REVIEW


Dr. Eric Graham’s most recent effort entitled *Burns and the Sugar Plantocracy of Ayrshire* is as useful an addition to Scottish Enlightenment-era literature as it is to local Ayrshire history. Yet, the book may also serve as a functional tool for those scholars examining the ‘Black Atlantic’ through a Scottish lens. Building on previous works (including ‘Abolitionists and Apologists: Scotland’s Slave Trade Stories’, *Discover NLS*, 6, Winter 2007, 20–22 and ‘Black People in Scotland during the Slavery Era’, *Scottish Local History*, 71, 2007, 11–16), Graham’s monograph is complemented with several illustrations (nearly one for every two pages) and six helpful appendices that map out the lineages of the families involved.

While the author’s overview of the participating Ayrshire families is sometimes *Numbers-esque*, his use of contemporary sources is to be commended. In particular, Graham utilizes an impressive collection of private letters from the various family estates. As the centerpiece of Graham’s research, these correspondences flesh out the zeniths and nadirs of Ayrshire’s Hamiltons, Fergussons, Hunter Blairs and Cunynghames; a group who won their riches in Jamaica and St. Kitts. The author’s meticulous recounting of the travails of these tobacco lords and sugarcane ladies, and his ability to locate the pulse of the greed-driven social circle in which they thrived are the central strengths of *Burns and the Sugar Plantocracy*. 
The work also brings to life the various career trajectories of certain young Scottish men-of-means who – given the worrisome survival rates in the ‘white man’s grave’ – chose to gamble in the West Indies as physicians or, more commonly, in administrative positions such as plantation overseers and bookkeepers. By virtue of such examination, Graham succeeds in exposing the regrettable hands-on role that some Scots had in those plantation economies born of the odious slave trade. The plainness of Scottish complicity subtly peaks out of the corners of Graham’s clever narrative.

Refreshingly, the author also affords the slaves their own agency within the Scottish-run plantations. Making the most of a precious few sources that actually mention the slaves themselves, Graham is able to convey the cold, matter-of-fact manner in which the ‘property’ were regarded by their owners. (p. 54) The author, however, might have made more of the Scottish-centric Abolitionist movement than he did. To this end, some of the more compelling footnotes might have worked better in the narrative proper. (p. 58) Readers also have to wait until the conclusion before a meaningful discussion on Scottish distaste for the slave trade is undertaken. Still, it should be noted that the concluding review of Inveraray’s Zachary Macaulay, anti-slavery meetings in Glasgow, and fugitive-slave/Burns-aficionado Frederick Douglass makes for one of the book’s more engaging sections. (pp. 94–8)

Perhaps the monograph’s main weakness was the author’s choice for a title. Where the work is strong on ‘sugar’ and ‘plantocracy’, it is rather light on ‘Burns’. And when the Bard does appear, Graham often chooses conjecture over content. While the benefit of having Burns’ name in the title needs no explanation, its inclusion has exploited the limitations of the study. Specifically, Graham attempts to massage Burns into his study under a ‘what if Burns had gone?’ approach: the author queries how ‘Rab the humanist’ might have coped with the reality of slavery had he gone to Jamaica as planned. (p. 19
and p. 94) Unfortunately, at least for the title in question, Burns stayed in Scotland, and the too few and tenuous references to him throughout the book do not fulfill the promise of the cover. Indeed, Burns’ ‘Ode, Sacred to the Memory of Mrs. Oswald of Auchencruive’ was perhaps the only tangible example of the poet’s relations with any of the Ayrshire Plantocracy. (pp. 61–2) Nevertheless, while he may have failed to pin the Bard to the story, Graham has provided plenty of reasons to consider *Burns and the Sugar Plantocracy of Ayrshire* a highly readable account of an under-explored area of Scottish and Caribbean history.

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