</sup> Thomas Cuming (Moray),<sup>15</sup> George Inglis (Inverness) and Baillie of Dochfour (Inverness). The Belladrum Frasers were leading figures in that part of Berbice to which Seaforth was to be drawn as a new speculator and Fraser of Reelig, writing to Seaforth in 1801, noted that Belladrum was 'said to have made £40,000 by his last trip'<sup>16</sup> and later hoped that Seaforth would return from Barbados 'as rich as a Demerary man'.<sup>17</sup>

Colonel James Fraser of Belladrum (1732–1808) and his brother Alexander (1738–84) both had interests in Tobago before 1784.<sup>18</sup> By 1792 Col Fraser was involved in St Kitts<sup>19</sup> and before 1795 his eldest son, also James, was in Demerara,<sup>20</sup> where he was later joined by the two other sons, Simon and Evan. Col James Fraser, through his marriage to Hannah Baillie of Dochfour (Inverness), had links to one of the principal Bristol merchants involved in the slave and West Indies trades. Her brother Evan Baillie (1740–1835) had entered the army as an ensign at the age of fifteen and served in the West Indies during the Seven Years War (1756–63). He then established himself as a slave trader and merchant in

<sup>12</sup> Devine, *Scotland's Empire*, 238

<sup>13</sup> NAS GD46/17/14, p337

<sup>14</sup> All are mentioned as holding property before 1800 in Land Claims

<sup>15</sup> NAS GD23/10/639 Cumingsburgh is now part of Georgetown, Demerara, and Cuming's Plantation Craigmill was named after his property at Dallas, Moray. In 1815 Lachlan Cuming, of a related Dallas family, chaired a meeting to establish a Presbyterian church in Demerara and was later known as 'The Patriarch of Scotland in Guiana'. See 'Pages from The History of The Scottish Kirk in British Guiana' in *The Argosy*, Georgetown, 1930.

<sup>16</sup> NAS GD46/17/20 Reelig to Seaforth, 18 June 1801

<sup>17</sup> NAS GD46/17/23 Reelig to Seaforth, 30 Apr 1803

<sup>18</sup> GD23/10/594 Alexander's will granted freedom and an annuity to a female slave and her daughter Ann, probably his daughter, and an annuity to a creole girl, Rosie.

<sup>19</sup> NAS GD23/10/607 James Fraser of Belladrum arranged for William Jack, the son of a Fortrose butcher, to be indentured to Alexander and James Fraser, merchants in St Kitts.

<sup>20</sup> NAS GD23/5/352

the West Indian trade, finally settling at Bristol, which he represented in Parliament from 1802, campaigning forcefully against the abolition of the slave trade. By the death of his elder brother Alexander in 1799, he succeeded to the family property of Dochfour, where he lived for the last twenty years of his life before his death in 1835.<sup>21</sup> The existence of Plantation Dochfour, established in Demerara before 1797, indicates that the Baillies had early interests there<sup>22</sup> and Evan Baillie's son, James Evan Baillie, later became Chairman of the British Guiana Association.<sup>23</sup>

The extent of these local networks can be judged in other ways. There were two donations from Demerara to Inverness Royal Academy before 1796 and, in 1799, James Fraser, younger of Belladrum, forwarded subscriptions of over £500 from the colony for the Inverness infirmary.<sup>24</sup> In 1814 nearly £1000 was subscribed from Berbice to support the establishment of Tain Academy, with donations from many estates named after properties in Easter Ross and Sutherland – Alness, Creich, Dunrobin, Foulis, Golspie and Novar.<sup>25</sup> A current gazetteer of Guyana<sup>26</sup> lists settlements on the east coast of Berbice named Alness, Ankerville, Belladrum, Borlam, Cromarty, Dunrobin, Fyrish, Glastulich, Kilcoy, Kildonan, Kiltairn [Kiltearn], Lintlair [Lemlair], Lochaber, Nigg, Rosehall, Tain and Tarlogie; and, on the west coast, Belladrum, Brahan, Edderton, Fearn, Foulis, Inverness, Kingelly [Kingillie], Novar, Ross, Rossfield and Seafield. Only eight other Scottish place names are listed.

Networks also extended into the lower ranks of society and this is an important aspect of the impact on the Highlands of involvement in Guiana. For example, as Seaforth's manager brought his Berbice estates into cultivation he found he required two further overseers. They were brought from Ross-shire from where he requested, through the gardener at Brahan Castle, 'two lads – if bred to gardening so much the better. They should not be younger than 18 to 20, and be able to read, write tolerably and know the common rules of Arithmetic.' A carpenter was found in the same way,<sup>27</sup> a trade which was much in demand and where a skilled worker could advance quickly.

### **'A speculation in Berbice' – land and capital**

The strong Scottish contingent in migration to Berbice was fuelled by the lure of profit – in Seaforth's words 'very rapid and splendid fortunes'. While some saw such success as evidence of innately superior British drive, it was in reality the outcome of the favourable

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<sup>21</sup> *Inverness Courier*, 29 July 1835; Durham University Archive, Papers of 1<sup>st</sup> Earl Grey, A10, 1763. He was at the siege of Havana in 1762 and in 1763 wrote an account of Martinique, Grenada, Dominica, and St. Vincent.

<sup>22</sup> PRO Prob 11/1314 Will of James Fraser, Commander of the Ship Pilgrim of Bristol.

<sup>23</sup> Information from Dr Douglas Hamilton, University of Aberdeen

<sup>24</sup> Account Book of Thomas Gilzean, Inverness Museum

<sup>25</sup> RW & J Munro, *Tain Through the Centuries* (Tain, 1966)

<sup>26</sup> <http://www.tageo.com>

<sup>27</sup> NAS GD46/17/25

economic climate for a number of years after 1796, with rising prices for sugar, coffee and cotton. In 1801 Lord Seaforth became part of a consortium which bought ten lots of land and a tract of 3000 acres, all formerly owned by the Dutch Berbice Company. Seaforth had financial support from his kinsman Col Alexander Mackenzie and from Edward Fraser of Reelig, and the project also involved James Fraser of Belladrum, and Dr William Munro and Archibald Alves, both of London but with family connections to Inverness. The only non-Scot was an Anthony Somersall.

Edward Fraser of Reelig, an obsessive maker of lists, had enumerated the advantages of the colony before the purchase of the Berbice Company lands in what amounted to a manifesto for what he elsewhere called 'adventures abroad'. These included natural advantages in the richness of soil, the fact that it required little work to clear the land before cultivation, the absence of hurricanes and both the abundance of 'provision land' for food for slaves and of fish, fowl and game for the masters to hunt. He believed that the more southerly location gave the colony a number of advantages over the islands of the Caribbean – the health of slaves was allegedly better, they required little clothing and were 'wonderfully prolific'. Cotton grew exceptionally well on the saline soils, it gave a crop in six months and the plants were perennial, with the result that 'the number of negroes required to manage land is not above 1/10th of that in the Islands'. Moreover, the Dutch government had encouraged planters and there were low taxes. Just as important, if not more so, was the availability of credit and mortgages. Land could be acquired by down payment of a quarter of the purchase price and then three-quarters in annual instalments over three years, slaves could be bought at eighteen to twenty-four months credit and, because there was a crop every six months, the 'negroes and instalments are paid by the crops'. Mortgages were available because British merchants were eager to secure the consignment of produce and as a result, in Seaforth's words 'those who could barely procure a mortgage at home on an unencumbered estate can immediately command money if they own a property in Guiana'. Fraser's enthusiasm blinded him to the very real threats posed by Berbice's climate and its indigenous diseases, which ten years later would lead him to exclaim 'Berbice is a poison!'.<sup>28</sup>

The Berbice Company lands, which were all on the coast and still to be brought under cultivation, were bought for just over £31,000 but with other expenses the cost was over £36,000, of which Seaforth was to pay £8,000 – £3,800 up front and the remainder in three annual instalments.<sup>29</sup> In 1801 Seaforth arranged to bring his share of the lots on West Sea Coast, Berbice, into cultivation as Plantations Brahan and Kintail and, on the East Sea Coast, to bring his share of a lot into cultivation as Plantation Seawell. He contracted with

<sup>28</sup> NAS GD46/17/35 Edward S Fraser to Lord Seaforth, 30 Nov 1810

<sup>29</sup> NAS GD46/17/19, p46

his secretary, Peter Fairbairn, making him manager of the concern and agreeing to provide a total of £12,000 for the purchase of the land and 'stocking' it with slaves.<sup>30</sup> One year into the venture £4775 had been expended on the purchase of fifty-three slaves. The cotton crop of the following year was expected to sell for £6000 but there were expenses of £3120 – namely, £800 for a 'task gang' (additional slave labour hired in from other estates), £280 for provisions, £400 for overseers' fees, £300 for clothing and doctors bills, £940 for shipping the crop and a fee of £300 due to Fairbairn – leaving a net profit of just under £3000. He was advised that bringing further land into cultivation might increase this return to between £4000 and £4500.

It was reckoned by one writer that a sugar plantation in Guiana with 200 slaves would require capital of £20,000 and produce a net annual profit of £3500, and that even if the estate were fully mortgaged at ten per cent, this would leave a net profit of £1500, with minimal living costs.<sup>31</sup> Seaforth's return of £3000 on an investment of £12,000 in a cotton plantation was even better.

Speculation in the rising value of land was also part of the attraction of investment in Guiana. Seaforth and his partners intended selling their undeveloped land in lots to recoup their capital and they had the model of Mr Blair, one of the largest plantation owners, who had paid about £1666 for each one for ten lots in the 1790s and sold some for £5000 each in 1800. The following year another of his uncultivated lots sold for £7000. In Reelig's words there were 'vast fortunes made by land jobbing'.<sup>32</sup>

But in reality, speculators were very vulnerable. Not only were they were borrowing in order to invest, and relying on credit and quick returns from their crops – but they were locked into a commitment to expansion. In 1805 Seaforth described the position of a typical 'young adventurer' in these new colonies who, with capital of perhaps £1000, would make a down payment on an estate with a purchase price of between £3000 and £5000, paying in four or five annual instalments – and would acquire between eight and twelve negro slaves on eighteen to twenty-four months credit. At the end of the first year he would require more slaves, on further credit, in order to expand cultivation to produce a crop which would cover the payments due. Only after five years or so, when the land was paid for, might he be in a position to push forward improvements from a more secure foundation – until then 'to stand still was to invite ruin'.<sup>33</sup> Seaforth and his fellow investors operated on a larger scale but the problem was the same – even one poor season would create difficulties in cash flow and there were, in fact, almost ten consecutive years of

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<sup>30</sup> NAS GD46/17/11

<sup>31</sup> Rodway, *History of British Guiana*, ii. 153

<sup>32</sup> GD/46/17/14, 386

<sup>33</sup> NAS GD46/17/25 The necessity of such expansion formed part of Lord Seaforth objection to the Restriction on importing slaves to the newly conquered colonies imposed in 1805.



disastrous weather, either too dry or too wet. Cotton prices fell and, since investment in Guiana was less attractive, it was not possible for the speculators to sell on their surplus land. In 1808 Fairbairn pointed out to Seaforth that the original business plan had been based not on the average crop over a number of years, but on a single season 1799/1800 which produced almost double the usual crop.<sup>34</sup>

Seaforth had hoped, by the end of his term as Governor of Barbados in 1806, to finance himself in Britain from the profits of the Berbice estates. Not only was this impossible but further borrowings were required and the venture was restructured as 'The United Rosshire Company settled in and trading to Berbice', with Fairbairn as a partner. However, there were yet more bad seasons and by 1808 Seaforth had, probably unfairly, lost confidence in Fairbairn. Their relationship deteriorated – in 1810 Seaforth considered travelling to Berbice himself and in 1814 was looking for someone to investigate the management of the estates on his behalf. Between 1805 and 1810, Plantation Brahan, the first to be brought into cultivation had, despite sustained effort, fallen in value by almost eight per cent (from 238,033 guilders to 219,862 guilders) – and had at best only covered its running costs from year to year.

Yet the same problems had faced all Guiana estates – by 1810 Reelig was intending to bring his sons home after 'ten years unsuccessful trial'<sup>35</sup> and the Belladrum's Scottish estate, near Beaulieu, was sold off in 1812, the family having failed to continue their early successes in Guiana. Seaforth clung on, financed at home, for the time being, by the profits of kelp from his other Scottish estate on the island of Lewis. But by 1814 his affairs were 'desperate' and the advice was clear: 'In regard to Berbice, I am afraid it will do no more than pay for itself, if it will even do that. Lord Seaforth should lose no time in selling . . . the Slaves will fetch a good price . . . the Land, and Machinery, I am afraid, nothing.'<sup>36</sup>

### **'A speculation in Berbice' – slave labour**

The prospect of 'rapid and splendid fortunes' relied on the systematic and brutal exploitation of black slaves. The decade from 1796, when Britain gained control of the colony, brought significant growth in slave imports. The slave population of Demerara doubled between 1792 and 1802 – and a further 20,000 slaves were imported to the united colony of Demerara and Essequibo between 1802 and 1804.<sup>37</sup> By 1815 Guiana as a whole had the greatest disproportion between black and white populations of any British Caribbean colony – a ratio of 37:1 compared to an average of 12:1.<sup>38</sup> This was even higher

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<sup>34</sup> NAS GD46/17/31

<sup>35</sup> NAS GD46/17/35, p332

<sup>36</sup> NRAS 2177, Bundle 1597. Alexander Mundell, London to Robert Brown, factor, Hamilton Palace, 14<sup>th</sup> July 1814

<sup>37</sup> Emilia Viotti da Costa, *Crowns of Glory, Tears of Blood: The Demerara Slave Rebellion of 1823* (Oxford, 1994), 46

<sup>38</sup> Ward 'The British West Indies, 1748 – 1815', 432. A considerable number of whites lived in the principal settlements

in Berbice where, in 1815, there were about 500 whites and 25,810 registered black slaves – a ratio of 50:1.<sup>39</sup>

Scottish involvement in the slave trade has often been ignored but it is clear that the Scottish 'enterprise networks' extended to this sphere of activity. A recent study of the business of a Bristol slave trader, John Rogers, notes that before his bankruptcy in the late 1790s his captains dealt with agents in the Caribbean 'who included Francis Grant, Alexander MacLeod and John Cunningham in Jamaica; Munro McFarlane, James Baillie & Company, and Campbell, Baillie & Company in Grenada; William Webb in Dominica; James Maud in Antigua; George Baillie & Company in St Vincent and William Grumley in Tortola.'<sup>40</sup> – names which indicate a significant Scots involvement in slave trading. Of one of these, George Baillie and Company, Fairbairn commented that they had 'effected a very extensive and complete system of business in the West Indies, connected with his new House – he is likely to command the cream of the African trade in Guiana and the Leeward Islands – and is to receive large consignments of produce but advances no money'.<sup>41</sup> Fairbairn bought slaves from a Mr Macleod, Baillie's agent in Kingston, Demerara, who was in business with a William Mackenzie, and he also refers to a John Ross, in Berbice, probably part of the partnership Fraser, Ross & Sinclair in New Amsterdam<sup>42</sup> – names suggesting a strong north Highland involvement.

It is almost impossible to discover details of the lives of any of the individual enslaved Africans. Most slaves sold to plantations in Berbice had been brought from that part of modern Ghana then called the Gold Coast,<sup>43</sup> and were likely to have been of the Fanti or Asante (Ashanti) nations.<sup>44</sup> A group of twenty such 'prime Gold Coast Negroes' were bought from William Mackenzie in July 1803 by Seaforth's agent, Fairbairn, for Plantation Brahan. The ten men in the group were re-named Brahan, Kintail, Lewis, Ross, Sutherland, Inverness, Dingwall, Britain, Gordon and Crawford.<sup>45</sup>

The slave Inverness appears a number of times in subsequent correspondence. He had been purchased for about £85 and was taken with the others to Plantation Brahan, managed by Hector Mackenzie, where they joined over sixty other slaves. Since 1801, ninety-five slaves had now been bought but five had died and six were 'runaways'. Of those

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and consequently the ratio was higher on the plantations themselves, most of which were close together on the coastal fringe or along the rivers, with relatively easy communication between them. These were factors which made possible the Demerara Revolt of August 1823, the largest slave insurrection in the British colonies, involving some 9,000 to 12,000 slaves in 60 plantations along the Demerara River. The Revolt provided considerable impetus to the abolitionist politics of William Wilberforce and others, leading to Parliament's 1833 Acts terminating colonial slavery.

<sup>39</sup> Thompson, *Unprofitable Servants*, 26–7

<sup>40</sup> Kenneth Morgan, 'James Rogers and the Bristol slave trade' in *Historical Research*, Vol 76, Issue 192 (May 2003), 189ff

<sup>41</sup> NAS GD46/17/20

<sup>42</sup> PRO Prob11/1440 John Sinclair was from the parish of Halkirk in Caithness.

<sup>43</sup> See for example NAS GD46/17/21 'Negroes purchased for the Berbice estate, 1801'

<sup>44</sup> DP Mannix and M Cowley, *Black Cargoes* (London, 1962), 17

<sup>45</sup> NAS GD46/17/25

remaining at Brahan, two were nursing their children, three were house slaves and eleven were unfit through various illnesses, including one woman with venereal disease. This left sixty-six slaves 'for the field', a storekeeper and one child.<sup>46</sup>

This was insufficient to create polders, cultivate cotton as a cash crop and secure a future supply of plantains as food for the slaves. A polder of 220 acres had been completed at Brahan but this had only been possible by hiring a 'task gang' of slaves – a 'ruinous expedient', according to one of Fairbairn's critics, which had cost £1000. It had been planted with cotton, with thirty acres set aside as a 'plantain walk'. The plan was to make the enterprise self sufficient in slave food within twelve months but plantain walks throughout the colony failed in the dry season of 1803 – the driest for over thirty years – and slaves were instead fed on imported American flour and cornmeal. They were unaccustomed to this food, had no way of preparing it properly and dysentery became widespread.

By the end of the year another polder of 250 acres had been created – of which 100 acres were set aside for plantains – but by this date both Inverness and Dingwall had absconded. Inverness was re-captured in January of 1804 when a group of around fifty runaways – or 'maroons' – were discovered established in the woods about a day's journey away, on the Demerara side of the Abary river, where they were growing 'plantains, rice, tobacco, cassava etc in abundance', all in marked contrast to the food supply at Brahan. Dingwall and a third slave from Brahan, named Peter, were part of this group but evaded capture.

In early 1804 Fairbairn described 'desertion' as 'furious this quarter' with five slaves having absconded from the neighbouring Plantation Union.<sup>47</sup> In a later communication, he estimated that there were now 100 maroons and his concern was as much that they be driven away as captured because there was continuing communication between the runaways and the estates on the coast.<sup>48</sup>

Life for the Brahan slaves became no easier. From 1804 there were a series of very wet seasons, which not only led to poor cotton crops but also destroyed the plantain walks. Moreover, the demands on the slave labour force increased because the rains necessitated the digging of further drainage canals to release flood water which built up on the savannah behind the coastal estates.

Inverness again absconded and remained at liberty for some time. He was in contact with another Brahan slave, Favourite, who was discovered to be practicing *obeah* – African-

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<sup>46</sup> NAS GD46/17/25

<sup>47</sup> NAS GD46/17/23, p290

<sup>48</sup> NAS GD46/17/80 p244 Not dated but probably 1805 or later.

derived religious rites, which were regarded by the planters as subversive.<sup>49</sup> It was alleged that Favourite was also conspiring to 'carry off' female slaves 'to the Woods'. He was imprisoned and returned to Plantation Seawell, on the East Sea Coast. Favourite was caught practising *obeah* again and set to work wearing iron shackles. He escaped and was recaptured at Brahan, while attempting, with Inverness, to free another slave. Inverness was said to 'have been long absent' but 'knew the way back and holds correspondence with the coast'.

It is not clear whether or not Inverness was recaptured with Favourite. In any event, the maroon camp continued until at least 1810, when 100 runaways were killed or captured by a military expedition. Among those brought back alive were twenty slaves from the neighbouring Plantation Union and a slave named Quaco, who had been Lord Seaforth's cook in Barbados before being brought to Plantation Kintail in Berbice. The maroons were sent to islands off the coast, where they were probably worked as 'Crown slaves' belonging to the state, while their former owners received compensation.

In the seven years between Inverness's arrival as a slave in Berbice in 1803 and the destruction of the maroon camp in 1810, there had been a number of significant changes in the slave-labour economy. In 1807 the colonial slave trade from Africa – but not colonial slavery – was abolished by the British parliament. Abolition had been preceded in 1805 by what was termed 'the Restriction', limiting imports of slaves to the newly conquered colonies, including Berbice. The Restriction allowed for a three per cent level of imports to replace slaves who died but this was considered wholly inadequate by the planters – an indication of the reality of high death rates. Fairbairn passed on Seaforth's comments, objecting to the Restriction, to the planters in Demerara who were taking the lead in composing a 'Remonstrance'.<sup>50</sup> However, he was soon reporting that the 'difficulties in procuring Negroes under the Restriction were not as great as imagined' since the Governor was issuing permits.<sup>51</sup> Fairbairn himself obtained a permit to admit '40 Negroes from Demerara' and sent fifteen to Kintail, five to Brahan and twenty to Seawell.

By 1810 Fairbairn had increased the slave population on the three estates to 257, valued at almost £27,000, approximately forty per cent of their assets in Berbice.<sup>52</sup> Some has been bought 'seasoned' – that is, already broken in by work on other plantations – but most were 'prime Gold Coast negroes' purchased from slave ships. On one occasion Fairbairn declined to buy slaves from the Congo who were regarded as 'not fit for this country unless they are very young' but, nevertheless, the slaves were bought by other planters.<sup>53</sup>

<sup>49</sup> Thompson, *Unprofitable Servants*, 197–200

<sup>50</sup> NAS GD46/17/24, p326

<sup>51</sup> NAS GD46/17/24, p327

<sup>52</sup> NAS GD46/17/37 Inventory of estates, Dec 1810

<sup>53</sup> NAS GD46/17/27 Fairburn to Seaforth, 2 Nov 1805

After the end of the slave trade it was envisioned that slaves would thereafter be 'reared rather than purchased'.<sup>54</sup> This arguably led to arrangements to improve family life and better care of the sick, including the employment of more doctors, something which Scotland was well positioned to supply – but it also increased pressure to maximise the productivity of slave labour. Plantations Brahan, Kintail and Seawell were managed with a ratio of male to female adults of around 60:40 and there was a significant increase in the number of children by 1810, by which time fifty of the 257 slaves were children. The highest proportion of children was at Brahan, where there were thirty children and sixty-on adults.

Sexual exploitation of female slaves was endemic in plantation society, taking many forms including sexual abuse of children, and was often accompanied by sadistic punishment of those who offered resistance.<sup>55</sup> The mixed-race children born as a result of forced sexual relations were themselves brought up as slaves. In 1810, one girl among the fifty-five children on the Seaforth plantations was identified as a mulatto – and given a monetary value higher than the other children.<sup>56</sup>

#### **'A speculation in Berbice' – managers and overseers**

Fairbairn's letters to his employer, Lord Seaforth, were generally restricted to business matters but from time to time there are glimpses of his personal circumstances, particularly his sense, as the years went by, of being trapped in the colony. In this he was the victim of the ill-founded optimism of Seaforth and his partners in their purchase of the lands of the Berbice Company. Each successive failure led Fairbairn to place greater hope in the next season's crop and he speculated on anticipated good years both by acquiring more slaves – in advance of the Restriction and then Abolition of the slave trade – and by acquiring more land when prospects seemed good.<sup>57</sup>

Fairbairn was originally employed as Seaforth's secretary at Brahan Castle in Ross-shire, an important position because Seaforth was both deaf and dumb, and so relied heavily on written communications. Fairbairn arrived in Berbice in November 1801 and, contrary to all his expectations, remained in Guiana until his death in 1822.<sup>58</sup> He had never intended to stay so long. In 1808 he hoped 'to return next year after 8 years abroad' and felt, at this date, that he had stayed for the previous two years against his own interests and to the injury of his family and children, all 'to keep down the expenses of the concern and render

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<sup>54</sup> MacDonnell, *Considerations on Negro Slavery*

<sup>55</sup> For specific references to sexual abuse of slaves in Berbice see Thompson, *Unprofitable Servants*, 222–3.

<sup>56</sup> NAS GD46/17/37

<sup>57</sup> NAS GD46/17/36 James Baillie Fraser to Seaforth, reporting on Fairbairn's management of the plantations

<sup>58</sup> *Gniana Chronicle & Demerara Gazette* (Georgetown Guyana) Monday 8 July 1822 - Died - At Pln. Ross, West Coast, Berbice, yesterday se'ennight, the Hon. Peter Fairbairn, late a member of the Courts of Policy and Justice, of that Colony.

it productive'.<sup>59</sup> By July 1809, however, he was still unable to leave: 'In vain I attempted to close my arrangements to quit this country and find it impossible until I see results of the ensuing crop.'<sup>60</sup> In 1810 he was still there and expressed his regret that he had not left in 1806, when Seaforth completed his term as Governor of Barbados. And so things continued, with perhaps some sense by 1814 that he was reconciled to life in the colony – by then he was resident at Kintail, his 'favourite place', with both land and building neatly laid out 'like a European farm'.<sup>61</sup>

The circumstances in which Fairbairn found himself contributed to both Seaforth losing confidence in him as manager and to an apparent breakdown in his relationship with his family in Ross-shire. Seaforth began to query Fairbairn's management in 1808 because he believed he had not been provided with adequate accounts of what was happening in Berbice. This was later summarised by James Baillie Fraser: 'The continued series of uninterrupted misfortunes which have marked . . . late years has made it also a most unpleasant task to write frequently . . . what indeed is there to be spoken of but a train of disappointment, a disheartening detail of plans fondly conceived, ever failing . . . correspondence would first languish, then expire.'<sup>62</sup>

At the same time Fairbairn became deeply concerned about his family. Mrs Fairbairn appears not to have paid the rent on their farm of Moy on the Brahan estate in Ross-shire and payments of her annuity had consequently been withheld. In one of the last amicable exchanges between Fairbairn and Seaforth he had outlined his hopes for his six sons. The three youngest were still at school, the eldest intended to come out as a planter – Fairbairn had hoped to get him a 'Dutch education' but the wars had prevented this – the next was training in Edinburgh as a doctor and the third wanted a career in the navy, something in which Seaforth might have helped. These plans were now in ruins. In Fairbairn's words, 'Our West India speculation does in this instance sicken me to the heart. It would seem that I am suspected here and that my family must starve at home.'<sup>63</sup>

Although his eldest son John came to Berbice and managed Plantation Seawell, Fairbairn was, a few years later, judged to have neglected his family. James Baillie Fraser could only offer a limited explanation: 'I hardly know how to account for it – but when the general laxity of manners prevalent in these colonies is considered, the state of continued exertion . . . and the tendency to laziness that pervades all ranks in these climates, we may find the shadow of a reason.'<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> NAS GD46/17/31

<sup>60</sup> NAS GD46/17/35

<sup>61</sup> NAS GD46/17/36

<sup>62</sup> NAS GD46/17/36

<sup>63</sup> NAS GD46/17/31

<sup>64</sup> NAS GD46/17/36

A more detailed personal view of Berbice, from the perspective of a white planter, can be gleaned from the letters of Edward Fraser, the son of one of Seaforth's partners, Edward Satchwell Fraser of Reelig (1751–1835). Reelig senior was Collector of Customs at Inverness and in 1802, as 'an indefatigable opponent of Highland emigration', wrote an extensive account of its causes and effects, for the Board of Customs.<sup>65</sup> But he was careful to distinguish emigration, of which he disapproved, from what he termed 'adventures abroad' and in 1800 he made attempts to solicit a post for himself with Seaforth in Barbados. His eldest son, James Baillie Fraser, had already been indentured in 1799 at the age of 16 to James Brown and William Matheson, merchants in St Vincent.<sup>66</sup> After Reelig had acquired an interest in the Berbice Company lands in 1801, James moved to the colony, where he was joined in late 1803 by his younger brother Edward. Edward wrote frequent and candid letters to his mother over the next nine years, which provide a detailed and personal account of life in the colony.

Edward, arrived in Stabroek (later renamed Georgetown) in Demerara in October 1803, aged 17, and went immediately to the Weldaad Estate, Berbice. His future was in the hands of James Fraser, younger of Belladrum, who sent him, in late November, to work as an overseer for Dr Munro on Plantation Novar – an example of how local and family networks provided training and contacts for new arrivals. He remained there until September 1804, when he moved to a plantation called Lot 28, owned by his father and managed by his brother James. There had been some conflicting advice as to whether or not it was a good idea for the two brothers to work together, with James in a superior position to Edward, who remained an overseer. However, Edward was delighted with the arrangement.

He returned for a brief visit to Scotland in 1807 and in the following year, aged 22, he progressed to the position of manager on the neighbouring estate, Lot 27.<sup>67</sup> The family's continuing financial problems, and his father's determination to retain their Scottish estate, led to the sale of Lot 28 and by 1810 Edward had concluded that there was no prospect of getting on in Berbice and that India was preferable.<sup>68</sup> He returned to Inverness in 1811 or 1812, from where he travelled to India but died on route at St Helena in 1813.<sup>69</sup> His elder brother, James Baillie Fraser, subsequently pursued a highly successful career in India.

From his arrival in 1803 Edward was clear why he was there, in a place he found ugly and depressing and would come to regard as a danger to both health and morals. In one of

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<sup>65</sup> JM Bumstead, *The People's Clearance* (Edinburgh, 1982), p88. Fraser's account of 'Emigration from the Highlands and Islands of Scotland' is NLS Ms 9646.

<sup>66</sup> NRAS 2696/Bundle 187

<sup>67</sup> NRAS 2696/Bundle 8

<sup>68</sup> NRAS 2696/Bundle 9

<sup>69</sup> NRAS 2696/Bundle 10

his first letters home he wrote that 'the only thing in favour of this country is that if one is very industrious (one) may make some money in it.' Yet this was not a short sojourn or adventure. He wrote in 1804 that 'this is the country for us for perhaps 20 years'.<sup>70</sup> His work in Berbice was undertaken not primarily for himself but for the sake of his hard-pressed family and it was thus a matter of honour – 'to return home little better than I came out would be to me more dreadful than never to return'.<sup>71</sup>

Edward's experience of Demerara and Berbice was like that of many Scots in the West Indies, where few intended to settle and consequently where there was little investment in social institutions.<sup>72</sup> He thought Stabroek 'an ugly abominable place'. There were no paved streets, only a canal of 'stagnating, stinking water' with a track on each side.<sup>73</sup> He also described the 'deficiencies of the town of Berbice and the low tone of society there'. Like Stabroek there were no proper streets and all the buildings were of wood, except the brick-built Government House. There was a tavern where 'in the evening you see a parcel of drunken men (I can scarce call them gentlemen) smoking tobacco, drinking Gin and playing billiards'. Drunkenness was common, even on Sundays.<sup>74</sup>

Edward frequently commented on the 'low character' of the settlers. The manager at Plantation Dochfour, Mr Simson, where James had worked, was 'a harsh disagreeable vulgar little creature' whose house was 'abominably dirty' and where James had often not even had water to wash – although Edward had to concede that he was reckoned a good planter.<sup>75</sup> He often felt isolated as overseer at Lot 28 – 'so very few I see but vulgar people'.<sup>76</sup> Communication with Scotland was not always easy. There were no post offices except in Stabroek, sending and receiving letters was difficult and sometimes unreliable, and some young men lost regular contact with their families. At one point, Edward had to inform an acquaintance, Adam Fraser of Newton, of his own sister's recent death.<sup>77</sup>

Some settlers attempted to adopt what they regarded as a more civilised life-style. Edward had frequent contact with Mr and Mrs Simon Fraser, Belladrum. He stayed with them shortly after he arrived in Berbice and visited Plantation Union – about seven miles from Weldaad – to see the place where their new house was to be built in 'as pretty a situation as the flat country will allow' beside some old mangrove trees. Simon Fraser hated the country, but Edward thought his wife, the daughter of a former Dutch governor, sought to make the best of it. They lived in style, spending over £2000 a year on house

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<sup>70</sup> NRAS 2696/Bundle 8

<sup>71</sup> NRAS 2696/Bundle 7

<sup>72</sup> Alan L Karras, *Sojourners in the Sun: Scottish Migrants in Jamaica and the Chesapeake, 1740–1800* (London, 1992), 47

<sup>73</sup> NRAS 2696/Bundle 7

<sup>74</sup> NRAS 2696/Bundle 27

<sup>75</sup> NRAS 2696/Bundle 7

<sup>76</sup> NRAS 2696/Bundle 27

<sup>77</sup> NRAS 2696/Bundle 7



expenses and their new house cost at least £5000, although by 1807 they had moved and were living further east at Plantation Brighton on the Corantine coast.

The Frasers' life style is also described in an account of military service in Berbice and Demerara between 1806 and 1808, written by Thomas Staunton Saint Clair, an ensign in the Royal Scots.<sup>78</sup> His duties were not onerous and included an extended social visit to Plantation Geanies, adjacent to Plantation Brighton, and jointly owned by the Frasers and the Easter Ross laird, Macleod of Geanies. He travelled to the plantation on the Frasers' schooner and Saint Clair's description illustrates the pleasures of shooting, dining and exploring which were open to those with time and money.<sup>79</sup>

Edward, in contrast, although from a similar background, had to make a living and could not participate in such activities. But he made a determined effort to improve things at Lot 28. He enthused about becoming a 'housekeeper' along with his brother; welcomed his mother's gifts of table cloths, bed linen, towels, a teapot, glassware and luxuries such as cheese, smoked mutton hams and newspapers; and suggested that James send to Britain for silver cutlery. He learnt to play the flute and had a piano shipped out, hoping that James would be able to entertain when their house was improved.<sup>80</sup>

These efforts bore little fruit. James became silent and withdrawn and developed 'an utter aversion to being at home'. Edward saw little of him and social life on their plantation did not improve. Edward saw what was happening to his brother as a typical effect of the country, explaining to his mother that 'many little forms and ceremonies in society at home . . . are unknown or despised here as restraints' – the result of 'being almost entirely without the society of women which acts as a check on the liberties men would otherwise take'.<sup>81</sup> The country had 'great attractions for some people but they are people I hope I will never resemble'.<sup>82</sup>

The breakdown of social conventions was exacerbated by the position in which young men such as Edward found themselves. They were gentlemen sons of landed families, but were, in the colony, often employees. In 1805 a young man named Donald Noble joined Edward and James at Lot 28, apparently under the misapprehension that he was to lead the life of a gentleman planter. He had the notion that he was on the same footing as James, ordered the house slaves with more freedom than Edward, 'read the newspaper at breakfast' and did not appear to understand what an overseer was.<sup>83</sup> In contrast Edward

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<sup>78</sup> Thomas Staunton Saint Clair, *A Residence in the West Indies and America*, 2 vols (London, 1834)

<sup>79</sup> Saint Clair, *Residence*, 240ff

<sup>80</sup> NRAS 2696/Bundle 27

<sup>81</sup> NRAS 2696/Bundle 8

<sup>82</sup> NRAS 2696/Bundle 27

<sup>83</sup> NRAS 2696/Bundle 27

was acutely aware that he was in an inferior position to James and, earlier, on Plantation Novar had been anxious to be treated as an overseer.

Isolation, and the 'low tone' of society, was a greater problem for the few white women in the colony. Mrs James Fraser saw 'nobody but a parcel of the neighbouring gentlemen who are not all of the first water'<sup>84</sup> and she had no female friends or acquaintances, except one old woman.<sup>85</sup>

The male settlers not only felt the lack of white, female company – when James attended a ball to celebrate the Queen's birthday there were seventy men but only fifteen women – but also found it difficult to maintain engagements to women at home in Scotland. This was an understandable situation. The minister of Urray, Ross-shire, writing in 1797, argued that the promotion of manufactures at home would create a new class of merchants, avoiding the necessity of sending young men to the East and West Indies 'where the climate destroys three of every four' and, as a result, young women 'would have husbands'.<sup>86</sup> An engagement to a young man abroad in a fever ridden country was clearly not a good bet in the marriage stakes. In 1808 Edward wrote of Alex Fraser being 'mad about Miss Heywood's marriage'. She had not only jilted him – but two or three other men in the colony.<sup>87</sup> And on his return to Berbice after a visit home in 1807 Edward wrote of 'our great calamity' and its affect on James. When he met with James he gave him 'the ring'. James looked at it in silence and then went to his own room.<sup>88</sup>

Edward's letters reveal many of the tensions of daily life in the literal and metaphorical hothouse of plantation society. Simon Fraser's wife, Fraulein Battenberg, a daughter of the Dutch governor, had a manner which seemed to emanate contempt for those around her and many disapproved of her having come out to Berbice.<sup>89</sup> James bore a hatred for her and a difficult situation arose when she took a fancy to, and wished to buy, one of the Reeligs' women slaves, Susey, who was nursing Mrs Fraser's child during a visit. Edward knew that Susey 'could not bear Mrs Fraser' and did not think his father would wish her sold as she was 'one of the best women on the place'. Like James, Edward felt that Mrs Fraser always showed him contempt – but he admitted that she had done him many good turns and, on another occasion, wrote that this Dutch woman, still in her early thirties, 'is almost the only woman I ever see and she will run in my head'.<sup>90</sup> He later lent his piano to her, on which she played Haydn symphonies and, though badly, Scots airs.<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> NRAS 2696/Bundle 8

<sup>85</sup> NRAS 2696/Bundle 7

<sup>86</sup> J Downie, *Hints towards the Improvement of the Counties of Ross and Cromarty* (Edinburgh, 1797) 26

<sup>87</sup> NRAS 2696/Bundle 8

<sup>88</sup> NRAS 2696/Bundle 7

<sup>89</sup> NRAS 2696/Bundle 8

<sup>90</sup> NRAS 2696/Bundle 27

<sup>91</sup> NRAS 2696/Bundle 8

In his letters to Seaforth, Fairbairn generally confined himself to business matters but could not refrain in October 1804 from conveying details of the 'elopement' of Madame van Battenberg, Mrs Fraser's mother, with Major Hardiman, the commandant of British troops in the colony. Her husband, Simon Fraser, subsequently duelled with Hardiman, but neither was injured. Another acquaintance, Dr Gordon, was involved in a duel the following month, after his friend was horse-whipped in the street. Gordon was shot in the arm.<sup>92</sup>

Disease was a constant concern and a topic of many letters – rightly so, for it was the principle disincentive to settlement. In 1796, forty per cent of white troops in the West Indies died from disease and although this dropped to just over eleven per cent in 1802<sup>93</sup> yellow fever was a constant threat.<sup>94</sup> News conveyed home that an acquaintance was in good health was not a mere pleasantry, and often the news was of death. For example, a Duncan Fraser, who came out in 1804, died of fever within two days of reaching the estate which was his destination<sup>95</sup> and by the following year Edward had heard of the deaths of three more individuals named Fraser from 'putrid or yellow fever'.<sup>96</sup> Fairbairn identifies two of them as Alex Fraser of Culduthel, manager at Brahan, and his schoolfellow, Adam Fraser of Newton, who died on the neighbouring estate the next day.<sup>97</sup>

James Fraser of Belladrum was dangerously ill in 1807 and his wife suffered from continuous poor health.<sup>98</sup> Tom Fraser of Kingillie – a cousin of the Belladrum Frasers – who had been on Plantation Paradise when Edward arrived, had such poor health by 1807 that, despite having made little money, he was trying to return home by making arrangements to work in Glasgow.<sup>99</sup> Both Reelig brothers were very ill in 1805 and James had fever in 1807 and again in 1808. There are a number of references in his letters to means of avoiding fever – temperance and exercise,<sup>100</sup> 'Dr Chisholm's plan' of drinking nothing but water, drinking fruit syrups and, in the case of one of James's fevers, staying away from the coast at spring tides.<sup>101</sup> Abuse of alcohol was also a significant cause of death. Another acquaintance, Dr Noble, was known to have 'drunk himself to death', leaving his sisters-in-law in mourning, cutting themselves off from all society.<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> NAS GD46/23/26

<sup>93</sup> Bolinbroke, *Voyage to the Demerary*, 129

<sup>94</sup> The death rate for white troops in Demerara and Berbice averaged 8.4% between 1817 and 1836, but was higher in Jamaica, St Lucia and Trinidad, where it was closer to 12%. Fever accounted for almost half of the deaths but 'disease of the brain', usually *delirium tremens* brought on by alcoholism was significant. Deaths from disease among black troops were consistently less than half that of whites. See HG Dalton, *A History of British Guiana*, 2 vols (London, 1855) ii. 128.

<sup>95</sup> NRAS 2696/Bundle 27

<sup>96</sup> NRAS 2696/Bundle 7

<sup>97</sup> NAS GD46/17/27, 28 Sep 1805

<sup>98</sup> NRAS 2696/Bundle 7

<sup>99</sup> NRAS 2696/Bundle 8

<sup>100</sup> NRAS 2696/Bundle 7

<sup>101</sup> NRAS 2696/Bundle 8

<sup>102</sup> NRAS 2696/Bundle 27

### Slaves and masters

A central contradiction of plantation society was that, while it was based on the brutal exploitation of black slaves, this forced labour was for the benefit of individuals many of whom at least claimed allegiance to principles of humanity and justice. This can rightly be described as hypocrisy – but 'managing' the contradiction was nonetheless an important feature of the lives of at least some planters.

Landed gentry, whether major proprietors such as Seaforth or minor landholders such as the Reelig or Belladrum Frasers, were brought up to believe that *noblesse oblige* and had usually – either themselves or their sons – been educated in the atmosphere of the Enlightenment. Some insulated themselves from this dilemma by their distance from the plantations. Despite pontificating on the advantages of Guiana, Edward Fraser senior of Reelig, never went there to face the reality and his final comments in his letters to Seaforth on the subject were mixture of prudence and what might pass for concern for the slaves: 'Rear plantain walks and cattle and put no more land in cotton than can be raised by your own negroes – cause anxious attention to be paid to the state of pregnant and inlying women – on my estate there is now a specific practice that prevents the loss of infants by lockjaw and the Creole increase will be truly valuable.' And he contrasted Seaforth and himself with other plantation owners – 'low cunning characters versed in every subterfuge and ravelling'.<sup>103</sup>

It always appeared to be someone else who had the 'low character' necessary to run a plantation effectively – but even those directly overseeing slaves might seek to justify their role. Control of the large slave population by a small group of whites involved not only force but some degree of negotiation and acceptance of established codes of conduct.<sup>104</sup> Acting according to such codes was often a practical necessity but it also had, for the masters, the advantage that it gave a semblance of justice and appeared to humanise their dominance over the slaves.

For example, slaves throughout the Caribbean, with varying degrees of success, established a customary 'right' to tend their own plots, hold their own celebrations, buy and sell food and other goods, and even hire themselves out during their 'free' time. Thus, Edward Fraser noted that Sunday was the slaves' 'own day' and some were permitted to hire themselves out to work for two or three guilders. Edward disapproved, believing that they should have the day to rest.<sup>105</sup>

An interesting example of slaves' limited but effective negotiating power can be seen in 1806 when Fairbairn entered into a bargain with Macleod to buy fourteen seasoned

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<sup>103</sup> NAS GD46/17/35

<sup>104</sup> NAS GD46/17/24, p327

<sup>105</sup> NRAS 2696/Bundle 8

slaves. The deal fell through when it became apparent that the slaves, who had been on a sugar plantation, did not wish to leave it for work in cotton. Their anticipated resistance presumably made the purchase too unattractive to be worth while.<sup>106</sup>

Other whites, although living in the colony, achieved the luxury of a greater distance from the reality of slave life. Some, such as Simon Fraser of Belladrum and his Dutch wife at Plantation Union, sought to create a household in Berbice as near as possible to that of a European country house. The physical trappings of this life style have been described above – but there was also a significant attempt to create a different relationship with domestic slaves, which may at times have seemed to approach that of 'master and servant', rather than master and slave. Thus, as examples, Mrs Fraser's child was nursed by the slave Susey on her visit to the Reelig's plantation; Edward took Susey's feelings into account in refusing to sell her to Mrs Fraser; and James Fraser took a 'devoted' personal slave back with him to Scotland.<sup>107</sup>

In the domestic sphere, a number of white men had enduring sexual relationships with either 'free coloureds' or black slaves, which, although forced in the case of slaves, differed in the eyes of the men from the rape of female slaves by overseers and managers. Like a number of those who wrote accounts of Caribbean colonies in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, Saint Clair noted that it was a common practise for young European men to buy an educated black slave who became their sexual partner.<sup>108</sup> The extent of coercion varied and many 'free coloureds' were enticed to Demerara and Berbice from Barbados and other Caribbean islands.<sup>109</sup> Saint Clair admitted to have been persuaded of the value of taking a black mistress after two of his friends were nursed through bouts of fever by their women – and also described their important skills in removing body parasites known as 'chigoes' or 'jiggers'.<sup>110</sup>

A parallel – although not an exact one – might be drawn between these relationships and relationships between native women and fur-traders, many of them Highland Scots, in Canada.<sup>111</sup> Van Kirk has shown that the fur trade depended on quasi-marital relationships between traders and Native American women, both as a means of creating and sustaining trading links with Indian tribes and as a source of vital survival skills. These included the production of moccasins and snow shoes. 'To be without women,' van Kirk notes, 'was to

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<sup>106</sup> NAS GD46/17/24, p327

<sup>107</sup> NRAS 2696/Bundle 27

<sup>108</sup> See Saint Clair, *Residence*; and Bolinbroke, *Voyage to the Demerary*

<sup>109</sup> Alvin O Thompson, *Colonialism and Underdevelopment in Guyana, 1580–1803* (Bridgetown, Barbados 1987), p87

<sup>110</sup> Saint Clair, *Residence*, 112

<sup>111</sup> Sylvia van Kirk, *Many Tenders Ties: Women in Fur-Trade Society, 1679–1870* (Oklahoma, 1983)

invite disaster.<sup>112</sup> There was, at least according to Saint Clair, a similar survival value in Guiana.

There were, of course, important differences. Native American women were not slaves – although some early accounts of inter-marriage refer to them as 'slave women'<sup>113</sup> – and they were from an established local culture, rather than the cultural mix of slave society. However, life in a fur-trading post offered an easier existence than in traditional society, where much heavy work was carried out by women,<sup>114</sup> and there was a similar advantage in a slave or 'free coloured' woman becoming the mistress of a plantation owner or manager. There is evidence that free coloured women actively sought what Pedro Walsh calls 'room-to-manoeuvre options' in their alliances, including sexual alliances, with white male power.<sup>115</sup>

The title of van Kirk's book – *Many Tender Ties* – refers to affectionate and enduring relationships that were formed between fur-traders and Native American women. Despite its origin in slave society, a similar 'tender tie' is seen in the will of George Jeffrey, made in Berbice in 1846. He left his property to his children by his housekeeper, Ajuba, with the provision that a legacy of £50 go to his sister in Dingwall – but only if this could be done without affecting the 'independence and comfort' of his mixed-race family.<sup>116</sup>

In Canada, it was at first common for officers in the two principal fur-trading companies to send their mixed-race children to Britain for education.<sup>117</sup> The same was true of Demerara and Berbice – Hugh Miller sat next to a 'mulatto' pupil in Cromarty in the 1810s<sup>118</sup> and, shortly before, there were three 'coloured' pupils at Inverness Royal Academy, all brothers named Macrae.<sup>119</sup> It did not take long for this to become unacceptable to British society.

It has been argued that the mothers of these mixed-race children, at the interface between white planters and black slaves, had a key role in the emergence of a new culture in plantation society. Sydney Mintz,<sup>120</sup> author of the leading account of the place of sugar in modern history, argues that the development of a cuisine within slave society was not only, in itself, an important exercise of freedom but that masters learned from their slaves and came to prize certain foods. Thus, some slaves 'came to enjoy an unanticipated freedom of manoeuvre' and masters allowed themselves to humanise the central contradictions of

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<sup>112</sup> Van Kirk, *Many Tender Ties*, 54

<sup>113</sup> Van Kirk, *Many Tender Ties*, 71

<sup>114</sup> Van Kirk, *Many Tender Ties*, 50

<sup>115</sup> Pedro L V Welch, 'Madams and Mariners: Expressions of Self Confidence Among Free Coloured Women in Barbados, 1750-1834' (29th Annual Conference of The Association Of Caribbean Historians, April 7-12, 1997)

<sup>116</sup> *Land Claim: Berbice*, 258-9

<sup>117</sup> Van Kirk, *Many Tender Ties*, 87

<sup>118</sup> Hugh Miller, *Memoir: From Stonemason to Geologist* (Edinburgh, 1995), 107

<sup>119</sup> Information from Dr Douglas Hamilton, University of Aberdeen

<sup>120</sup> Sydney W Mintz, *Tasting Food, Tasting Freedom* (Boston, 1996), 33-49

slavery. As the person responsible for the management of a household, it can be argued that black housekeeper/concubines played a crucial role in salvaging some value from the fundamentally abusive nature of slave society.

### **'Something foul in the mode of their accumulation'**

Those 'first speculators' in Guyana who were able to repatriate at least part of their wealth before the poor seasons of the early 1800s, often returned to Scotland 'as rich as a Demerary man', bringing new speculators, such as Seaforth, to seek ways of emulating their 'very rapid and splendid fortunes'. This phase is taken from Seaforth memorandum to the Duke of Portland composed in 1800, the opening paragraph of which runs as follows:

*Whatever may be the public consequences resulting from the occupation of Dutch Guiana by the British, its operation in creating very rapid and splendid fortunes to Individuals is very apparent, & some of these fortunes have been so very rapidly acquired as to furnish grounds to strong suspicions that there had been something foul in the mode of their accumulation.<sup>121</sup>*

With unselfconscious irony Seaforth defended the speculators. There was, of course, something extremely foul in the mode of accumulation, to which Seaforth and his partners were blind. It is to the credit of Edward Fraser that he was more clear-sighted.

In a number of letters written to his mother and sister, he expressed his thoughts on the treatment of slaves. In the early years he looked for what positive things he could in his situation. He considered 'negroes a very handsome people',<sup>122</sup> the slaves in his charge were 'well behaved', he rarely punished them and then only as severely as he thought just.<sup>123</sup> In his first experience as an overseer, on Plantation Novar, where he worked for a time in 1804, he was 'left melancholy' by the death in its mother's arms of a 'four-day old negro child with lockjaw', despite being laughed at by the son of the house for this.<sup>124</sup> The following year, 1805, he sent his mother a small bottle of Cayenne pepper made by his black cook, Jacoba, and asked her to sent some 'cheap and gaudy articles' for her and to give away to children.

But he saw from an early point that it was characters such as Simson, the manager at Plantation Dochfour – 'a harsh disagreeable vulgar little creature' – who were successful planters. When Edward came to leave Berbice in 1811 he had come to hold the bleak and pessimistic view that 'blacks are seldom capable of lasting attachment to their owners because of the way their owners treat them and they treat their owners'. While he

<sup>121</sup> NAS GD46/17/14, p337ff Draft memorandum to the Duke of Portland

<sup>122</sup> NRAS 2696/Bundle 23

<sup>123</sup> NRAS 2696/Bundle 66

<sup>124</sup> NRAS 2696/Bundle 27

recognised his mother's claim that a family servant, Black John – who presumably had been taken back to Scotland – had grieved and felt deserted when his master, Edward's brother James, went away, he argued that 'if he returned to the country and there was an insurrection . . . he would as soon see his master and me killed as not.' He claimed his view was based on the facts, citing the insurrection in St Domingo where there had been 'just one instance of fidelity but many domestics, seemingly attached to masters, who were the first to knock them down.' This was only to be expected. 'People ought to feel no faith in their slaves for they all know they deserve no return from them but such as is generally met with.' Edward's conclusion was that it was not possible to salvage relationships of value from the abuse of slavery.<sup>125</sup>

He acknowledged, however, that James 'had other notions' and, as it turned out, Black John remained with James Baillie Fraser for over fifteen years, travelling with him in India and elsewhere. Although James made provision for John's retirement in London, he did not live to enjoy it. He died in the Middlesex Hospital in 1823 and was buried in Paddington churchyard – no longer a slave, but according to Edward and James's mother, 'the attached faithful friend as well as the devoted servant'.<sup>126</sup>

David Alston  
Cromarty  
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<sup>125</sup> NRAS 2696/Bundle 9

<sup>126</sup> NRAS 2696/Diary of Jane Fraser