

Thursday 22 August 2019

**‘Attitudes towards slavery are more complex, just as life today is complex’**

**Finlay McKichan at the Edinburgh International Book Festival**

“Attitudes towards slavery are more complex, just as life today is complex” said Finlay McKichan at the Edinburgh International Book Festival. It is in McKichan’s new in-depth study *Lord Seaforth: Highland Landowner, Caribbean Governor* that an image of one of Scotland’s most conflicted figures is explored. The indebted Highland land owner who went on to assume the position of Governor of Barbados argued in court for the rights of enslaved people, despite owning plantations himself. McKichan gave the audience a rounded reason as to why Scots were involved in the slave trade using the lens of Francis Humberston Mackenzie’s life. Using sources from Seaforth’s own life, McKichan pieced together the legacy of the Scot’s hand in colonial slavery.

McKichan recounted the story of the Highland Clearances where crofters were often forced off land in favor of sheep pasture, many emigrating to North America or Australia. Seaforth was an unusual character as he allied with those who worked his land rather than the cheviot. McKichan described Seaforth as a ‘humanitarian’ after he declined an offer of triple rent from sheep farmers for the Kintail Lands in the general sett of 1787. By 1801 however, Seaforth’s nephew, Colin Mackenzie, urged him to lend pasture to sheep farmers on Glenshiel as a matter of financial urgency. The Seaforth Estate was greatly indebted, and to continue the ‘extravagant’ lifestyle of the family Seaforth was strongly advised to find new sources of income. McKichan duly noted the absurdity of an expansion on Seaforth’s Brahan Castle during this time of financial peril. To afford the extension Seaforth filled the position of Governor of Barbados - a position which would result in a salary largely made up of profits from plantations.

McKichan spoke of how the Scots were “heavily involved” in the slave trade; He noted Seaforth not only “believed in slavery” but thought he could “humanize slavery”. Part of this belief was encapsulated in his desire to convert enslaved people to Christianity.

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McKichan commented that this was a radical notion as it suggested that Seaforth viewed enslaved people as people, not property. Just as he felt responsible for the crofters on his estate in Scotland, he felt responsible for the enslaved people working the land in Barbados and Guyana. He provided medical care for those working on the plantations regardless of age. McKichan said it “became a personal crusade for Seaforth” to try and “prevent a slave uprising”.

It became clear towards the end of the talk that the Scottish influence in the slave trade was vast and undeniable. McKichan not only noted how many parts of Barbados were given Scottish names such as St. Andrews but also how “Profits from slave plantations had helped to build Scottish Mansions and even the University of Glasgow”.

When McKichan was asked by an audience member if he thought Seaforth’s treatment of enslaved people was sincere, McKichan responded with the opinion that the slave owner was a “well intentioned, but flawed individual” and later reinforced this statement by saying “attitudes were different two hundred years ago”.

The event finished with the McKichen concluding “I am suggesting attitudes towards slavery are more complex just as life today is complex”.