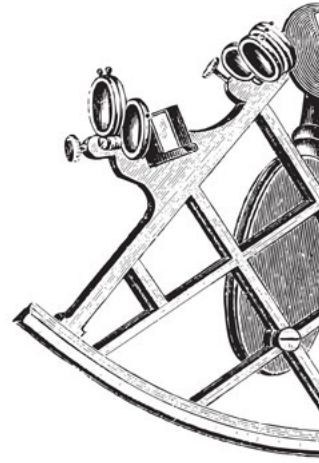


SCIENCE UNDER THE LENS



Further information on ‘The Great Instauration’

‘The Great Instauration’ is a research-led artwork by Gayle Chong Kwan, who explored histories of the Enlightenment in Scotland and the lesser-known narratives and voices that are connected to it. Included here are more details of the histories referenced by the engravings you can see on the plinths of the artwork. While there is limited information recorded about enslaved people, sharing their names and circumstances acknowledges their lived experience and their connections to Scotland.

At the top of each page is the text engraved on the plinths.

A copy of this information is available online



SCOTLAND, ARRAN, GORDON, JENNY, FLORA, GLASGOW

Persons, enslaved by William McDowall, St Kitts

1710

These are the names given to people who were enslaved by William McDowall, who was a Scottish Member of Parliament. Many of the people enslaved by McDowall were assigned traditionally Scottish names.

William McDowall was an enslaver and plantation proprietor in Saint Kitts during the eighteenth century. Like many European landowners in the Caribbean, McDowall made his wealth from the production of sugar, which relied heavily on the labour of enslaved Africans. Sugar plantations were extremely demanding environments, where enslaved people worked under harsh conditions to grow and process sugar cane.

Records from plantations like McDowall's show how plantation owners depended on enslaved labour to maintain productivity and profits. At the same time, enslaved people faced strict discipline, poor living conditions, and no freedom. The wealth generated by plantations in islands such as Saint Kitts helped build fortunes for Scottish families, while the enslaved population endured exploitation and hardship.

The enslaved people did not only live in Saint Kitts. There are records that McDowall ordered for two enslaved people to be brought from Saint Kitts to Glasgow for personal use.

While there is a detailed history of writing on the movements and life of McDowall, there is little information about the people he enslaved beyond their names.

OBEAH ACT

Obeah healing criminalised in Jamaica

1898

CORNELIUS JARVIS

Imprisoned for practicing
Obeah healing in Antigua

1905

OBEAH ACT

Obeah healing criminalised
in Antigua and Barbados

1834

Obeah healing is a traditional Afro-Caribbean spiritual and herbal practice that developed among enslaved Africans in the Caribbean during the colonial period. It combined African religious beliefs, knowledge of medicinal plants, and spiritual rituals used to protect, heal, and guide. As Obeah practitioners were respected figures, colonial authorities often feared their influence and worried that they could lead rebellions.

During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, colonial governments attempted to abolish or suppress Obeah. After several uprisings of enslaved people, particularly in Jamaica, authorities claimed that Obeah encouraged resistance and rebellion. Laws known as Obeah Acts were introduced, making the practice illegal and punishing practitioners with imprisonment, whipping, or other harsh penalties. These laws aimed to weaken and destroy African cultural traditions and maintain colonial control.

Despite attempts at abolition and burying the knowledge, Obeah healing has endured. Many communities continue to practise it today, passing knowledge of herbs, rituals, and spiritual protection through generations.

YAWS

Enslaved healers' treatment found to be more effective than European doctors

1773

Yaws was a contagious tropical disease that caused skin infections, common on Caribbean plantations. Enslaved Africans often suffered from the disease because of poor living conditions, overcrowding, and lack of medical care. Doctors attempted to treat yaws using traditional European medicine, but their treatments were often ineffective and harmful.

In the eighteenth century, an important experiment took place on a plantation in Grenada that compared the treatment methods of a European-trained surgeon and an enslaved African healer. The European doctor used a common remedy that involved mercury which, unknown to the European doctor, could damage the body and weaken patients over time. The enslaved healer used knowledge brought from Africa, including herbal medicine and sweating treatments. The method involved placing patients in a heated cask to sweat and giving them medicine made from local wood.

The results were undeniable. The enslaved healer successfully cured his patients within about two weeks, while the patients treated by the European doctor did not recover. The plantation owner then placed the enslaved healer in charge of treating all yaws patients on the plantation hospital.

Enslaved healers possessed valuable medical knowledge, especially about tropical diseases. While this experiment and recorded outcome demonstrates the importance of this knowledge, the names recorded to this experiment are the European doctors.

SMALLPOX

Dr. John Quier experimented
on 850 enslaved people in Jamaica

1768

Smallpox was one of the most dangerous diseases in the Caribbean during the eighteenth century. It spread quickly among plantation populations and caused high death rates, especially among enslaved Africans who lived in crowded conditions with limited medical care. The disease threatened both lives and plantation productivity, so plantation doctors and owners were eager to find ways to control it.

One of the doctors involved in studying smallpox in Jamaica was John Quier. Quier carried out medical experiments on enslaved people to test methods of protecting against the disease. Records show that around 850 enslaved individuals were involved in these experiments. Many of them were deliberately inoculated with smallpox to try and create immunity.

This highlights the harsh reality where enslaved people's bodies were used for medical research without their permission or protection.

The experiments allowed doctors to learn more about smallpox prevention, which in turn reduced levels in Scottish school children. This was hailed as a success with no acknowledgement of the suffering of those tested on.

SCOTLAND

Person enslaved
by William McDowall St Kitts

1710

CINCHONA

Dr Thomas Anderson established
plantation in Darjeeling

1862

THEODOLITE

The Roy Military Survey
of Scotland

1747

MALARIA

Isolation of mosquito parasite
by Dr Ronald Ross

1897

ARRAN

Person enslaved
by William McDowall St Kitts

1710

GALEN

Enslaved person worked as doctor
on Dr Alexander Johnston's
plantation Jamaica

1773

OBEAH ACT

Obeah healing
criminalised in Jamaica

1898

MICROSCOPE

Compound microscope
designed by Robert Hooke

1671

GORDON

Person enslaved
by William McDowall St Kitts

1710

YAWS

Enslaved healers' treatment
found to be more effective than
European doctors

1773

SMALLPOX

Dr John Quier experimented
on 850 enslaved people in Jamaica

1768

THERMOMETER

Aerometrical beads patented by
Isabelle Lovi of Edinburgh

1805

JENNY

Person enslaved
by William McDowall St Kitts

1710

CHRONOMETER

Navigation instruments tested
on West Indies slave routes

1714

SCURVY

Dr Thomas Trotter worked
on Brookes slave ship

1783

TOBACCO

James Gillespie set up hospital and
school with profits from slavery

1797

FLORA

Person enslaved
by William McDowall St Kitts

1710

SUGAR

700 enslaved people worked on
Dr James Balfour's plantations
in Suriname

1819

CLOCK

Dial commissioned by Earl of Ilay
from colonial trading profits

1715

McDOWALL'S LAW

Plantation owners permitted
to kill escaped slaves St Kitts

1725

GLASGOW

Person enslaved
by William McDowall St Kitts

1710

TELESCOPE

James Short telescope maker
from Edinburgh

1734

CORNELIUS JARVIS

Imprisoned for practicing
Obeah healing in Antigua

1905

OBEAH ACT

Obeah healing criminalised
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