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Family Secrets: Questioning the Past

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'All that is solid melts into air'

Abstract: *I opened the antique chest I inherited from my great-great uncle Alexander and began unravelling the strands of his life as an evangelical minister in late nineteenth-century Italy, bringing to light the cover-ups in Britain's history of Empire and the ways in which a handful of families even today continue to shore up their wealth.*

Key words: family history, slavery, wealth, inheritance, landed aristocracy, cover-ups

Family history can draw scorn from academic historians. For me it has been revelatory, disrupting assumptions and revealing facts about my background that I could never have imagined. A popular subject in adult education classes since the 1970s, it has become an important form of popular involvement in history, contributing to the democratisation of historical knowledge and disrupting many of our assumptions about the past. When it comes to broader questions of change and continuity, says Tanya Evans, 'The construction of a family tree, the discovery of manifold secrets and lies, throw into question the solidity not only of the history of family, class relationships and power relations between men and women but also of the history of nation and empire. Each newly discovered document encourages the historian to add to or question the narrative so far' (Evans, 2011, p. 54).

My own experience bears this out. I signed up to the family history website, ancestry.co.uk. to find out more about Rev. Alexander Robertson (1846-1933), my great-great uncle. The only thing I knew about him was that he had worked in Italy as a Presbyterian minister and that the

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seventeenth-century Venetian chest I inherited from my mother had come from him – a wedding gift to my grandfather, his nephew. I inherited it along with a green linen-bound book, *Fra Paolo Sarpi: The Greatest of the Venetians*, its title and author, 'Alexander Robertson, D.D' embossed in gold on its cover. I had not yet opened it (Robertson, 1893).

My reasons for wanting to find out more about Alexander were straightforward enough. For the first time I had the time to do so, having recently left full-time academic work, and I already had a connection to Italy, having lived there for a year between 1972 and 1973 with my husband and baby son, just four years into our careers after graduating from Glasgow University. In Florence, we marched with striking factory workers and were introduced to Italian Marxist-philosopher-journalist Antonio Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks* (1971).

Back from Florence, I returned to my lectureship in sociology, now inspired by Gramsci's idea of 'hegemony', denoting a kind of political domination through consent that extends beyond the state into the realm of culture and ideas. I also helped my husband (a journalist at the *Glasgow Herald*, then BBC) produce an 'alternative' newspaper, *Glasgow News*. Set up in the spirit of the community journalism movement, the paper, produced each weekend in our flat, had a strong, social justice focus. I was also an active member of the Women's Liberation Movement, which in Glasgow had a strong socialist-feminist bent, unlike our Edinburgh sisters from whose 'radical feminism' we distanced ourselves! Heady days.

When I began my research on Alexander's life, I think I hoped to find some long-lost Italian relations. Certainly, by following in his footsteps through Italy, I'd be able to revisit favourite works of Renaissance art that featured in my Open University Art History course. But above all, I was curious. Why would a Presbyterian minister, son of a railway clerk, brought up in the Old Town of Edinburgh, spend most of his life in Italy, an overwhelmingly Catholic country?

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In the course of finding answers to this question, I was to make some startling discoveries, not least that the man responsible for my hero Antonio Gramsci's imprisonment and untimely death in 1937, Benito Mussolini, was Alexander's hero. He had even published a biography of the dictator. Worse still, the book was endorsed by the *Duce* himself with an affectionate dedication to Alexander handwritten on the frontispiece (Robertson, 1929).

Everything changed about a year into my research when I spotted a name in the family tree that I was constructing around Alexander. The name was Robert Cecil, Earl of Salisbury, chief minister of King James VI of Scotland, I of England, who foiled the Gunpowder Plot of 1605 and had its Catholic ringleaders executed. His father, Queen Elizabeth I's chief minister, William Cecil, had seen to Mary, Queen of Scots' beheading in 1587. The reason the name jumped out at me was that two mini-series were being broadcast on BBC TV at the time, one called *Elizabeth I's Secret Agents*, the other, *Gunpowder*. They starred, respectively, William and Robert Cecil!

A crash course in British dynastic history ensued, as revelations of ancestral connections to other illustrious families, including several dukes and duchesses, followed thick and fast. My simple curiosity about the life of an obscure Scottish minister turned into something entirely different - a pursuit described in my book, *The Legacy: A Memoir*, as 'following the money' (Barr, 2022, p. 3). As a result, Alexander became less a biographical subject and more a way into a narrative of linked historical events and people across an empire. A story emerged of how the British class system persists, underpinned by a landed aristocracy that continually renews itself with new sources of money, new blood, and frequently multiple marriages.

As a left-leaning sociologist, philosophy graduate and adult educator, I was intrigued, not to say dismayed, to find myself in such illustrious/notorious company. My parents were Labour

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Party voters, egalitarians and firm believers in the welfare state and power of education to change lives. The local 'non-denominational' Battlefield Primary and Queen's Park Senior Secondary Schools I attended, and the Glasgow district of Langside where I was brought up, were all named after the site of Mary, Queen of Scots' defeat by Protestant forces at the Battle of Langside in 1568. Fleeing to England and incarcerated by Elizabeth, she was eventually beheaded, thanks, I now know, to William Cecil's spy network which aimed precisely at preventing the Catholic Mary from ascending the English throne (Alford, 2008).

Tracing Alexander's life and career was the simplest part of my story. Born into a working-class family in Edinburgh, he gained an education at Moray House Normal School, then at the Royal High, followed by an arts degree at Edinburgh University, teacher training at Moray House, and training for the ministry through summer schools at Edinburgh's United Presbyterian Trinity Hall. Ordained in 1875 to St Margaret's Hope United Presbyterian Church in Orkney, six years later his wife's ill-health took them to San Remo, where she died and he re-married. His second wife, Julia Braddon, was a rich widow whose husband had been a wealthy merchant for the East India Company. She brought to the marriage an EIC widow's pension and a privileged, cosmopolitan background. Her Aunt Emily, I discovered, was courted by Washington Irving. Through Julia, Alexander's social circle was transformed.

Before my Cecil revelation I had been scouring University College London (UCL)'s *Legacies of British Slave-Ownership* database, alerted to it by the Jamaican addresses appearing in my tree. Through Julia's maternal family, Alexander became aligned with the Foster and Foster Barham families whose ownership of slave-driven sugar plantations in the Caribbean had made them very rich. Julia was connected to some of the richest and most powerful families in Britain, some having made fortunes through owning plantations in the Caribbean. An elaborate series of inter-marriages had consolidated that wealth over generations.

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One of Julia's ancestors, her great-aunt Elizabeth Vassall, became Lady Holland when she married Henry Richard Fox, bringing both her name and annual income of £7000 from the Jamaican sugar estates she inherited from her grandfather. Lord Holland's *Memoirs of the Whig Party* (1854) make no mention of this, despite acknowledging that the 1807 abolition of the slave *trade* ended a great evil. Three claims for compensation were made in the names of Lord and Lady Holland after slavery was ended in 1833. Again, there is no mention of this in Henry's *Memoirs*.

By joining the dots, it wasn't hard to see the reason for Robert Cecil's presence in my family tree through Alexander's marriage to Julia. It is the same reason the Dukes of Devonshire and Bedford are there: basically, intermarriage between the aristocracy and a small group of exceedingly wealthy Caribbean slave plantation owners whose wealth, secured over two centuries from slavery, helped secure the landed aristocracy's continued existence as a powerful class in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, through marriage into it.

Later in my research I uncovered a connection between the Fosters in Jamaica and the powerful land-owning Campbells of Argyll. Margaret Foster (1715-1786), Julia's 'great grandaunt', married Colin Campbell in Jamaica when she reached eighteen – the age that she came into her £4000 inheritance as specified by her father Colonel John Foster's will. Colin's father, Colonel John Campbell of Inveraray, was a nephew of the Duke of Argyll and the first of the Campbell clan to settle in Jamaica. Colin was born in Jamaica and sent to Europe for his education, matriculating at Glasgow University in 1720. The man in charge of his education, Archibald Campbell, Earl of Islay, went on to become the 3rd Duke of Argyll.

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Returning to Alexander and Julia in Italy, the Robertsons later relocated from San Remo to Venice, where they lived for the rest of their lives. In both places, Alexander was a popular, if controversial Protestant preacher, socialising with an elite circle, writing polemics against the Catholic Church, meeting Queen Victoria and other members of European royalty, assisting Ezra Pound with the publication of his first book of poetry, and becoming an ardent supporter (and biographer) of Mussolini. He wrote over ten books, and was *The Scotsman*'s 'Correspondent in Italy' for decades.

The more I delved into my lineage, the more disturbed I became, as details about the notoriously brutal treatment of slaves in the plantations owned by Julia's ancestors emerged. In Bedford, Julia's birthplace, I scoured archives relating to an obscure Protestant sect known as Moravians to which Julia's maternal family belonged. I learned that her slave-owning great-grandfather William Foster and great-great uncle Joseph Foster Barham sent the first missionaries to Jamaica in 1754 to Christianise the slaves, whilst happily pocketing the profits made on their backs.

At The British Library, I read *The Journal of Emily Foster*, Julia's aunt, who as a teenager was courted by Washington Irving whilst living in Dresden in the early 1820s with her family. There is no hint in the diary of the source of her family's wealth or that her father is often absent at his Jamaican plantation. Whilst musing about her romantic hopes, Emily says nothing of the six slaves she owns, one of many similar silences I was to encounter.

Joseph Foster Barham II, MP, son of whose namesake sent the first Christian missionaries to Jamaica to 'civilise' the slaves, was an influential voice in the 'West India Interest', a powerful alliance which fought against abolition, spearheaded by him and Lord Holland. Though a lapsed Moravian, Joseph promoted new missions in Jamaica, urging slave owners to 'get hold

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of the minds of our negroes and correct their manners'. As an effective delaying strategy, so called 'amelioration' (or gradualism), combined with Moravian missionary work, was sold as an *alternative* to emancipation after the slave trade was ended in 1807.

Joseph's Moravian initiative, supported by Lord Holland, effectively delayed the British abolition of slavery by several years. From University College London's *Legacies of British Slave-Ownership* online database, I discovered the extent to which the Fosters and related families were further enriched by the 1833 Slavery Abolition Act. In 1834, when the payments were made, the pay-out to British slave owners represented 40% of total government expenditure, further concentrating wealth in the hands of a few already very rich families. This would amount to £200 billion today. The slaves received nothing.

An even less well known fact is that the bail-out resulted in a debt not finally paid off by the British taxpayer until 2015, a fact only revealed to the public in 2018 because of a Freedom of Information request. This public revelation was not accompanied by any government apology to the Caribbean for its exploitation or to the British taxpayer for its failure to disclose the inherited debt. Instead, a Treasury 'Friday Fact' was tweeted in February 2018 that 'because it had taken so long to pay off the debt, millions of living British citizens helped pay to end the slave trade'. Besides misconstruing the 'fact' as being about the slave *trade* rather than slavery itself, the government was effectively asking black Britons to celebrate paying taxes to compensate those who had enslaved their ancestors.

In a form of what is accurately described as 'money laundering', wealth derived from slavery was made 'respectable', redeployed into country houses, philanthropy (such as the British Museum and the Royal National Lifeboat Institution) and, crucially, land ownership. By buying up land and marrying into traditional landed families, slave-owners effectively covered up the

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origins of their riches, which were quickly forgotten. Estate sales in the west Highlands and Islands of Scotland doubled in the 1830s, mainly from 1834 onwards, the height of the Clearances and not coincidentally the date when the government started making 'compensation' payments to Caribbean slave owners for their loss of 'property'.

Scotland still has the most concentrated pattern of landownership in the developed world with fewer than 500 people owning 50 per cent of its privately owned land and most of the country still dominated by large estates, many owned by the same aristocratic families. In his book, *Who Owns England?* Guy Shrubsole observes that the resilience of the British aristocracy is one of the great success stories of recent history (Shrubsole, 2019).

My book concludes with an exploration of what has been called the 'new enclosures': the buying up of public land and property since Margaret Thatcher's Right to Buy scheme was launched in 1979 (allowing people to buy their council house at well below market value, without stock replenishment) followed by the privatisation of various public utilities. Around five million acres of land, worth £400 billion, have been sold off by the public sector in the past four decades and, according to the Office for National Statistics, land values have increased *five-fold* since 1995. It is the price of land that is at the heart of the UK's housing crisis, says Chris Christophers, Professor of social and economic geography at the University of Uppsala; it's not bricks and mortar that have gone through the roof (Christophers, 2018).

So - my book's title has a double meaning. The legacy of the title speaks to my inheritance (the chest). It also refers to the enduring impact on British society (and the rest of the world) of imperial exploitation, and to the continuing influence in Britain of the families who profited most from it and continue to do so through inheritance. At the heart of *The Legacy: A Memoir*

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is a story about suppressed facts surrounding slavery and Empire, facts which should be common knowledge but which have to be continually ferreted out.

The chest I inherited from my great-great uncle and which sparked off my own quest is still my most cherished possession. I loved it as a child for its 'secret' compartment, a deep inner box with its own flat lid flush with the top. Polished to a high chestnut sheen with Lavender Polish it smelled delicious. Nobody in my family knew that the chest held a deeper secret, one which once uncovered would transform it from cherished heirloom into a link in a long chain that placed my family at the heart of Britain's most shameful history.

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