

## REVIEWS

David Alston, *Slaves and Highlanders: Silenced Histories of Scotland and the Caribbean*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2021; ISBN: 9781474427333; xviii, 381 pp.

The horrors and injustices of the British colonial past have been the subject of recent activism campaigns, including Rhodes Must Fall, Countering Colston, and opinions on Scottish-born colonial Governor of New South Wales, Lachlan Macquarie, to name but a few. Historian David Alston adds to these voices to further reveal the part that Scottish people had to play in the development, prosperity, and exploitation of enslaved Africans in Caribbean colonies. Alston implores these ‘hidden’ histories to be acknowledged attempting to correct the historiography, contributing to the knowledge of the academy and wider public. His unveiling of information is through the publication of this text and his extensive website, promoted as a research tool.

Scotland’s revered local processed food production of shortbread, marmalade, and even whisky requires sugar as a key ingredient. The interconnectivity of the production of sugar and the part that Scottish people had in the development, prosperity and participation in the slavery is at the heart of Alston’s mission to bring to light missing histories.

The book is divided into four main sections which deal with: The African Slave Trade, The English ‘Sugar Islands’ and Scots in the Expanding Empire; Northern Scots in Guyana on the ‘Last Frontier’ of Empire; Entangled Histories – The Legacies of slavery in the north of Scotland; and Reckonings.

Alston begins with a potted history of the circumstances of slavery before outlining the many Scottish players – the plantation owners, slave traders, auctioneers, and Africans. This chapter delivers case studies of families and their degree of affluence abroad. Of most interest is the description of anti-abolitionists and the anti-abolitionist movement within Scotland at the time and the variations of circumstances across the islands. These include those poorer Scots, evicted from their homelands then migrating to the Caribbean for residency and employment within the slave-based economy.

When describing the Northern Scots in Guyana, and the region of Demerara, once a Dutch colony, Alston specifies meticulous information on its governance and commerce. Alston offers plantation particulars of note to link the value put on its sugar outputs as well as its workforce. This information goes some way to offering slaves’ points of view with an analysis of conditions and relationships between the layers of personnel working within plantations.

Alston’s third part addresses the economic impact of slavery on Northern Scotland and hidden elements behind the tragedy. The presentation outlines globalisation at play in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, punctuated by war, volatility of the British Empire, and legislative impacts on landowners and producers. The flax-spinning industry and trade of Scottish woollens to the Caribbean is a surprising entry with material on how their profits from slavery. Indentured Scottish servants and illegitimate children from the Scots are also described and Alston states “The personal histories of some families are a fankle – lines so knotted to be almost impossible to untie” with complications of mixed-race offspring returning to the old country for education and

then continuing residence. It is a fascinating collection of family information and their contribution to Scotland.

In the Reckonings final section of the work, Alston critically reviews lack of institutional contrition, including the Free Church of Scotland in 2020 not wanting to be accountable for its organisation's past involvement, benefitting from slavery. There is also a reference to former Australian Prime Minister John Howard's lack of apology to First Nations Australians during his tenure. Although Alston does not accompany these views with the Commonwealth of Australia's 2007 Apology to Australia's Indigenous Peoples led by then Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd, he summarises well the inconsistencies and silences from Scottish institutions and corporations. The book ends with suggested models for the future although does not consider those such as community or citizen panels that have applied in cities such as Bristol in taking forward lessons from reducing the physical presence of reminders of slave-trader Edward Colston.

*Slaves and Highlanders* supports giving exposure to the hidden and shameful histories of Scotland that Alston was craving. The context across the British Empire of the period draws on experiences of New Zealand and Australia although leaving their own hidden histories for other volumes, instead bringing front and centre the abhorrent detail of the New World. A challenging, informative, and very visible read.

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