

Introduction

In 1891 the Planters' Association of Ceylon publicly celebrated the seminal achievements of a Scotsman, James Taylor, who had successfully pioneered what had become by then the vast new tea economy of the colony. As the Association's Chairman put it: 'There was no denying the fact that he [Taylor] originally proved in this Island that Ceylon could make good tea.'¹ A mere six months after this public accolade, Taylor was dead, and his reputation sullied beforehand. He had been dismissed in disgrace from the post of superintendent at the estate that he had served for more than forty years and where he had carried out his famous and successful experiments in the cultivation of tea.

This book, set in its contemporary context, examines the remarkable life story of James Taylor from his upbringing in north-east Scotland until his death in 1892 in Ceylon (known as Sri Lanka since 1972). He was born in 1835 near the village of Auchenblae in Kincardineshire and, after leaving there at the age of sixteen, spent the rest of his days working on the island colony in coffee, cinchona, and tea cultivation. In a sense he was fairly typical of the countless number of young Scots who sought their fortunes in the British Empire and beyond throughout the nineteenth century. Yet, for the reasons given below, his particular career merits special attention.

Taylor was a key progenitor of what became a global trade in Ceylon tea. As late as the early 1860s little was cultivated on the island, but by 1900 150 million pounds of tea were exported and the land devoted to its cultivation had expanded to 384,000 acres. As one commentator retrospectively put it in the 1930s, this "rush into tea" on the part of Ceylon planters, with a corresponding growth of exports constitutes one of the most remarkable instances of rapid development in the history of the tea trade'.² Today, Sri Lanka is the world's fourth-largest producer of tea, and second-biggest when measured by its share of global tea exports. Taylor's early efforts in Victorian times therefore helped to create the foundations for the transformation of the country's economy and, in the process, helped to shape the world's drinking habits.

In addition, while biographies of the imperial great and good are commonplace, the individual lives of the hundreds of thousands of Britons from more

humble backgrounds are either ignored or considered only in the mass as part of broader examinations of migration patterns.³ James Taylor belonged to that social class of the skilled and the semi-skilled which was vital to the imperial project but whose private lives have mainly fallen below the historical radar. He came from artisan stock in north-east Scotland and his father was a wright (carpenter) of modest means. Taylor himself always remained an employee of larger concerns in Ceylon and never rose above the rank of plantation manager throughout his life. As he put it in 1874, ‘Some how or other I was born apparently to do good for others without much benefitting myself.’⁴ He did not achieve wealth and, though earning a high reputation and generous acclaim among his peers in the cinchona and tea economies of Ceylon before he died, never received recognition in the land of his birth. To this day, his name stirs little or no resonance in Scotland, although he is a national figure in Sri Lanka. Taylor has never been recorded among the pantheon of ‘Great Scots’ whose remarkable deeds in far-off lands aroused such pride across the nation during the heyday of empire.⁵ Indeed, but for the chance survival of his voluminous correspondence, Taylor’s name, outside Sri Lanka at least, might well have been lost to history. It is the long and detailed series of letters which he wrote to his family at home – together with his photographs and published correspondence – which have made this ‘subaltern biography’ possible.

Between 1851 in London, where he awaited passage to Asia, and 1891, just before his death, Taylor corresponded regularly, mainly with his father, but also with his sister, brother-in-law, and maternal grandfather in Scotland.⁶ There is only one significant gap in the sequence, between 1861 and 1868, when his letters home do not seem to have survived.⁷ The bulk of his correspondence, some 83,000 words in all, is preserved in the National Library of Scotland in Edinburgh. To the best of our knowledge, the correspondence is unique to one of Taylor’s social class and function in the published history of empire. To this, we can add his two photograph albums and his many published letters in the press and in the Proceedings of the Planters’ Association, the island’s representative body for the planting community.⁸ Extending over four decades, these collective sources are by far the richest archive we have come across for a nineteenth-century migrant of humble origin from Scotland. As John MacKenzie, the esteemed historian of the British Empire, has put it, ‘In the annals of imperial correspondence, the forty-year consistency of the Taylor letters to his family is exceptionally unusual for someone from his social background. They therefore constitute an unrivalled source for the origins of tea production in Ceylon (Sri Lanka).’⁹ So too does this correspondence illuminate forty years of distinct transformations in Ceylon’s history.

The late Denys Forrest, the first to make some use of the Taylor letters, recognised their importance in containing ‘perhaps the most complete account in existence of a young planter’s experiences and feelings’.¹⁰ The archive is

indeed a fascinating mine of information on a range of subjects, including little known details on the coffee, cinchona, and tea economies of Ceylon; Taylor's own pioneering efforts which eventually resulted in a virtual tea monoculture on the island by the end of the nineteenth century; the life of a planter in the high noon of the Victorian empire; the labour force in coffee, cinchona, and tea; cross-cultural relationships; the ties of an emigrant with family at home; and much else. Taylor's acclaim as the 'father of the Ceylon tea enterprise' has overshadowed his other achievements, but these are given due acknowledgement here.

Taylor's writings and photographs can be supplemented by a number of other important sources, including the private and published papers of fellow planters (among them his relatives Henry Stiven and Peter Moir), the proceedings of their professional associations, and the Ceylon press. A particularly valuable source on tea and other commodities in Ceylon and beyond the island's borders is the *Tropical Agriculturist*, the brainchild of a Highland Scot, John Ferguson. Ferguson's own personal archive, the botanical archives at Kew, and records from official tea repositories in Sri Lanka have also been employed to amplify and extend the story. We have drawn too upon crucial genealogical sources, both manuscript and digitised.

Material from archives and libraries is central to the book, but we have gone further by following in Taylor's footsteps, both in Scotland and in Sri Lanka. Several visits have been made to his birthplace at Auchenblae and the surrounding district where he grew to manhood. In Sri Lanka, we travelled to Loolecondera, the estate that he managed for forty years, visited his grave just outside Kandy, and traced the commemorations of his legacy, including the imposing 13-foot bust at the Mlesna Tea Castle at Talawakelle and artefacts that supposedly belonged to him and which are now lodged in the Ceylon Tea Museum at Hantana.

What emerges is, we believe, the first serious academic study of a British planter in nineteenth-century Asia at a time when plantation economies were prominent throughout India, Borneo, Ceylon, Burma, Malaysia, and elsewhere in the age of empire. Throughout, we quote at length from Taylor's letters in order to understand the public and private man in his own terms, the language he used, and his personality and mindset.

The book, then, is the first large-scale study of James Taylor and is the only one to use his extant correspondence from beginning to end.¹¹ While several scholars have drawn on personal letters in the analysis of other ethnicities to examine their migrations over time,¹² never before has a long series of correspondence on this scale been considered to project the life and work of a migrant from Scotland.¹³ Given the long history of Scottish emigration, dating back to medieval times, this in itself is a remarkable fact. The focus on Ceylon and Asia also serves to offer a fresh perspective on the study of the

Scottish diaspora, which to date has mainly focused on the Atlantic world and the settlement colonies of Australasia and South Africa.¹⁴

The richness and diversity of the source material permits the detailed consideration of a number of themes and questions emerging from historiographical issues in imperial, Asian, diaspora, and Scottish history. They include the nature of colonisation, cross-cultural contact, identities, the emerging field of emotions, and study of the global trade in new consumer commodities. Thus, although Taylor's life is a key concern, we are in full agreement with the contention of one distinguished biographer that 'to have explanatory power, biography needs to be embedded in a wider history of social and political forces which shape the individual and his ... scope for action'.¹⁵ Some biographies often do not take account of the forces that help to shape the life of an individual or provide scope for the impact he or she made and which both mould and constrain that effect.¹⁶ That, we suggest, is a myopic approach. Therefore, we have tried throughout to set Taylor's character, behaviour, aspirations, and emotions within the context of the social, economic, cultural, and political history of his times. This also explains why the book is structured as a thematic biography, which allows scope for analytical depth and breadth rather than a chronological narrative of the life of one individual.

By making ethnicity a core theme throughout the book, we also try to connect with ongoing debates within the history of the British world by challenging the view that tends to portray migrants as an undifferentiated mass. This approach has the potential to obscure the profoundly important influence of the different cultures of the homeland on the formation of mindset and personal identity among those who left for the new lands.¹⁷ As one scholar has put it, the 'ethnic mix from the United Kingdom ... [is] the great hidden story of imperial rule'.¹⁸ The value of adopting this approach has been argued recently by one of us in a global overview of Scottish migration: 'individual nations of Britain still do merit special consideration in their own right as part of the broader British dynamic. This is true in terms of the nature of their emigration, migrant identities and global impact because of the distinctive nature of their own economic, social and intellectual structures.'¹⁹ This book therefore examines the special Scottish contribution to Ceylon, and in doing so engages with Gary Magee and Andrew Thompson's view of 'culture as the matrix in which economic life occurs'.²⁰ It will be clear from the pages that follow that in order to understand James Taylor it is also necessary to comprehend the distinctive cultural, religious, social, and economic milieu that shaped his early years in his native land.

Our sense is that this particular intellectual battle has now been won. Some, however, may well wish to refine 'the nation' further in the direction of the region and locality and so to a sub-national experience. That aspiration is perhaps predictable, given the concentric nature of human identity that

can encompass nation, country, region, locality, town, parish, and family. To uncouple these, distinctions may or may not be of value depending on the particular circumstances and the questions under consideration. At least in the case of James Taylor, who hailed from a village in the north-east of Scotland, it is not immediately apparent that his local experience complicated or altered his central identity as a Scot. It did, however, provide him with skillsets that would facilitate his achievements abroad.

The 150th anniversary of Ceylon tea is commemorated in 2017. This is, then, an appropriate time to recover the life of a significant figure in the history of Sri Lanka and in the story of Scottish emigration to Asia in the nineteenth century.

Notes

- 1 'Proposed testimonial to Mr James Taylor, pioneer tea planter', *Proceedings of the Planters' Association of Ceylon for year ending 17th February, 1891* (Colombo, 1891), p. 38.
- 2 William H. Ukers, *All About Tea*, vol. 2 (New York, 1935), p. 132.
- 3 Recent biographical work includes Clare Anderson, *Subaltern Lives: Biographies of Colonialism in the Indian Ocean World, 1790–1820* (Cambridge, 2012); David Lambert and Alan Lester (eds), *Colonial Lives Across the British Empire: Imperial Careering in the Long Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, 2006); and Emma Rothschild, *The Inner Life of Empires: An Eighteenth-Century History* (Princeton, 2011).
- 4 Taylor letters, 25 January 1873, in NLS, Papers of James Taylor, planter in Ceylon, MS 15908. See Appendix 1 for list of letters.
- 5 See, for example, David Nasaw, *Andrew Carnegie* (New York, 2006); Claire Harman, *Robert Louis Stevenson: A Biography* (London, 2005); Michael Gardiner, *At the Edge of Empire: The Life of Thomas Blake Glover* (Edinburgh, 2008).
- 6 The collection also includes six letters sent to Taylor from his maternal grandfather, one from his father, one from his brother Robert, and four from the Planters' Association of Ceylon. Two letters from fellow planter C.E. Bonner were sent to Taylor's relatives after Taylor's death. See Appendix 1.
- 7 Denys Forrest speculates that these letters may have been borrowed by one of the Fergusons 'when compiling their biographies of the planting pioneers; indeed, John Ferguson quotes at least one phrase from a Taylor letter which is not in the correspondence as we have it'. See D.M. Forrest, *A Hundred Years of Ceylon Tea, 1867–1967* (London, 1967), pp. xi–xii. Forrest does not cite the phrase but presumably means the following extracts from the *TA*, 2 July 1894, p. 2: 'That he had trials for some time in his new sphere as in his native land we learn from a letter written home some years afterwards, in which he says:- "The first two years in Ceylon were the most uncomfortable in my life." Another time he sends his respects to all old schoolfellows, adding: "We were a noble lot, and how well many of us have got on, especially John Ross, now Rector of Arbroath Academy."' Neither of these phrases appear in any of the Taylor letters held at the NLS, though the latter may be paraphrased.

- 8 Two of Taylor's photograph albums are held at the NLS. Further photographs are held at the NMS in a volume titled *Views of Ceylon*. The book features a number of renowned images of Sri Lanka including the Kandy Lake and Temple of the Tooth. Blank pages at the back of the volume contain smaller images that Taylor acquired during his brief trip to Darjeeling in Assam (see 6.1). It also features two images of cinchona with captions, both taken from Alistair Ferguson's *Abbotsford Album*, which showcased twenty photographs of coffee, tea, and cinchona plantations at Dimbula in the mid-1870s taken by W.L.H. Skeen. See *The Abbotsford Album: A Series of Twenty Views on and from a Mountain Plantation in the District of Dimbula, Ceylon, Illustrative of the Culture of Coffee, Tea, and Cinchona* (Colombo, c.1875). Thanks to James Webb for alerting us that the album is held at the Archives of the Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew. Several smaller loose photographs in the Taylor file at NMS include his portrait, a view of his famous first 20 acres of tea planting beneath Looecondera rock, his early bungalow and factory, his grave at Mahiyawa, near Kandy, and Sir William Gregory, Governor of Ceylon between 1872 and 1877.
- 9 John MacKenzie email to Angela McCarthy, 29 August 2016.
- 10 Forrest, *A Hundred Years of Ceylon Tea*, p. 63.
- 11 Taylor features fleetingly in such works as Forrest, *A Hundred Years of Ceylon Tea*; James Webb, *Tropical Pioneers: Human Agency and Ecological Change in the Highlands of Sri Lanka, 1800–1900* (Athens, 2002); James Duncan, *In the Shadoms of the Tropics: Climate, Race and Biopower in Nineteenth Century Ceylon* (Aldershot, 2007); John Weatherstone, *The Early British Tea and Coffee Planters and their Way of Life, 1825–1900: The Pioneers* (London, 1986); Royston Ellis, *The Growing Years: History of the Ceylon Planters' Association* (Colombo, 2014); and Maxwell Fernando, *The Story of Ceylon Tea* (Colombo, 2000). Extracts from Taylor's letters also appear in two unpublished pieces that Tom Barron kindly provided to us: 'British coffee planters in 19th century Ceylon', presented to the postgraduate seminar at the Institute of Commonwealth Studies, University of London, 1973, and 'Sir James Emerson Tennent and the planting pioneers', presented to the Ceylon Studies seminar series, 1970/72.
- 12 See, for instance, works on the letters of Irish migrants in David Fitzpatrick, *Oceans of Consolation: Personal Accounts of Irish Migration to Australia* (Cork, 1995); Angela McCarthy, *Irish Migrants in New Zealand, 1840–1937: 'The Desired Haven'* (Woodbridge, 2005); Kerby A. Miller, *Emigrants and Exiles: Ireland and the Irish Exodus to North America* (New York, 1984); and Patrick O'Farrell, *Letters from Irish Australia, 1825–1929* (Kensington, 1984).
- 13 The potential for this is evident in Angela McCarthy (ed.), *A Global Clan: Scottish Migrant Networks and Identities since the Eighteenth Century* (London and New York, 2006).
- 14 Marjory Harper, *Adventurers and Exiles: The Great Scottish Exodus* (London, 2003); Angela McCarthy, *Personal Narratives of Irish and Scottish Migration, 1921–65: 'For Spirit and Adventure'* (Manchester, 2007); John M. MacKenzie with Nigel R. Dalziel, *The Scots in South Africa: Ethnicity, Identity, Gender and Race, 1772–1914* (Manchester, 2005). A recent exception is T.M. Devine and Angela McCarthy

- (eds), *The Scottish Experience in Asia, c.1700 to the Present: Settlers and Sojourners* (Cham, 2017).
- 15 Ian Kershaw, 'Personality and power: The individual's role in the history of twentieth-century Europe', *Historian*, 83 (2004), p. 15.
 - 16 *Ibid.*, p. 18.
 - 17 This elision of ethnicity is evident most recently in James Belich, *Replenishing the Earth: The Settler Revolution and the Rise of the Anglo-World, 1783–1939* (Oxford, 2009). See also Antoinette Burton, 'Who needs the nation? Interrogating "British" history', *Journal of Historical Sociology*, 10:3 (1997), pp. 227–248.
 - 18 John M. MacKenzie, *Empires of Nature and the Nature of Empires: Imperialism, Scotland and the Environment* (East Linton, 1997), pp. 64–65.
 - 19 T.M. Devine, *To the Ends of the Earth: Scotland's Global Diaspora, 1750–2010* (London, 2011), p. xvi.
 - 20 Gary B. Magee and Andrew S. Thompson, *Empire and Globalisation: Networks of People, Goods and Capital in the British World, c.1850–1914* (Cambridge, 2010), p. 14.