**Servitude, Freedom, and Land: The Scottish Prisoners in New England**

**By Carol Gardner**

In writing *The Involuntary American: A Scottish Prisoner’s Journey to the New World*, I chose not to investigate all 422 Scottish prisoners shipped to New England after the Battles of Dunbar and Worcester. Instead, I followed one, Thomas Doughty, throughout his life. I was anxious to understand what it was like for an illiterate foot soldier to be exiled abroad and to try and survive in a new and unfamiliar land during the 1600s.

Still, by relating Doughty’s experiences—seven years’ servitude, building a family and a livelihood, and surviving three wars, an unstable climate, and social upheaval—I was, in a way, telling the story of many Scottish prisoners. Much of what Doughty experienced affected his peers, and telling it from his perspective allowed me to better grasp the pressures, fears, and hardships of life during turbulent times.

In the process of researching and writing, I gained an entirely new perspective on early New England history. In this blog, I’ll share just a bit of what I learned about three important issues: servitude, freedom, and land.

**Forced Immigration to New England**

You might think that shipping two boatloads of prisoners to New England to be sold at Boston—or conveyed as property to an iron foundry—were rare occurrences. Not so. Although many immigrants came freely to the New World, many, many individuals came to New England against their wills in the 17th century.

In 1623 and 1632, for example, the Council for New England—an advisory council to the king—urged the king to order magistrates across England to send “the poorer sort of people” to New England. This doesn’t mean they enticed them with travel brochures, free meals and free nights in local hotels. It means they rounded them up against their wills and shipped them abroad as laborers.[[1]](#endnote-1)

Scotland was no different. In the 1660s, Edinburgh magistrates petitioned “to send all such men and women who shall be legallie found guiltie of whoredom or theift aff this kingdome with the first conveniency to Barbados.”[[2]](#endnote-2) Although the destination was different, the motive was the same: to shift social problems away from Europe to the New World.

In his journal, John Winthrop, founder and governor of Massachusetts Bay, writes about 20 unaccompanied children arriving in Boston: the ship “Seabridge arrived with 20 children and some other passengers out of England.” And, wrote Winthrop, there would be “many more to come after.” The children—orphans and children of the poor—were to become servants in New England. And it’s unlikely that any did so willingly. Sadly, Winthrop documents the death of one of these children, a young boy named Nathaniel Sewall, and the trial of his master who was found guilty of causing the boy’s death through harsh treatment.[[3]](#endnote-3)

New England needed laborers so desperately that trade in servants became a profitable enterprise. Sometimes it was legal; sometimes it wasn’t. Kidnapping rings developed in the British Isles during the 17th century, and the operatives of those rings, called “spirits,” kidnapped individuals of many ages and ethnicities and shipped them to America as laborers. In 1653, Richard Leader, the man who purchased 15 to 25 of the Scottish prisoners for the Great Works sawmill, engaged in a business deal to scare up, transport, and sell 550 Irish men and women to New England and Virginia as servants.[[4]](#endnote-4)

Throughout the 1600s, well-to-do New Englanders also purchased African slaves. A man named Samuel Maverick who lived on Noddles Island, where Logan Airport sits today, held slaves as early as 1638. Massachusetts Bay governor Simon Bradstreet, husband of poet Anne Bradstreet, conveyed two African women slaves to heirs in his will. Cotton Mather, the prolific clergyman and chronicler of early New England, received an African slave as a gift from his congregation.[[5]](#endnote-5)

Africans had a very different experience from the other kidnapped individuals. Most of them became slaves for life, and in many cases, their children became property of their masters. This simply wasn’t the case for European individuals. In most cases, white individuals, including the Scottish prisoners, had finite terms of servitude and were prohibited from marrying while servants. But if they had children, in or out of wedlock, those children were their own, not their masters’. So referring to the Scottish Prisoners of War as “slaves” is not entirely accurate. Better terms might be “bonded” or “forced” or “indentured” laborers.

Banishment and forced labor were common punishments for those on the losing side of battles. Our 422 Scottish prisoners were not the only soldiers shipped abroad. We know that some of the Dunbar prisoners were sent to England and France; an additional 1,300 captives from the Battle of Worcester were transported to Barbados;and later in the century, 277 participants in Argyll’s Rising (1685) were sent to Jamaica and New Jersey.[[6]](#endnote-6) These numbers are just a few of the documented Scottish exiles. Moreover, as many as 1,000 Native American combatants were shipped *away* from New England as servants after the Pequot and King Philip’s Wars, to places including Bermuda, Barbados, and Cadiz.[[7]](#endnote-7) Once again, government officials were shifting social problems onto others.

By the time the Dunbar and Worcester Scots arrived in Boston, the Wars of the Three Kingdoms had cut severely into the number of servants coming to Massachusetts Bay. The healthiest young men in Scotland and England were being conscripted into the armies. So New England industrialists—those who ran the Hammersmith Iron Works and sawmills in Maine and New Hampshire—were thrilled to have these prisoners of war as laborers. And the businessmen who shipped the Dunbar prisoners abroad—John Becx and Joshua Foote—were happy, too. They made a handsome six-figure profit in today’s dollars by selling some 70 of the prisoners after they arrived.[[8]](#endnote-8)

**On Land and Freedom**

One of the most interesting facts about the Scottish prisoners is that, after being set free, not a single one that we can trace returned home to Scotland. Of course, the trip back would have been grueling, and no one knew whether they’d be welcomed or thrown in jail if they did return. But an important reason behind their staying likely involved the availability of land in New England.

The Massachusetts Body of Liberties, which was a sort of Constitution for the Massachusetts Bay Colony, dictated that “Servants that have served deligentlie and faithfully to the benefitt of their maisters seaven yeares, shall not be sent away emptie.”[[9]](#endnote-9) So many Scottish Prisoners received land grants at the end of their service. Hercules Corser, a captive of the Battle of Dunbar, and later, a member of the Scots Charitable Society, received a grant of land in Charlestown, just when he would have been released from servitude. Four other Scots from the Battle of Dunbar drew lots in Charlestown at that time: Edward Wyer, Alexander Bow, James Grant, and John Hamilton.[[10]](#endnote-10)

At Oyster River, Valentine Hill granted some of his own land to servants Henry Brown, James Oare, and Patrick Jameson. Thomas Doughty, another Scottish servant of Hill’s, received not land but money, which he immediately used to purchase land. While many of the Scots began to farm their lands, Doughty harvested the trees on his property, sold the lumber to mills and merchants, and then sold the cleared land as farmland to the future first president of the Province of New Hampshire, John Cutt.[[11]](#endnote-11) Doughty then moved to Maine looking for more opportunities to cut and mill timber. He built a dam at present-day North Berwick, Maine—at a spot still referred to as Doughty Falls—with the thought of building a sawmill there. But he didn’t stay long; he apparently found better opportunities along the Saco River in present-day Biddeford, where he moved next.

Had these men remained in Scotland, it would’ve been virtually impossible for any of them to acquire their own land. There, land was held by lairds and clan chiefs and simply wasn’t available for the average individual. So being able to acquire their own property in New England was a tremendous opportunity—one that compelled many Scottish prisoners to stay. But just because land was easy to come by didn’t mean it would be easy to hang onto.

Yet did the English truly have the right to grant lands to former servants? Remember, all of New England was indigenous land, and the many transactions made between European and Native peoples—some in good faith, many not—would eventually erupt into conflict.

The English had a motive for granting parcels to British subjects: security. The more white property owners there were, the more they provided protection and safety from Natives who would eventually contest their ownership and their land uses. And the Scots rarely received land grants in secure town centers like Boston or Salem; rather, their grants lay on the margins of villages and on New England’s western and eastern frontiers. As a result, Scots were among the first ones to face the wrath of dispossessed Native Americans.

In 1675, King Philip’s War began in Massachusetts. In large part, the issue was land. The Natives felt that they were being systematically fenced out of and otherwise removed from lands that had been theirs for millennia.[[12]](#endnote-12) Violence first broke out at Swansea in Plymouth Colony. Among the first casualties was former Dunbar prisoner William Cahoon, who had helped to found the Swansea settlement.[[13]](#endnote-13) Many more former Scottish prisoners from Swansea to Saco eventually faced the vengeance of Native Americans who were angry that their rivers were being dammed, their forests leveled, their cultivated fields destroyed by English cattle, and their lands fenced off into private parcels. Several former Scottish prisoners in Piscataqua were killed during the war, including Andrew Rankin, John Curmuckhell, James Jackson and James Ross.[[14]](#endnote-14) Thomas Doughty was more fortunate; he lost only his home and mill during the conflict. It wouldn’t be the last time.

Doughty was forced by war to immigrate to America, and once he arrived here, war and economic concerns forced him to move seven more times. In this blog, I’ve touched on a few themes I write about in *The Involuntary American*. But the book covers many other topics in depth: coming of age in Scotland in the early 1600s; the Wars of the Three Kingdoms; the Dunbar prisoners’ captivity and march to Durham; their transatlantic trip; servitude and freedom; marriage and raising families; the First and Second Indian Wars; and the tight-knit communities that helped the Scottish prisoners to survive, and in some cases, prosper, in New England.

1. See meetings of 15 January 1622 and 6 November 1632 in *Records of the Council for New England,* reprinted from the *Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society* for April 1867 (Cambridge: John Wilson & Son, 1867), pp. 31, 63. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Brown, ed., *The Register of the Privy Council of Scotland*, (3rd series) 1: 181. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. John Winthrop, The Journal of John Winthrop, 1630-1649, Eds., Richard S. Dunn, James Savage, and Laetitia Yeandle (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), p. 429. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. John Blake, “Irish Transportation to America, 1653–1660.” Irish Historical Studies, 3, no. 11 (March 1943): 271-272. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. John Josselyn, *John Josselyn, Colonial Traveler: A Critical Edition of Two Voyages to New-England*, ed. Paul J. Lindholdt (Hanover, NH: Unversity Press of New England, 1988), p. 24. Will of Simon Bradstreet, cases 2364, 2383, Feb. 20, 1689. *Suffolk County Probate*, 11: 276-82. New England Historic Genealogical Society microfilm. Kathryn S. Koo, “Strangers in the House of God: Cotton Mather, Onesimus, and an Experiment in Christian Slaveholding,” *Proceedings of the* *American Antiquarian Society*, 117: 143-175. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. See Simon P. Newman, *A New World of Labor: The Development of Plantation Slavery in the British Atlantic* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), pp. 80, and K.G. Davies, *The North Atlantic World in the Seventeenth Century* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1974), p. 92. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. See Margaret Ellen Newell, *Brethren by Nature: New England Indians, Colonists, and the Origins of American Slavery* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2015). See espec. pp. 143-154.for a treatment of Native slavery and exile. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. See Charles Edward Banks, “Scotch Prisoners Deported to New England by Cromwell, 1651-52,” in *Proceedings of the Massachusetts Historical Society*, 61 (Oct. 1927-Jun. 1928):13. Banks concludes that Becx and Foote must have made around £1,500 from the sale of Scots, but he fails to account for the death of some 10% of the prisoners aboard ship. Calculating the worth of £1,000 in today’s dollars is a thorny and controversial proposition. Still, it’s important for emphasizing that trafficking in slaves and servants was a profit-making activity. The “six-figure” estimation was reached using the Measuring Worth calculator ([www.measuringworth.com](http://www.measuringworth.com)). According to that tool, the “commodity value,” “labour value,” and “income value” of 1,000 pounds in 1650 all resulted in six-figure amounts for 2017 British Pounds. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Massachusetts Body of Liberties, 1641. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Scottishprisonersofwar.com, biography of John Hamilton. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. See Doutie to Cutt, item #138, October 5, 1667, New Hampshire State Archives. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. See Lisa Brooks, *Our Beloved Kin: A New History of King Philip’s War* (New Haven: Yale, 2018), for a discussion of how land disputes figured prominently in the war. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. See williamcolquhoon.blogspot.com. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. See B.C. Stinson, “Scots at Oyster River,” 2016, scottishprisonersofwar.com and Everett Stackpole, *Scotch Exiles in New England*. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)