

# Transnational Island Museologies



Materials for discussion

Edited by  
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**ICOFOFOM** ICOM  
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**ICOFOM Materials for Discussion**

# **Transnational island museologies**

## ICOFOM MATERIALS FOR DISCUSSION

This publication brings together papers submitted for the 47th symposium organised by ICOFOM under the theme Transnational Island Museologies, to be held at the University of St Andrews, Scotland, 5-7 June, 2024.

The Materials for Discussion collection brings together, in an inclusive spirit, contributions selected for the symposium in the form of short articles, to prepare the ICOFOM Symposium. This publication has been made available before the symposium, in a very short time frame. In spite of the care given to the publication, some mistakes may remain.

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# Reassembling the fragments – Scotland and the Caribbean

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Scotland and the Caribbean have been directly connected from as early as the 16th century. This connection started as a trading relationship and evolved into a complex exchange of people, ideas and cultures. Such activities connected and changed lives on both sides of the Atlantic. Historical fragments that tell the story of this rich past still exist silently among us. Place names, family stories, documents and even dimensions of our culture that we do not fully understand help to tell this powerful story. This presentation continues the process of piecing the mosaic back together using the parameters of the Shared Island Stories between Scotland and the Caribbean: Past, Present, Future project. The presentation takes a closer look at how the Scottish islands and highlands and the Caribbean became linked with special emphasis on the 1750s to the 1830s. It explores the multifaceted dimensions of the interconnectivity which evolved and the ways in which new lifestyles were shaped and new communities were forged. Most of all, it emphasises the extent and depth of the connections between these two distant and different areas in a period when communication was both difficult and dangerous. This movement between the two geographic spaces created a world which transcended geographical borders and the restrictions on growth and development that characterised the period, particularly for certain income groups.

It is hoped that as we put the pieces of the mosaic together the picture which emerges, though complex and at times troubling, can help us to better understand our societies in 2024. These connections that were initiated centuries ago played a crucial role in the formation of the basis of our modern world. The focus here is on Scottish working and middle-income groups. These were the people who were at the heart of the interconnected worlds, and those whose lives were uncovered represent the numerous lives which were transformed on both sides of the Atlantic. These stories have been hidden within the histories of the highlands and the islands and overshadowed by stories of successful planters, lords and merchants.

## Reassembling the fragments

Information was recovered in plantation records, diaries, contemporary texts, official and personal letters, legal documents such as wills, merchant record books, public records and contemporary newspapers as well as colonial office correspondence. Cultural artefacts were revealed through family histories, oral histories, songs and poems. Recently compiled historical data such as the slave trade database and slave compensation records provided valuable quantitative support for conclusions. Secondary sources provided important background information and filled gaps in the narrative. This approach allowed for as many voices as possible to be heard in the assembly of the fragments that were being unearthed. The varied voices included persons on both sides of the Atlantic. However, there was deafening silence in both Scotland and the Caribbean from the large number of people who were positioned at the bottom of the social pyramids of both societies. In

the case of the Caribbean islands these were the voices of the enslaved population; in the case of Scotland these were the working classes in the islands and highlands. In the cases of both groups a concerted effort had to be made and techniques devised to hear such voices, even if it had to be through the lens and scripts of other actors. Thus, collating the fragments was not without its challenges.

Often the Caribbean and the Scottish islands and highlands could not be specifically located in sources, particularly official statistics. These areas were often subsumed within references to America or the New World and to Britain or Scotland. This was exacerbated by the fact that record keeping in the Caribbean as well as the islands and highlands was not consistent, and in some cases non-existent. Both geographical spaces were considered remote areas, and this affected approaches to record keeping. In the case of emigration statistics, which are critical in a study such as this, it soon became apparent that migrants to the Caribbean were often not regarded or classified as emigrants. They were regarded as participating in temporary spells overseas because they were essentially a group of white males without families and the intention was always to return home. The Caribbean was treated as a temporary prelude on the way to a better life.

Adding to these challenges was the fact that many of the enslaved and working classes were illiterate and left few first-hand written records. Even fewer of such sources were likely to have been preserved. However, information was pieced together from reports on their welfare; the few individuals who left a written trail; letters and diaries which often reflected much more than the writers intended; and wills or inheritances which were left by persons from all walks of life. Such sources, when deconstructed, provided much insight. Accounts of remittances received, and in one case a receipt signed with thumb print, were among the important historical artefacts unearthed. Collating such fragments helps to bring to life the narratives of the working classes.

## **The re-assembled fragments**

### ***Social reconstruction***

The Caribbean was associated with making fortunes and large numbers of Europeans came to the region because of financial difficulties. Some were the sons of established families and educated professionals. However, there were numerous men and boys from working class backgrounds. The need to make an 'independent living' is a recurring motif among those coming to the Caribbean. Spurred on by this inspiration, they worked hard. There was an intense longing for home, and many worked with the goal of returning. They held a unique place between the white upper class and the black population. The Caribbean provided social possibilities that were not available at home. Being white created social, economic and political opportunities. It was easier to move upwards in a society where there was a deficiency of white men. They filled spaces of a much needed white middle class. Further, the fact that they were resident in the Caribbean fostered special relationships with rich planters and members of the upper classes in Britain. They were also the ones who interacted closely on a day-to-day basis with the enslaved population. Relationships with women, many of whom were African and mixed, led to children and Caribbean families.

The two worlds became connected as the men moved back and forth, and family members, mixed offspring and enslaved persons crossed the Atlantic. However, it was not just the people who migrated that experienced change. Much more than sugar and rum crossed the Atlantic. Also making the journey were a variety of animals, plants, fruits, tools and implements, medicines as well as customs and practices which became part of households in Scotland and the Caribbean. A new world evolved where shared island stories were interwoven and solidified through a network which directly connected the two regions of the world.

Life was difficult. Morbidity and mortality were high in the Caribbean. Yet, a Scottish world was created in the Caribbean with strong highland links. Estates were named after areas in the Scottish Highlands. It was not unusual for friends and school mates to meet in the Caribbean. Letters gave updates on persons from communities at home and were as much communal documents as private documents. A Scottish network developed which welcomed them. Persons did not just go to the Caribbean; they went to a community. Newspapers in Scotland shared aspects of life in the Caribbean. The two communities were intertwined. There was an extension of the geographical boundaries of 'home'. The period spent in the Caribbean could be a short sojourn, years, decades and, in some cases, became permanent.

### ***Economic reconstruction***

There were two occupational trajectories for European immigrants. The planting line involved entry level positions of bookkeeper and access to an occupation hierarchy that transitioned upward to overseer and to plantation manager. The other line was the mercantile line where one started as a clerk and could advance to an accountant and a partner. There were periods of boom and decline and what was accumulated could be easily lost. However, economic benefits were experienced by many more than the relatively small group who can be said to have made a fortune. The economic impact on these less visible lives has not yet been fully appreciated. An economic base was provided for numerous families, which was considerably better than what existed before. Carpenters, butchers, tailors, clerks, indentured servants, sailors, soldiers, apprentices, the unemployed and those in legal difficulties were all willing to risk employment in the Caribbean. Despite often starting with low level positions, they were able to not only build better lives for themselves but to send money home to support families. The Caribbean became an extension of their island/highland economies. Documents are littered with evidence of small and regular remittances of between £5 and £10 sent to support families at home.

Success varied and took on multiple forms. Some became property owners either in Britain, the Caribbean or both places. The Caribbean became the centre of family undertakings and opportunities were created for sons and brothers. Family members were recruited, sponsored and assisted. Some returned to Britain, but many stayed in the Caribbean. The success stories varied in character and extent. Regardless of the extent of the success, or lack thereof, opportunities were created that were simply not even on their horizons before the Caribbean became a part of their stories. Money made in the Caribbean increased individual incomes, supported families, built institutions and establishments in the islands/highlands and changed the lives of communities, not just the persons who came to the region. A much-needed source and stream of income among the working and middle classes was created at a time when there were very few viable opportunities.

In the Caribbean, there were not only numerous job openings for British citizens, but there were also ways of earning additional income. Thus, the relatively small salaries which ranged between £50 and £200 per annum should not be viewed as indicative of the yearly income made. It should be noted, however, that for the working class even £50 was regarded as substantial. Further, incomes increased because they held multiple different positions. Many also had side businesses and sold goods from Scotland. For all, slave ownership was important. It was how they began their rise. Too poor to think of owning land, they could all aspire to owning an enslaved person, and this is how they began. They eventually acquired gangs of enslaved workers who they hired out for additional income. Many also became involved in debt collection for persons in Britain. The economic challenge was not earning income in the Caribbean, it was getting that income home and maintaining themselves on this income. Many also became so indebted in a system that essentially depended on credit that they could not return home. They could, however, maintain quite a good standard of life in the Caribbean, and many did.

However, it was not only these men and their immediate families who benefitted. Numerous other small, medium and large businesses developed from the world they created. People from all walks of life became recruiting agents who sourced workers for the Caribbean. Men from all levels in European society advanced small loans to outfit persons to go out to the Caribbean. Middle- and working-class people became small, medium and large suppliers who transported goods to and from the Caribbean. The herring industry was heavily dependent on the Caribbean trade. A rudimentary cotton industry developed in the highlands and served the needs of the Caribbean. Both were important sources of income for not only men but also women and children. Seamen and ship captains frequented the region. Ships left from the numerous official and unofficial ports in the Northwest. Boarding houses housed children from the Caribbean who were sent home for their education. Governesses were hired to supervise and tutor these children. Schools in the Scottish highlands educated children born in the Caribbean.

### ***A new mosaic stronger than its fragments***

The shared island story between Scotland and the Caribbean sprouted and fertilised a new economic world that had more opportunities for lower income groups. Thus, two extensive networks on either side of the Atlantic which connected economies and linked communities developed and bloomed. New ways of making money as well as expanded social and economic opportunities were created in both spaces. The upper classes were just the tip of the proverbial iceberg. The peak which has attracted attention and research was in reality a relatively small group who stood out at the top. Below, but not as visible, was a much larger and varied group which encompassed a growing working and middle class whose notion of the world, sources of income and lifestyle opportunities and expectations had been changed forever. A shared story in two disparate parts of the world can in fact be said to have changed the lived reality of working- and middle-class people on both sides of the Atlantic at very decisive time in history.

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