

The wealth has all gone, the shame remains

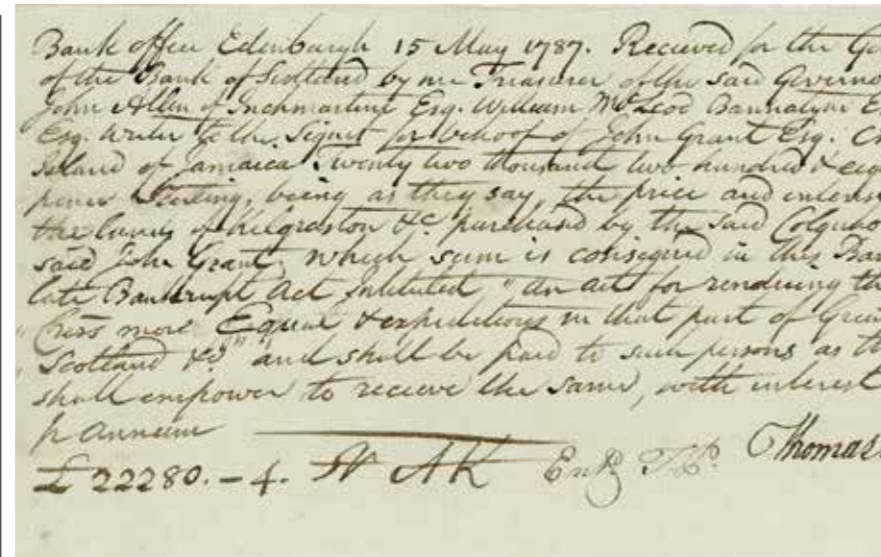
◆ Richard Blake is a descendant of the Grant family, who made Kilgraston House in Perthshire their home. His book *Sugar, Slaves and High Society* charts the family's rise and fall and how its wealth and status was built on money made from the slave trade

My great-great-grandmother was born in 1834 – the same year that slavery was abolished and was one of 14 Grant siblings. *Sugar, Slaves and High Society* is a history of that family, but it is also the history of localities, whether in Cromdale, the home to the Grants for several previous generations, or Perthshire. Furthermore, it is a British story which, while incorporating class and social advancement, colonialism and empire, shows how slavery was hidden in plain sight.

As a boy, I listened to tales which could have come from *Boys' Own*: the Elgin Marbles; the Rajahs of Sarawak; and the general who featured in a *Flashman* novel. It was not until after the 1993 Perth flood that the idea for a book took hold. By chance, I found a receipt dated 1787 which recorded the price paid for Kilgraston. This was the catalyst for me to piece together its story.

My research has taken me to some of the many countries visited by the Grants, and I continue to find marvellous paintings by Sir Francis and sculptures by Mary in museums and galleries at home and abroad.

Like many Scottish families, the Grants



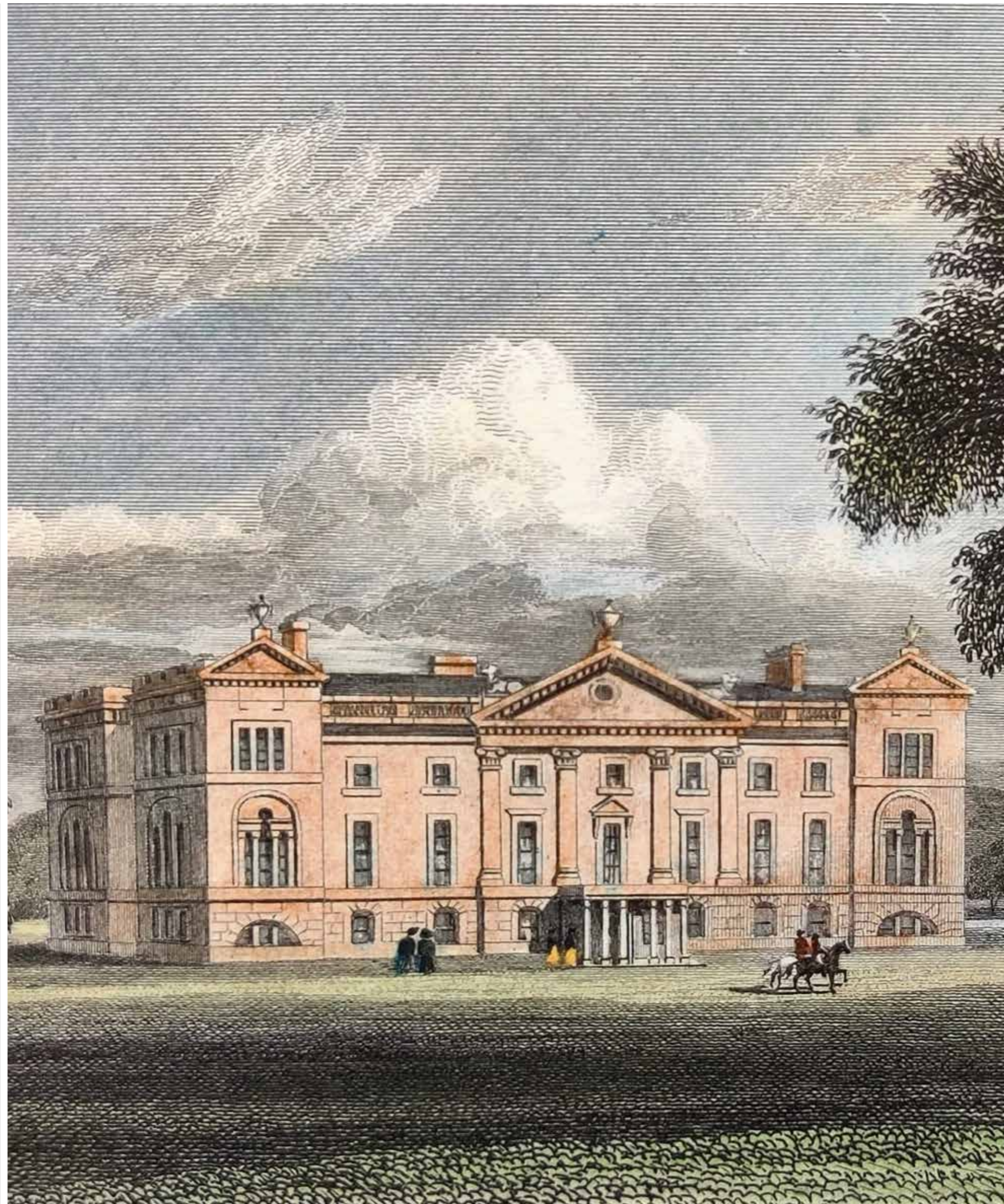
An etching of Kilgraston House, seat of the Grant family, in Bridge of Weir, Perthshire, main; a receipt from 1787, found by author Richard Blake, for its purchase

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Francis, owner of Blackness plantation, was also a slave trader

were an upwardly mobile family which relied on repatriated Jamaican wealth. Inevitably, the abolition of slavery led to reduced income, increased debt and the gradual demise of Kilgraston. By 1920, the estate had been sold and the house had been gifted to the nation.

It became clear to me that the Kilgraston Grants had been content to display the trappings of wealth but rarely, if ever, had discussed the morality of slavery. Charitable donations in Scotland were made by this devoutly



Christian family, while the Jamaican slaves were valued as chattels. Of course, it is true that slavery was legal at the time, but that doesn't detract from its barbarism.

John, with his brother Francis, left Glenlochry to grasp the opportunities created for Scots in the British colonies following the Union of 1707. Through clan kinship, John travelled to Nova Scotia where he trained as a lawyer, and thence to Jamaica, where fortunes could be made or lost. Francis followed.

The island's economy relied on slave labour in an era when slavery was legal. The demand for sugar had led to an increase in the number of plantations, slaves and investors. This required management, at which the brothers proved adept.

Wealth was accumulated through their network of clients. John, soon the Chief Justice, was well respected. I was shocked to find that Francis, owner of Blackness plantation, was also a slave trader.

The brothers' intention had been to remain in Jamaica until they had purchased a suitable property in Scotland. That was Kilgraston. The Chief Justice died soon after returning home and his brother rebuilt the house, which looks today much as it did in 1800.

The men and women of the Kilgraston Grants were colourful, wayward, adventurous and well-connected. Following Francis's death, his eldest son, John, inherited Kilgraston, while John's brothers each inherited £10,000 (approximately £600,000 today). Known for their wild behaviour, two of them spent their inheritances on horses and the high life.

Frank threw himself and his small fortune into hunting society at Melton Mowbray, where he kept his stables. His parents wanted him to be a lawyer, but he had other ideas, burnt his books in front of his tutor and determined to become an artist. While also collecting art, he followed his instinct and spent time in the studios of Nasmyth, Raeburn and Watson Gordon. His first wife having died in childbirth, his subsequent marriage to a relative of the Duke of Rutland took him back to England, where he became a highly regarded equestrian painter. He was also, for many years, the portrait artist of choice to Queen Victoria, Prime Ministers and members of the élite, before being elected as President of the Royal Academy. He was responsible for its relocation to Burlington House.

His youngest brother, Hope, was less profligate, spending part of his inheritance on a commission in the Royal Lancers. While he was a first-rate horseman and renowned for his bravery in battle, Hope was also a talented musician, which led to his appointment as Brigade Major in the China campaign. There followed postings to India, where Hope was at the forefront of the Relief of Lucknow during the Indian Rebellion, and back to China, where he was Commander-in-Chief of the forces when the Imperial Palace was burned.

Frank and Hope were knighted by Queen Victoria, while their brother, John, travelled through Europe to locate an Old Master painting, and immersed himself in Scottish society. He was Captain of the Royal and Ancient Golf Club and of the Royal Perth Golfing Society; Master of the Perth Hunt; and a member of The Royal Company of Archers. Married to the Earl of Elgin's daughter, his position in society was secure but, with a large family and reducing income from Jamaica, he found it increasingly difficult to maintain the estate.

The unique Kilgraston Stud Book, in which John had described and painted a picture of each horse, illustrates the importance of hunting at Kilgraston, which was well known for its hospitality. However, with the loss of several children through illness, it was also a place of sadness. I have visited the extraordinary, roofless, family burial ground, which would only have been a short walk from the house. Its many memorials tell the poignant story of a far-flung family. There are graves of children and young mothers who died at home and others of those who died abroad: John's eldest son, another Frank, in the Crimea; Arthur in India; Harry in France; and Annie in Borneo.

Annie's death, soon after she had lost her second son, was felt most keenly at Kilgraston. As the wife of the heir to the first White Rajah of Sarawak, she had travelled to Borneo with him and her brother, Charley, and his new wife. Life there was hard and lonely. Charley served the Rajah for many years before returning home, succeeding as laird after the devastating fire at the mansion house. I have visited Annie's lonely, austere memorial, with its inscription upside down, in Sarawak, thousands of miles from her family home.

All the privileges enjoyed by the family had been made possible by wealth repatriated to Scotland from Jamaica. However, by 1860, Kilgraston was in decline as successive lairds struggled to balance the books. The art collection was sold, and then the house was occupied by tenants before the estate was broken up.

Rather than only being a story of adventures and travel, I wanted this book to show how the changes of history and society within the British Empire in the 19th century impacted on one Scottish family. Kilgraston, like so many other Scottish houses, was built with slave-generated wealth, of which nothing now remains.

The estate and mansion house were disposed of a century ago and the direct Grant line ended in 1950. Along with the building, which is an independent school currently battling closure, the only legacies are Sir Francis's paintings, Mary's sculptures and Sir Hope's achievements, all of which must now be set in their true context.

Sugar, Slaves and High Society by Richard Blake is published by Buskin Books, priced £25 and out on 4 July

