From London to Madeira

James Gordon and Grizel Dunbar had six children, two of whom died early. Their eldest son, Patrick, entered the Scots College at Ratisbon, or Regensberg, in Bavaria in 1718. This was an abbey staffed by Scottish monks which acted as one of the training grounds for priests sent back to Scotland. This reminds us of the intensely catholic milieu in which the Gordons of Letterfourie moved. James’s cousin, also confusingly named James, was appointed Vicar Apostolic to Scotland in 1718, having attended the Scots College in Paris. His brother George was ‘out’ in 1715. A coeval with Patrick’s generation was James Gordon of Glaistrum, who also attended the Scots College in Paris and was ‘out’ in the 45. A further two more distant relations, Robert and George Gordon, were Jesuits who were connected with missions to Scotland. Patrick Gordon was thus following in family traditions when he spent a year at Ratisbon studying logic, followed by two years at Erfurt studying civil law. This perhaps suggests he was destined for a career in the law rather than the church, but he died in 1737 before his sister’s marriage.

This made James (1707–1790) the heir to the estate, but he had already left for London, where we will join him shortly. Another brother, William is recorded as having being murdered crossing the Alps in 1740, although the circumstances are not clear. This left a further brother, Alexander (1715–1797), who in time joined his brother James in Madeira. These four boys were followed by two sisters. Anne was to marry the local landowner James Ogilvie of Logie in November 1726. Intriguingly, James Ogilvie of Logie is recorded as being ordained as an elder of Rathven church in 1753, suggesting that ‘marrying out’, for women at least, was not as important as securing

2 Peter Dewar, Burke’s Landed Gentry 19th edition volume 1 The Kingdom in Scotland (Wilmington, 2001), 519–21.
material stability). The youngest child was Mary who, as we have seen, married John Duff in 1739.

We have noted the burdens under which catholics laboured in Scotland, making the options for a second son rather limited. This might have been the spur to his departure for London. We don’t know exactly when this was, but it appears to have been sometime around 1725. London was a magnet for Scots who were seeking better opportunities than those available to them at home. For example, Jerry White notes that amongst the Scots who flocked to London in search of opportunity was the catholic architect James Gibb, who arrived from Aberdeenshire in 1708. Although Scots of all hues, and especially catholics, faced considerable hostility in the capital, it was easier to blend into the relative anonymity afforded by a bustling city of over 500,000 inhabitants. This was aided in turn by the existence of foreign embassies, which could offer safe havens for those who wished to hear mass. The Portuguese embassy after the marriage of Charles II to Catherine of Braganza, daughter of the Portuguese king John IV in 1662, was especially important as a centre for projecting the old faith back into Britain. Indeed, it has been claimed that it is ‘clear from documents extant in Portugal that it was always intended that she and her entourage should act as a focal point for English catholics’. The embassy, based in Golden Square in Soho had a chapel attached at the back which fronted onto Warwick Street. (The existing Roman Catholic church of Our Lady of the Assumption and St. Gregory was built in 1789–90 on the site of the chapel, by then occupied by the Bavarian ambassador, destroyed in the Gordon Riots). In 1729 the trumpeter John Grano, a staunch catholic, recorded in his diary ‘my Mamma and I went to the Portuguese Chapel and heard Vespers.’ Given the timing, it is entirely possible that James also attended services there.

Catholic merchants could find profitable niches in the capital. Indeed, when James left for Madeira in 1730, the Lord Mayor was Humphrey Parsons,

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3 ‘This day Edict was served for James Ogilvie of Logie in Letterfury Charles Grant Charity Schoolmr at Broadley John Burges at Mill of Gollachy John Sinclair at Shore of Buckie John Gregory in Woodside and John Smith in Broadlyth yr being ordained elders in face of the Congregation and if any find objection to give in agt any of the Said persons, that they may declare the Same before the ordination’, 8 April 1753, 405, NRS, CH2/308/1, Rathven kirk session minutes.
6 John Ginger, Handel’s Trumpeter: The Diary of John Grano (Stuyvesant, NY, 1998), 305.
the owner of the Red Lion Brewery, then London’s leading brewery. He was a high Tory, with pronounced Jacobite leanings, being a frequent visitor to the French court. He was also a catholic, although this was something he practised with discretion at his own private chapel, having publicly to conform to the Church of England in order to hold office.7 He was Grano’s patron, so it is perhaps not too fanciful to imagine a meeting with the madeira wine merchant William Halloran at the Portuguese chapel at a time when Portuguese wine imports to Britain were growing. We don’t know much about Halloran, and the little we do know is largely derived from legal proceedings with James after the former’s death, so it is partial evidence. However, it would appear that he was a Galway merchant and so likely to have been a catholic, one member of that city’s catholic merchant community largely shut out from trade by a protestant elite at the end of the seventeenth century.8 As we will see, this might have facilitated business in Madeira, but before we journey to that island, we need to understand something of the relationship between Britain and Portugal.

Strategic alliances between England and Portugal had their origins in the Middle Ages.9 Edward III concluded a treaty in 1373 which saw English archers play a significant role in the Battle of Aljubarrota in 1385 that helped Portugal to win independence from Spain. This fostered important trading links between the two nations, although the balance of trade favoured the English. In 1642, by which time, of course, Scotland and England shared a common monarch in the Stuart Charles I, a commercial treaty was concluded, although its terms were overtaken by the Civil War. In 1654 the Commonwealth regime of Oliver Cromwell concluded a Treaty of Peace and Commerce with Portugal. This followed raids by the Commonwealth fleet on Portuguese ships returning from their colonies in Brazil and a naval blockade of Lisbon. Not surprisingly, the Portuguese regarded this as signed under duress and British merchants were to complain that the free trade and liberty they were promised under its terms were routinely ignored by the Portuguese authorities. A frequent cause of complaint was the interference of the powerful Portuguese Inquisition into the commercial affairs of largely Protestant British merchants. The contract of 1661 which preceded the marriage of Charles and Catherine saw confirmation of the previous treaties. It

7   Ibid., 329.
9   The following discussion is based on Shaw, Anglo-Portuguese Alliance.
was followed by an important treaty, the Methuen Treaty of 1703, which, in return for the free entry of British woollen goods into Portugal, guaranteed that Portuguese wines would only ever be taxed in Britain at two-thirds of the rate applied to French wines. The alliance with Portugal was important for two reasons. The first was that it gave British merchants access to the lucrative trade with Brazil, which was a Portuguese colony. The second was that the Royal Navy could use Portuguese ports to service its Atlantic fleet. These factors would be significant as transatlantic trade boomed in the eighteenth century, especially given Madeira’s geographical position.

Madeira is an island in the East Atlantic, 559 miles southwest of Lisbon and 340 miles west of the African coast. It is a small island – thirty-four miles long and fourteen miles across – but an impressive one, with a mountainous spine rising from precipitous sea cliffs, especially on its northern side. Here it faces the full thrust of Atlantic storms. The island was claimed for Portugal in 1419 and settled thereafter. The new settlers were able to realise the natural fertility of the south side of the island, with its volcanic soils and Mediterranean climate, by channelling water from the north through an extensive network of irrigation canals or ‘levadas’. Clinging to the sides of mountains in impressive feats of engineering, their waters were tapped off to irrigate land carefully terraced on steep hill sides. The island was initially a centre of sugar cane cultivation, until this was undercut by both Brazil and, more importantly, the West Indies. Bananas replaced some of the sugar, but the great development was in wine. It was discovered that the heat and motion encountered on long ocean crossings improved the taste of the wine. This has been admirably documented by David Hancock in his extensive history of the development of madeira wine, especially in the context of patterns of consumption in the United States. This transatlantic connection points to the importance of the location of Madeira at a geographical crossroads.

Because of the vital importance of prevailing wind directions in the era of sailing ships, Madeira was ideally placed for ships outward bound from Europe to either India via the Cape of Good Hope or to the Americas. Ships could stop off to take on fresh provisions and in the process both bring in supplies for the islands and take off wine for their ultimate destinations. Portuguese wine enjoyed a considerable boost after the Methuen

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10 David Hancock, Oceans of Wine: Madeira and the Emergence of American Trade and Taste (New Haven: CT, 2009).
treaty, which saw the balance of exports to Britain shift from the south of the country via Lisbon to the wines of the Douro Valley out of Oporto. Thanks to the endemic wars between Britain and France during the eighteenth century, the drinking of Portuguese wines which now enjoyed lower duties became something of a badge of patriotism. Madeira shared in this popularity. There had been English merchants trading in wine in the seventeenth century, but now their numbers expanded. By 1727 eight English merchants controlled over half of wine exports from the island. During the century Scottish merchants, with James Gordon a prominent player, came to take up a significant role.

Although a member of the Drummond family, distant relations of the Earl of Perth, was reputed to have resided in Madeira from the early fifteenth century and to have fathered a numerous set of descendants, it seems unlikely that James's involvement owed much to Scottish connections. Thanks to its long-standing relations with France the drink of choice amongst the Scottish nobility was claret. 'At one time', reports F Marion McNeil, 'Scotland was reputed to drink more claret than any other country, and Edinburgh to have a more discriminating taste in that wine than any other city outside France.' The consequence was that Scotland had limited trade with the Iberian Peninsula generally in the seventeenth century. This owed something, as we shall see, to religious differences between the two regions, but also, argues T. C. Smout, 'one of those inexplicable quirks of national taste: sherry, port and Canary wines were second best to Scotsmen, and while claret was readily available in France, there was no eager market for other wines.' Charles Ludington confirms the pre-eminence of claret in Scotland, suggesting that it was connected to resistance to the Union and the preservation of a distinctively Scottish identity. As he notes, this did not change until the middle of the eighteenth century, as the Scottish

12 Hancock, Oceans of Wine, 13
13 National Library of Scotland, Edinburgh (hereafter NLS), Adv MS 73.1.17, Drummond of Madeira.
nobility sought to emulate their English counterparts. One important factor in the mid–seventeenth century, however, were the changes in the English Navigation Acts occasioned by Catherine of Braganza’s arrival in London. The Navigation Acts laid down that goods to the English colonies in the Americas and elsewhere could only be carried in English–registered ships. This was designed with the Dutch in mind, but it also hit the Scots, who were already trading across the Atlantic. Through cunning and duplicity, they were able to build transatlantic trade, but it helped connections with Madeira that Portuguese products were exempt from the operation of the Navigation Acts. This facilitated the growth of shipping in the triangular trade carrying provisions into Madeira, wine to the West Indies and America and goods back to Britain. Smout notes an increase in ships from Madeira in the Clyde in the late seventeenth century.17 But what was really significant in the growth of madeira was the transatlantic traffic, rather than ships trading directly with Britain.

It is likely that London connections were important in the partnership between James Gordon and William Halloran, as well as their shared religious adherence. Although it was quite possible for Protestants to trade with Portugal, life was not always easy for them. A Captain Robert Anderson, whose brother–in–law and brothers were elders in the kirk of Alloa, built up a successful business trading to Spain until he was forced to relocate to Lisbon in 1696.18 Here he was joined by his nephew Edward Mayne. The Maynes will figure in the activities of the House of Gordon later, but they are proof that it was possible to trade as Protestants in the staunchly Roman Catholic Portugal. Indeed, freedom to exercise their religion was supposed to be guaranteed by the 1654 treaty, but its provisions were often ignored. Despite, for example, there being provision in the treaty for a separate burial ground for Protestants, this was not granted in Lisbon until 1717.19 Matters in Madeira were far worse, for Protestants had to be buried at sea until a burial ground was granted in 1761.20 Thus one chronicle from within the British wine merchant tradition recounts that “There was a tradition handed down...
among the older British firms that one of the earlier partners in Gordon, Duff & Co had such a horror of a watery grave that he begged his partners to bury him under his desk in the old Esmeraldo Palace.”

This obstruction of the treaty’s provisions owed much to the weight of the Portuguese Inquisition in Portuguese society, employing as it did many thousands of functionaries. This could mean that the testimony of protestant merchants in court cases could be discounted as the unreliable evidence of ‘heretics’. It also led to concerns among protestant merchants about the forced kidnap and conversion of their children. It would seem that in these conditions that the Roman Catholicism that was a civil burden in Britain could be a positive advantage in Madeira.

The power of the Inquisition was also of significance in colouring Portuguese attitudes to trade. Aristocrats were forbidden to trade, relying on state office and the profits of imperial adventures. This gave trade low social status and much of Portugal’s trade was conducted by the so-called ‘New Christians’, Jews who had been forced to convert to Christianity in 1497. Much of the Inquisition’s activity was centred on accusations of Judaism and the fortunes of New Christian merchants were subject to expropriation. As a result, many kept a large proportion of their capital overseas, reducing their ability to trade. Shaw notes that ‘Portugal had to import goods from abroad, but foreigners could not be expected to export their goods on credit to new christian merchants and factors when they could not be assured of being paid for those goods’. As a consequence, foreign merchants preferred to trade with their own nationals. They also, of course, benefitted from both the protection of their commerce by their home navy and, in the case of British merchants, their connections with fellow countrymen in the Americas. As we will see, these were vital for the success of the trade in madeira wine.

Thus the partnership of Halloran and Gordon enjoyed some significant advantages. In 1730, according to James’s later account, the two men sailed for the island. There they found that their Madeiran partner, Manuel da Costa Campos, had done little to further their business. Having his own estate, the Madeiran was, according to Gordon, ‘indolent & unfit for anything in the mercantile way’.

In what would be a recurrent theme in James’s career, da Costa Campos was accused of a lax attitude towards the running

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22 Shaw, Anglo–Portuguese Alliance, 27.
23 State of the case betwixt the late Mr Wm Halloran of London & his partner Jas Gordon of Madeira, AULSC Gordon of Letterfourie, MS Ac 422, box ten.
of his business, having neglected to keep proper books of account. While Halloran returned to London, James endeavoured to construct a proper set of accounts with the objective of ‘getting by degrees the Acct from under ye management of Manuel da Costa’. In this he was assisted by Halloran’s nephew William Casey, but he was to argue that he had carried out the bulk of the work:

Mr Gordon having acquir’d the language & being able to see that matters did not go on right began to advise Mr H of it in 1731, and as he made further discoveries into the mismanagement of the house, continued his advice. Ml da Costa by this time had given himself so much up to drinking that he was become a mere Sott, incapable of anything and despis’d by everybody, having through Indolence & his natural easiness of temper let everybody impose on him so much, that he found himself reduced to poverty before he was aware of it, and from a man of good esteem and Substance, sank so low in Credit as hardly to be trusted.

James discovered to his horror that the partnership was virtually insolvent, so he worked to extricate himself and Halloran from the partnership. Then, keeping the true financial state of the partnership a secret, he ‘govern’d things with as much economy and Industry as possible, study’d to make the most of all articles that came, and ship good Wine to the Employers,’ with the result that ‘the house extricated and put on a more respectable footing than ever it had been.’ Some corroboration of this might be found in Halloran’s will of 1750, in which he spoke of ‘my good friend and partner Mr Gordon’ in the hope that on his death his nephew William Casey, who had been acting as clerk on Madeira, would be taken into the business. It was after this point that relations between the two men became strained, with James alleging that Halloran failed to settle accounts with him and establish their partnership on a clear footing. Halloran’s nephew declined to enter the partnership and his other nephew Edward Casey ‘an eminent Madeira merchant’ died in 1756. Thus when William Halloran died in 1758 his estate was left to his three unmarried daughters, Cecilia, Mary and Ann. It was this which occasioned a
lawsuit thanks to the daughters’ demands for a settlement which would give two–thirds of the business to them. It was a claim stoutly contested by James. Unfortunately, we only have his side of the story, but in 1761 he received a letter from Cecilia Halloran ‘desirous of bringing to an Equitable conclusion’ the outstanding matters. Some confirmation, however, of his allegations about the chaotic nature of Halloran’s business affairs came in a letter from the Lisbon merchant John White to his associate Philip Jackson in 1765. White was also being pursued for money by Halloran’s executors, although his accounts showed a considerable balance owing in White’s favour. John White was looking for help from James as ‘Mr Jas Gordon, who always corresponded with me honbly & punctually, will I hope lend a helping hand, his accts & mine always agreed.’ In the event he was not able to recover his money, as Halloran’s books were in a state of confusion.

This is where the trail ends and we lose sight of James’s early ventures in Madeira until later he appears as a substantial member of the British community on the island. His early experiences do provide some pointers to his character. He does not appear to have inherited the martial inclinations of his ancestors. He seems to have been rather cautious and worried in temperament, with careful conduct of business affairs based on exact and thorough recording of transactions being the bedrock of his life. This stood in sharp contrast to his brother Alexander, who would lead an altogether more eventful life while James was off on Madeira. First, however, we need to catch up with the Duffs after their 1739 marriage.

29 Cecelia Halloran to James Gordon, 11 August 1761, AULSC, Gordon of Letterfourie, MS Acc 422, box nine, Letters to London.
30 Copy letter from John White of Lisbon to Philip Jackson, London, 19 October 1765, ibid., box two, Bundle of London letters. See also in the same bundle a letter to James Gordon merchant in London from Joseph White, Lisbon, 29 March 1766.