

INTRODUCTION

It is a privilege to learn about racism instead of experiencing it
your whole life.

Sign at a Black Lives Matter rally,
June 2020

I AM AN HEIR OF Britain's slavery past. It marks my mind, my culture, my DNA. I am a descendant of the owners of enslaved people, and of traders in them; of a campaigner for the abolition of slavery and of an enslaved African woman. Like me, the Britain in which I grew up is a place shaped, in no small way, by transatlantic and plantation slavery and the many industries that thrived on them. I am part of the legacy that lives on, economically and culturally, visible not just in grand houses and old statues, but in the systemic and street-level racism that afflicts our country today.

Like most of us, I am a mess of differing inheritances, but the person I present to the world is pretty much the one formed by the wealthy people of my ancestry. As a white, middle-class Briton I am so shielded from everyday racism I rarely notice it. While most of the wealth my ancestors accrued was long ago spent, the privilege garnered from it still protects and supports me. The history of Britain and slavery, worked and glossed to make it distant and irrelevant, is the foundation of my comfortable, liberal life.

My family keeps archives. When I read the papers there that documented our forebears' activities in the Caribbean, most of them carefully annotated by my historian grandfather, I knew that the story they contained had to be brought to the light. I felt it wrong to keep the history from the descendants of the enslaved people who had worked and died on our plantations. Most of the

wider family, including my own children, knew nothing of this past. What I discovered profoundly challenged my assumptions about who I was, about the history I had been taught, and about Britain today.

The papers make it possible to untangle some of what happened in Tobago and Jamaica. But a huge hole will always remain where the accounts of the 950 or so people who were enslaved by my ancestors should sit.² We have the direct testimony of just one of them. That fact renders this only half a narrative, one that hardly deserves to be called history. So, it is the story of my mother's family, the Fergussons, their partners the Hunter Blairs and the Britain that, not so long ago, tolerated the enslaving of human beings for profit. It is also about the legacy, still toxic, still harming people, 180 years after emancipation in the British Caribbean.

The Fergussons were wealthy, well-educated and influential. They were connected to some of the most powerful in the land, including the politicians on either side of the forty-year-long public debate over abolition of slavery and the slave trade. The individuals who I have come to know through their letters were humane and generous in their dealings in Britain. It is more than uncomfortable to realise that, were it possible to erase their West Indian business ventures, and the great moral disaster that enabled those, you might find some likeable, even admirable people.

As slave plantation owners, the Fergussons were ordinary. They only emerge from the mass of people who invested in this way because of the survival of these records. Like many, my ancestors were absentee owners, with one brief exception. They did not make any great fortune by the standards of the time. The profits they accrued from sugar did not build grand houses or finance a nineteenth-century industrial empire. The British government made more in taxes on the Fergusson West Indies business than the family did in profits.

When the Fergussons invested in land and enslaved people in the West Indies they were doing something ordinary, for people with money, or the means to borrow it, at that time. The compensation records of 1834 list 46,000 slave owners who were rewarded for giving up their 'property' at abolition. Among those are thirty-seven other Fergusons or Fergussons who owned enslaved people: some of them got much richer. Much of what happened at Rozelle, the Jamaica plantation my family co-owned from 1769 to 1848 (and then owned

alone till 1875), is average too. The family papers provide some explanations for what happened there and in Tobago: ignorance, bad managers, financial and social pressures, the normalisation of the racist brutality of the plantations, the exigencies of familial duty. Horrified and ashamed of what our ancestors did, we cling to these excuses. But they are not of much use to anyone.

Tens of thousands of Britons profited directly from transatlantic and plantation slavery: many of them ordinary people who did something extraordinarily wrong, understood now as a crime against humanity. Clearly they thought of it differently. But they were not so different. As I got to know my ancestors, I had to acknowledge that the choices they made were ones I might have made too had I lived then. This book attempts to show how that came to be and why the wrong they and the others like them did is downplayed and misunderstood – a history abused by those who did best out of it and a legacy still blighting our society today.

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The many industries dependent on the trade in enslaved people and slavery-run plantations accounted for 12 per cent of British GDP at the start of the nineteenth century.³ Yet the enslaving side of this was an offshore enterprise, kept 5,000 miles away in the Americas: by the 1770s it was becoming impossible to own or be an enslaved person in Britain itself.* But even if the plantations had been in Perthshire and Sussex, I suspect many white Britons would still find a way to deny the relevance of what was done, to discount the lives of 3.25 million Africans⁴ and their uncounted descendants that we squandered for profit. The story is too recent, its legacy too awful, for us to accept it for what it was – an inexcusable crime, the ‘original sin’ of the British Empire, as the historian Simon Schama puts it. The enslavement of Africans, he continues, was a necessary condition of the success of the Empire – the stain left, ‘no amount of self-congratulation at its eventual abolition can altogether wash away’.⁵

* The *Somerset v Stewart* case in England in 1772 ruled that an owner could not forcibly transport black people back to chattel slavery, though it did not make slavery illegal. The Joseph Knight case in Scotland of 1778 went further, deciding that slavery was inconsistent with Scots law.

I grew up, like most white British people of my age, ignorant of Britain's history of slavery. Why wasn't this crucial period in the forming of modern Britain part of the knowledge we were given to address the world? We learnt a lot about the origins of the First World War. There was just a great empty space around the 250 years of exploitation in the British American and Caribbean colonies. This hole was not just in my mind, but in all of mainstream British culture, from literature and art to film. Why? American twentieth-century literature addressed slavery and its legacy, yet the United States emancipated its enslaved people hardly three decades after we did.⁶

The enslaving of Africans laid the foundations – political, economic, cultural – of the Britain in which I grew up, and which my family played a part in ruling. Yet all I knew by the end of my expensive education was that William Wilberforce inspired the British government to abolish the slave trade in 1807, and that that was something of which we could all be very proud. This triumph, it was implied, cancelled out all that we had done with and to the people we enslaved. Even more, 1807 was the birth-year of the notion of morally exceptional Britain, the best-intentioned imperial power that the world has ever known. As the great Caribbean historian of empire, Eric Williams, wrote in 1964: 'The British historians wrote almost as if Britain had introduced Negro slavery solely for the satisfaction of abolishing it.'⁷

The fact that I had no idea of the date when Britain actually did abolish slavery in its Caribbean colonies says much. I knew even less about what happened in those colonies after slavery was ended – another blank that carries on right through to the arrival of West Indians, as we called them, in the great whiteness of the English home counties where I grew up in the 1960s and 1970s. Like most young, middle-class Britons of that time, I did not really know anything at all until Bob Marley and Burning Spear entered my consciousness.

This great ignorance was a product of both shame and pride, I believe. The generations that went before us shaped and moulded the history into something they could live with. They offered themselves many consolations and reassurances. When historians writing in the mid-twentieth century briefly mention transatlantic slavery and Britain they often quote the then-fashionable philosopher Walter Benjamin: 'There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism.' Intellectualism, just

like patriotism, was and remains quick at providing mitigations and alibis for the unforgivable.

Debates about the morality of forcibly removing people from Africa were – as they still are – dissembled into discussions about the blame that might be shouldered instead by Africans for selling each other to the Europeans. Slavery's role in financing Britain's subsequent industrial growth was discounted. And what the historians could not swallow, they buried. The details of the massacre of the Africans on trading ships like the *Zong* were known, as was the account of the decades of rape by the respectable planter Thomas Thistlewood. There is much more in the records on the gross injustices that led to Samuel Sharpe's 'rebellion'* in Jamaica in 1831 and the insanely brutal retribution that followed the 'West Indian Mutiny' – the uprising of labourers and smallholders around Jamaica's Morant Bay in 1865. But most mainstream, white twentieth-century historians skipped over these.

The British government's failings in Jamaica and other colonies after 1838 – the true date of the end of slavery in the British Caribbean – are perhaps the least told story of all. The history of Britain's Caribbean colonies after emancipation is a story of decades of gross neglect, careless and deliberate. It is not the benevolent imperialism about which we were taught. The colonial period perpetuated the injustice that went before and ensured that the racism of slavery would continue to blight lives today. We did know: missionaries wrote reports, economists visited and deplored the situation. Joseph Chamberlain, Secretary of State for the Colonies, looked at the desperate poverty of the Caribbean colonies in 1898 and promised action to alleviate 'the Empire's darkest slum'. But though people of those islands came to fight in our wars, and do our most menial jobs, we did not act to help them as fellow-Britons, or fellow-human beings.

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Until June 2020 and the rise in mainstream media coverage of the Black Lives Matter movement, most white Britons, however educated, have hardly thought for a moment about this history. 'Why can't they just get over it, move on, live in the twenty-first century?' is a

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* Accounts from Britain's colonial era frequently use words like 'rebellion' or 'mutiny' for a civil uprising or insurrection.

complaint I heard a lot that year. We know we are ignorant, but we reject with ease the notion that racism against black people is itself born of the transatlantic slavery era, of the beliefs we acquired to make the enslavement of people on the grounds of their colour morally acceptable. If you sift through the eighteenth-century arguments, philosophical and theological, over slavery you will come up with an inescapable conclusion. As Christian people who believed in the rights of man, my ancestors and many like them could not have owned actual human beings. They had to believe their 'property' was something less than human in order to justify the act.

In many ways, the class that rules Britain today is not so different from the one that profited from slavery and delayed its abolition. The political descendants of those who defended slavery now deny or discount its continuing legacy. This mindset refuses, too, to accept that the modern problems of peoples and nations that endured slavery under European colonisers might be caused by that traumatic history. It rejects the health and mental health statistics, the arrest and imprisonment rates, the evidence of barriers in education and work: any excuse will be found for all these except that of racially based inequality. One hard fact illustrates a lot of what goes wrong in our systems: while young white British men are more likely than any other group to report suicidal thoughts, the group most likely to actually kill themselves are young black men.⁸

Any explicatory narrative other than slavery and its legacy of racism and poverty will do, it seems. In June 2020 Britain's prime minister Boris Johnson called for a 'change of narrative', for black people to lose their 'sense of discrimination and victimisation'.⁹ That seems both naïve and cruel to people who have clearly been discriminated against and victimised. Johnson's statement came just as the Office for National Statistics revealed that four times as many British people of 'black ethnicity' were dying of Covid-19 as white people.¹⁰ (In the United States, 24 per cent of deaths by August 2020 had been black people, who make up 13 per cent of the population.¹¹) While some of the British, from bus drivers to doctors and nurses, were infected as they did their jobs, most appear to have died because of previous poor health or lack of resources: because of structural racism.*

* No genetic factor explaining a higher susceptibility to Covid-19 among people with African origins had been identified by the time this book went to press.

The ignorance and the cover-up of racism today are crimes as notable in their way as slavery itself, and their effects on our modern world seem as pernicious. They start with the denial of black people's access to the materials of their own history as well as the interpretation of it, which has allowed the racist slurs of the slavery period to survive and flourish. Modern racism thrives on those ideas: while researching this book I heard every slur and falsehood put about by the pro-slavery lobby during the abolition debates two centuries ago repeated by people in Britain today.

During and after slavery, the British empire used racism as a key organising mechanism. Today, among the poisonous detritus of that empire, is the fact that skin colour is still used to predetermine a human being's honesty, ability and intelligence – their value to society. All you can do with such nonsense and bigotry is take it as proof that those who say that British transatlantic slavery is an era concluded are wrong. We who took possession of the story continue to perpetuate a slavery of the mind that is as powerful and damaging to the victims of it today as it has ever been.

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'Silence is violence'. In June 2020 I saw a poster that said that, made for a Black Lives Matter rally held in Holyrood Park, in Edinburgh. This was a peaceful, well-tempered event addressed by, among others, Sir Geoff Palmer, a retired professor of brewing science. Sir Geoff came to Britain in 1954, aged fourteen, to join his mother, who had arrived on the *Windrush* to help fill the need for workers as the country recovered from the war.

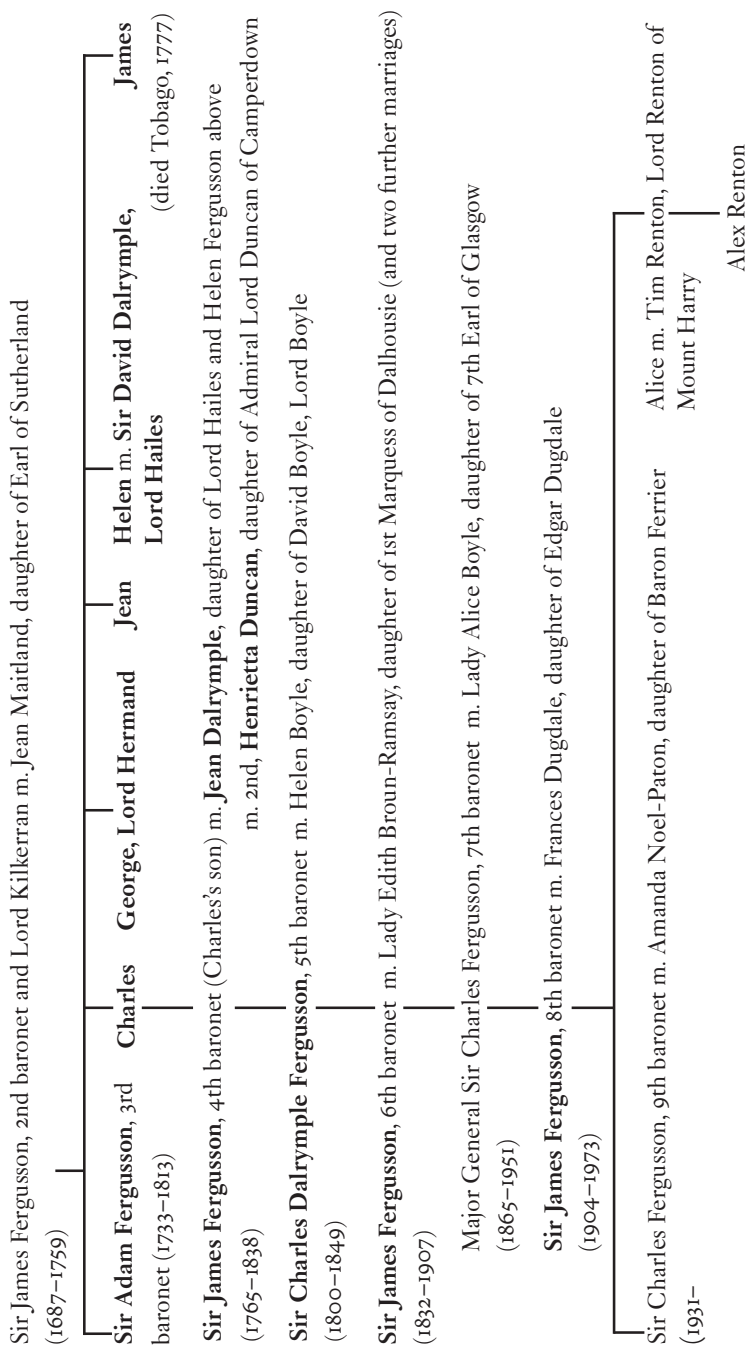
Now aged eighty, Sir Geoff is well known in Scotland for his personal campaign for his country to recognise how much of its wealth comes from slavery. He has spent his retirement touring the country and explaining, with patience and good humour, the history that is in fact in front of Scottish people's noses. A re-plaquer, not a statue-breaker, he puts better than anyone else why it is worth telling this story truthfully. 'You can't change the past,' he says, 'but you can change its consequences.'

Is silence violence? The challenge is that merely not being, or not considering oneself, racist actually props up racism. That notion was enraging some people during the summer of 2020. Their contention

was that being passive was a human right, to call their stance collusion was an aggression. For my part, I feel that, having found out what was in the family archive, silence would have been wrong, a complicity. If my family can admit our history, we can do a right. We can change a consequence; even, in a small way, help steer the long story of transatlantic slavery onto a different path. As the historian David Olusoga said in late 2020, acknowledging slavery and the violence of a part of our past is not ‘almost treasonous’ – as some people have indicated to him – but constructive and mature. ‘Britain is a wonderful country. But like every country that ever existed it did some good and it did some bad and if we only focus on the good we delude ourselves . . . We need a history that functions for a country that’s 14 per cent BAME.’¹²

When I first started thinking about this book I spoke to many people about what they would like to read. How could I, a stereotype of a white liberal journalist, ripe with post-imperial guilt, best exploit my privilege – and my access to these papers? ‘No more slavery porn!’ said one interviewee of African-Caribbean origin. She had had enough of reading about deaths on plantations and slave ships; she had had enough of white liberal breast-beating too. ‘What I’m interested in is how you – your family – are going to heal yourselves. That is what is needed: for the white people to work out what they are going to do and be for the future.’

The Fergussons of Kilkerran



Offspring that are not relevant have been omitted; names in bold appear in this story.

CHAPTER I

IN THE FAMILY PAPERS

WHEN I WAS A CHILD we spent many holidays at my mother's family home, a grand but decaying old house in the Girvan valley of Ayrshire, south-west Scotland. Her family, the Fergussons, had lived in the valley for more than 500 years: the house, Kilkerran, was a living museum of the preceding generations and of their adventures. The Fergussons had roamed far, 'serving the Empire': soldiers and politicians stared down from their portraits at us, their books were on the library shelves. The rooms where we played – there were more empty and disused than actually lived in – were full of their trophies: medals, uniforms, swords (ceremonial and real), stuffed animals, strange hats all jumbled up with the toys of long-ago childhoods. We were steeped in the family history; we learnt to revere it and those serious-faced ancestors. They did not seem very distant: the adults talked of them and their feats and faults as though they had just departed.

The attic floor was servants' rooms, from the days when the house had a dozen or more of them. In the early 1940s it housed evacuees from the German bombing of Glasgow and Clydeside. Now it was abandoned, a continual battle being waged against the dry rot that threatened the roof. Heaps of junk and broken furniture were piled inside the damp rooms. One rainy day we discovered two half-length coats of chain mail in a former maid's room. We tried to put them on. They were incredibly heavy – it was impossible to pull them over your head. The only way was to crawl into the tunnel of rusty links and then try to stand up.

My grandfather laughed when we told him we'd found suits of armour from the Crusades. He was a gentle and kind person, a historian and journalist – not very like his soldiering forebears. We

did not see him much; during the week he was in Edinburgh, where he ran Scotland's national records office. At home he was often shut away in his cigarette smoke-filled study 'working on the family papers'. These were a vast trove. The most important, dating from the seventeenth century, were kept in a thick-walled room at the house's ancient heart. Being shown round the strong-room by my grandfather – who told a good ghost story – was a holiday treat.

No, he told us, it was not armour but chain mail, and not from the Crusades but much more recent – 1839, sixty-five years before he was born. The suits had been made for the Eglinton Tournament. It was a huge fancy-dress party, he said, where families from around Ayrshire, and from all over Britain, came together to pretend to be medieval knights and joust at each other on horseback as in the olden days.

'With real spears?' we asked.

'Oh yes,' he said, 'it was dangerous. And very expensive. Sadly it was not a success: it rained for the whole weekend.'

Years later I found an old paperback book about the tournament titled *The Knight and the Umbrella*, by Ian Anstruther. Quotes from my grandfather's enthusiastic review for *The Bookman* magazine fill the back cover. Anstruther tells how, at the dawn of the industrial age, a group of wealthy aristocrats met at Eglinton Castle in Ayrshire to re-stage a spectacle of the height of feudal times. The novels of Sir Walter Scott, full of chivalry and romance, were an inspiration.

The tournament was the idea of Archibald Montgomerie, 13th Earl of Eglinton, a spoilt twenty-seven-year-old aesthete from an ancient Ayrshire family. He had been infuriated at the lack of traditional ceremony at the coronation of Queen Victoria the previous year. He resolved to put all that right, to remind a swiftly modernising Britain of the greatness of its past and the splendour of its nobility. This fancy was to cost him £40,000, perhaps the equivalent of £3.5 million today.¹

The knights, some of the best-known playboys of the era, bought horses, trained them and practised jousting with lances. They spent fortunes on outfits for themselves, their horses and their wives. Meanwhile a great medieval fairground, with grandstands, encampments for the knights and their retainers, pavilions, marquees, lists and tiltyards, was set up outside Eglinton's brand new Gothic castle. Rehearsals were held and all was set for a weekend in August 1839.

The new-fangled railways laid on special trains and a crowd of more than 100,000 turned up. To get a ticket for the grandstand you had to promise you were a supporter of the Conservative Party. Queen Victoria expressed regret that she could not attend.

Lord Eglinton, 'Lord of the Tournament', wearing armour that was gold-plated, or gold-painted, was escorted by a troop of halberdiers. Prince Louis Napoleon (later Emperor Napoleon III) and the Duchess of Somerset ('The Queen of Beauty') dressed up to join the opening procession. Prince Louis's presence was particularly pleasing to Archie Eglinton. As he liked to point out, his ancestor Gabriel Montgomerie had managed to kill King Henri II of France – by mistake – in a joust at a tournament in 1559. Montgomerie, who was captain of King Henri's Scots Guards, skewered him through the eye when a splinter from his lance entered the king's helmet.



Archibald, 13th Earl of Eglinton, dressed as the Lord of the Tournament,
Henry Corbould c. 1840.

Nineteen knights made themselves ready, each of them attended by esquires, pages and men-at-arms. My grandfather's great-uncle, John Fergusson, acted as esquire to 'The Knight of the Ram', who, under the armour, was the Hon. Captain Henry Gage. It was nineteen-year-old John's chain mail hauberk into which we had been trying to clamber.

Interest was intense: the newspapers covered the preparations, reported the worries of the police over crowds and the possibility someone might be killed, and then mocked mercilessly when it all went wrong, in the most traditionally Scottish way. 'The lists in the park of Eglinton Castle at this time exhibit the appearance of a pond,' reported *The Times* as the tournament weekend began. The visitors had to wade through mud for a mile or more to get to the site.

A gale of bitterly cold rain drenched the vast crowd, flooding the royal box and the grandstand and knocking down the banqueting tent. The spectacle of men on horses charging at each other turned out to be quite dull, so much did the mud slow the action down. There was just one injury to the knights: Lord Stafford's son, Edward Jerningham, sprained his wrist. The whole event was a disaster. The *Spectator* magazine titled its report 'Eglintoun Emasculated Mopstick Middle Age Recovery Society'.² Queen Victoria pronounced the tournament 'the greatest absurdity'.³ The age of chivalry had had its last blast.

The Knight and the Umbrella, published in 1963, sets the story well in the time; it laughs kindly at Eglinton and his friends' quixotic crusade against the dullness of modern, democratising Britain. Ian Anstruther, the author, reprints the invoices from the one man who did well out of the tournament, Britain's last remaining armourer, Samuel Pratt. Just the hire of a suit of armour from him cost £60 – £5,300 today.⁴

Anstruther never questions the source of all the money spent on the three-day wash-out. The answer to that was in part in the papers on which my grandfather worked. Our family, and most of the neighbours, cousins and friends who took part in the tournament – Lords Glenlyon, Cassilis and Airlie, the families of Hamilton, Dallas, Fairlie,⁵ Johnstone, Crawford, Montgomerie, Montgomery, Kennedy, Oswald, Cunningham, Balfour, Dundas, Campbell, Balcarres Lindsay, Hunter Blair, Wemyss – had made or added to their fortunes quite recently through an industry that was not at all romantic or honourable.

The same was true for the families of many of the English knights and esquires – Kents, Gages, de la Poer Beresfords, Howard de Waldens, Staffords and Seymours – who performed that day. The 250-year-old enterprise that was the source of some of their money, plantation slavery in the British Caribbean, had finally ended just a year before the tournament's opening day.

Some of the families, like the Fergussons, Hamiltons and Hunter Blairs, still had slave plantations when the Act abolishing slavery was passed in 1833. They had got a windfall as a result. The British government had brought about the end of slavery in the Caribbean colonies by the simple expedient of buying off the 46,000 slave-owners: paying them a sum per person owned by way of compensation 'for loss of property'. The enslaved people received nothing,

The Hunter Blairs and the Fergussons, who jointly owned 198 enslaved people on their Jamaica plantation, received a compensation payout in 1836 of £3,591, eight shillings and eightpence: a little over £3 million today.⁶ The total cost to the British taxpayer was £20 million, perhaps £17 billion today, though some analyses put it much higher.⁷

In the Caribbean, even now, people who are the descendants of the enslaved Africans the British imported ask what was actually done with the profits their ancestors laboured and died to make? Did any good things come about? The Eglinton Tournament, gilt armour, velvet caparisons, trained horses and twelve-foot lances designed to shatter in a way that would not injure the jousters, is a part of the answer.

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In the old servants' hall

The history is kept down in the guts of the house. Only three of the five floors of Kilkerran are lived in now, the basement and the huge attics essentially abandoned. In the old servants' dining hall tiers of shelves rise from dust and pigeon droppings. On them are boxes, ledgers and files containing the paperwork of four centuries of the family's business affairs, political machinations, imperial appointments and military exploits.

There are diaries of campaigning aunts and grandmothers (suffragism and Zionism), of grandfathers and great-uncles who were subalterns and generals during the imperial wars in Crimea, Sudan,

South Africa, Flanders and Burma. There are photo albums, commonplace books, letters from children at boarding school and notes from prime ministers. There are a lot of bills too.

My grandfather was the last man with deep knowledge of what the shelves contained. He died in 1973. He was Sir James Fergusson, an eminent journalist and historian who was for twenty years in charge, as Keeper of the Records, of all Scotland's historical archive. His own family's archive was his chief hobby, and the source of several of his published books.

In the family, the achievements and adventures of the forebears were much discussed. The Carribean history was not. 'It never came up when we were young,' my mother says now. Much later, when planning to visit Jamaica and the Rozelle plantation, my grandfather discussed the slave-owning past. He told his children that though, like many families in Scotland we had owned people as slaves, it was only briefly and we had made no money. My generation knew nothing about it at all.

My grandfather was a good and kind man and a meticulous, old-fashioned scholar. There was deep shame in the papers, and it called to question the origins of the family's narrative of itself as philanthropic, disinterested servants of Britain and the Empire, champions of liberal causes. I think my grandfather believed that full knowledge of this past was not a burden his heirs should carry.

He shared only a little of what he knew of the Fergusson slavery enterprises with the closest family members and they felt able to discount the significance. His brother Bernard, a soldier and writer who became Lord Ballantrae, published a memoir in 1979 where he stated – with some relief – that his ancestor Sir Adam Fergusson only became a slave owner through inheritance. Embarrassed, Sir Adam 'rid himself of the Jamaica estate as soon as he reasonably could'. If only that were true. In fact Sir Adam backed his brother's purchase of half the Rozelle sugar estate in eastern Jamaica, and then managed and profited from it for the next forty-three years, until his death in 1813.

The story was close to my grandfather: it was his grandfather, also called Sir James Fergusson, who finally did rid the family of the Jamaica estate, but not until 1875. (This Sir James died while visiting Jamaica in 1907, a victim of the great earthquake that all but flattened Kingston.) As eighth baronet of Kilkerran, chief of the clan Fergusson, my grandfather was proud of the family history. He, his children

and grandchildren and other relatives carried the eighteenth-century ancestors' names: James, Alexander, Helen, Christian, George, Adam and Charles. In the Caribbean, on the plantations, it was the custom to delete the real names of the newly-purchased enslaved Africans, giving them European replacements. At Rozelle, some were given these same Fergusson family Christian names.

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The papers don't give up their secrets easily. Heavy foolscap sheets of deeds and contracts unfold with a creak, resisting any attempt to scan them. The lighter paper used for letters and notes may crack into fragments that will blow away on a breath. Water blurs a sentence just as it seems about to give up some meaning – tropical or sea damp, or spray from the hoses of the firefighters who saved the papers and the house from a fire some decades ago. The outside of some bundles is black from the smoke of that misfortune.

The cursive italic is often crammed on the page, as though paper was a hideous expense. But that cannot have been the problem, because the sentences go on and on and round in circles. Full stops are rare things. And while my ancestors and their correspondents turn their phrases with elegant, ecclesiastical rhythms they are averse to saying anything briefly. Squeezing meaning from the script can be eye-aching, brain-numbing work.

Some of the documents are more plain. A few tell you things with all the clarity of a punch in the stomach. None more so than the plantation accounts books, with their cold lists of the 'increase' and 'decrease' in human beings. More detail comes in the inventories periodically made of all the sellable assets on the plantations. The first of these I saw was in a bundle that my ancestral uncle Sir Adam Fergusson filed away in January 1781, with this covering note:

The Within Letters are my only Apology for engaging in that unfortunate business of Tobago. Those who do not know what it is to be anxious to procure an establishment for a beloved Brother will think them none. Those who do, though they may not think them a sufficient Excuse for the Folly, will perhaps allow that they extenuate it.

Inside, among the letters, is a formal document titled 'Inventory and appraisement of Carrick Plantation in the Parish of St John, the property of Sir Adam Fergusson Baronet' and dated 8 November 1777. Eleven foolscap pages follow, bound with thread and laid out as an accounts book. It has been drawn up by a professional and signed by other Tobago landowners, all Scots. It lists everything of any value, from the rooms of the house Sir Adam's brother James had built in Tobago down to the carpentry tools, James's clothing, cutlery and the teapot. But the most valuable things are listed on the first page, starting with the land and its crop. Next comes 'Buildings' and then 'Slaves'.

That section begins with the title 'House' and five names: Emoinda, Rachael, Monimia, Sophia and Peggy. The last three have their roles stated: washerwoman, cook and sick nurse. Emoinda and Rachael were maids, perhaps. In the next column these humans' value is estimated: Emoinda at £65, Rachael at £57 and Peggy, the nurse, £90.

Peggy is nearly the most valuable person on the plantation – valued higher than Scotland, the carpenter (£80) or Solomon, one of the watchmen (£81). Quashie, listed as one of the two 'drivers' – field team leaders, or bosses – is priced at £108. The inventory lists a total of 79 people, most of them under the heading 'Field'. Their total value is £4,198 – nearly £7 million today. They have no surnames and only a few names sound remotely West African, though most of them would have been born there. Many are given plain Scottish names – the Fergusson family's first names are there – or borrowings from literature: Romeo, Polydore, Daphne, Nero, Hamlet and Othello. You imagine the white men were aware of the ironies of renaming an enslaved African Othello: not a proud Moorish general but a field-hand picking cotton, his body and life valued at £80.

When I read this list I felt nauseous. The last heading is 'Children' – just five of them, judged too young to work until over six years old: Billy, Johney, Colin, Jeanie and Flora. Billy has a value of £25, Colin just £8 and the others £10. Immediately below their names on the page the next category gives a context, some evidence of how a child's life in that world was measured. It is of the animals: '1 horse – £40, 2 mules – £58, 2 cows – £30, 3 calves – £12'.

And so, in the papers in the old dining hall, I realised that my ancestors were indeed plantation owners in the British slave colonies: farmers of human beings. As the abolitionists of the 1790s pointed out, their profits were directly related to the levels of misery they imposed on the people they owned. My ancestors cannot be called murderers: what they and their paid managers did was legal then.* However we view them today, they were, by the standards of their class and the time, considered moral and progressive men. My grandfather was clearly appalled by some of the detail in the papers. In a 1972 letter to his son Adam, enclosing some excerpts of his ancestors' correspondence about the Tobago plantation, he writes of the 'horror' one must feel at reading them. But he goes on to call the principal slave-owning ancestor, Sir Adam Fergusson, third baronet of Kilkerran, 'a highly civilised man in the last civilised age the world has yet known'.

The Fergussons were Christians, liberal-minded politicians, friends of the philosophers and economists of the 'Scottish Enlightenment'. But they enslaved people, traded in them and their children and opposed the end of slavery. When full abolition came at last to the British Empire in 1838, they became wealthier as a result. This story is about how that happened, and what it means for us – me, my family and all of us who profited from the transatlantic slavery industry – today.

* Murder, mutilation or rape of an enslaved person by a free one was not an offence in Jamaica until 1788, though a suit for damage to property might be brought. In 1811 Arthur Hodge, a planter in the British Virgin Islands, was prosecuted and executed for torturing and killing Prosper, an enslaved man he owned, but the case is unique.