East India Company at Home, 1757-1857

Finn, Margot, Smith, Kate

Published by University College London


For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/81934

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=2779584
‘I shall follow your Advice in not making haste to get Rich which to my Sorrow is out of my Power’, the East India Company (EIC) writer Alexander Hall wrote from Sumatra in 1755 to his sister in Scotland. Hall blamed his misfortune on ‘my Losses at Sea, the Heavy Duties laid on by our Masters at Madrass and withall a Dull Trade [which] are very bad circumstances for me and make my Hopes of Reaching an overgrown fortune or even a moderate Competency at a great distance’. Hall’s struggle to gain a ‘competency’ and get ‘rich’ in a far-flung colony is a useful starting point from which to explore the ‘dull trade’ East India Company servants took part in during the eighteenth century. Hall’s life story, recreated through the letters he sent to and received from his family, details resistance by the indigenous population, warfare between European imperial powers and climatic problems that dogged his attempt to make a ‘competency’ and return to Scotland rich. His career trajectory from rural Scotland to insecure Sumatra offers further support to the now well-worn narrative of how Scots dominated the East India Company. Hall, however, not only benefitted from these networks of Scottish patronage but also sought to construct a sense of ‘Scottishness’ in Sumatra through the goods he had sent from home. These goods, ranging from newspapers and salmon to slaves and gold, point to a complex interplay of nostalgic and economic concerns that informed Hall’s trading practices. Looking at these practices and Hall’s shipping of goods between colony and metropole gives access not only to
the economic benefits (or not) of an Indian career but also the emotional baggage of such trade.

The East India Company had outposts (sometimes held only briefly) in places as far apart as the Ambon Island in the east, St Helena in the south and Aden in the west. Among these remote but important outposts of the Company we can count Sumatra. The island was of interest to the English from the very foundation of the EIC. The first voyage of the English East India Company, undertaken by James Lancaster in 1601, stopped at the Sumatran port of Aceh. The island was of strategic importance as a bridge between the Bay of Bengal and the China Sea. In terms of trade, Sumatra was significant primarily for pepper, providing 42 per cent of the 103,908,000 pounds of pepper consumed in Britain between 1711 and 1760. However, as Anne Lindsey Reber has stated, ‘From a commercial viewpoint, the Benkulen settlement was never a success.’ Nor did this profitability improve in the second half of the eighteenth century, when pepper sales rarely exceeded the massive Company outlay on civil servants, soldiers and slaves. Instead, the British maintained a colony in Sumatra to prevent a Dutch monopoly over the pepper trade, fearing that the profits would allow the Dutch to maintain a Navy that could threaten the power of the British. These concerns of war and trade play out in Hall’s letters, demonstrating the domestic impact of global structures on an individual civil servant and the objects he circulated.

The second half of the eighteenth century has long been seen as a period when EIC servants made vast fortunes through private trade. Historians such as P. J. Marshall, George McGilvary and Tillman Nechtman have detailed the hundreds of thousands of pounds that Company men remitted to Britain. Such claims have also been made for Europeans stationed at Sumatra. K. N. Chaudhuri has argued that Bencoolen was ‘the inefficient, unprofitable, and corrupt settlement par excellence’. Through his reading, it was the individual European civil servants who benefitted from colonial trade in Sumatra. However, if there were fortunes to be made in Sumatra, Hall did not benefit from them. By looking to a distant and (relatively) unprosperous British colony, this chapter will illuminate new ways of looking at Company service and the compromises it required to gain a competency.

Hall’s biography and attempts at trade offer insight into how material goods structured imperial service economically and emotionally. Indeed, British life in mainland India has long been seen as shaped by a multitude of servants and luxury objects. However, focusing on mainland India, especially Bengal, threatens to project an unrepresentative picture of luxury and prosperity of the lives led by civil servants in the
colonies. In Sumatra, domestic life was far rougher for Company men. Early British buildings in Bencoolen, as A. G. Harfield has demonstrated, were not only highly fortified but with great frequency were attacked by foreign powers and razed by earthquakes. Early British buildings in Bencoolen, as A. G. Harfield has demonstrated, were not only highly fortified but with great frequency were attacked by foreign powers and razed by earthquakes. York Fort, for example, was finished in 1685 and abandoned some 35 years after it was established. Fort Marlborough, built between 1709 and 1716, was even shorter lived, burnt to the ground by the indigenous population in 1724, forcing the British to flee. When the British returned a year later, they rebuilt the Fort again. These vicissitudes of climate and revolt meant that Hall’s domestic life was defined by the military and lived within military buildings. In the face of this militarized domestic space, Hall sought other means of comfort for his rabid homesickness. Objects were central to the ways he overcame this exile from his homeland. His family sent him objects from Scotland, from necessities like towels and sheets to more indulgent items like wine and salmon. By tracing these more intimate objects between metropole and colony, a more textured picture of Company everyday life and trade can emerge.

The ‘things’ that the Hall family circulated between Scotland and Sumatra included enslaved people. Sumatra could not have functioned without slave labour. Introduced from Madagascar and St Helena, these slaves were used to harvest pepper, build forts, tend ill Europeans and act as guards. As Frenise A. Logan has detailed, slaves were perceived as a necessity because of the high death rate of the English soldiers who had been previously sent to work on the island. As early as 1687 the Board of Directors refused to commit any more Englishmen to the island: ‘For wee cannot be so unkind to our countrymen as to send many more to a place which wee know has prov’d a Grave to so many of them already’. As early as 1687, convicted thieves were also sent to Sumatra and were to remain there as ‘slaves’ for the rest of their lives. Indeed, this practice of transporting convicts to Sumatra and making them slaves continued beyond the end of the slave trade in 1807. In 1825, a correspondent to the Bengal Hukura wrote to condemn the practice introduced by Stamford Raffles in the 1810s of what was essentially a continence of the slave trade by calling Africans ‘debtors’ and making them indentured labourers. It is against this long history of trade in people and forced labour in Sumatra that British attempts to colonize such an inhospitable and dangerous island must be read.

Alexander Hall’s familiar letters give us access to these intimate histories of slavery and trade. As Kate Teltscher has argued, family letters should be used alongside the official sources in the India Office Records at the British Library. Hall’s life and letters offer a more personal, intimate account of life in Sumatra than previous overarching histories of
East India Company involvement with the island afford. Reading Hall’s career through his letters explicitly for the ‘things’ he traded between Scotland and Sumatra gives us access to the primary way Hall sought to maintain intimacy with his family in Europe. From his first letters from London in the 1740s, describing borrowing his brother’s coat, to his shipping of Scottish salmon to Sumatra towards the end of his life, material things impacted Hall’s life in multifarious and complex ways. Following these letters along the shipping routes Hall used (from his trip out via St Helena to his escape as a prisoner of war via Madras) gives us access to multiple colonies belonging to multiple European nations. Through examining Hall’s trading practices, this chapter opens up a discussion about how the (infra)structure of the East India Company was co-opted by its servants for economic gain and emotional sustenance.

**Entering the Company service**

Alexander Hall (c.1731/2–1764) was the youngest son of James Hall, 2nd Baronet of Dunglass (d.1742) and Margaret Pringle (d.1756), daughter of Sir John Pringle of Stichill (1662–1721). Little is known of Alexander’s early life. His father was a substantial landowner and noted ‘improver’ in the Scottish Lothians. He had four elder brothers whose careers ran the gamut of employments open to Scottish elite men. James (1724–1745) was studying to be a minister when he died, Robert (d.1763) was an officer in the 37th Regiment of Foot, William (d.1800) an officer in the Engineers before inheriting his uncle’s lands, and John (d.1776) was trained in the law before inheriting the family estates. Alexander Hall’s position in the East India Company was secured through his eldest brother John. With the Jacobite uprising of 1745, large numbers of the Scottish gentry raised an army in support of Charles Edward Stuart’s claim to the British throne. In comparison to the rebellious Highlands, however, the Lowlands remained relatively loyal to the British state. Here, the Halls were no exception. In the aftermath of the Jacobite uprising of 1745, Alexander’s brother John was one of the Grand Jury for the trial in 1748 of the Jacobite rebels at Edinburgh. Alexander wrote to him, ‘I went to Hume-Campbell to whom I propos’d my going to the East Indies he was pretty sure he cou’d find Interest to get me into the Company’s.’

Hugh Hume-Campbell, third Earl of Marchmont (1708–94), was a great landowner in the Halls’ native Berwickshire and a staunch supporter of the Union, helping defend Berwick in 1745 and supporting the actions of the Duke of Cumberland in suppressing the rebellion. Throughout his time in the Company, Hall relied on these local and anti-Jacobite
men for patronage: Lord Elibank (1703–78) and Sir Lawrence Dundas (c.1710–81), for example, were applied to for an exchange to Bengal in the 1760s.  

While empire, especially Jamaica and India, had long been seen as a place to reform Jacobites and integrate them into the British state, the fact that positions in the East India Company were given out to reward loyal Scots is less widely known. Indeed, while Jacobites often ended up in the Company army, Hall was rewarded with a civil post, offering a lower likelihood of death and greater pay. The superior nature of his post was one way Hall convinced his mother to let him go to India, arguing ‘if I don’t go there I will inevitably end up in the Army’. In the year before Hall departed for the subcontinent he bought various items of clothing and began to ‘learn to speak not only French but English’. This learning of ‘English’ was a means for Hall to erase his Scottish accent and integrate himself into the ‘English’ East India Company, especially pertinent in the aftermath of the Jacobite rebellion.

In November 1750, Hall received word that he had been appointed a factor at Sumatra, which he informed his mother was ‘as much as I could expect’. During the eighteenth century, Sumatra appears to have gained a reputation for being a dead-end destination for the ambitious Company servant. In 1770, James Swinton wrote of his relative: ‘Tommy Swinton is gone out a writer to Bencoolen, & sailed about a Month ago in the Harcort, being all my Brothers Interest exerted to the utmost cou’d procure for him’. The period between Hall’s appointment to Sumatra and his departure to the territory from Kent was only three weeks. Hall’s letters during this brief juncture worry about his outfitting for India and pester his brothers for money to invest in the East. In the midst of this tumult, Hall wrote to his eldest brother John that ‘I never was in such a hurry in my Life. I was last night at Court in one of Willie’s Coat’s [sic]. Direct my Sheets & c., to Mr Gilbert Eliot’s care Searcher at Gravesend & mind some Table napkins. Tell the Captn who carries it to have the parcel [sic] at hand when he passes Gravesend if it be John Fergusson I am sure he’ll oblige me much’. This extract suggests how preparations for India were dependent on family and friendship networks: Hall wore his brother William’s coat for his interview by the Court of Directors while responsibility for the shipping of his sheets from Scotland to Kent was given to Fergusson, a family friend. This was due to financial necessity as London was too expensive for Hall, and he asked his sister for cheaper towels and sheets to be sent from Scotland. Hall’s eldest brother John covered the £170 cost of kitting him out. Nor were all of Hall’s goods for himself. The bill Alexander presented to John read, ‘Passage £40, Wine
£35, “Wearing Apparel &c. and a 1000 Small things some to sell, some for my own use”. In exchange for covering his costs, Alexander promised to try to provide John with ‘Gay Pyots pink Nutmogs’, and black and white pepper from Batavia. This kind of reciprocal trade suggests the role of family and friendship networks in gaining, funding, and kitting out Hall for an Indian career.

Life in Sumatra

Hall set sail for the subcontinent in December 1750, eventually reaching Sumatra over six months after he departed from Kent. His first impressions were favourable. As he wrote to his uncle: ‘I was much Surprised on coming ashore here, to see so fine a Country after being told so many bad Accounts of it by the Jack Tars who generally do not say any thing Good of any other Country except of Old England’. This positive response was informed by the pleasant weather. He wrote to reassure his mother: ‘The Climate here you’ll no doubt think, is unspeakably hot, & unhealthy, but I do assure you, it is not warmer, than I wou’d desire, except in the middle of the day, & for Healthiness, it is allowed by all here, to be as good as any place in India’. Despite Hall’s reassurances to his mother and the reliance on slaves for manual labour, there was a high death rate of civil servants in Sumatra, mainly due to disease and war. From the beginning of 1760 to April 1762, over a third of the civil servants, military men, surgeons and artificers at the Fort died.

Hall fluctuated between loathing and love of Sumatra. When he was sent to Natal later in 1753, his mood brightened due to the possibilities available for trading natural resources: There us [sic] a great Trade & it is the fountain Head of Gold, Benjamen & Camphire all very fine. The Gold is taken about a days
Journey up the Country, by navigation & most of it 22 or 23 Carats fine The Benjamen, (I supppose I need not tell you) ouses [sic] out, of a large Tree, the best of it is full of Lumps & Veins as White as Ivory. \(^{39}\)

While in Hall’s description fortune oozes out of the ground, this apparent wealth of natural resources was somewhat illusionary. Madras civil servant Claud Russell (1733–1820) wrote to Hall, ‘The Wastage in melting of Gold dust, (particularly the coarse sort from Padang which loses sometimes 9 pr Cent) is so great, that unless the Touch can be very correctly ascertained, it is a precarious Article to deal in’. \(^{40}\) Such ephemeral economic reward led Hall to renew his call to be sent to Bengal. He wrote to his brother: ‘I think on the decayed State of this Coast, where I assure you there are now small Hopes of a Gentleman’s picking up a Competency. I must therefore beg of you if its possible, to get me Removed to Bengal & leave you & the rest of my friends to apply for me in the best method they judge proper’. \(^{41}\)

If Hall’s financial fortunes fluctuated, his dislike of the indigenous population was a constant theme in his letters home. He wrote soon after his arrival to his mother: ‘the only objection I have to it, is the want of Trade which is owing to the Natives of the Country who although they have all the advantages with regard to Sail &c. yet they are so very indolent as to neglect their own Sustenance in a manner’. \(^{42}\) This construction of Sumatrans as lazy is a common form of asserting the racial superiority of Europeans in the Georgian period. \(^{43}\) It also allowed Hall to present himself as an industrious trader in contrast. Even while Hall was positive about the climate and scenery of Sumatra, he cast the indigenous population as lazy and savage, a construction that allowed him to position himself as industrious and civilized.

Hall’s thwarted desire to make a ‘competency’ along with the omnipresent risk of death were made worse by the near constant threat of attack from Dutch, Malay or French forces. In 1755 he joked to his sister: ‘So that you have once prophesied true that our penknives are turned to Swords & our Pepper Corns into cannon Balls but however now as we have got the advantage I hope every thing will return to its primitive state’. \(^{44}\) Any peace was short lived. In 1760, two French ships under the command of Count D’Estaing took Alexander Hall prisoner at Natal before going on to attack Fort Marlborough. Hall and many of his fellow factors were sent to the Dutch settlement at Padang, some 300 miles south-west of Bencoolen, and remained there ‘without any means of Subsistence’ for five months. \(^{45}\) While there, the British men tried to get on a Dutch boat to
reach the Coromandel Coast but were informed that the Dutch East India Company did not give passage to foreigners. Instead, Hall and William Wyatt, the two most senior civil servants, petitioned the Governors of Padang for 2,800 Spanish Dollars to purchase a boat. They left Padang by this boat on 25 August 1760 and reached Masulipatam on 30 October. They stayed there until the end of the monsoon season before embarking on the short journey to Madras. Before they reached Madras, however, the vessel was wrecked near Nellore, ‘where everything was lost but Cloaths [sic] and a Chest of Treasure’. After this misfortune, the nearby Nabob Nasum Boolee Chan gave them palanquins, camels and coolies to carry them to Madras.

Despite his repeated petitioning of George Pigot, the Governor at Madras, Hall could not get exchanged at Madras and freed from the terms of his parole. Instead, finding he could not work, Hall decided to return to Europe. As Linda Colley has suggested in Captives, the widespread imperial warfare during this period often saw British individuals ‘captured’ literally and figuratively in much bigger historical events. Her insight that these British failures represented humiliating stumbling blocks in the wider imperial project allows us to better understand how Hall sought to overcome the indignity of having been captured. For Hall, being captured was yet another failure to be placed alongside his inability to generate a fortune or carve out a successful imperial career. While this incident further interrupted Hall’s desire to make a ‘competency’ it did, however, help reverse his increasing estrangement from his family after an absence of twelve years from Britain. Hall was conflicted about the wisdom of returning to Britain, writing from London: ‘Already I have drawn this comfort from my Voyage, that, were it not for the Pleasure of being with you & the rest of my friends in Scotland, I would immediately transport my self again to India, for I am heartily tired of—even London.’ This dislike of London was increased by Hall’s engagement with the serpentine windings of the Company’s bureaucracy. In March 1762, he submitted a minute to the Directors, requesting that they pay off the 2,800 Spanish Dollars he had borrowed from the Dutch at Padang. Eventually, the Directors appear to have grudgingly agreed, even while they refused to pay for Hall’s return passage to India. Hall was released from the conditions of his parole in June 1762, but he decided to wait until the following year before returning to India, ‘to spare my self the Trouble & Risk of my Health in resettling the West Coast & to be with my friends once more in my Life’.

Before he left London in 1762, Hall petitioned Lord Shelburne (1737–1805), an MP well-connected to the Company, to be transferred
to the Bengal Presidency. He was refused on the grounds that his knowledge of Sumatra was too valuable for the Company. Hall did not give up this attempt for an exchange to Bengal and wrote to his brother John from India:

On account of the great loss of Companies Servants at Bengal lately, I have renewed my request to go there as I daresay they will be sending Gentlemen in pretty high Rank. I have wrote it to (don't be angry) Ld M[archmont] & Mr Crompton who assisted me before ... I also beg of you to see what you can do, to get me removed from our Cursed Coast. Its true there's Trouble's [sic] at Bengal, but its good fishing in Muddy Water.

His brother replied, stating he would attempt to get him an exchange but expressed his misgivings about Bengal, which he believed ‘more unhealthy’ and ‘more dangerous than any station in all India’.

Before Hall’s return, the Company did instigate some changes in the face of the French attack on Sumatra. The council at Madras had written to London in 1761 that ‘the Papers delivered in by Govr Carter have been examined, tis thought they put too great a Confidence in the Mallays’, continuing ‘Slaves will be much wanted at West Coast when the place is resettled’. Duncan Clerk assured Hall from Scotland in 1764: ‘I find the Company are resolved to take better care of you, if another war should break out; There will soon be a considerable military force in India’. Hall never succeeded in getting a transfer to Bengal and instead returned to Fort Marlborough in September 1764. Nor did he benefit from the Company’s ‘reforms’ when he returned to Sumatra, dying there just over two months after his arrival.

**Tinned salmon and the Caledonian Mercury: importing Scotland to Sumatra**

While an outline of Hall’s career grants insight into the trade (however unsuccessful) and tribulations of a civil servant in Sumatra, this official biography can tell us only part of Hall’s imperial life. Throughout Hall’s time in Sumatra his fondness for Scotland and his homeland remained. In part, this enduring affiliation reflected the sheer number of Scots entering the Company during this period. Of the journey to India in 1763, he wrote to his brother John that ‘we had no less than 28 Messmates, mostly Scots’. In Sumatra, Hall’s letters back to his relatives in Scotland
were littered with references to other Scottish Company men. In 1755, he listed four other Scots who were in Sumatra in a letter to his sister.60 These Scottish networks simultaneously maintained Hall’s connection to Scotland as well as supporting him in various ways: Charles Stuart offered him accommodation in Calcutta, the Hay brothers from Drumelzier, Peeblesshire executed his will, and Captain Mackleish shipped him claret wine.61

Beyond his fellow East India Company servants, the love of his homeland was kept alive by the letters exchanged with his family and friends. He assured his brother at the very beginning of his career: ‘You know I cant write you any news, these I shall expect from You, even to the minutest [sic] Article, for you may Sure I shall gape for them.’62 While epistolary correspondence was the primary means for Hall to maintain connections to his family, it could take six months for a letter to reach Sumatra, meaning the contents often felt out of date. Hall wrote in response to a letter from his mother in 1754: ‘You write me a long letter of news, which you may be sure gives me vast pleasure, I can only say I rejoiced at some & sorry for others; Reflections are lost at such a distance of Time & place’.63 Letters could also get lost. Hall wrote despondently in 1757: ‘I should now be more particular was I not almost certain this Bitt [sic] of Paper will be buffetted [sic] about the World and God knows when, come to your Hands’.64 The weakening of emotional ties over the time he was in Sumatra and the death of his mother in 1756 also led to Hall corresponding with fewer people. In 1764, shortly before his own death, Hall described a dream to his brother John: ‘I dreamed of the Two Youngsters last night & don’t write to any body now, but you’.65 The spiritual link of Hall’s dreams and more physical one of epistolary correspondence suggest how family networks and intimacy were maintained in empire. These dreams offered an instant connection that could otherwise take over a year to bridge with letters.

Newspapers sent by his relatives from Scotland likewise maintained this link. Hall wrote from Natal four years after his arrival in Sumatra to his brother John: ‘My dissappointment [sic] in not having the Caledonian Mercury (by which we call the Scots Magazines) was very great and I believe had I kept a Collections in this Part of the World, my Customers would not all have left me’.66 Here, his fellow Scots were both his customers and his community. This use of national newspapers attached Hall to an imagined reading (commoditized) community, akin to the nationalist imaginary outlined by Benedict Anderson in Imagined Communities. As Anderson argued: ‘The date at the top of the newspaper, the single most important emblem on it, provides the essential—the steady onward clocking of homogeneous, empty time’.67 According to Anderson’s analysis,
this simultaneous reading of national newspapers created an ‘imagined community’. However, for Hall, receiving the newspapers some six months after they had been published, this reading was near-simultaneous only with his fellow Scottish EIC men. Hall’s reading of the Scottish newspapers cannot be conceived as ‘homogeneous’ time, rendering him part of ‘a solid community moving steadily through history’. Instead, his position in a precarious British territory, connected to Scotland by a haphazard postal system, meant Hall was outside of this national time. This temporal dissonance demonstrates his insecure connection to Scotland and the instability of the tactics he employed to maintain these swiftly disintegrating relationships.

Food appears to have been another way for Hall to maintain his connection to Britain and sometimes specifically to Scotland. In a letter to his brother William, he indulged in the fantasy of teleportation: ‘Had I such a Magicians Rod as you mentiond I would make better use of it than you. You speak of making only one visit here. I would be in England three times a day viz Breakfast dinner & Supper, to eat bread of which we have none on this Coast’. He went on to list the exorbitant price of flour and beer, over three times more expensive in Sumatra than in England. It was perhaps this expense and captive market that encouraged Hall to pioneer his own form of tinning and preserving food. After he was forced to return to London to be exchanged as a prisoner of war, he asked his brother to send eggs, salmon and portable soup from Scotland. The success of these endeavours to package and send Scottish food abroad varied. While portable soup, a powdery substance akin to modern-day stock cubes, was a relatively conventional foodstuff to ship abroad, salmon and eggs were less so. Hall reported from India:

My Salmon from Cockburn of Berwick, turns out well th’ it had not very fair play, for I told him to put it in Double Cases, its true he did so, but he did not fill up the interstice with a Salt Pickle as I desired him, besides there were some of the Cases which would not hold in some Salt Beef Pickle I poured in, aboard ship during the Voyage. I dare say he may sell many Hundreds Kitts if its done properly. Pray send me out Four 1/2 Kitts every year. Let them also be sent to George Fairholme. The Torwoodlee Eggs would not keep cross the Line, they did not stick much, but they were very much evaporated & of a stinking Straw Taste.

Hall attached a very precise sense of place to his description of the food – both spoilt and unspoilt. Even while economics and monetary
returns remain at the forefront of his mind – Cockburn ‘may sell many Hundreds Kitts if its done properly’ (presumably to Scots in India) – the eggs are ‘Torwoodlee’ and the salmon ‘Berwick’. The sense of place Hall attached to food becomes a means of situating himself in the geography of home: salmon tinned and transported, sometimes unspoilt, relocated his local geography of Scotland to Sumatra. Even so, Hall’s importing of Scottish food was scarcely more successful than his previous attempts to export gold or camphire. That his Torwoodlee eggs were ‘stinking’ and his salmon tasted of beef shows how tenuous a connection these perishable objects could grant him to his homeland. The manner in which economics and sentiment overlapped in Hall’s letters and schemes suggests the difficulty of separating out the two. The potential trade in salmon becomes a form of sustenance – literally, figuratively and economically – connecting Hall to the landscape of his birth, even if it was a connection that ‘evaporated’ all too easily.

Sex and slaves in Sumatra and Scotland

Hall did not only seek intimacy in words, dreams and food while in Sumatra. He also, like many Europeans during this period, had sex with at least one Indian woman. This relationship was detailed in his will, and it was only by reading the document after Alexander’s death that his sister found out about his illegitimate, mixed-race daughter. She asked Alexander’s executor Robert Hay to send the child to Scotland if thought appropriate. Isabella’s brother John harboured more doubts and wrote to Hay inquiring whether Alexander’s daughter ‘is Tawney Colourd or not’. This concern about skin colour informed whether she should be sent to Scotland. If ‘Tawney’ she should be kept in India ‘where her colour is no detainment’, but if ‘she is of the ordinary Complexion of this country I dare say my sister would be glad to have her here to exert herself in the care of her Education but if she be of a colour different from our’s it would be making her miserable to bring to a place where she would always be particular’. Robert Hay responded, without making reference to skin colour: ‘The known regard your Brother had for it put it out of all doubt with me the sending of it’. Hay and Isabella Hall kept up a steady correspondence over the next decade until Hay’s return to Peeblesshire in 1777. These letters display real concern for Peggy on both sides while revealing the manifold tensions that sending her to Scotland engendered. Tracing Peggy and her maid’s journey from Sumatra to the Borders demonstrates the ‘black presence’ in rural Scotland during the
mid-eighteenth century, suggesting the role that the East India Company had in instigating ‘counter-flows to colonialism’.78

Peggy was also one of the few material ‘things’ that Alexander Hall left behind – he made little money in Sumatra. She was born at Madras in November 1761, conceived during Hall’s period under parole when he was unable to work, and was christened at Fort Marlborough in 1762.79 Sending her to Scotland was one of the first difficulties that Hay and Isabella had to negotiate. They sent her in a ship under the care of a man named Braham who was returning to England.80 By 1770, Isabella could claim Peggy was ‘much grown since she came to this Country’ and a year later further on that ‘she continues to thrive and grow vastly, and is much improved in her colour tho she still speaks like a Foreigner which Im [sic] surprised at as she came here so young’.81 Here, Scotland is perceived as a country where Peggy can ‘thrive and grow vastly’ in contrast to her stunted height in Sumatra. Even so, Dunglass could not cure all ills: Peggy continued to speak ‘like a Foreigner’. By 1773, Isabella reported that Peggy had outgrown the teaching at the local school and was to be sent to a boarding school in Edinburgh.82 Isabella perceived education as one means of mitigating Peggy’s ‘foreignness’ in accent, displaying how Peggy’s mixed-raceness could be overcome by Scottish climate and education.

If Peggy Hall was an enigma to her Scottish family, then the nurse ‘Betty’ caused more practical problems. Henry Idell, who brought Peggy from London to Dunglass, listed the following objects ‘belonging’ to the child:

- One Trunk contg wearing Apparell
- One Pair of Gold Earrings
- One Pair of Gold Sleeve Buttons
- One Gold Ring
- One Slave Woman named Betty
- One chest of Wearing Apparell belg to Betty83

The casual listing of ‘Betty’ as ‘belonging’ to the young Hall casts the woman as an ‘object’, even as it acknowledges her ability in turn to own property such as wearing apparel. It suggests that the enslaved could be perceived of as an exotic and valuable object just as a ‘gold ring’ or clothing from Surat. This translated into Betty being unable to dictate when she could return to Sumatra; Idell wrote ‘The Nurse is a Slave & must return to India’.84 As Margot Finn and Emma Rothschild have demonstrated, slaves and emancipated slaves were a part of Scottish society during the eighteenth century. Both have suggested the dislocations that slaves
caused in terms of how slave-ownership conflicted and overlapped with Enlightenment thought, the Scottish legal systems and family life. 85 While the Halls apparently had few qualms about the moral or legal dilemmas surrounding slavery, Betty nonetheless caused problems of a more mundane sort. Namely, the Halls worried about how to ship Betty back to her master in Sumatra. While Idell was supposed to organize Betty’s return to Sumatra, by September 1768 the Halls had heard nothing more. Instead, Sir John organized a man called Neilson to carry her by boat to London and then petitioned Braham to get her passage on a ship to India: ‘you will have the Satisfaction of doing a charitable action to the Poor Woman who is pining to be home – I believe she belongs to Mr Robert Hay and I suppose he will be glad to have his servant again’. 86

However, Braham failed to find Betty a passage back to Sumatra, and Isabella wrote that ‘I’m afraid [sic] we shall be obliged to bring her back from London again which I shou’d be sorry for, as the poor Woman, wishd much to be home, was of no use here, and probably woud be missed in your service’. 87 Henry Idell resurfaced in the Spring of the next year and finally arranged Betty’s passage. She reached Sumatra safely, and in January 1771 Isabella Hall wrote to Robert Hay that ‘we were all vastly glade [sic] to Betty the black Maids safe arrival in India and that her being so long away was no unconvenience [sic]’. 88 Some five years later, shortly before Hay was due to leave Sumatra, Isabella stated ‘I would wish to make a little present to Betty the black maid that here & beg you will take the trouble to give her two or three Guineas or what you think proper and place it to my account’. 89 Throughout these exchanges, ‘Betty’ is granted no voice. Indeed, her construction as near object to be shipped to Scotland and back to India is evidence of her relative powerlessness in both colony and metropole. After Hay left Sumatra, Betty disappears from the historical record. Peggy, however, cast a longer shadow over the Hall family papers. As Sally Wilson has detailed, Peggy was mentioned as a regular visitor to Dunglass as late as the 1790s. 90 She died in 1800 and was buried in Greyfriars Churchyard in Edinburgh, leaving property worth £1,400. 91

Conclusion

The Halls’ connection to India did not end with Peggy. When Sir James Hall, 4th Baronet remodelled Dunglass House in 1807, he decorated the drawing room with Chinese wallpaper and lacquered cabinets. 92 Such decorating fits within Nechtman’s analysis of objects shipped home by nabobs from India: ‘These objects marginalized the comfort-
able, domestic, and British world, replacing it with luxury objects from imperial India.” Against these ‘luxury objects’ this chapter has placed the everyday objects and enslaved people who circulated between colony and metropole, a trade which, while not luxurious, was nonetheless equally disruptive to Scottish domestic life. By tracing the official and unofficial life of Alexander Hall in Sumatra, new insights into the difficulty of trade in Sumatra and making it pay (especially in comparison to a far more lucrative position in Bengal) emerge. Alexander Hall offers on one level a compelling example of Scots’ dominance of the EIC in the second half of the eighteenth century. Aided by patronage of local Scottish politicians and landowners as well as his family’s loyalty to the British state during the Jacobite revolt, he was able to secure a position in the Company civil service. On another level, the warfare that saw Hall made prisoner and the climate that claimed his life demonstrate the high stakes risk these men took, often for meagre reward. The dislocation Hall felt from Scotland while in Sumatra was eased by the exchange of letters, food and newspapers from Europe. In these objects we find Hall’s attempt to recreate Scotland in a foreign land, detailing the nostalgic and quotidian trade of goods that sustained Scottish men in the Company on a domestic level. If Europeans faced hardship, however, this was lessened because of their reliance on slave labour. In the case of Hall, this forced labour was most visible in his domestic life, especially in the case of Betty’s care of Hall’s mixed-race daughter. The history of Hall, Peggy and Betty should suggest the darker histories and forced labour that lurks behind the beautiful, exotic objects that would come to decorate Dunglass in the nineteenth century.
General Patrick Duff (1742–1803) gained his ‘competency’ through military service in Bengal, aided and supplemented by the wealth garnered in the Madeira wine trade by his uncles and brothers (see Figure 16.1). The continuing legacy of his success is the outstanding court of farm buildings built on his estate of Carnousie, near Turriff, in the historic...