

THE STAPLETON SUGAR PLANTATIONS IN THE LEEWARD ISLANDS

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IN the introduction to Professor Pares's account of the Pinney sugar plantations in Nevis¹ he urges the importance, for the study of economic history, of accounts of individual and representative economic enterprises. The activities of the Stapleton family as sugar plantation proprietors were on an even grander scale than those of the Pinneys, spanning a period of two and a half centuries, and concerning (for varying periods) all four of the Leeward Islands. However, an account of these activities on a scale comparable in intensity to Pares's treatment of the Pinneys is impossible, not only because of their very extent and diffusion, but also because at an early stage the Stapletons became absentee proprietors. As a result of this, the amount of attention devoted by the family to their plantations varied considerably from time to time, as did the amount of independence enjoyed by their attorneys and plantation managers. This, in turn, no doubt is responsible for some of the extensive and unfortunate gaps in the surviving documentary evidence of their affairs.

The documentary evidence that has survived is contained firstly in the Stapleton MSS., which were deposited in the John Rylands Library in 1951 by Sir Miles T. Stapleton, bart. These manuscripts consist mainly of letters and accounts concerning Sir William Stapleton's plantation in Nevis between 1722 and 1740. For a number of years Sir William Stapleton, 4th baronet, kept a letter-book; this has been acquired by Harvard College Library, and extracts from it were published by Edwin F. Gay as "Letters from a Sugar Plantation in Nevis, 1723-1732" in *Journal of Economic and Business History*, i. 149-73 (Cambridge, Mass., 1928). Judging from the printed extracts, the letter-book consists chiefly of

¹ R. Pares, *A West-India Fortune* (London, 1950).

copies of letters contained in the Rylands Stapleton MSS. The second source of information is the Stapleton-Cotton MSS., which were deposited in the Library of the University College of North Wales, Bangor, in 1922. These consist chiefly of letters and accounts concerning Dame Frances Stapleton's plantations in Nevis and St. Christopher in the second half of the eighteenth, and in the nineteenth centuries.¹ Some additional information is contained among the Bodrhyddan MSS., also deposited in U.C.N.W., in 1958.

The foundation of the family estates and interests in the Leeward Islands was laid by Sir William Stapleton (d. 1686), 1st baronet, Governor-General of the Leeward Islands from 1672 to 1685. Stapleton was the third son of an Anglo-Irish family which had its estates in County Tipperary forfeited during the Civil War, and for a number of years he served on the Continent as a soldier of fortune. He returned to England after the Restoration, but in 1667 he was imprisoned in Newgate Gaol on a charge of murder, when Sir Tobias Bridge's regiment (in which he was lieutenant-colonel) was ordered to Barbados, and he had to petition for the king's pardon in order to sail with it.² From Barbados Stapleton was sent to the Leeward Islands, where he led an unsuccessful invasion of St. Christopher, from which the English planters had been expelled by the French. The Treaty of Breda (1667) brought the peaceful restoration of English land in the island, which was delayed, however, by legal complications, in which Stapleton found employment as one of the Commissioners to treat with the French. In the following year he was selected by William, Lord Willoughby, for his known courage, race and religion, to be Deputy-Governor of Montserrat,³ where the majority of the inhabitants were turbulent Irish Catholics.

Stapleton consolidated his position in 1671 by his marriage to Anne, daughter of Colonel Randolph (or Randal) Russell (d. 1678), and niece of Sir James Russell (1600-74) of Nevis. Soon afterwards he was appointed the second Governor-General of the

¹ These manuscripts form the basis of the writer's University of Wales M.A. thesis (1964), "The Sugar Plantations of the Heirs of Lady Frances Stapleton, in Nevis and St. Christopher (1746-1810)". ² *C.S.P. Domestic, 1666-1667*, p. 527.

³ Rylands Stapleton MS. 1/1 (27.4.1668).

Leeward Islands,¹ when Sir Charles Wheler deserted his post. Within a few years he had risen from the position of a penniless soldier to become a responsible servant of the Crown, at the same time attached by his marriage and property to the interest of the powerful planter aristocracy. His term of office was remarkably successful, due to his strong personality, his honesty and loyalty to the Crown, and to his fairness to his fellow planters.² Other members of his family shared in his success. His elder brother, Edmund, was Deputy-Governor of Montserrat until 1678, and his younger brother, Redmond, held the same post from 1685 until his death in 1687.

Stapleton derived little wealth from his official position. His salary of £700 per annum (payable out of the 4½ per cent. levy on exports from the Leeward Islands) was constantly in arrears, as was his pay as a soldier, and his allowance for two companies of foot in St. Christopher.³ Yet he became a wealthy man through his ownership of sugar plantations. At the time of his death he owned, or had an interest in, plantations in all four islands. His first acquisition was in Montserrat, when, upon his appointment as Deputy-Governor, the Waterwork plantation (573 acres) in St. Peter's Parish, part of the estate of the traitorous Anthony Bryskett, was settled on him and his heirs.⁴ He enlarged his interest in Montserrat by purchasing, on 2 July 1680, for 100,000 lb. of muscovado sugar, land that he had granted on behalf of the Crown to his brother-in-law, Colonel Sir James Russell (d. 1687), on 1 May 1678. The plantations are described as :

. . . A certaine Plantation or Parcel of land situate . . . in the Island Mountserratt (viz.) The Plantation Commonly called the Waterworke Plantation Containeing a Mile square from North to a south square Line, or upon ye same cross point as ye plantacons beyond Corke hill doth Run, from ye Gutt called gut hart or spring gutt. Bounded at the foot with both Rivere and Corkehill Plantacons running to

¹ *C.S.P. Colonial, 1669-1674*, no. 669 (20.12.1671).

² His administration is described in C. S. S. Higham, *The Development of the Leeward Islands Under the Restoration, 1660-1688* (Cambridge, 1921).

³ Stapleton's financial position is described in Higham, "The Accounts of a Colonial Governor's Agent in the Seventeenth Century," *Amer. Hist. Rev.*, xxviii (1922-3), 263-285, in which some of Rylands Stapleton MSS. 3/1 are reproduced.

⁴ *C.S.P. Colonial, 1669-1674*, no. 77. i.

the full Extent of the Mountains, Together with all the lands above the Mill untill it meetes with the Windward Plantations granted formerly under Patent by my Lord Wm. Willoughby to me. & also . . . the woodlands on the other side of spring Gutt bounded upon the lands formerly . . . granted to one Botkin and Nicholson, and alsoe all the land in the old Roade begining at the Sea side bounded with the severall windings and turneings of the River to the East and South, bounded on the North side with the Plantation of Capt. Wm. ffreeman and Capt. Jno Bramley, Containeing more or lesse [?] acres of land above Brisketts house until it meetes with the River againe, Excepting onely the lande on which the said Capt. ffreeman and Capt. Bramly have a store house built. . . . All that Plantation alsoe let to Mr. Tho. Lee and now in his tenure and occupacon in the Parish of St. Anthony . . . formerly called Codery. . . .¹

In Antigua Stapleton granted two plantations (1,025 acres) to his brother, Redmond, on 1 January 1679/80, which he purchased from him for 100,000 lb. of sugar, on 6 July 1682 :

. . . Two Certaine Plantations or Parcells of Land Situate . . . in the Island of Antigua heretofore called . . . the body lands or Plantations but now under ye Title & manner of Carleton . . . seaven hundred acres, more or less, being East and West One Hundred Chaines and North and South Seaventy Six Chaines at least, includeing the body ponds and waste Angles, Bounded to ye East wth. ye land of Vallentine Russell Esq. and Samuel Irish, West with the woods, South with the Land of Coll. Phillip Warner and other waste land. More alsoe, three hundred twenty five acres begining from the body gutt North North East Seventeene Chaines, thence North Ninety Nine Chaines and fivety [Qentism's?] To the Land formerly belonging to Coll. Midellton called Crab hall, thence South Ninety nine Chaines to the body gutt and soe by the severall Turnings and angles of the said Gutt to the first Station, all the afforesaid parcells of land containing one thousand twenty five acres, three hundred twenty five acres thereof being Relinquished by John Pary Esq . . .²

In St. Christopher Philip de Nogle, the Father Hermit, assigned his plantation, in Cayon Quarter, as a gift to Stapleton in 1684,³ retaining possession of it for his own lifetime. In Nevis, where it is unlikely that his wife brought him any land as her dowry, since her father was merely a tenant on his brother's estate, Stapleton purchased a plantation in the Parish of St. John, Figtree. He did this by granting it to Major Charles Pim on 1 May 1678, and purchasing it from Pim for 400,000 lb of sugar on the same day :

. . . A certaine Plantation or Parcel of land Situate . . . at or in the South West division . . . Extending in length from the Sea near long Point to the figg tree Pond included wth. those Ranges agreeably theretoe ; In Mr Hiltons mapp . . . Called

¹ Ryl. Stapleton MS. 2/1.

² Ibid. 2/1.

³ Ibid. 8/2.

by the name of Jennings and Balls Range, Containeing five hundred and thirty two acres, one Rood and twelve Perches . . . limited Southerly with the land and Platations appertaineing to the heirs of Capt. Francis Smith decd. and Mr John Smiths Plantation Leased to Mr Thomas Tovey, East Northerly with the Plantations of Mr Francis Burton, Mr. Henry Mayle and John Sampson, north Westerly with the land . . . of Mr. George Cruft, Mr Wm. Springar, Ralph Wyan and Thomas Johnson, Mrs Honor Thompson, Nicholas Cashine, Capt. John Williams, Capt. Wm. Howard and the Plantation belonging to the heires of Mr Gerrard Lowrey decd., and west southerly with the Sea near Long Point. More, three and twenty acres of land and two Roods leying at bath hill in the said division, bounded Northerly, Westerly and Southerly with the land of Mr John Coker & Easterly with the land of Wm. Lettice. . . .¹

The plantation was about two miles south of Charlestown,² and it was here that Stapleton resided, ignoring orders from London that he should live in St. Christopher.³ The great house became the centre of the social life of the Leeward Island planters, and it was to Lady Stapleton that Christopher Jeaffreson sold the luxury articles of a Smyrna carpet and cotton hangings.⁴ The small plantation at Bath Hill had a pot works on it, and Stapleton also owned a plot of land in Charlestown, on which a store house was built.⁵

Stapleton enlarged his plantation by purchasing small pieces of adjoining land, as the increasing cost of producing sugar forced his neighbours to part with their land. In a copy of instructions to his attorneys (with additions in Sir William's hand-writing) probably before his departure for England, in the spring of 1685, he orders them :

. . . To purchase the Land of Mr John Smith, adjoyneing to the Southward line of my plantation, the head of what I bought by Capt. Lee from English Smith, in

¹ Ryl. Stapleton MS. 2/1.

² Pares (op. cit., pp. 39, 150, 344) places Stapleton's plantation in the Parish of St. Thomas, Lowland, in the north west of the island, directly adjoining the northern boundary of Pinney's plantation. The basis of his assumption appears to be the sale of 24½ acres of land in this area to Azariah Pinney, in 1713, by Stapleton's daughter-in-law (Dame Frances Stapleton). However, there is no manuscript evidence of a Stapleton plantation in St. Thomas's Parish, and it seems probable that the land sold by Dame Frances was part of a plantation belonging to her second husband, General Walter Hamilton.

³ *C.S.P. Colonial, 1669-1674*, nos. 700, 891. i.

⁴ J. C. Jeaffreson, *A Young Squire of the Seventeenth Century* (London, 1878), i. 77.

⁵ Ryl. Stapleton MS. 8/2. Conveyed to him by Walter Symonds in 1682.

case the widdow does not keep or redeem it for her selfe, or Child, &c., at the Appraisement, but never to give as I have for the Lower end yet something more then any other . . . Alsoe a little bitt of ground adjoyneing at the fig tree hill to my North line, betwixt it and George Crufts, possessed formerly by one Brady, and is the head of the Land I bought from Bennet . . . ¹

Stapleton's return to England in 1685 was caused by ill-health, and he died in Paris (where he had taken his wife and three sons) on 22 July 1686.² In his will he bequeathed half of his Nevis plantation to his wife, for her life, and the other half to his eldest son, James. The Montserrat plantations went to his second son, William, and those in Antigua to his third son, Miles. He directed that De Nogle's plantation in St. Christopher should be sold, and the proceeds used to purchase an estate in Ireland for James. He bequeathed £1,500 to his daughter, Anne, and £1,000 each to his daughters, Louise and Frances.³ His eldest daughter, Mary, who had married Sir James Cottar, predeceased him. His sudden death brought disaster and confusion to his family and their fortunes. At the instigation of Stapleton's agent in London, Sir Patrick Trant, bart., a Commissioner of Excise and Hearth Money, his sons were imprisoned at their French school, to prevent Lady Stapleton bringing them up as Protestants. James managed to escape from Douai, but died on the voyage to England. It soon became apparent that Trant had embezzled over £8,000 of Stapleton's money. A law suit followed, in which judgement was secured against Trant, but the Revolution of 1688 and his subsequent condemnation as a traitor, made it impossible to recover the money from Trant's estate in Ireland. Lady Stapleton then petitioned for payment of £3,914 arrears of pay for the soldiers in St. Christopher, due to Stapleton's estate. Though her petition was referred by Queen Anne to Lord Godolphin, Lord High Treasurer, for his favourable consideration, it appears that nothing was done in the matter.⁴

The baronetcy had now passed to William (1674-99), 3rd baronet, who greatly increased the West Indian property by his

¹ Ryl. Stapleton MS. 2/8.

² Ibid. 3/1. Not, as is usually stated, on 3 August 1686, when the news reached England.

³ Ibid. 2/1 (Will 1.4.1686).

⁴ Ibid. 3/1. Petition dated 4-1-1702/3. *C.S.P. Domestic, 1697*, p. 95; *C.S.P. Domestic, 1703-1704*, pp. 374, 379-380.

marriage to his first cousin, Frances, third daughter of his maternal uncle, Colonel Sir James Russell. Frances was co-heiress to the entire Russell property in Nevis, since her father had been the heir of his uncle, Sir James Russell (1600-74). The plantations all lay in the Parish of St. James, Windward, in the north east of the island, and comprised Russell's Rest, Hog Valley, Fitz-James (later known as the River or Camp) and Pot Works.¹ In 1697, on the marriage of Frances, and of her sister, Penelope (to Martin Madan), the property was divided. Frances's dowry consisted of half of Russell's Rest (which was divided by a line run from the sea to the summit of Nevis Mountain) containing 507 acres and the great house built by her great-uncle,² and the River Plantation (287 acres).³ Russell's Rest lay about four miles south of Newcastle, and was triangular in shape, with a broad frontage on the sea and its apex high on the upper slopes of the mountain. Frances's portion retained its original name, while Penelope's became known as Madan's. The River (or Camp) plantation lay about one mile from Newcastle, with the Camp (or Jones's) River flowing through its higher land.

After his marriage Sir William resided in Nevis, on his own plantation, leasing Russell's Rest and his Montserrat plantations to tenants. Contrary to his father's wish, De Nogle's plantation in St. Christopher was not sold. In 1696 the validity of the gift was upheld, and it was granted jointly to Sir William and his mother.⁴ It seems probable that it was later exchanged for Miles's estate in Antigua. The plantation in St. Christopher descended to Miles's heirs, who leased it to the Rev. Martin Madan in 1767.⁵ Sir William, 4th baronet, was concerned in business over a plantation in Antigua in 1725.⁶ The Stapletons' residence in the Leeward Islands was ended by the early death of the 3rd baronet in 1699. His two infant sons were brought to England by their mother, and for the next twenty years the family was headed by the two ladies, Dame Anne and Dame

¹ P.R.O., C. 11(181/7).

² J. W. Damer-Powell, "Sir James Russell, Defender of Nevis", *United Empire*, xxii (1931), 557-9.

³ U.C.N.W., Stapleton-Cotton MS. 1(i).

⁴ Ryl. Stapleton MS. 8/2.

⁵ V. L. Oliver, *History of the Island of Antigua* (London, 1894-9), iii, p. 102.

⁶ Ryl. Stapleton MS. 8/2.

Frances. The family became permanent absentee proprietors through their influence, fear of the West Indian climate, and the acquisition of English estates by purchase, or through marriage settlements, secured by West Indian revenue.

The 3rd baronet bequeathed half of his estate to his wife, for her life (in lieu of her dower) and the remainder to his elder son, William. His younger son, James Russell Stapleton, was to receive £1,000 at the age of 21.¹ It appears that Dame Frances, as well as retaining her plantations in St. James's Parish, also received half the revenue of her husband's plantation in St. John's Parish during the minority of her eldest son. In 1701 she settled her plantations in Nevis on James, retaining the use of them for her lifetime, from the profits of which William was to receive £2,000 at the age of 21.²

The plantation in St. John's Parish suffered very heavily from the French invasion of Nevis in 1706, lying as it did across the path of the invaders, from the south of the island towards Charlestown. In 1700 it had contained over 600 acres, with 183 Negro slaves.³ Of these 147 were carried off, and the great-house, mills, sugar works, 70 acres of plant canes and 50 acres of ratoons were destroyed, to a total value of £6,862 sterling.⁴ In 1713 compensation was paid to the value of one-third of the estimated loss (in the form of 6 per cent. debentures)⁵ but the plantation never fully recovered its former prosperity. Apart from the material losses, the incident preyed on the mind of Dame Anne to such an extent that she was utterly averse to investing the necessary capital to restore the plantation.⁶ Dame Frances's plantations, in St. James's Parish, escaped serious damage. Eason, the manager, reported that only six Negroes had been carried off, and though the plant canes had been burnt only minor damage had been caused to the works.⁷ Dame Frances received £256 compensation.⁸

¹ Ryl. Stapleton MS. 12/2 (Will 6.12.1699).

² U.C.N.W., Stapleton-Cotton MS. 1 (i-ii).

³ Ryl. Stapleton MS. 5/1.

⁴ Ibid. 4/13.

⁵ P.R.O., C.O. 243/8 (debenture no. 5).

⁶ Ryl. Stapleton MS. 4/1. Copy of letter from Sir William, 4th baronet, to his attorneys in Nevis, 10.7.1722.

⁷ Ibid. 4/13.

⁸ P.R.O., C.O. 243/8 (debenture no. 4).

Meanwhile, Dame Frances further extended the Stapleton estates in the Leeward Islands through her second marriage, in 1711, to General Walter Hamilton. His career resembled, in many respects, that of the elder Stapleton. He was born in Germany, of Scottish parents, and came to the Leeward Islands in 1690, as adjutant to Sir Timothy Thornhill. He distinguished himself in the capture of the French portion of St. Christopher and was a staunch supporter of the Codringtons, father and son. As soon as his naturalization had been secured, by Act of Parliament,¹ he was appointed Deputy-Governor of St. Christopher. He married first the widow of a planter in Nevis, and by 1706 he owned a plantation in St. Christopher, one in Nevis and a share in another (jointly with Archibald Hamilton).² After the invasion he was transferred to a similar post in Nevis, and though he was accused of complicity in the murder of the Governor-General Daniel Parke, in 1711, he was exonerated and appointed Governor-General in 1715.³ The marriage contract with Dame Frances, who never assumed the name of Hamilton, gave him the revenue of her plantations in Nevis, out of which he must pay £100 per annum for the education and maintenance of James Russell Stapleton. He was bound to revoke any claim to her dower in Sir William's plantation.⁴

Hamilton took up his post as Governor in 1716, accompanied by Dame Frances, who returned to England two years later.⁵ By the Treaty of Utrecht (1713) the French portion of St. Christopher came finally into English hands. This comprised the two extremities of the island, including a large area of cane land in the fertile valley running northwards from Basseterre town. Some two miles north of the town lay the Fountain plantation, originally owned by De Poincy, French Governor of St. Christopher from 1639 to 1660, on which he had built a fortified great-house. While the English Government was making up its mind how the former French lands were to be

¹ *C.S.P. Colonial*, 1702, no. 996.

² P.R.O., C.O. 243/8 (debentures nos. 1-3).

³ *C.S.P. Colonial*, 1714-1715, no. 197. 1.

⁴ Ryl. Stapleton MS. 6/2 (23.8.1711).

⁵ *C.S.P. Colonial*, 1716-1717, no. 68; *C.S.P. Colonial*, 1717-1718, no. 691.

disposed of, various provisional grants were made to public servants, or to those in favour with the authorities. In 1717 Hamilton secured this Fountain (or Castle) plantation, of 333 acres, by a grant to Colonel William McDowell, in trust for himself, his tenure being renewed in 1721.¹ Before this expired Hamilton died, in 1722, having been succeeded as Governor-General by Colonel John Hart in the previous year. In his will he bequeathed estates in England and his tenure of the Fountain plantation to Dame Frances, and her sons, with the provision that after their deaths his *tenure and personal estate* belonging to the plantation (including the Negroes) should be divided equally between James Tyrrell, of Shotover, Bucks., and Gavin Hamilton, of Clidsdale, Scotland.²

Dame Frances's tenure of the plantation, however, was threatened first by Governor Hart, who wanted it for himself.³ Though she secured an extension of the tenancy until the French lands should be disposed of,⁴ when they were finally sold, in 1726, and occupiers were given pre-emptive right to purchase their holdings, the Commissioners were instructed to limit sales to any individual to 200 acres. This was an attempt by the English Government to check the growing consolidation of large estates. Dame Frances was allowed to purchase 200 acres of the plantation for £3,400, together with 50 acres of pasturage near the Salt Ponds, and a plot of land in Basseterre.⁵ The surplus of the plantation, however, was sold in trust for Gilbert Fleming, one of the Commissioners, who took advantage of his official position to acquire a large estate in this manner. Dame Frances had petitioned the Treasury that Sir William might be allowed to purchase the surplusage of the Fountain plantation, and negotiations with Fleming dragged on for a number of years.⁶ The affair was finally settled amicably, in 1730, by Thomas Butler, the London sugar merchant, a mutual friend. Fleming agreed to sell 20 acres of cane land and 10 acres of pasturage, adjoining

¹ U.C.N.W., Stapleton-Cotton MS. 1(ix); Ryl. Stapleton MS. 4/14.

² Ryl. Stapleton MS. 6/2 (Will 16.4.1722).

³ Ibid. 4/11. Timothy Tyrrell to Sir William, 18.6.1722.

⁴ P.R.O., C.O. 324/34 (17.7.1722).

⁵ U.C.N.W., Stapleton-Cotton MS. 1(v); Ryl. Stapleton MS. 4/14.

⁶ U.C.N.W., Stapleton-Cotton MS. 1(iii).

the plantation, to Sir William, in return for a release from his claim to the surplus land.¹

In the opinion of historians the soil of St. Christopher was the most fertile, and produced the greatest quantity of highest quality sugar per acre, of all the British West Indian colonies, and so the Fountain plantation became the most valuable and profitable of all the Stapleton property. The plantation, in the Parish of St. Peter's, Basseterre, lay between 350 and 700 feet above sea-level, and was sheltered from the prevailing north-easterly wind by the Canada Hills, which also insured that it had an adequate rainfall. It was bounded to the north with the land of Robert Cunningham, Timothy Hare and Charles Lowndes, to the east with that of General Hart, and William McDowell, to the south with that of General Hart, the assigns of James Ward and the River Gut, and to the west with a line dividing it from the surplus land.² The land purchased from Fleming consisted of 27 acres, 3 roods and 21 perches of cane land on the eastern boundary of the plantation, and 5 acres, 3 roods and 26 perches of pasturage on its western boundary.³

Dame Frances's elder son, Sir William (1698-1740), 4th baronet, was educated at Christ Church, Oxford, and spent his early life at Grey's Court, in Rotherfield Greys, Oxon. He acquired an English estate by his marriage, in 1724, to Catherine, daughter and heiress of William Paul, of Braywicke, Berks., and grand-daughter (on her mother's side) of the 4th earl of Westmorland and Lord Le Despencer. In the marriage contract Dame Frances settled on him £11,000 from the revenue of her plantations in Nevis and St. Christopher, in the form of an annuity of £500.⁴ After his marriage Sir William was elected M.P. for Oxfordshire, and remained so until his death. At first he displayed a considerable interest in his plantation in Nevis, as witnessed by the letter-book already mentioned. Though the plantation in Nevis had declined greatly, through neglect and the effects of drought (from which it suffered particularly, since it lay in the lee of Nevis Mountain) it has been estimated that

¹ U.C.N.W., Stapleton-Cotton MS. 1(iv); Ryl. Stapleton MS. 4/2.

² U.C.N.W., Stapleton-Cotton MS. 1(v).

³ *ibid.* 1(iv).

⁴ Ryl. Stapleton MS. 12/1 (23.4.1724).

between 1725 and 1731 Sir William enjoyed a net annual revenue of over £1,000 from it.¹ The plantation was surveyed professionally for the first time in 1734, when it was discovered that the boundaries had inexplicably contracted to 500 acres. There were only 133 Negroes, and nearly all the buildings needed repair.² Two years later an index to a plan (which has not survived) of the plantation shows that 237 acres were in sugar canes, 20 in ratoons, 130 in woodland, 47 in pasture, 31 in potatoes, 9 in cotton, and the remainder was occupied by a garden, buildings, negro houses and other provision ground.³ The decade 1730 to 1739 was a poor time for planters, with the price of sugar low, and the plantation suffering further from drought, the blast (an insect pest) and through the negligence of David Stalker, the manager, who allowed about 30 Negroes to perish before he drank himself to death in 1738.⁴ In 1737 the Waterwork plantation (600 acres) in Montserrat, which had been continuously leased to tenants, was sold to a relative, William Fenton, for £2,500.⁵

Dame Frances's younger son, James Russell Stapleton (1699-1743), attained the rank of Colonel in the Third Foot Guards. He acquired an estate in Wales through his marriage, in 1731, to Penelope, daughter and co-heiress of Sir John Conway, bart., of Bodrhyddan, near Rhuddlan, Flints. Dame Frances settled on him an annuity of £240 from the revenue of the Fountain plantation in St. Christopher.⁶ His wife, having borne six daughters in eight years, died in 1739, and James left his property to be divided equally between his daughters.⁷

Dame Frances survived until 1746, out-living her two sons, as the matriarch of the family. Through the will of Walter Hamilton she had acquired estates at Stoke Poges and Wexham, in Buckinghamshire; she also owned a house in Cheltenham, and rented one in Grosvenor Street, London. A rough draft of a will, drawn up in 1735 while her sons were alive, reveals her intention to bequeath the Stoke Poges estate and the plantation in St. Christopher to Sir William, and the Wexham estate and her

¹ Gay, *op. cit.* pp. 151-3.

² Ryl. Stapleton MS. 6/3.

³ *Ibid.* 6/3.

⁴ *Ibid.* 4/9. Charles Pym to Sir William, 17.5.1738.

⁵ Oliver, *op. cit.* iii. 101.

⁶ U.C.N.W., Bodrhyddan MS. 65.

⁷ U.C.N.W., Stapleton-Cotton MS. 1 (viii).

plantations in Nevis to James.¹ But the death of her sons induced her to make a fresh will, in 1743, altering the disposal of the property. In this she confirmed her settlement of the plantations in Nevis on the heirs of James. But she now directed that her English estates, and her plantation in St. Christopher, should be entrusted to her executors, and the revenue from them be used to pay the balance of the £11,000 settled on Sir William in 1724. When this had been settled, £8,000 was to be raised from the revenue of the Fountain plantation, to be divided among James's five surviving daughters and Sir William's three younger children. Thereafter these eight children were to own the Fountain plantation, as tenants in common, while the English estates went to Sir William's heir, Sir Thomas.²

The terms of the will, which did not become known until after the death of Dame Frances, came as a shock and surprise to Sir Thomas and to his mother, Dame Catherine Stapleton. In spite of the English property he was to receive in lieu of the Fountain plantation, Sir Thomas (1727-81), 5th baronet, resented its loss. Indeed, since he and his mother remained in ignorance of the settlement of the plantations in Nevis on James in 1701,³ they believed that he should rightly inherit the entire Stapleton property in the Leeward Islands. Other factors made the situation even more complicated. All nine surviving grand-children of Dame Frances were still minors. Of the executors and trustees of her will, Dame Penelope Conway (James's mother-in-law) died within a few months. Two others, her nephews, Martin Madan and Augustus Schutz, refused to act as executors. Sole responsibility for the estate, as well as the care of James's daughters, devolved on Eleanora Conway, James's sister-in-law. Indeed Schutz took advantage of the situation to claim half of the Fountain plantation for himself, as the executor of James Tyrrell (under Walter Hamilton's will). He began a suit in Chancery for possession of the plantation, in which he was joined by James Robertson, assignee (in Scottish law) of Gavin Hamilton's will. In addition to the complicated trusts set up by

¹ U.C.N.W., Stapleton-Cotton MS. 1(vi).

² Ryl. Stapleton MS. 13. Will quoted in case of *Stapleton v. Conway*, 23.10.1746.

³ P.R.O., C.33/394, fols. 584-587.

Dame Frances's will, there were long outstanding debts and legacies to be settled, such as the £2,640 owed by the 4th baronet to his mother when he died intestate and insolvent in 1740, the £1,000 bequeathed to James in 1699, and the £2,000 settled on Sir William in 1701. In the circumstances Eleanora Conway felt unable to execute the will, and placed the entire estate under the administration of the Court of Chancery. An action was then begun on behalf of James's children against their aunt and the executors of the will, for the performance of its provisions, and for recovery of the debts from the 4th baronet's estate.¹ Pending the hearing of the two suits, the revenue of the Fountain plantation was impounded by the Court.

In the suit brought by Schutz and Roberton, which was contested by the united forces of the Stapleton family, they first claimed possession of the plantation as it had been occupied by Hamilton, and satisfaction for his personal estate. In the case for the defence, drawn up by Paris (Dame Catherine's solicitor), it was pointed out that Dame Frances had purchased the plantation in her own right, not as heir of Hamilton's right as a tenant, and no protest or claim had been made in the intervening period.² The plaintiffs then modified their claim to one on the personal estate only. In an opinion sought from R. Wilbraham, on behalf of the defendants, he believed that the plaintiffs were entitled to such of Hamilton's personal estate (the Negroes, stock and plantation utensils) as was still alive or in existence in 1746.³ This, of course, would amount to little in value, and would be very difficult to determine. Schutz made a final claim to satisfaction out of Dame Frances's personal estate,⁴ but there is no evidence that the suit was ever settled. It appears that Schutz offered to accept £500 in satisfaction for all his claims,⁵ which remained as a vague threat to the Fountain plantation for the next twenty years.

¹ Ryl. Stapleton MS. 13. Case of Stapleton v. Conway, 23.10.1746.

² Ryl. Stapleton MS 4/14. Matters to be insisted on for the Defts., 4.11.1746.

³ U.C.N.W., Stapleton-Cotton MS. 1(ix) (11.7.1748).

⁴ P.R.O., C. 11 (186/6). Case of Schutz v. Stapleton, 27.6.1749.

⁵ U.C.N.W., Stapleton-Cotton MS. 1(xi). H. Hayward to E. Yonge, 15.6.1762.

While this somewhat absurd litigation was proceeding, the two branches of the Stapleton family were contesting Dame Frances's will. Dame Catherine carried out a vigorous campaign on behalf of her eldest son, involving research into the family deeds and accounts, from the time of the 1st baronet onwards. In this she encountered great difficulty, because of the lapse of time, the scant information she was able to derive from such documents as she was able to find, and the unwillingness of various members of the family to provide information that might add fuel to the contest. She even sent lengthy and detailed lists of questions to friends of her husband in the Leeward Islands, but the information they were able to provide was of little value, because all legal records in Nevis had been destroyed during the French invasion of 1706.¹ The case of *Stapleton v. Conway* was finally heard by Lord Chancellor Hardwicke on 30 March 1750. The settlement of the West Indian property, and the creation of trusts, according to the terms of Dame Frances's will, were upheld, and the Master of the Court was made responsible for rationalizing the arrears of debts and payment of legacies.² Dame Frances's plantation remained under the administration of the Court until 1760, when all the heirs came of age.

The Court's decision virtually ended the active interest of the elder branch of the family in sugar planting. In 1750 Sir Thomas leased his plantation in St. John's Parish, Nevis, to Thomas Ottley, for fourteen years,³ when it was valued at £7,020 currency.⁴ At the end of the term the lease was renewed, or a fresh one made,⁵ and thereafter the plantation must have been continuously leased to tenants, because the name of Lord Le Despencer⁶ is not listed among the owners of slaves to whom

¹ Ryl. Stapleton MSS. 4/14. Copies of letters, December 1746-January 1746/7. Replies are quoted in P.R.O., C. 11 (181/7).

² P.R.O., C. 33/394, fols. 584-7. The progress of the financial settlement is dealt with in P.R.O., C. 33/396, fol. 402; C. 33/400, fols. 129-131; C. 12 (801/48); and in Ryl. Stapleton MS. 13 (Petition of Mathew Dutton, 10.1.1754).

³ Oliver, *op. cit.* ii. 370.

⁴ Ryl. Stapleton MS. 6/3. Appraisal, 11.1.1750/1.

⁵ U.C.N.W., Stapleton-Cotton MS. 15(la). B. Weekes to M. Burt, 18.5.1767.

⁶ In 1788 Sir Thomas Stapleton (1766-1829), 6th baronet, was created Baron Le Despencer through the right of his grandmother, Dame Catherine.

compensation was paid under the Emancipation Act of 1833. Lord Le Despencer continued to own the plantation at least until 1871, when it was known as Lower Ground, and was leased to J. R. Wilkin.¹ In 1920 Low Ground (491 acres) was owned by Clare, Countess Cowley.² The 5th baronet continued to have a share in the Fountain plantation because he inherited the shares of his two younger brothers, James and William, who both died young. In May 1761, he notified the Misses Stapleton (daughters of James Russell Stapleton) that he was willing to sell his interest (amounting to two-eighths of the real, and three-sixteenths of the personal property) to them. They accepted his offer, and bought out his interest for £6,000,³ the Fountain plantation then being valued at £25,000. His younger sister, Catherine (1732–1802), married James Wright (d. 1803) in 1754; Wright was later Resident Minister to the Republic of Venice, and was created baronet in 1772. Wright followed Sir Thomas's example and offered to sell his interest in the Fountain plantation to the Misses Stapleton for £4,800. However, negotiations over this transaction broke down, though they did purchase a fragmentary share of the personal estate (disputed between Wright and Sir Thomas) for £681.⁴ A one-eighth interest in the Fountain plantation remained in the Wright family until 1840, when it was sold to the major proprietor, Lord Combermere, for £3,500.⁵

By 1764 the whole of Dame Frances's plantations in Nevis and seven-eighths of the Fountain plantation, were owned by the four surviving daughters of James Russell Stapleton. The eldest, Penelope (1732–88), married Ellis Yonge, of Bryn Iorcyn, Flints., and Acton Hall, near Wrexham, in 1753. The second, Catherine (1734–1815) remained a spinster. The two youngest were both married in 1767. Elizabeth (1738–1825) married

¹ J. A. B. Iles, *An Account Descriptive of the Island of Nevis* (Norwich, 1871), p. 14.

² K. J. Burdon, *A Handbook of St. Kitts-Nevis* (London, 1920), p. 206.

³ U.C.N.W., Stapleton-Cotton MSS. 8 (Accounts current, 1761-2) and 9 (Letters).

⁴ *Ibid.* 1(xi). Letters, 1762, and 1(x), Indenture, 21.3.1764.

⁵ *Ibid.* 29. Messrs. Manning and Anderdon to Lord Combermere, 20.1.1841.

Watkin Williams, of Penbedw, near Holywell, Flints., M.P. for Flint from 1777 to 1806. Frances (1739–1825) married Sir Robert Salusbury Cotton, 5th baronet, of Llewenni, Denbs., who sold the Llewenni estate soon after the marriage, and moved to Combermere Abbey, near Nantwich, Cheshire ; he was M.P. for Cheshire from 1780 to 1796. The young proprietors were somewhat reluctantly facing up to the responsibilities of plantation ownership. The principles of sugar planting were essentially the same as those of any other capitalistic enterprise. In order to maintain the real value of the plantations, and their productiveness, a considerable proportion of the profits needed to be reinvested in maintaining buildings and utensils, in improving the efficiency and lowering the cost of plantation operations, and (above all) in keeping a sufficient labour force of Negro slaves and animals. Without such reinvestment the production of sugar, profits and the real value declined rapidly, while the cost of food, timber and other supplies remained high. In the Leeward Islands, by the third decade of the eighteenth century, the quantity of sugar produced had reached its maximum, and though slaves continued to be imported in large numbers, there was no corresponding increase in production. Thereafter, however much profits might fluctuate with the price of sugar, the cost of production increased steadily. This may be accounted for by the declining fertility of soil that had been exhausted by intensive cultivation (especially in Nevis), necessitating extra labour to replant and manure it heavily. The extra demand for slaves, and competition for them from the newly acquired colonies in the Windward Islands, sent their price soaring. The growing cost of sugar production could only be balanced by greater efficiency, or by a corresponding increase in the price of sugar. While British planters enjoyed an insatiable demand in the protected markets of Britain and North America, a check on the price of sugar was imposed by competition from the newer and larger British colonies, and (in the European market) from French sugar.

Plantations belonging to absentee proprietors suffered especially from the evils of a wasteful system of agriculture. Proprietors had little else on which to judge the efficiency of their attorneys

and managers besides the quantity of sugar produced and the size of the immediate profit. The Stapletons naturally shared this outlook of their fellows. In a letter of instructions to a new manager in Nevis, Catherine Stapleton wrote, “. . . You have been appointed manager . . . from the recommendation of Mr Nisbet [the attorney], who I must look upon . . . as responsible to me for your economical and judicious management . . . Your continuing Manager will entirely depend on this . . . the best judge of it will be the sugar shipt from my Estate, in proportion to my property and the general Crop of the Island. . . .”¹ Thus there was a tendency for conscientious managers to strain their land and slaves to satisfy the immediate demands of their employers, with little thought for the necessity of conserving and balancing their resources for the future. Careless and dishonest managers (who were far more common) neglected to manure and cultivate the more inaccessible parts of their plantations, diverted the work of the slaves to their own benefit, and lived as extravagantly as they could at the expense of their employers. At the best planter-ship was always a hazardous enterprise, at the mercy of the natural disasters of drought, hurricanes, insect pests, war and epidemics among the Negroes.

It was inevitable that during the minority of the proprietors, while their revenue was being used to settle debts and legacies, the Stapleton plantations should have been neglected. An inventory of the Fountain plantation in 1761 revealed that nearly all the buildings were dilapidated, many of the utensils were worn-out, and there were only 142 Negroes.² From accounts of the quantity of sugar sold in England for the period 1747 to 1760³ it appears that an average of 102 hogsheads was sold annually, yielding an average annual profit of £1,265 (5 per cent. on the capital value of the plantation of £25,000). The cane land of the plantation amounted to about 170 acres, or one-hundredth of that of the whole island, half of which was planted each year. From this the average annual crop was about 107 hogsheads (of 15 cwt. each), compared with Bryan Edwards’s

¹ U.C.N.W., Stapleton-Cotton MSS. 17(ii-iii). Letter to George Webbe Daniel, 1.9.1783 (copies).

² Ibid. 20(2a-2e). Inventories, 15/24.9.1761.

³ Ibid. 3, 5. Estate accounts.

estimate of an average annual crop of two hogsheads per acre for the whole island.¹ Contemporaries confirmed that the plantation was producing well below its potential crop and profit. Alexander Douglas (who supplied much of the information about St. Christopher for Edwards's book²) became attorney in 1761, and declared bluntly, ". . . I look upon it to have been the most neglected, and for 20 nay 30 years past the worst managed, Estate in the whole Island; not less than £800 or £1,000 yearly has been lost" [which would represent 50 or 60 hogsheads a year]. "Unless it is put on a proper footing, I would advise you to sell it. A sugar estate well supplied . . . is perhaps the best in the world, but where it is otherwise I do not know so great a pickpocket."³ The major defects he mentioned were the need for new sugar works (boiling, curing and distilling houses), a stone windmill instead of the present horse-mill, at least forty seasoned Negroes, and a supply of running water to be piped from the Fountain River. Fresh water was essential for making rum, from the sale of which the local plantation expenses ought to be paid; in 1760 only 46 gallons of rum per hogshead of sugar was being made. By 1771 most of the suggested improvements had been carried out, though the windmill was only a wooden structure, and the number of Negroes had been increased to 186.⁴ The amount of sugar sold rose to an average of 135 hogsheads per annum, and the cost of the improvements (over £6,000) was largely met from the profits of the plantation. In 1771 72 gallons of rum per hogshead of sugar was made, not far short of the estimate of 80 set by Samuel Martin for a skilled distiller.⁵

While these improvements were being carried out in St. Christopher, the estate in Nevis had been largely neglected. In fact, the Stapletons were more intent on selling the plantations than on improving them. Early in the century the lower land of Russell's Rest (below the common road) had been formed into

¹ B. Edwards, *The History, Civil and Commercial, of the British Colonies in the West Indies* (London, 1793), i. 464-5.

² Edwards, op. cit. i. xi.

³ U.C.N.W., Stapleton-Cotton MS. 20(iii). Letter, 21.3.1766.

⁴ Ibid. 20(iii), letters from and to Alexander Douglas, 1765-9; 21(i), plantation account, 1771.

⁵ S. Martin, *An Essay in Plantership* (Antigua, 1768), p. 55.

a separate plantation, known as Whitehall. The reason for this was probably because the upper land of Russell's Rest had become exhausted; as early as 1725 the manager reported that it (and Madan's) was worn to the very bone, and the ground was too steep to retain manure.¹ From the plantation accounts for 1745 to 1752 it appears that at Russell's Rest there was the old dwelling-house, a cattle-mill and an old boiling-house; at Whitehall a cattle-mill, boiling-house, distilling-house and store-house; and at the Camp were a cattle-mill and boiling-house. In 1746 there were 197 slaves, and cattle were the animals used for most plantation work. The cane land in the three plantations amounted to about 290 acres, or one-fourteenth of that of the whole island. A third of it was planted each year, since one crop of ratoons (second growth canes) was raised. Between 1746 and 1752 the average annual crop amounted to 127 hogsheads (of 13 cwt. each) of which a considerable proportion was sold locally. Production of rum was very low, and none at all was produced from a poor crop.² Between 1747 and 1760 an annual average of 96 hogsheads of sugar was sold in London, yielding a profit of £800 (4 per cent of an estimated capital value of £20,000). Between 1761 and 1770 an annual average of 140 hogsheads was sold in London, the rise being probably due to a greater proportion of the crop being shipped rather than to any marked increase in production. From this the yearly profit nearly doubled, to £1,578.³

Because of the desire of the proprietors to sell the plantations, they were roughly surveyed and valued in 1766. The 110 acres of cane land each at Whitehall and the Camp was valued at £50 per acre, and the 70 at Russell's Rest at £30 per acre. An unspecified quantity of pasture and provision land at Whitehall and the Camp was valued at £8 per acre, while that at Russell's Rest was worth only £6 an acre. The old boiling-house at Russell's Rest was now worthless, but at the Camp a new boiling and curing house had been erected in the intervening period. The number of Negroes had fallen to 186. The valuation (without the pasture

¹ Ryl. Stapleton MS. 7/1. Timothy Tyrrell to Dame Frances, 25.5.1725.

² U.C.N.W., Stapleton-Cotton MS. 13(i-viii).

³ *Ibid.* 2, 4. Estate accounts.

and provision land) amounted to £22,700 sterling.¹ One potential buyer was assured that the Stapleton plantations constituted the best single property in Nevis, but that 100 more Negroes, a sugar works at Russell's Rest, and a supply of running water to the distilling-house, would greatly enhance its value.² Nothing came of the negotiations for the sale of the estate, and by 1771 the proprietors were reconciled to the necessity of further investment in improvements. The Stapletons were no longer in the position of being able to invest capital in the improvements, so the work had to be carried out with the loan of £6,000 from their sugar agents, Messrs. Neave and Willett, to be repaid (with interest of 4½ per cent.) from the profits of the estate.³

The improvements in Nevis were delayed by difficulties over the management of the plantations. Walter Nisbet, manager from about 1736 to 1765, was succeeded by his eldest son, Walter, on his death.⁴ The latter was apparently dismissed in 1770, but continued to take an unofficial interest in the estate for the next two years. The principal attorney for the estates in both islands was now John Nelson, who resided in Dominica, and difficulties of communication made it impossible for him to exercise an effective oversight. The manager in Nevis from 1770 to 1773, James Ward, was dismissed for inefficiency and extravagance, which was revealed to the proprietors by Nisbet. His post was filled by transferring John Queely from his post as manager in St. Christopher. The Stapletons then took the unusual step of entrusting both estates to the care of John Robinson, who exercised absolute control at his own discretion, since he became neither attorney nor manager. Robinson had been Collector of Customs in Rhode Island, and one of the Commissioners of the American Board of Customs. Following a brawl in a Boston coffee house, in 1769, in which Robinson had been accused of assaulting James Otis, he deserted his post for

¹ U.C.N.W., Stapleton-Cotton MS. 14 (Schedule, 7.7.1766) and 18(iii), Nisbet to Messrs. Truman, Neave & Co., 25.7.1766.

² Ibid. 15(ia-b). Burt Weekes to Matthew Burt, 18.5.1767.

³ Ibid. 9. R. Neave to Catherine Stapleton, 14.6.1771.

⁴ Josiah Nisbet, M.D. (whose widow married Horatio Nelson in 1787) was his third son, and was plantation doctor from 1773 to 1781.

England. For the next three years he continued on leave, an increasing source of embarrassment to the Treasury, which he badgered with requests for alternative employment.¹ The reason for his employment by the Stapletons is not clear, but it was probably as a office of friendship in return for their influence in support of his claim to the post of Collector of Customs in St. Vincent.² Robinson was in the Leeward Islands from February 1774 to July 1775, and threw himself into the task of improving the Stapleton plantations with great vigour and little concern for the expense to the proprietors. In Nevis a new boiling-house was erected at Russell's Rest, the dwelling-house was repaired, and a distilling-house at Whitehall was supplied with fresh water piped through hollow bricks from the mountain above Russell's Rest. At the Camp a windmill and a new distilling-house were built. In St. Christopher a new dwelling-house was erected. Robinson purchased about 100 Negroes for the Nevis estate, and over fifty for that in St. Christopher (from Dominica and St. Vincent), and supplies and provisions for both estates on a lavish scale.

The improvements carried out by Robinson, and the expense he incurred, proved of doubtful lasting benefit to the estates. This was partly due to his admitted ignorance of plantation economy, because of which production of sugar and the efficiency of the plantations fell sharply. The dwelling-house in St. Christopher was built of North American spruce, instead of Georgia pitch pine (as Robinson had promised), so that it had to be pulled down and rebuilt ten years later. A greater part of the Stapletons' misfortune was due to Robinson's deliberate dishonesty. In spite of the lavish ordering of provisions and supplies, the managers of both estates were soon complaining that they lacked almost all the necessities of life, as well as of the neglected condition of the plantations.³ The purchase of large numbers of slaves was always a risky operation, and Robinson

¹ P.R.O., T.1/499, fols. 63, 87-88, 289-92, 293-4.

² U.C.N.W., Stapleton-Cotton MS. 15(ix). John Robinson to Catherine Stapleton, 20.10.1774.

³ *Ibid.* 16(viii), Charles Hutton to Catherine Stapleton, 30.7.1777; 22(iii) John Bryan to Robinson, 20.2.1776.

cannot be blamed for the epidemics of dysentery which killed many of them in later years. But the size of this disaster is more explicable in the light of information later brought to light. It appears that when Robinson purchased the highest quality Negroes for the Nevis estate he had also purchased an identical number of refuse, whom he substituted on the estate, and sold the highly priced Negroes to his own profit.¹ The total cost of his operations was enormous. The Nevis estate account was in debt for £9,568 sterling in 1776.² In St. Christopher not only had the estate account a loss of nearly £1,000 for the year ending 1776, but at end of 1775 the plantation account was almost £1,000 sterling in debt, a fact that did not become known to the proprietors until the accounts were audited two years later.³ The Stapletons terminated their agreement with Robinson amicably in May 1776.⁴

For the past seven or eight years chief responsibility for plantation affairs had been assumed by Catherine Stapleton. This remarkable lady led an independent life, attaining a social position of considerable prestige among the wide circle of her influential friends, based on genuine admiration for her character and generosity. Her aunt and guardian Eleanora Conway was also an aunt (on her mother's side) of Richard Grenville, Earl Temple (1711-79) and his brother, George (1712-70). In a life devoted to good works, Catherine Stapleton began, in 1769, by taking care of the children of the widowed George Grenville.⁵ Presumably through her friendship with the Grenvilles she became acquainted with William Pitt, Earl of Chatham, with whose widow she lived as companion at Burton Pynsent, Somerset, from about 1780 until the death of the latter in 1803. Horace Walpole was another friend and admirer.⁶

By 1776 the financial state of the Nevis estate had reached a point of crisis, and the outbreak of the American war brought

¹ U.C.N.W., Stapleton-Cotton MS. 18(v). James Nisbet to Catherine Stapleton, 28.8.1784.

² Ibid. 4.

³ Ibid. 9. Messrs. Neave & Willett to Catherine Stapleton, 31.7.1777.

⁴ Ibid. 22(iii). Catherine Stapleton to John Bryan, 4.5.1776 (copy).

⁵ R. Leighton, ed., *Correspondence of Charlotte Grenville* (London, 1920), p. 5.

⁶ H. Walpole, *Letters*, ed. by P. Cunningham (Edinburgh, 1906), vi. 32-33 ; vii. 155, 246.

a slump in West Indian securities and caused great alarm among planters. Watkin Williams had personal debts amounting to £10,000, and was desperate to sell his interest in the plantations for whatever he could get for it.¹ Sir Robert Cotton also owed over £4,000 to the sugar agents. Prompted no doubt by pride of ownership, and the desire to keep the plantations within the family, Catherine Stapleton began negotiations to lease or purchase the interests of her brothers-in-law in them. She was encouraged in this by John Nelson, who was confident that the war would be short and successful, that the North American colonies would return to their former allegiance, and that West Indian credit would be quickly restored.² She finally purchased the interests of Cotton and Williams at the rate of £18,000 each, an amount comprehending their debts to the sugar merchants. The balance of £14,000 owing to Cotton, and £11,000 to Williams was to be paid in ten years with interest of 4½ per cent.³ A similar agreement with Ellis Yonge reached an advanced stage, but finally came to nothing. This may have been due to a letter to the latter from Walter Nisbet, who declared that with further improvements and good management the two estates together would be worth £100,000, and capable of producing 500 hogsheads of sugar annually.⁴

As a result of this purchase Catherine Stapleton became the principal proprietor of the plantations, owning three-quarters of those in Nevis, and three-quarters of seven-eighths of the Fountain plantation. In return she undertook not only the payment of the debts and interest to Cotton and Williams, but also the major part of the debt on the Nevis estate account. The remainder of her life was occupied by the search for one expedient after another to enable her to bear this financial burden. The reason for her difficulties now appears obvious. In addition to the factors already mentioned tending towards the declining prosperity of the older British sugar colonies, the American war

¹ U.C.N.W., Stapleton-Cotton MS. 24(i). Williams to C. Stapleton, 4.2.1776.

² Ibid. 24(v). Nelson to C. Stapleton, 17.3.1776.

³ Ibid. 24(i), Agreement, April 1776; P.R.O., C. 54/6456, fols. 31-39, Indentures, 24/25.3.1777.

⁴ U.C.N.W., Bodrhyddan MS. 2156 (22.4.1776).

greatly increased the cost of food and supplies, and was followed by restrictions on trade with the United States, causing the loss of American food and timber and the market for West Indian rum. Though the plantations were afterwards managed with greater efficiency, and produced greater crops of sugar, the margin of profit remained at about 5 per cent., a sum equal to the rate of interest being paid on debts, bonds and mortgages in order to retain them. That the Stapleton plantations did not inexorably slide into bankruptcy, as did so many others, was due entirely to the tenacity of Catherine Stapleton. Firstly, in addition to the prestige she enjoyed from her ownership of West Indian property, she was able and willing to use her Bodrhyddan and other English property as security for the loans she sought. Secondly, she lived in a frugal manner; after 1776 she rarely drew more than £200 in any one year from her estate accounts.¹ Above all, as a relative and friend of the Grenvilles, and with the private ear of William Pitt, she was in a social position where West-Indian place-seekers sought her favour in return for their services to the plantations, and great merchants like Sir Richard Neave strained themselves to treat her with respect and consideration.

In St. Christopher the manager appointed by Robinson in 1775, John Bryan, was a skilful planter who produced an average annual crop of 133 hogsheads of high quality sugar between 1775 and 1777. But he was handicapped by the large local debts left by Robinson's extravagance, which was made worse by the loss of the market for rum and the increased cost of provisions, due to the outbreak of war. The autumn of 1776 was very wet, bringing an epidemic of fever and dysentery, from which over a third of the Negroes suffered. The remainder had to be driven harder than usual to carry on plantation operations, and in April 1777, when John Nelson paid one of his infrequent visits to the plantation, the Negroes were sullen and rebellious. Nelson was revolted by the threats of punishment uttered by Bryan on that occasion, and condemned him for lack of humanity.² Later in the year the Negroes in mass deserted their work during crop

¹ U.C.N.W., Stapleton-Cotton MS. 8. Accounts current.

² *Ibid.* 22(iii). Letters between Nelson and Bryan, April-May, 1777.

time, and the crop of sugar was saved only by the intervention of William Wharton, the attorney, who lent his own Negroes to carry out the work.¹ When reports from Nelson and Wharton reached England, Neave was inclined to blame Nelson for interfering in plantation discipline, and pointed out that Robinson was responsible for the amount of debt which now became known.² Nelson, however, urged the dismissal of Bryan, which took place at the end of the year.

Bryan was replaced by Robert Thomson, who had been manager of the plantation in St. Christopher rented by the Rev. Martin Madan.³ Thomson, who remained as manager until 1801, soon proved himself to be the best manager ever employed by the Stapletons. Though he did not produce such fine sugar as Bryan, he more than compensated for this by the prudence and honesty of his management, which is more remarkable because he appears never to have sought any favours from the proprietors in exchange. Under his management the average annual crop of the plantation between 1778 and 1788 rose to 162 hogsheads, yielding an annual profit of £2,130 (6 per cent. on the capital value of £36,000). This unprecedented prosperity was accomplished during a period of extreme political danger and grave economic hardship. From 1778 the Leeward Islands were overshadowed by the threat of a French invasion, which finally came in February 1782, and the islands remained in French hands until the end of the war in the following year. Shipment of sugar from, and of provisions to, the islands suffered little, because of the tolerant attitude of the French Government, but there was considerable interruption of plantation routine before and during the invasion. During and after the war taxation, to cover the cost of the defence of the island, cost the Stapleton plantation alone £16,000 sterling up to 1788. Before the invasion Thomson was able to carry out a number of improvements to the plantation, including replacing the wooden windmill with a stone one and rebuilding the dwelling-house of pitch pine. These improvements,

¹ U.C.N.W., Stapleton-Cotton MS. 22(iii). Bryan to Catherine Stapleton, 16.8.1777.

² *Ibid.* 9. Messrs. Neave and Willett to Catherine Stapleton, 23.10.1777.

³ Madan (1726-90) was the celebrated and controversial hymnologist, early Methodist preacher, and classical scholar.

and the purchase of timber, animals and a few Negroes cost the proprietors nothing in capital expenditure, since Thomson was able to pay for them, and the normal expenses of the plantation, from the sale of rum. At the same time he strove to keep down the cost of food, and to make the plantation more self-sufficient, by growing as much provisions, such as yams, as he could. In 1780 the proprietors showed their confidence in Thomson by taking the unusual step of giving him powers of attorneyship. As attorney he could, at his discretion, purchase Negroes, when the death of an important workman made it necessary. In fact between 1780 and 1788 he purchased only nine, relying on greater care for the health and comfort of the Negroes to bring about an increase by natural methods. The result of his policy, which he regarded as highly complimentary to his management, brought about an increase from 194 to 213, with fifty-eight births and only forty-five deaths.¹ The prosperous condition of the plantation was later impaired by several seasons of drought, and by the appearance of an insect pest, the borer-worm, which persisted from 1787 to 1791.

In Nevis John Queely was replaced as manager by Charles Hutton in 1777. Under Hutton's management the expectations of the proprietors that their recent investment in improvements would result in greater crops and higher profits were not realized. Between 1778 and 1782 an average of 104 hogsheads of sugar was sold in London each year, yielding an annual profit of £1,612 (4.7 per cent. on the capital value of £34,000), which was no improvement on previous years. The reason was due partly to the war, the greater cost of supplies and food, and a succession of dry seasons, but mainly to Hutton's neglect of the plantation, in favour of his own. Since the island was virtually defenceless, there was little interruption of plantation operations for work on defences. Hutton made the war-time scarcity of timber an excuse for not carrying out necessary repairs to the buildings, and blamed the drought for the poor crops, in which he was supported by John Taylor, John Nelson and Archibald Thomson, the

¹ U.C.N.W., Stapleton-Cotton MSS. 23(v), Thomson's statement on his management, 23.4.1789, and 23 (vi), letters to Catherine Stapleton, 1780-9.

attorneys.¹ A major development was the decision to lease Madan's plantation as a stock estate to provide animals for the plantations in both islands. In St. Christopher horses had been used for most of the work of the plantation, since the climate was too damp for mules, and the war had ended the supply of American horses. In Nevis cattle were mainly used, but the area of pasture land was too small to breed an adequate number. A lease of Madan's for seven years, at £200 per annum, was drawn up in 1780, in which the Stapleton attorneys blundered not only in agreeing to an excessive rent, but in committing the lessees to maintain the existing sugar works on the plantation. Though it was later pointed out to the Rev. Martin Madan that this was a useless expense, since sugar would never again be made upon the plantation, he stubbornly refused to allow any alteration of the terms of the lease.²

In 1783 Walter Nisbet (once again) brought about a change in the management in Nevis, when Hutton shipped another poor crop in a fine season. The new manager appointed, George Webbe Daniel, was a relative of Nisbet, but apart from securing the post for him Nisbet showed little indulgence to him. As attorney for the estate, and resident in Nevis from 1784 to his death in 1797, Nisbet drove Daniel to produce greater crops, clear the estate of local debts, repair the buildings and maintain the estate on a stringently economical level in supplies and food. Nisbet, who was Collector of Customs in Nevis, depended on the influence of Catherine Stapleton to secure him the post of Collector in St. Christopher, and even that of Lieutenant-Governor of Nevis, neither of which he ever achieved.³ Daniel produced a crop of 211 hogsheads in 1785, and 212 in 1787, but the appearance of the borer-worm, which persisted until 1791, ended hopes of continuing fine crops. From 1783 to 1795 the estate produced an average crop of only 101 hogsheads, yielding an annual profit of £1,077 (3 per cent. on the capital value). Madan's plantation continued to be a liability rather than an

¹ U.C.N.W., Stapleton-Cotton MSS. 16(viii), letter from Taylor, 15.6.1780, 24(v), letter from Nelson, May 1780, and 23(vi), letter from Thomson, 17.6.1780.

² Ibid. 24(v), letter from Nelson, May 1780, and 9, Richard Neave to Catherine Stapleton, 25.8.1780, 11.1.1781.

³ Ibid. 18(v). Letter, 29.5.1784.

advantage to the estate. In 1787, when Robert Thomson inspected it, he found that the buildings had fallen into decay, and that the land had been allowed to grow up in cashave, a prickly shrub, so thick that cattle could not penetrate it.¹ The plantation was in no condition to be handed back to the owner, so a fresh lease was negotiated by Nisbet in 1788, with the rent reduced to £100. He declared to Catherine Stapleton, "You had had very little deference paid you—indeed not common justice—to say it has been a scandalous take-in, and a most infamous Lease, is but the truth . . . [Madan] seems . . . not a little attached to his own Interest, and, notwithstanding his thirst after a better state, to have no particular contempt for the good things of the present. . . ."²

Upon the death of Ellis Yonge, in 1785, his interest in the plantations was divided between his two daughters, Penelope (1758–89) and Barbara (1760–1837). In 1777 Penelope had married the Rev. William Davies Shipley (1745–1826), Dean of St. Asaph. The Dean was a man of forceful character and of radical political views, who was indicted for publishing a seditious libel in 1783—a tract on the principles of government written by his brother-in-law, Sir William Jones (the philologist). He evidently felt no incompatibility between his calling and his political principles, and the ownership of sugar plantations and slaves. Although he acquired (through his wife) only a minor interest in the plantations, his voice frequently over-shadowed that of Catherine Stapleton in the management of their affairs. His endeavours were directed towards securing the maximum profit from the plantations, by harrying the managers over their efficiency and economy, and the sugar merchants about the market and cost of insurance. On at least one occasion he appears to have ordered the dismissal of Daniel, in Nevis, without consulting his fellow proprietors.³

After the death of Nisbet in Nevis, and the retirement of Thomson in St. Christopher, difficulties again arose over the management of both estates. These induced the Stapletons to

¹ U.C.N.W., Stapleton-Cotton MSS. 23(vi). Letter 6.5.1787.

² Ibid. 18(v). Letter, 23.5.1788.

³ Ibid. 9. R. & T. Neave to Catherine Stapleton, 31.10.1794.

send out a representative of the family to reside in the Leeward Islands. This was Mordaunt James Shipley, the Dean's second son, who arrived in Nevis in 1801, as manager of that estate and with oversight of the plantation in St. Christopher. Once again the climate proved fatal, and he died of fever in 1806, at the age of 26. There is not much evidence of the effect of having even such a young and inexperienced planter in residence upon the estate. But it is significant that Madan's plantation was finally purchased in 1803, and that about 130 acres of it was again used to grow sugar cane. From 1805 onwards there was a marked increase in the crop of the Nevis estate, and between 1796 and 1810 an average of 166 hogsheads was sold each year, yielding an annual profit of £1,700 (5 per cent. on the capital value). The plantation in St. Christopher also maintained a fairly high level of production, with an average crop of 110 hogsheads between 1789 and 1809, yielding an annual profit of £2,066 (nearly 6 per cent. on the capital value). This level of production, linked with an artificial and temporary inflation in the price of sugar during the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic wars, finally ended the deadlock between Catherine Stapleton's income and expenses. By 1811, for the first time since 1776, the debt on her current account with the sugar merchants had been cleared. The remainder of her debts had been consolidated into a mortgage for £12,000 on her West Indian property. From 1800 to 1810 this had been held by Alexander Hood, Admiral Viscount Bridport. It had then been transferred to Sir Peter Warburton, of Arley, Chester. On the death of Warburton in 1813 the trustees of his estate refused to continue the mortgage, and demanded repayment of the money. They finally threatened foreclosure of a bill in Chancery, to gain possession of the West Indian property, if the money was not paid by February 1815. Catherine Stapleton, now aged 81, was faced by the gravest financial crisis of her life. She was saved only by the sympathy of her sugar agents, Messrs. Manning and Anderdon, who took the unusual step of offering collateral security for her debt. They arranged for half of her debt to be paid at once, and the remainder in annual instalments. This transaction saved the plantations, but stripped her of her very last financial

resources.¹ In 1806 she had parted with her half share in the Bodrhyddan estate, by settling it on the Dean's eldest son, Colonel William Shipley (1779-1820), upon his brilliant marriage to Charlotte Williams-Wynne, of Wynnstay.² Shipley was M.P. for Flint from 1807 to 1812. After her death, on 28 August 1815, at Audlem, Cheshire, it was found that her personal estate amounted to very little. In her will she bequeathed her share of the West Indian property in trust for the Rev. William Cotton and the eldest son of General Sir Stapleton Cotton (1773-1865), Baron Combermere.³

In fact the whole of her interest in the plantations came into the hands of Lord Combermere (eldest son of Sir Robert Salisbury Cotton), who had been Wellington's cavalry commander in the Peninsular campaign, and was created Viscount Combermere of Bhurtpore in 1834. In 1817, while Combermere was Governor of Barbados, he visited the plantations. Emancipation of the Negroes, in 1833, created a serious problem of labour, and greatly increased the financial strain of maintaining the plantations, which could be met only out of the income from his English property.⁴ Combermere received compensation amounting to £3,739 for 227 slaves in St. Christopher, and £3,465 for 193 slaves in Nevis.⁵ He attempted to overcome the problems of labour and cost, and the sharp fall in the price of sugar under free trade, by experimenting with the use of steam-powered machinery in the manufacture of sugar, the use of guano as fertilizer, and introducing cross-bred Indian cattle to the plantations.⁶ Undismayed by the difficulties of plantation ownership in the mid-nineteenth century, he enlarged the property in St. Christopher by purchasing the adjoining Parry's plantation (175 acres) in 1841.⁷ The estate in Nevis had greatly declined in value, and all the plantations were leased to various tenants at

¹ U.C.N.W., Stapleton-Cotton MSS. 12.

² U.C.N.W., Bodrhyddan MS. 103.

³ *Hist. MSS. Comm. Reports, Fortescue MSS.*, x. 405-7.

⁴ M. W. S. Cotton, Viscountess Combermere, and W. W. Knollys, *Memoirs and Correspondence of Viscount Combermere* (London, 1866), i. 354.

⁵ *H. of Commons Sess. Papers, Accounts and Papers, Sess. 1837-8*, xlvi. 90 (424), 107 (441).

⁶ U.C.N.W., Stapleton-Cotton MS. 29.

⁷ *Ibid.* 27, 29.

different times during the century. In 1862 Lord Combermere transferred the West Indian property to his son, Wellington Henry (1818-91), 2nd Viscount.¹ The latter further increased the property in Nevis, and also purchased three plantations in Antigua in 1865.² The property in Nevis and St. Christopher was bequeathed to his younger son, Colonel R. S. G. Stapleton-Cotton (1849-1925). In 1920 the Stapleton plantation in St. Christopher contained 716 acres. There were seven Stapleton plantations in St. James's Parish, Nevis, namely, Brick Kiln (30 acres), Camp (269 acres), Gardner's (60 acres), Hope (148 acres), Jeffrey's (120 acres), Maddens (1,028 acres) and Nisbett's (111 acres).³ It is probable that the plantations were sold soon after this.

The Shipley share in the plantations was never reunited with the main interest. On the death of the Dean in 1826, his interest was inherited by his grandson, William (1807-69), who bequeathed it to his sister, Charlotte Rowley (1811-71). It descended from her to her son, Conwy Rowley (1841-1900), who adopted the surname of Conwy. On the death of Barbara Yonge, in 1837, her interest was bequeathed to Charlotte Rowley, so that this also was inherited by Conwy Rowley-Conwy.⁴ The combined interest was inherited by the latter's son, Admiral Rafe Grenville Rowley-Conwy (1875-1951), who sold it in 1936.⁵

From this brief sketch of the history of an important family of sugar plantation proprietors it is worth noting that it is incorrect to think wholly in terms of the exploitation of West Indian resources by absentee planters. Even in the eighteenth century, under the old colonial system, with all its attendant evils of absenteeism, wastefulness and slavery, successful planting over any lengthy period of time involved a two-way flow of capital. The chief guarantee of success in a hazardous enterprise was possession of secure landed property in the mother country, which could bear the brunt of misfortune in the colonies.

¹ U.C.N.W., Stapleton-Cotton MS. 30.

² *Ibid.* 42.

³ Burdon, *op. cit.* pp. 144, 204.

⁴ U.C.N.W., Bodrhyddan MS. 240.

⁵ N. Tucker, "Bodrhyddan and the Families of Conwy, Shipley-Conwy and Rowley-Conwy," Part 2, *Jnl. of the Flints. Hist. Soc.* (1962), xx. 7.