GENERAL EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

On Friday 8 April 1831, Sir Walter Scott recorded in his journal that he had been taking his leave of his friend Major John Scott, who 'being afflicted with a distressing asthma has resolved upon selling his house of Ravenswood which he had dressed up with much neatness and going abroad to Jamaica'. This intriguing entry looks both backwards and forwards. On the one hand, the West Indies were far from being unknown territory for the Scots over the previous century and a half. On the other, going there for one's health would have seemed bizarre in that earlier period, when the Caribbean vied with India for unhealthiness. Seeking a superior, health-giving climate was to become much more a characteristic of the later nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

When Robert Burns was famously saved from heading for Jamaica by the success of his Kilmarnock edition in 1786, he had already written a song, 'Will ye go to the Indies, my Mary?', in which he invited Mary Campbell 'to leave auld Scotia's shore' and join him. 'But a' the charms o' the Indies', he wrote, 'Can never equal thine'. In 1792, another of his amours, Nancy Craig McLehose, sailed for Kingston to join her husband, only to find that he had taken a black mistress. These literary references indicate that, if the Indies had its charms, it also had its Scots population.

Yet the role of Scots in the Caribbean has never featured strongly in the historical literature. When we think of the Scots overseas, we have tended to concentrate on North America, or India, or perhaps New Zealand. We often imagine that the Scots were attracted by terrain and climates which they found fairly familiar, like Nova Scotia or Otago. In the past, the literature has also focused primarily on the 'long nineteenth century', the era from the time of the Clearances to the wave of migration that preceded the First World War. Douglas Hamilton sets out to show us how far the Scots were also active in the West Indies in the eighteenth century.

Using a wide range of records in the Caribbean, the United States and the United Kingdom, he examines the Scottish social and economic contexts from which they departed, the conditions, charming or not, in which they found themselves in the West Indies and the various ways in which they participated in the life of the islands in that period. They were already following a considerable tradition of Scots migration within the Atlantic world, reflecting the growing power of Glasgow and other Scots towns in the trades of North America and the Caribbean. Their education and their traditional specialisms gave them a considerable role in plantation management, in merchant activity, in the military and in professions like the medical. They became active in local politics, interacted with the slave population and with other colonists, and also repatriated cash to oil activities at home, in developing estates, expanding mercantile companies, funding education and paying their way into metropolitan politics.

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It is an important story which contributes greatly to an understanding of the richness and diversity, as well as the infamy, of the undertakings of the Scots overseas, including their involvement in slavery and the slave trade. It contributes to an understanding of their astonishing role in the Atlantic economy, as well as to their search for the 'main chance' when they returned to Britain. This book also contributes to an understanding of white ethnicity, of the manner in which Scots often held on to ethnic and cultural forms that rendered them distinctive, sometimes emphasising their Scottishness, while also seeking to blend into their environment when it suited them. In all of these respects, Hamilton's work will stand as a landmark in the developing understanding of Scots in contexts, like the Caribbean, which have so far been little studied.

John M. MacKenzie