

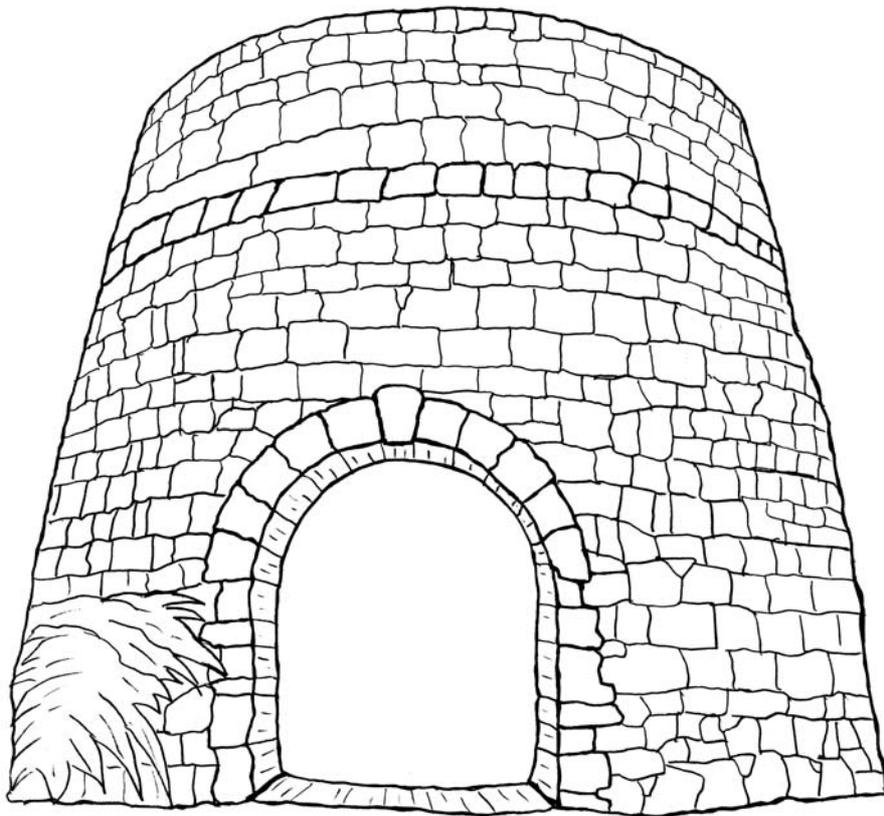
## 6. 'A Sufficient Stock of Negroes' The Secret Lives of William McDowall of Castle Semple and James Milliken of Kilbarchan

Stuart Nisbet

Major James Milliken and Colonel William McDowall were two of the most important figures in the early eighteenth century development of the West of Scotland. Born shortly after the Restoration, they were at their peak immediately after the Union of 1707. Returning from great success in the Caribbean, they were among the first to exploit the benefits of Atlantic trade on a truly massive scale. Three generations of their families came to dominate eighteenth century Glasgow and the west of Scotland, as merchants, patrons of parishes, MPs, Sheriffs and rectors of Glasgow University.

The pair came from the periphery of English mercantile power to achieve colossal success commercially and socially. Yet when they came home from the Caribbean, they were in late middle age. Virtually nothing is known about their rise to wealth during their first 50 years. Why is this and why were men of such renown apparently so guarded about their lives? Using hundreds of personal letters and accounts, this article attempts, for the first time in 300 years, to document the secret lives of Colonel William McDowall and Major James Milliken.

**Note:** Most paragraph headings are edited from the original letters of Colonel William McDowall, his brother Captain David McDowall and Major James Milliken. For source abbreviations see end of article.



**Col. McDowall's Windmill, Canada Hills, St. Kitts.**

## 1. Beginnings

### **'Young gentlemen putting out in the world'** <sup>1</sup>

The few lines that are known about the two men claim that, when commanding a regiment on the Leeward island of St Kitts (St Christopher), they became very wealthy through marriages to ladies of 'ample fortune' <sup>2</sup>. This very brief statement is repeated in almost every history of the west of Scotland. We shall see that the full story involves an amazing tale of personal ambition and outstanding success. Unfortunately it is gravely corrupted by the deepest personal involvement in the use and abuse of thousands of enslaved Africans, to forcibly produce sugar.

### **'Your brother Garthland went for Galloway on Monday'** <sup>3</sup>

William McDowall was a younger son of a middling landed family from Garthland, south of Stranraer. Born in 1678, his son would later purchase the family seat and secure the Garthland title. Before his venture to the Caribbean, William's family had maritime connections. His elder brother Patrick (b.1674) served as a supercargo on trading vessels, including a voyage to supply the Darien Scheme <sup>4</sup>. William also reared his younger brother David (b.1685) to captain his ships and help manage his affairs in London.

### **'He took the title and designation of James Milliken of Milliken'** <sup>5</sup>

The origins of James Milliken have hitherto been unknown, but he had a close family connection with Hugh Montgomery of Skelmorlie, provost of Glasgow (1701-3) and seafarer <sup>6</sup>. Milliken was born in 1669 on the northern fringes of Ayrshire, between Skelmorlie and Largs <sup>7</sup>. The true origins of the Millikens are complicated by later attempts to acquire a lineage in retrospect <sup>8</sup>. Semple's history tells us that Milliken 'took' the family title, which he formally acquired, along with the family crest from Lord Lyon in 1749. Like McDowall, both James Milliken and his brother Captain Thomas Milliken had a maritime heritage, through the Ayrshire Ports.

## 2. Clyde to Caribbean

### **'An indenture made with a young man'** <sup>9</sup>

Despite the known connection with St Kitts, both men started out as trainee plantation managers on the adjacent island of Nevis. A West Indies apprenticeship was perceived as a prime route to fortune for the younger sons of many middling late seventeenth century west of Scotland families. In later life, William McDowall was frequently asked to provide Caribbean postings by a network of landed gentry. The islands were also seen as a refuge for wayward young ladies, such as when McDowall was later asked for a situation to conceal a young lady's 'misfortune due to the insufficiency of her youth' <sup>10</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Col. Wm McD Glasgow to cousin David Alexander, St Kitts, Jan 1729 (W).

<sup>2</sup> Semple, W., 'History of the Shire of Renfrew' (1782), p.vi: 'some gentlemen of a very blameless character have declined furnishing him with that information which was within their power'.

<sup>3</sup> Col. Wm McD Glasgow to Capt David McD London Jan 3rd 1729 (W).

<sup>4</sup> This popular tradition is still to be verified.

<sup>5</sup> Semple, History, p.127.

<sup>6</sup> Col. Wm McD Glasgow to Hugh Montgomery of Skelmorlie Nov 4<sup>th</sup> 1728 (W).

<sup>7</sup> I am very grateful to Alan Milligan for sharing his research on the origins of the Millikens.

<sup>8</sup> Robertson's history of Renfrewshire (1818), says even less: 'JM of Milliken, of which family the connection with the county of Renfrew shall be here stated in few terms'.

<sup>9</sup> Col. Wm McD Glasgow to Madam Frances Stapleton London March 28<sup>th</sup> 1729 (W).

<sup>10</sup> Col. Wm McD London to Sir James Agnew of Lochnaw May 10<sup>th</sup> 1726 (W).

**'To persons desirous to transport themselves to the Caribby islands out of the River Clyde' <sup>11</sup>**

Before the Union of 1707, Scots are almost absent from the abundant literature on the English West Indies. Yet the Clyde had been importing sugar from Nevis since the 1660s, when several sugar houses were built in Glasgow <sup>12</sup>. By the 1680s the means of transport was readily available, with well known Glasgow merchants such as Walter Gibson offering passage on his ships from the Clyde to the Carribean. In the same period, James Milliken's father Thomas was a merchant in Ayr, and engaged in Caribbean trade in the *James and Swan* <sup>13</sup>.

**'He has a mind to settle at your island or at Nevis' <sup>14</sup>**

The Leeward Islands, including St Kitts and Nevis, were among the first landfalls for sailing ships riding the Atlantic trade winds from the Canary Islands. Nevis was one of the islands encountered by Columbus in November 1493 <sup>15</sup>. At only six miles diameter, it was too small to attract the attention of the Spanish empire, and used mostly as a watering hole for passing ships. It is a typical 'lost world', with gently sloping slopes, broken by mountain streams. The slopes gradually steepen to a central thousand-metre volcanic peak, clad in rainforest and permanently shrouded in cloud.

**'Whatever Negroes the Major thinks to be bought, I shall be satisfied' <sup>16</sup>**

When the two young men arrived in the mid-1690s, Nevis was a relative newcomer to sugar cultivation. The basic process involved planting, cutting, crushing and boiling. Most early planters were poor subsistence farmers using servants from Scotland or Ireland, either indentured or exiled by Cromwell. However few could cope with the back-breaking work in the tropical heat. It was soon realised that to produce sugar economically needed organisation on a much larger scale. From the 1660s enslaved Africans were carried across the Atlantic in deplorable conditions to be sold by the hundred to a growing elite of planters from Bristol and London.

**'I am glad to hear that you have good weather and prospect of a good crop next year' <sup>17</sup>**

The first and most arduous part of the process was clearing the fields and planting the cane. It was usually ready for harvesting early in the year, to allow processing and shipping to London, before the start of the hurricane season in July. The cane was cut by hand and carried to the estate mill to be crushed. From the mill the cane juice passed down a channel to the boiling works, consisting of a large stone structure with open pans on the top and fires below. The juice was heated in large metal bowls ('coppers') of gradually decreasing size until it crystallised, the waste molasses being distilled into rum. Nothing was wasted and the dried vegetation provided the fuel for the boiling works. The sugar was then put in large barrels ('hogsheads') and shipped to London.

### **3. Apprentice Nevis Planters**

**'I was hired eleven years on Colonel Smiths plantation' <sup>18</sup>**

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<sup>11</sup> The Bannatyne Miscellany Vol.3 (1815) p.385 (edited).

<sup>12</sup> Smout, T.C., 'The Early Scottish Sugar Houses 1660-1720', Economic History Review, 14 p.240- (1962).

<sup>13</sup> NAS E72.3.12 Customs Accounts Second Series (1662-1691); and information from Alan Milligan.

<sup>14</sup> Col. Wm McD London to Maj. JM St Kitts Jun 18<sup>th</sup> 1726 (W).

<sup>15</sup> Dyde, B., 'Out of the Crowded Vagueness', (2005) p.13.

<sup>16</sup> Col. Wm McD London to Jas Gordon St Kitts July 18<sup>th</sup> 1726 (W).

<sup>17</sup> Col. Wm McD London to Maj. JM St Kitts Aug 16<sup>th</sup> 1726 (W).

<sup>18</sup> Col. Wm McD CS to Capt David McD London May 10<sup>th</sup> 1733 (W).

William McDowall's first decade was spent apprenticed to Colonel Daniel Smith, a second generation sugar planter and island Councillor. His annual salary latterly consisted of a cask of butter, a box of candles, fifty pounds of soap, a hogshead of wine and £500 sterling <sup>19</sup>. James Milliken followed a similar path with planter Henry Carpenter. Each of the main plantations used a hundred or more enslaved Africans, and the task of the young Scotsmen was to manage and control them to maximise sugar production. The evolving planting system determined that the enslaved were worked as hard as possible, but fed and clothed to a minimum.

**'Have been a large expense, with Negroes and mules dying' <sup>20</sup>**

The Leewards had amongst the worst reputation in the Americas for violence against slaves and Scots were favoured as the harshest taskmasters <sup>21</sup>. In addition to the high death rate on the slave ships, as many as forty percent died within a year of arrival on the island <sup>22</sup>. Despite the diminutive size of the islands, the very high mortality meant that around three quarters of the two million slaves carried by the British to the Americas in the 18<sup>th</sup> century went to the Caribbean.

**'If Negroes were to be humoured, they would be little good' <sup>23</sup>**

The two young Scots arrived on Nevis in the earliest and cruellest period in the whole business. To enforce discipline, legislation was passed by their planter bosses for increasingly brutal punishment for the most trivial offences <sup>24</sup>. Minor theft or a careless glance resulted in the loss of a limb or a life. There was no room for kindness, as the law also penalised lenient white masters, who were a threat to the security of the majority <sup>25</sup>. By 1700 Nevis had 8,000 slaves, outnumbering the whites by five to one. Soon after, the sugar exports from the tiny Leeward Islands exceeded the total combined trade of the whole of North America <sup>26</sup>.

**'The crop being burned up with dry weather' <sup>27</sup>**

Gradually they rose above the image of tough Scottish overseers, entering one of the many paradoxes of plantation life, where high society flourished amongst the gravest cruelty of the cane fields. The tropical heat of the Leeward Islands seems an unlikely place for Scots to spend most of their lives, but when visiting the planters' houses today, it is a paradise. The shade, the warm but refreshing breeze, the exotic vegetation, make it literally one of the most pleasant environments on earth. This contrasts completely with the baking heat of the cane fields. Today several plantation villas have been converted to luxury hotels, including Ottleys Plantation Inn, originally owned by William McDowall's friend and banker Drew Ottley. James Milliken gradually rose to a position where he was considered to be an eligible suitor, marrying a Nevis planter's widow Mary Tovey. By 1707 he had become a substantial planter on Nevis, owning 112 black slaves <sup>28</sup>. He had four children on Nevis, two girls Anne and Parnell, and two boys, his subsequent heir Jamey, and his young brother Frances.

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<sup>19</sup> Col. Wm McD London to Jas Gordon St Kitts July 9<sup>th</sup> 1728 (W).

<sup>20</sup> Maj. JM St Kitts to Lady Frances Stapleton London June 26<sup>th</sup> 1728 (S).

<sup>21</sup> Devine, T.M., 'Scotland's Empire' (2003) p.245.

<sup>22</sup> Hubbard, V.K., 'A History of St Kitts', (2002), p.75.

<sup>23</sup> Tym Tyrrell (JM's partner) London to Lady Stapleton Nevis 22<sup>nd</sup> March 1723 (S).

<sup>24</sup> e.g.: Calendar of State Papers (CSP), Colonial Series, America and West Indies, Vol.12, Jan 29<sup>th</sup> 1686, Nevis Council minute: 'Any negro stealing sugar shall suffer.... for the second offence the loss of the other ear or 60 lashes, and for the third offence death; that any master concealing the above offences be fined 1,000 lb of sugar'.

<sup>25</sup> Pares, R. 'A West India Fortune' (1950) p.25: 'the legislature believed that the slave-owners themselves and the whites in general must be forced to play their part in keeping up this discipline'.

<sup>26</sup> Hubbard, 'St Kitts', p.74

<sup>27</sup> Col. Wm McD London to Alex McD of Garthland May 10<sup>th</sup> 1726 (W).

<sup>28</sup> Nevis Census (1707), in V. L. Oliver, Caribbeana (1909-1919) Vol.3 p.173.

#### **'A war will be of no great purpose to the plantations'** <sup>29</sup>

Their early years on the island were spent amidst ongoing warfare. Nevis escaped much of the conflict until 1706, when the French launched a major invasion. William McDowall fought alongside his boss, Colonel Daniel Smith, who was badly wounded and retired, later to become governor of Nevis. Captain James Milliken was driven back to a fort on the south side of the mountain, where he signed the surrender. Following the conflict Milliken rose from Captain to Major and McDowall from Captain to Colonel <sup>30</sup>. Later when they returned to Britain, both men relied heavily on these colonial ranks as titles of respect. The irony is that the 'ranks' were simply in the island militia, and stemmed from their influence and slave ownership. Thus the seemingly elegant title of 'Major Milliken' simply meant 'major slave owner Milliken'.

#### **"After the surrender of the Fort, (Milliken) a Captain in the Militia, was refused his sword and his house was burned"** <sup>31</sup>

The French raid of 1706 seriously damaged the sugar production of Nevis. Milliken's estate was burned, but his main concern was the loss of his slaves <sup>32</sup>. His ambitious nature attracted enemies and in 1711 he was suspended as Major of the fort in Nevis and also from the Council for alleged embezzlement of militia stores <sup>33</sup>. However the war and disputes were among many apparent setbacks which were turned to their advantage. In the aftermath, and in the absence of the main planters, Milliken was one of 'three good men' seconded onto the influential island Council <sup>34</sup>. Nevis never fully recovered from the French orgy of destruction and declined in favour of the adjacent island of St Kitts.

### **4. St Kitts**

#### **'I shall sail for St Kitts some time next month'** <sup>35</sup>

At nearly seventy square miles, St Kitts is more than double the area of Nevis, yet still a dot in the ocean. It is of comparable size and shape to the Scottish Isle of Bute in the Firth of Clyde, but with similar volcanic topography to Nevis. From its settlement by the English in 1624, St Kitts was split between English and French settlers. In the early years of English sugar cultivation it did less well than Nevis, due to the insecurity of ongoing skirmishes with the French.

#### **'A sufficient stock of Negroes'** <sup>36</sup>

After his harsh apprenticeship on a sugar estate, by 1707 McDowall was developing a small plantation of his own on St Kitts. For this he had purchased a dozen enslaved negroes, the first of thousands who would pass through the family's hands <sup>37</sup>. These nameless Africans were the hidden source of the family fortune and later of the extensive estate improvements at home. This modest St Kitts estate was also the first step in the spread of McDowall's family to many other Caribbean islands.

#### **'Governor Douglas encouraged the settlement of the former French parts'** <sup>38</sup>

From 1711 peace was negotiated and the French half of St Kitts was to be shared among British planters <sup>39</sup>. Compared with Nevis, the former French lands provided a

<sup>29</sup> Col. Wm McD London to Maj. JM St Kitts Dec 2<sup>nd</sup> 1726 (W).

<sup>30</sup> McD was a Captain in the Militia by 1718: CSP Vol. 30 No. 736: Oct 26 1718.

<sup>31</sup> CSP Vol.31 No. 204. xxiv: Deposition of JM (May 18<sup>th</sup> 1720).

<sup>32</sup> CSP *ibid*.

<sup>33</sup> CSP Vol.26 No.194 (Nov 28 1711); No. 325 (Feb 19 1712).

<sup>34</sup> CSP Vol.23 (Feb 21 1707).

<sup>35</sup> Capt. David McD London to Col. Wm McD CS Oct 16<sup>th</sup> 1732 (D).

<sup>36</sup> Col. Wm McD London to Jas Gordon St Kitts 9 Jul 9<sup>th</sup> 1728 (W).

<sup>37</sup> St Kitts Census (1707), Caribbeana Vol.3, p.132.

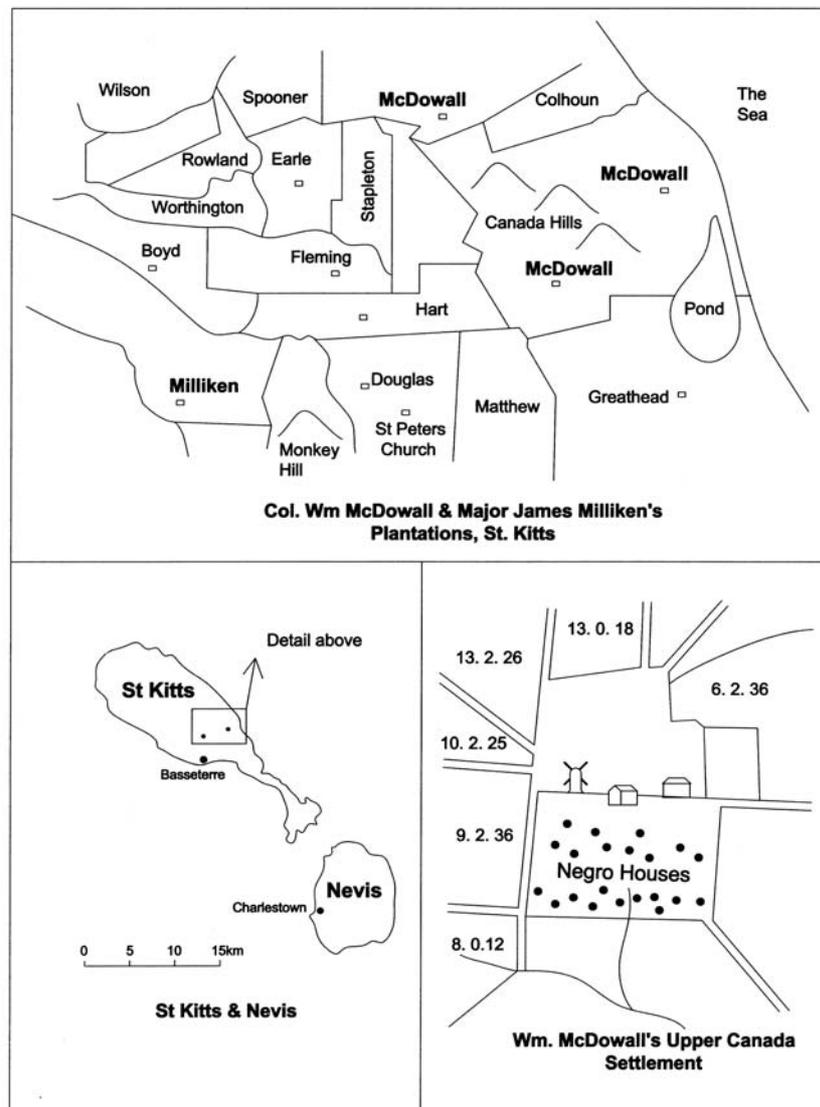
<sup>38</sup> CSP Vol.26 (Dec 13 1711).

<sup>39</sup> Dyde 'Vagueness', p.81.

clean slate for Scots to settle. McDowall & Milliken were by no means the only Scots, but part of a core group who had arrived before the Union, reaching maturity in the key decade after 1710. This comprised two Scots Governors, Douglas and Hamilton, plus a group of west of Scotland men, including Augustus Boyd from Kilmarnock and Robert Cunningham of Glengarnock.

**‘A Plantation from the top of Canada Hills to the end of Canary Pond’** <sup>40</sup>

By 1712 McDowall was granted a large sugar plantation on a former French portion at Canada Hills <sup>41</sup>. This was two miles north of the capital of Basseterre and would form the family’s core holding for the next century. Initially it contained a house, two sugar mills, boiling house and still house, and required the input of 120 slaves. The hidden snag was that such land grants were provisional, with no certainty of remaining permanently in any planter’s hands.



**Map of St Kitts and details of Col Wm McDowall’s Plantations**  
(c. mid-18<sup>th</sup> century) <sup>42</sup>

<sup>40</sup> St Kitts and Nevis Archives, Basseterre, Journal of the Proceedings of the Hon Wm Matthew Lt Gen of Leeward Caribbean (JPWM), p.53 (August 15<sup>th</sup> 1726).

<sup>41</sup> CSP Vol.35, No.554 (May 15 1727): ‘In 1712 Gov. Douglas made a grant to McD of a plantation upon those (Canada) hills, bounded on the west side likewise with the tops of them’.

<sup>42</sup> Based on surveys by Baker (1753) & McMahan (1828) in the National Archives.

**‘A Plantation in Basseterre Quarter, formerly belonging to Monsieur Lambert’** <sup>43</sup>  
Milliken was also granted a 200 acre former French estate <sup>44</sup>, known as Lamberts. This was located on the western shoulder of Monkey Hill, directly behind the capital. Lamberts had passed through several hands since the French left and at least three previous owners still laid claim to it. It was only latterly permanently secured through Milliken’s twenty-year friendship with Walter Hamilton, the Scots Governor. Hamilton dismissed Milliken’s main rival as a deserter and coward during the French invasion <sup>45</sup>. By 1718 Milliken had moved part of his household over from Nevis, along with 74 of his negroes <sup>46</sup>. Lamberts estate (Monkey Hill) was the basis of the Milliken fortune, persisting in the family to this day <sup>47</sup>.

**‘The use of my house for my Lord Londonderry’s entertainment’** <sup>48</sup>  
In addition to their plantations, they each had a town house and plot in Basseterre. Milliken’s was in College Street, on the site of the present Government building and Archives <sup>49</sup>. McDowall’s was one of the best houses on the island, fronting the sea <sup>50</sup>, later rented out to the Governor. They also had houses in Charleston, the capital of Nevis, which also provided rental income.

### **5. A Great Deal of Money** <sup>51</sup>

**‘A Plantation that will bring £2,000 to £3,000 a Year’** <sup>52</sup>

By 1712 both men had a foot on the plantation ladder, each with former French estates. McDowall also had his modest St Kitts estate, and Milliken had the substantial Tovey estate on Nevis. However when they came back to Scotland they were not simply rich, but super-rich. How did they rise above being average planters?

**‘No person to be allowed more than 200 acres, but McDowall has 800’** <sup>53</sup>

The first reason for their exceptional wealth was that, despite a rule restricting land grants, McDowall gradually secured an estate four times the permitted size. Admittedly, unlike most of the island, his estate did not only contain established cane fields, but also much steeper slopes amongst Canada Hills. Even today the upper fields can only be reached by four wheel drive jeep. His lower parts were a complete contrast, lying among flat swamp land around Conaree pond. These second rate lands had considerable potential to be cleared, improved and planted using hard slave labour. Due to his ambitious nature, McDowall would latterly create two large independent estates, from what had been mostly pasture, jungle or marshland.

**‘Hamilton secured the Fountain plantation by a grant to Col. Wm. McDowall’** <sup>54</sup>

<sup>43</sup> CSP Vol.30 (Dec 17 1717) & St Kitts Archives, JPWM, p.68.

<sup>44</sup> CSP Vol.30 No. 62 (Dec 1717) Aug 29, for Wm McD 200 acres; for JM 200 acres.

<sup>45</sup> CSP Vol.30 Nos. 260, 691.

<sup>46</sup> CSP Vol.30 (Dec 19 1718): Maj. Milliken is removed from Nevis and is now settled on St. Kitts and recommended for St Kitts Council as being a person ‘well affected to H.M. person and Govt.’

<sup>47</sup> In the third generation the Milliken male line died out and persisted with the Napiers of Milliken, who retain the Monkey Hill lands. Thanks to John Napier for kindly showing his estate and maps on St Kitts.

<sup>48</sup> Col. Wm McD London to Maj. JM St Kitts Aug 5th 1728 (W).

<sup>49</sup> St Kitts Archives, JPWM, p.63.

<sup>50</sup> St Kitts Archives, JPWM, p.53.

<sup>51</sup> Col. Wm McD CS to Robt Cunyngham St Kitts Nov 17th 1735 (W): ‘Your cousin Craigends was married about a week ago to the eldest sister to Jas Campbell of Jamaica by whom he expects a great deal of money’; (Renfrewshire Merchant Cunningham of Craigends was later a major planter and slave owner in Jamaica).

<sup>52</sup> Maj. JM St Kitts to Lady Stapleton London 24 May 24th 1722 (S).

<sup>53</sup> CSP Vol. 30 (May 15th 1727).

The second key to their enormous wealth was that they not only worked their own expanding plantations, but also controlled, dealt and worked additional estates on behalf of associates. McDowall acted on the behalf of fellow Scot Walter Douglas (governor 1711-15), in acquiring lands adjoining his own. Similarly in 1712 McDowall was granted the former French governor's 'Fountain' plantation, on behalf of his friend Walter Hamilton. This connection became even more important when Hamilton succeeded Douglas as governor in 1716.

**'I might take Madam Mead's plantation into my own hands'** <sup>55</sup>

Thirdly, through their wider family and social network, they also secured lucrative contracts to work large estates of absentee English planters. In 1711 Walter Hamilton married into the Stapleton family, who were among the oldest established and largest planters in the Leewards. McDowall & Milliken took a contract to jointly run one of the Stapleton estates, lying between their own <sup>56</sup>. In a similar manner, they worked an estate for the Mead family, who were relations of McDowall's original boss Daniel Smith <sup>57</sup>. Each of these estates cleared up to £5,000 profit per annum, an immense sum in the 1720s.

## 6. Coppers and Windmills

**'A windmill could be very convenient on my Upper Plantation'** <sup>58</sup>

Visiting William McDowall's upper Canada settlement today, it presents one of the best views on the island, overlooking Basseterre, and a distant cloud-capped Nevis. In 1732 he added a new windmill to the upper plantation. This circular stone tower <sup>59</sup> is among a variety of upstanding physical remains which still survive. At Upper and Lower Canada Hills, substantial remains also survive of the sugar boiling houses, dwellings and other structures. Even his boiling coppers still lie scattered around, through which every grain of his sugar fortune passed, deserving pride of place in a museum. The site of McDowall's adjacent slave village presents a tantalising field of mounds and bumps to the archaeologist. At Milliken's Monkey Hill, another windmill tower survives, plus the chimney, sugar works and foundations of the mansion house. All are under the threat of demolition and clearance, due to the recent failure of the sugar industry, and increase of tourist villa development <sup>60</sup>. McDowall's Upper estate is also on the edge of the island's largest quarry.

**'One of my small cattle mill coppers is split, please send one over'** <sup>61</sup>

Sugar processing was capital intensive and required ongoing repairs and purchases. All their ironmongery and plant was bought from London through agent Thomas Truman. The whole sugar process was a highly organised system of improved farming, long before such organization was practised at home in Scotland. It had a marked influence, their whole lives being dominated by a desire not simply to succeed, but to upgrade quality in every venture they entered. McDowall in particular castigated any sign of indifference or lack of enthusiasm in his partners or assistants. He constantly directed and reprimanded them on how to manage his plantations and make better quality sugar.

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<sup>54</sup> Johnstone, J. R.V., 'The Stapleton Sugar Plantations in the Leeward Islands', Bulletin of John Rylands Library Vol.48, No.1 (1965).

<sup>55</sup> Col. Wm McD London to Maj. JM St Kitts Apr 9th 1726 (W).

<sup>56</sup> St Kitts archives JPWM: Dame Francis Stapleton by their attorney Maj. JM pronounced grant from Gen Hamilton to Col. Wm McD (Aug 5 1721).

<sup>57</sup> Matthew Papers, Glamorgan Archive DMW/305/19: Indenture between Wm McD and Penelope Mead (Mar 29th 1723); McDowall lodged later with Madam Mead when in London.

<sup>58</sup> Col. Wm McD CS to Cousin David Alexander St Kitts May 12<sup>th</sup> 1731 (W).

<sup>59</sup> See Cover Sketch.

<sup>60</sup> It is hoped that, at very least, they can be recorded before they disappear.

<sup>61</sup> Col. Wm McD CS to Thos Truman London Sept 29<sup>th</sup> 1733 (W).

**‘Major Milliken is the only friend I can depend upon’** <sup>62</sup>

Through the shared experience of an ambitious violent life, the pair formed a bond which was deeper than with their own brothers. They trusted each other implicitly, right down to spending each other’s money, and raising their respective children. The bond was cemented when McDowall married Milliken’s step daughter <sup>63</sup>. Thereafter McDowall referred to Milliken and his wife as his ‘father and mother’ and Milliken called McDowall and wife his ‘son and daughter’.

**7. The Power of Life and Death**

**‘In the time I lived at Colonel Smith’s he had many indifferent Negroes’** <sup>64</sup>

The planters always feared correspondence going astray, and did not write home about their direct participation in slave control <sup>65</sup>. William McDowall’s letters reveal his tough and ambitious nature, and he would not suffer fools gladly. He later wrote that during his apprenticeship he was the only white man on the plantation, and that the slaves under his control were ‘indifferent’ <sup>66</sup>. To maximise production amidst such apathy, the full system of violent suppression was on hand. Later when he rose to an influential position on the island Council, he lobbied for the death penalty for escaped slaves, including his own slave ‘Christopher’ who led a revolt in 1722 <sup>67</sup>.

**‘Several of your Negroes are dead here, we must buy others’** <sup>68</sup>

Although they did not record specific acts of violence to control their slaves, once abuse resulted in deaths, it could not be concealed. The loss of chattels (slaves and cattle, which were listed together) was an expensive drain on capital and had to be recorded. In the early years of English settlement, St Kitts had supported an endless variety of high quality crops. However the intensity of sugar cultivation meant that little soil was spared to allow the labour force to grow their own food. The enslaved were thus largely at the mercy of imports of food and clothing by their masters. As this was a significant expense, it was minimised. In this early period nursing the sick or dying Negroes was rudimentary, and another avoidable expense. McDowall himself favoured employing an old woman, rather than ‘all the doctors in your country.’ <sup>69</sup> The impression is very much of a concentration camp scenario, where economics kept health very finely in the balance. The planters literally had the power of life and death over their workforce, with no fear of legal consequence for lack of care, let alone violence and cruelty.

**‘My Negro Houses have stood in the same place ever since I began - I would by no means have this altered’** <sup>70</sup>

One of the staple imports to feed the slaves throughout the 18<sup>th</sup> century was salted herrings from the Clyde estuary in Scotland <sup>71</sup>. Any hiccup in supply, particularly if combined with drought or frequent hurricanes, resulted quickly in deaths. This policy was also applied to the slaves’ accommodation. When his manager suggested

<sup>62</sup> Col. Wm McD to Wm Nevine at James Douglas’s merchant London Jan 1729 (W).

<sup>63</sup> Some time between Mary Tovey’s Will of 1715, and her 3<sup>rd</sup> codicil of 1723, Caribbeana Vol. 6, p.15: ‘since date of will my granddaughter Mary Tovey has married William McD of St Christopher’s’

<sup>64</sup> Col. Wm McD CS to Jas Gordon St Kitts May 16<sup>th</sup> 1732 (W).

<sup>65</sup> Maj. JM St Kitts to Lady Stapleton London May 1722 (S).

<sup>66</sup> Col. Wm McD CS to Jas Gordon St Kitts May 16<sup>th</sup> 1732 (W).

<sup>67</sup> CSP Vol. 30, recommended as Councillor Dec 19<sup>th</sup> 1718, sworn in April 24<sup>th</sup> 1719; also Assembly Acts of St Kitts (1722), quoted in Hubbard, ‘St Kitts’ p.61.

<sup>68</sup> Maj. JM St Kitts to Lady Stapleton February 8<sup>th</sup> 1726 (S).

<sup>69</sup> Col. Wm McD London to Jas Gordon St Kitts July 30<sup>th</sup> 1728 (W).

<sup>70</sup> Col. Wm McD CS to Thos Truman St Kitts Sept 29<sup>th</sup> 1733 (W).

<sup>71</sup> Refs to herrings ordered for negroes in Wm McD & JM letters; also: Pares, ‘West India’, p.353: ‘a few salt herrings formed part of the weekly allowance; John Pinney ordered these from Glasgow’.

improving the 'Negro houses', McDowall strenuously opposed any improvements. This deliberate policy of frugality in food and shelter led to abundant misery, death, and the need to continue buying more slaves to replace the dead.

**'I am surprised your Guinea Sloop has had so poor a Voyage'** <sup>72</sup>

Nevis island was the main slave market for the Eastern Caribbean <sup>73</sup>. James Milliken had the pick of the best slaves, as his former boss was the agent for the Royal African Company <sup>74</sup>. Milliken & McDowall also operated in the slave or 'Guinea' trade. Their slave ship was named the 'Parnellia' after Milliken's eldest daughter Parnell <sup>75</sup>. Their business was almost entirely with London, but they were well known in the Glasgow merchant community. McDowall was involved in direct slaving from Scotland, and one voyage sailed from Port Glasgow in 1719 to Calabar in West Africa. Of 134 negroes picked up, a quarter died on the crossing. Through his Glasgow connections, McDowall then sold most of the survivors at St Kitts <sup>76</sup>.

**'To my good friends at Bristol, at the Red Lodge and Marsh'** <sup>77</sup>

It was not only their immediate family who had direct involvement in slave plantations. Both men had married into the Tovey family of Bristol and Nevis, which presents the acceptable side of the family. However they were just as closely connected with Bristol's two most prominent merchant families and the city's biggest slavers. Two of their cousins by marriage, Bristol merchants Colonel Robert Yates and John Day, became close friends. In 1695 the Yates and Days had been sent to London to petition Parliament on Bristol's behalf for a slice of London's slave trade <sup>78</sup>. John Day owned the most prominent house in Bristol's 'Marsh' area at Queens Square and his family was responsible for more than fifty slaving voyages between 1698 and 1729 <sup>79</sup>. The Yates owned the Elizabethan Red Lodge, Bristol's earliest surviving dwelling, now a museum. McDowall visited his relatives in Bristol in 1728 where he owned a house on the famous Bristol bridge <sup>80</sup>.

## 8. Sugar and Shipping

**'I had a long passage from St Kitts of seven weeks, very blowing weather'** <sup>81</sup>

Their brothers Captain David McDowall and Captain Thomas Milliken not only took charge of their ships, but were also their partners and roving agents between London and the Caribbean. When at home in London, they were based at the famous maritime meeting places, including Lloyds Coffee House. Life at sea was hard, dangerous and poorly paid. Later when William McDowall retired, he tried to persuade brother David to join him. However David had virtually no capital, remaining at sea, and dying shortly after. The contrast between the ambitions, education and relative success of the two brothers was great <sup>82</sup>. They constantly argued about

<sup>72</sup> Col. Wm McD London to Maj. JM St Kitts Jun 18<sup>th</sup> 1726 (W).

<sup>73</sup> Hubbard, 'St Kitts', p.34.

<sup>74</sup> The RAC had the monopoly of slave supply in the British Caribbean.

<sup>75</sup> Col. Wm McD London to James Gordon St Kitts July 18 1726 (W); A slaving sloop held about 150 slaves; there was also a Bristol galley, the 'Parnell' trading slaves between West Africa and St Kitts around 1718 ('Bristol, Africa and the Slave Trade to America', Vol.1, 1698-1729 [1986]).

<sup>76</sup> Graham, E.J., & Mowat, S, 'The Slaving Voyage of the Hanover of Port Glasgow', History Scotland Vol 3. No.5 (Sept/Oct 2003).

<sup>77</sup> Col. Wm McD London to John Day Bristol Sep 1728 (W).

<sup>78</sup> Dresser, M, 'Slavery Obscured: The Social History of the Slave Trade in Bristol' (2007), p.94.

<sup>79</sup> Jones, P. 'Satan's Kingdom: Bristol's Transatlantic Slave System' (2007) p.42.

<sup>80</sup> Col. Wm McD CS to Col. Thos. Butler at Layes Castle House, Lumber Street, London Apr 4<sup>th</sup> 1728 (W): 'since my return from the west country to visit some friends...'

<sup>81</sup> Capt David McD London to Col. Wm McD Glasgow May 2<sup>nd</sup> 1733 (D).

<sup>82</sup> David's writing and grammar is notably much coarser than his brother William's.

trade, finance and building new ships<sup>83</sup>. Their trade was not just directly with the Caribbean, but went via a variety of ports en route, or much further afield, including Cork, Bristol, Amsterdam, Madeira, Jamaica, New England, Genoa and Bengal.

**'The freight duty and charges are the same upon good and bad sugar'**<sup>84</sup>

Through most of their lives their sugar was shipped exclusively to London. They had a core holding of their own ships, including the McDowall, the St Andrew and the Mary, which were captained by their brothers and closest associates. In a typical five-year period in the mid-1720s, they shipped sugar to London on more than fifty different named vessels<sup>85</sup>. They also ordered new ships of their own, including the Prince of Orange, built in London in 1732<sup>86</sup>. At London their sugar was sold by their agents, including William Coleman, Thomas Truman and James Douglas. They also carried goods belonging to others, as a full ship guaranteed high profits. The price of sugar at London varied with season and demand, and was a constant source of complaint. McDowall the perfectionist was obsessed with quality, and berated his associates for shipping poor quality sugar.

**'I got on horseback leaving the care of Basseterre to Colonel McDowall'**<sup>87</sup>

Fighting on St Kitts did not end with the French departure and pirates became the main obstacle to trade. The region was harried by Bartholomew Roberts, the most notorious pirate of his day. From 1719 to 1722 he captured several hundred vessels in the region. In September 1720 Roberts approached Basseterre, capturing two sugar ships which he set ablaze. Contemporary accounts from both sides record the militia rousing seventy dragoons and galloping frantically around the island to keep Roberts at bay<sup>88</sup>. The pirates retreated towards Nevis nearby, but the winds were against them, and they headed off to plunder elsewhere.

## 9. Homecoming: London

**'I petitioned the King in account of the encroachment Mr Hart made on me'**<sup>89</sup>

The provisional grants of former French lands continued to be extended<sup>90</sup>, but after the Scots planters had been working the lands for many years, the new Governor repossessed the lands, causing great unrest. The planters faced the prospect of re-bidding for their own estates, against others. This issue was particularly unfortunate for William McDowall, as his ambitious nature had led him to clear and plant every available scrap of wasteland, even beyond his 800 acres. The resale was unlikely to take account of the value of his improvements. He also had an ongoing boundary dispute with his eastern neighbour John Hart, who became the new Governor in 1721. Real power lay with the Governor and particularly with the Lords of the Treasury several thousand miles away in London.

**'I wrote by way of London re the sale of the sugars per the McDowall'**<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> Capt David McD London to Col. Wm McD, Glasgow, North Britain Aug 17<sup>th</sup> 1731 (D).

<sup>84</sup> Col. Wm McD CS to Robert Cunyngham St Kitts per Capt Houston Sept 18<sup>th</sup> 1733 (W).

<sup>85</sup> NAS GD 237/12/50: 'Accounts of St Kitts plantation rented from Mrs Penelope Mead by Wm McD & Jas Gordon (1723-30)'.

<sup>86</sup> Capt David McD London to Col. Wm McD at Glasgow North Britain July 5<sup>th</sup> 1732 (D): 'advised you of ye launching of ye shyp prince of orange'.

<sup>87</sup> CSP Vol.32 No.251 (Nov 29 1720).

<sup>88</sup> Ibid

<sup>89</sup> Col. Wm McD London to Maj. JM St Kitts Feb 5<sup>th</sup> 1726 (W); CSP Vol. 5, No. 202 (Jul 7 1726) & others.

<sup>90</sup> eg Milliken to continue in his plantations until further notice: Public Record Office, Journal of Commissioners of Supply for Trade and Plantations (JCS) (1722-28), p.132.

<sup>91</sup> Col. Wm W McD Glasgow to Mr JM at St Kitts Jan 1729 (W).

The land grant situation remained in limbo, becoming of such grave concern that McDowall returned to England in the spring of 1724. He spent the following year petitioning the Treasury, the Lords and the King on behalf of himself, James Milliken and his fellow planters. This included the Duke of Newcastle who was also in disagreement with Governor Hart <sup>92</sup>. He personally courted officials in Government such as a Mr Scroop in the Treasury who provided inside information, which he passed on to his friends in St Kitts <sup>93</sup>. From London he was also able to personally organise the commodities sent out to run the plantations. Over the next two years he travelled between London, Bristol, Garthland, Glasgow and Edinburgh, developing contact with relatives, friends and the nobility.

### **'Jamey Milliken gives me great concern, will near break his Father and Mother's heart' <sup>94</sup>**

Their overriding ambition in life was to create a landed legacy for their eldest sons. Once home, McDowall managed the English schooling of many of his planter friends, including Milliken's elder children. Jamey Milliken was the focus of attention, living with Lady Francis Stapleton and attending Eton in the mid 1720s. The contrast is acute between Jamey dancing and fencing amongst London society, while his father built the family fortune by overworking enslaved Africans <sup>95</sup>. Jamey was a spoiled and badly behaved boy, and was moved around schools. This contrasts heavily with his later description as having a 'dignity of mind, and easy obliging manner' <sup>96</sup>.

## **10. Homecoming: Scotland**

### **'I am not sure whether to go to Scotland this year or not' <sup>97</sup>**

By the time McDowall's St Kitts plantations were secured in summer 1728 <sup>98</sup>, he was fifty years old, and considering retirement. In retrospect it may seem obvious that as Scots they would retire to their country of birth. However their associates habitually purchased estates in southern England, where McDowall initially considered settling <sup>99</sup>. Wherever they operated they were ambitious and were not bound by existing conventions. They decided to break the longstanding mould and aim for Scotland. McDowall's brother had lined up several estates which had the potential to profit beyond agriculture. He considered Scotstoun estate, east of Glasgow, which had abundant reserves of coal, but the premium on these was too high <sup>100</sup>.

### **'Sugars will sell as well at Glasgow as in any other part of Britain' <sup>101</sup>**

McDowall & Milliken planned to switch their sugar trade from London to Glasgow. To do this, standards had to be raised for Glasgow sugar to attain the same profit level as London. In late 1726 McDowall bought a share in Daniel Campbell's South Sugar house, one of three built in Glasgow from 1667, to trade with Nevis. Campbell was a merchant from the previous generation and had traded sugar and slaves with the

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<sup>92</sup> JCS (1722-28), p.285.

<sup>93</sup> Col. Wm McD diary note Jun 10 1726 (W): 'Mr Scroop in the treasury told me there was a commission gone over to St Xtopher appointing Lt Gen Mathew, Mr. Ed Mason & Mr Gilb Fleming to inquire into the value of the French lands'.

<sup>94</sup> Col. Wm McD Edinburgh to Capt David McD London Jan 11<sup>th</sup> 1728 (W).

<sup>95</sup> Maj. JM St Kitts to Lady Frances Stapleton, London Mar 24<sup>th</sup> 1726, 'love to Jamey, your Ladyship may order him to dancing or fencing as you think proper' (S).

<sup>96</sup> Semple, 'History', p.127.

<sup>97</sup> Col. Wm McD London to Maj. JM St Kitts Aug 1726 (W).

<sup>98</sup> Col. Wm McD London to Jas Gordon St Kitts July 30<sup>th</sup> 1728 (W): 'I can now with a good deal of satisfaction tell you I have gott my contracts and Mjr Millikens confirmed by the Lords of the Treasury'.

<sup>99</sup> Col. Wm McD London to Robt Cunyngham at Crawland, Lincolnshire July 19<sup>th</sup> 1726 (W).

<sup>100</sup> Col. Wm McD London to Pat McD of Crichton Edinburgh 22<sup>nd</sup> Nov 1728 (W); NB: This was the Scotstoun at Hamilton Farm, Cambuslang, not the one at Clydebank.

<sup>101</sup> Col. Wm McD Edinburgh to Maj. JM St Kitts per Capt McD c.Nov 1727 (W).

Leewards and London <sup>102</sup>. McDowall began sending his sugar vessels to the Clyde from 1728 <sup>103</sup>.

**'Look out for a good Boiler for making all sorts of sugars and candys'** <sup>104</sup>

From the start, McDowall was determined to bring Glasgow sugar up to London standard. He chastised his new sugar house manager for making low quality sugar. As with many developing Scottish industries, the solution was to bring in an English expert. He wrote to his brother David to send an experienced sugar boiler from London. He wished to attain the highest quality suitable for making confectionery. It is a further irony that the end product of all the misery and abuse on the Caribbean plantations was simply to cater for the sweet tooth of Glaswegians.

**'I have this day agreement with Campbell of Shawfield for his Great House and gardens at Glasgow'** <sup>105</sup>

In the same time as he bought Campbell's sugar house, McDowall also bought Campbell's Shawfield mansion, Glasgow's earliest colonial villa, built in 1712. The house included a large garden and orchard, stretching the length of modern Glassford Street <sup>106</sup>. He wrote to Milliken in St Kitts: 'what you and my friends will think of it I know not, but I can tell you it is extremely liked by all my friends here' <sup>107</sup>. As an aside he told Milliken not to draw any bills at present due to his spending spree.

**'Have this day begun to drain my Loch which will be of more value than the Estate ... Mr Boucher came from Edinburgh to lay out my Gardens, Canal and Fish Pond'** <sup>108</sup>

In the same month, McDowall also purchased the Castle of Semple and much of Lord Semple's Lochwinnoch parish, for more than £10,000 Sterling. The investment of such a huge amount of capital in land was seemingly alien to his principles of high profit. However he had chosen his new estate carefully, as he planned to profit from draining a large loch lying directly in front of his castle, to create 500 acres of fertile new farmland <sup>109</sup>. To lay out his new policies he employed the distinguished estate improvers William Boucher and John Watt, the uncle of James the engineer.

**'There is neither Lord nor Lawyer in the Parish, being the greatest man myself... and a considerable Baron in the County'** <sup>110</sup>

McDowall was obsessed with improving his new estate to impress numerous friends invited from home and abroad. He ordered a sailing boat from London, equipped with coat of arms and flagstaff. He had a branch dug from his drainage canal to sail to the front of his medieval castle. He had achieved his ambition, having risen from modest apprentice to mix with Britain's top merchants and landowners. Along the way he had become a vain man, full of self importance. By 1733 he was already considering standing for MP of Renfrewshire <sup>111</sup>. However his pride was short lived. As soon as

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<sup>102</sup> Glasgow City Archives TD 1619.

<sup>103</sup> NAS GD 237/12/50: Penelope Mead Accounts Folio 18: The George for Glasgow, Capt Stewart.

<sup>104</sup> Col. Wm McD Edinburgh to Capt David McD London Dec 26<sup>th</sup> 1727 (W).

<sup>105</sup> Col. Wm McD London to Maj. JM St Kitts Dec 2<sup>nd</sup> 1726 (W).

<sup>106</sup> This was something of a bargain, as it had recently been damaged by the malt tax riots.

<sup>107</sup> Col. Wm McD London to Maj. JM St Kitts Feb 22<sup>nd</sup> 1727 (W).

<sup>108</sup> Col. Wm McD CS to Thos Truman London Jun 20<sup>th</sup> 1727 & diary note June 29<sup>th</sup> 1727 (W).

<sup>109</sup> Col. Wm McD CS to The Laird of Logan Sep 7<sup>th</sup> 1727: 'expectations of making it a profitable purchases by the hopes of draining a lough of about 500 acres'; This was not a new idea and had been started by Lord Semple in 1688 (NAS GD 126/6/221/2); Nisbet S.M. 'Early Drainage of Castle Semple Loch', RLHF Journal Vol. 12 2003/4, p.25.

<sup>110</sup> Col. Wm McD CS to Wm Mead London June 20<sup>th</sup> 1727 & to Mr Robert Colquhoun Apr 13<sup>th</sup> 1730 (W).

<sup>111</sup> Col. Wm McD CS to Capt David McD, Loyds Coffee House, London Sept 29<sup>th</sup> 1733 (W).

he began improvements, he was shocked at his lack of power over his own tenants, which was in complete contrast to his slave control in the Caribbean.

**'The Scoundrels broke my ditches and trod down the bank of my canal'** <sup>112</sup>

After thirty years participating in a violent culture of suppression and abuse, he was now powerless to control his minions. He wrote 'such is the temper of the creatures here that they choose to live upon potatoes and oat meal on their own dunghills'. In this outburst about his Lochwinnoch tenants, we are given a hint of his attitude to his 'indifferent' slaves. The distinction in Scotland was that he did not hold the power of life and death over his underlings, and could not whip nor maim them. He was particularly angry at his inability to stop his tenants taking short cuts across his loch and drainage canals on Sundays, to get to church. His solution was to appoint his brother Andrew, an Edinburgh advocate, to begin expensive court proceedings. Despite his perceived superiority, McDowall lost the case.

**'I left London and arrived at Edinburgh with Dundas, Crichton & Rankellor'** <sup>113</sup>

In Scotland, McDowall played on his landed connections through his wider family. In particular he had strong Edinburgh trading links via his sister Elizabeth, who married Wallace of Woolmet in 1723. Wallace was heavily involved in the slave trade between the Caribbean and Cape Castle Fort in west Africa <sup>114</sup>. McDowall later cemented the bond when he remarried, to Wallace's sister Isabella. McDowall's sister Marjorie married William Alexander, and two of her sons served as managers on McDowall's plantations. Another close friend and relative, cousin Patrick McDowall of Logan, married the heiress of the Crichton family near Edinburgh, where McDowall often spent Christmas. McDowall took Patrick to London to introduce him to his shipping agents on the Thames quayside.

**'A young gentleman who I have a very great word for'** <sup>115</sup>

Although Scots later became planters on numerous Caribbean islands, St Kitts was the starting point for many more than its diminutive scale would suggest. Alexander, the second son of Alexander Porterfield of Fulwood in Renfrewshire, followed the same path <sup>116</sup>. In 1728 McDowall shipped another young Scot, Robert Colquhoun, from the Clyde to St Kitts and he became McDowall's plantation manager and shipping agent. Colquhoun rose quickly to become a successful merchant, slave master and planter himself, with an estate directly to the north of McDowall. Colquhoun was later treasurer of the island, marrying McDowall's friend, Judge Matthew Mills, and having several children on St Kitts <sup>117</sup>. His son's name, 'William McDowall Colquhoun', indicates the deep affection which Robert Colquhoun had for McDowall.

**'Mr Colquhoun and Mr Milliken should have the care of my affairs'** <sup>118</sup>

The young William McDowall Colquhoun also became a very successful merchant, with estates in the Caribbean, and at home in Norfolk <sup>119</sup>. His eldest daughter Anne married Sir William Cunningham of Robertland and Fairlie. The younger sons of prominent Renfrewshire families continued to come out to St Kitts as plantation

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<sup>112</sup> Col Wm McD CS to his cousin, Patrick McDowall of Crichton Edinburgh Jun 4<sup>th</sup> 1733 (W).

<sup>113</sup> Col. Wm McD diary entry May 18<sup>th</sup> 1727 (W).

<sup>114</sup> Robt Colquhoun St Kitts to Col. Wm McD CS 15<sup>th</sup> April 1732 (W).

<sup>115</sup> Col. Wm McD Edinburgh to John Poplay merchant St Kitts Dec 8<sup>th</sup> 1727 (W).

<sup>116</sup> The Porterfields had held their lands since medieval times, but would decline in favour of the McDowalls, who bought Fulwood in 1774: Semple, History, p.111.

<sup>117</sup> Caribbeana Vol.3 supplement, p.73; Vol.6 p.38.

<sup>118</sup> Col. Wm McD CS to Jeremiah Brown St Kitts Nov 27<sup>th</sup> 1733 (W).

<sup>119</sup> Colquhoun had three estates in Norfolk, Thorpe, Wretham and Great Hockham, becoming MP for Bedford: Pares, R. 'A West India Fortune' (1950) p.280.

trainees. This included James, the third son of Sir John Maxwell of Nether Pollok <sup>120</sup>. James Maxwell married Frances the daughter of Robert Colquhoun of St Kitts in 1764 <sup>121</sup>. James succeeded to Pollok, becoming Sir James the 7<sup>th</sup> Baronet. Frances reigned as Lady Maxwell of Pollok until his death in 1785, when she remarried, to Sir John Shaw Stewart of Blackhall. The planter class had risen to the highest heights.

**'I want my wife over and whole family as soon as may be'** <sup>122</sup>

William McDowall planned to bring his own family home and continued to keep up connections with Bristol and London. James Milliken's children were brought from London to Glasgow, where William upgraded his town and country houses for the homecoming of his wider family.

## 11. End of a Dream

**'This most melancholy subject'** <sup>123</sup>

In late 1728 McDowall's family sailed home from a life spent on St Kitts and Nevis to Glasgow, but tragedy struck. Milliken's eldest daughter, Parnell, who had been under McDowalls' care in Britain for several years, came down with smallpox and died. McDowall penned a most traumatic letter to her father in St Kitts. Shortly after, McDowall's wife Mary and her sister also died of smallpox. The Scottish climate, combined with lack of immunity, and the long tiring journey home, proved too much for them. A relative of Milliken offered his lair in Blackfriars Churchyard, but they were interred in the most prominent spot of Glasgow Cathedral, under the choir <sup>124</sup>. In the records, both McDowall & Milliken are still described as 'in St Christophers', indicating how they perceived themselves at the time <sup>125</sup>.

**'I am very sorry for ye poor Major, am afraid this cold weather must pinch him'**

Family members were the trusted core of most Glasgow merchant businesses. Rather than becoming absentee planters, they groomed their eldest sons to become plantation managers. Eighteen-year-old Jamey Milliken sailed for St Kitts in December 1728 to manage McDowall's Canada plantations <sup>126</sup>. Thus when the fathers returned to Britain, rather than becoming absent planters, family involvement was permeated. This was not only by their sons and brothers, but by a long list of cousins and other kinsmen who were continually sent out. After a brief meeting with his son Jamey in St Kitts, Major Milliken returned to Scotland in the spring of 1729. McDowall had recently purchased the traditional castle and estate of Johnstone on Milliken's behalf, which lay close to Castle Semple <sup>127</sup>.

**'I want a bell inscribed William McDowall to the Church at Lochwinnoch'** <sup>128</sup>

McDowall continued to add to his estate, increasing his capital in land and reducing the amount available for business. By November 1733 he was deeply in debt and borrowing thousands of pounds. This was not unusual for merchants and he soon overcame this. Like many extremely rich men, he was very miserly. In one instance

<sup>120</sup> Fraser, W., 'the Memoirs of the Maxwells of Pollok' (1863) Vol.1, p.109.

<sup>121</sup> Eastwood Parish records 1<sup>st</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> Dec 1764: Sir James Maxwell of Pollok Bart to Miss Frances Colquhoun daughter of the deceased Robert Colquhoun of the island of St Christopher.

<sup>122</sup> Col. Wm McD Edinburgh to Maj. JM St Kitts Nov 21<sup>st</sup> 1727 (W).

<sup>123</sup> Col. Wm McD Glasgow to Maj. JM St Kitts Nov 18<sup>th</sup> 1728 (W).

<sup>124</sup> According to Glasgow Cathedral Archivist, a burial under the choir was unheard of, indicating a great deal of money and influence. Bones were found in recent years by archaeologists during maintenance work (personal communication, Ian MacNair 18<sup>th</sup> August 2007).

<sup>125</sup> Glasgow High Kirk Burials Vol.46, 13 Nov & 2 Dec 1728.

<sup>126</sup> Col. Wm McD, Glasgow, to Maj. JM, St Kitts Dec 25<sup>th</sup> 1728 (W): 'this goes by my brother who carries over your son .... I pray god preserve him and give you a joyfull meeting'.

<sup>127</sup> Col. Wm McD CS to Robert Colquhoun St Kitts Apr 13<sup>th</sup> 1730 (W).

<sup>128</sup> Col. Wm McD CS to Thos Truman London Apr 4<sup>th</sup> 1730 (W).

he regretted spending a few groats postage to settle a two pound debt to relieve a poor widow <sup>129</sup>. His friends had to take care with the contents of their letters, as he grudged paying postage for greetings, rather than for business <sup>130</sup>. Yet after his wife's death he softened, and quite unexpectedly ordered a bell as a gift to the newly built kirk at Lochwinnoch. The bell was ordered from his London agent, Thomas Truman, who supplied all his goods and hardware for his slave plantations. It is ironic that this ongoing symbol of church and community in Lochwinnoch was donated by McDowall the slave master, perhaps to salve his troubled conscience <sup>131</sup>.

**'God was pleased to afflict me, He will give me grace to bear whatever He shall load me with'** <sup>132</sup>

This initial attempt to tell the hidden story of William McDowall and James Milliken did not set out to expose slavery involvement, but now raises many questions. The biggest is how such supposedly educated and cultured men justified their participation in the very worst aspects of the slavery system. When the pair first went out as young men to Nevis in the 1690s, they may have been shocked at the whole system. Yet in the next generation they shipped their own sons back for the same experience. Many aspects seem not simply regrettable, but shocking from a modern perspective. Few things are more difficult to comprehend than James Milliken naming his slave ship after his beautiful daughter Parnell. What is clear from William McDowall's letters, particularly after the death of his first wife, is that he saw his life as being in divine hands, and his fate predestined. This view was widespread, and best expressed by Bristol slaver John Pinney: 'I was shocked at the first appearance of human flesh exposed to sale, but surely God ordained them for the use and benefit of us: otherwise his Divine Will would have made manifest by some sign or token'. <sup>133</sup> Perhaps this was simply a way of excusing their conscience.

**'Ten Negro boys at £23 sterling each, total £230'** <sup>134</sup>

Based on all the estates which the three William McDowalls worked (father, son and grandson) through the 18<sup>th</sup> century, this one family were responsible for the enslavement, maltreatment and fate of many thousands of African men, women and children. In Glasgow there is occasionally a token admission that its colonial imports relied on the labour of black slaves. However this has not been extended to the direct plantation involvement of its numerous merchant families. Multiplying the McDowalls' total by all the Scots who were involved in plantation control, suggests that a very large and dark chapter is missing from the history of the development of Glasgow and the west of Scotland.

## 12. Epitaphs and Accolades

**'Col McDowall was seized with fainting fits at Castlesemple, of which he died, a gentleman with a fine character'** <sup>135</sup>,

Major James Milliken died in 1741, aged 72 and was interred in a special aisle in Kilbarchan Kirk <sup>136</sup>. Colonel William McDowall passed away at Castle Semple in October 1748, aged 71. Their sons and grandsons became partners in Glasgow's

<sup>129</sup> Col. Wm McD CS to Richard Taylor London Nov 2<sup>nd</sup> 1731 (W).

<sup>130</sup> Capt David McD London to Col. Wm McD at Glasgow North Britain July 5<sup>th</sup> 1732 (D).

<sup>131</sup> The history of the various Lochwinnoch bells is complex. The Auld Symon bell was inspected from a scaffold in September 2007 and is apparently a later replacement, with no inscription. Other historic bells hang elsewhere in the village and estate.

<sup>132</sup> Col. Wm McD Glasgow to Matt Mills at St Kitts July 14<sup>th</sup> 1729 (W).

<sup>133</sup> Pares, 'West India', p.121.

<sup>134</sup> NAS GD 237/12/50: Penelope Mead Accounts, Folio 5 (Mar 9<sup>th</sup> 1724).

<sup>135</sup> Glasgow Journal Oct. 31, 1748.

<sup>136</sup> Later removed to Kilbarchan new cemetery: thanks to Helen Calcluth for information.

largest merchant house, Alexander Houston & Company <sup>137</sup>. By the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century the family empire had expanded to sugar plantations on many other Caribbean islands, including Antigua, St Vincent, Tobago and Jamaica. The families were considered to be amongst the elite of eighteenth century Scotland. McDowall and Milliken's planter sons and grandsons served as MP's, patrons of parishes, rectors of Glasgow University and took a leading part in local and national affairs. Accolades and epitaphs still persist, promoting them as of noble pedigree, fine character, gallant, romantic, virtuous, talented, praise-worthy, full of zeal for the public good, and promoting the prosperity of Scotland. They continue to be celebrated, while their countless enslaved victims remain invisible and unrecorded.

**'My poor little Billie, the only comfort I have left, has smallpox' <sup>138</sup>**

Perhaps the biggest paradox in their hitherto secret lives involves the story of their youngest enslaved victims. Amongst the buying and selling of African adults for their plantations, they also ordered batches of Negro children, to replace the ongoing dead. Various children were also sent home, such as in late 1727, when McDowall wrote from Glasgow to St Kitts requesting two negro boys, one for a servant, and another as a playmate for his young son Billie. There is a personal irony which makes McDowall's indifference to these young children very difficult to comprehend. While he was buying, using, overworking, or shipping young Negro boys home, he was simultaneously pandering over the condition of his own ten-year-old son Billie, the future William McDowall of Castle Semple and Garthland.

**'I desire you get me a good handsome Negro boy about 10 years old sent to Glasgow for my kinsman' <sup>139</sup>**

One of Milliken's slave boys had been captured in West Africa aged about nine, separated for ever from his family and friends, and carried to the coast. We may call him Andrew, one of many Scottish names given to their slave boys <sup>140</sup>. Andrew was then sold to a slave ship and carried in dreadful conditions across the Atlantic to St Kitts. He may have changed hands several times before James Milliken set eyes upon him, probing and prodding the naked boy to gauge his value. Andrew's travels were still far from over. In January 1728 William McDowall wrote from Glasgow to St Kitts, asking Milliken to ship the boy to Scotland, for the use of his cousin Patrick McDowall of Crichton.

We will probably never know if Andrew had the mental and physical stamina to survive the trauma of a second Atlantic crossing, let alone the Scottish climate. However if we remember anything at all about the hitherto secret lives of Colonel William McDowall and Major James Milliken, we may remember the negro boy 'Andrew'.

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<sup>137</sup> See Hamilton, D.J., 'Scotland, the Caribbean & the Atlantic World 1750-1820' (2005).

<sup>138</sup> Col. Wm McD Glasgow to Dr Thos Gibson, Angus, Jan 1729 (W)

<sup>139</sup> Col. Wm McD Edinburgh to Maj. JM St Kitts Dec 8<sup>th</sup> 1727 (W)

<sup>140</sup> eg List of 200 of Wm McD's St Kitts slaves (plus cattle and chattels) in the mid 18<sup>th</sup> century, in Hector, W., 'Selections from the Judicial Records of Renfrewshire' (1876), Vol.1, p. 304; includes slaves named Andrew, Glasgow & Scotland.

**Abbreviations**

(CS) Castle Semple; (McD) McDowall; (JM) James Milliken; (NLS) National Library of Scotland; (NAS) National Archives of Scotland; (CSP) Calendar of State Papers; (W) Letter book of Col. Wm. McD of CS, NLS 301/107 c.1726-35; (D) Letters from Capt. David McD, London, to Col. Wm. McD, Glasgow 1728-33, NAS GD 237/12/35; (S) Stapleton Mss., John Rylands University Library, Manchester, transcripts by Brian Littlewood.

This brief account of the 'lost' lives of McDowall and Milliken is part of ongoing research using transcripts of more than 400 letters, and a book is forthcoming.